

Thoughts on Bartolomé de las Casas OP

Ronald Cueto Ruiz

‘He this evening again recommended to me to perambulate Spain. I said it would amuse him to get a letter from me dated at Salamanca. Johnson. “I love the University of Salamanca; for when the Spaniards were in doubt as to the lawfulness of their conquering America, the University of Salamanca gave it as their opinion that it was not lawful”. He spoke with great emotion, and with the generous warmth which dictated the lines in his “London”, against Spanish encroachment’.¹

Boswell never got round to explaining precisely why it would have been so amusing for the Doctor to receive the letter from Salamanca, and Johnson never explained exactly what he meant by the University of Salamanca. Still, I suppose, not many Spaniards are very bothered about Boswell and Johnson, but they can still get mighty hot and bothered about the discovery and conquest of America; and they are not particularly happy about *Wasps* telling them where they went wrong. With all the logic of passionate indignation—which, of course, tends to brush aside the mere facts of history and geography—many is the irate Spaniard who has triumphantly produced in the form of a supposedly unanswerable question, what he thinks is to be the *coup de grâce* of any discussion on the relative merits of different brands of European imperialism, viz. : Where are the Indians in Protestant North America and why are they so numerous in Ibero-America?² (And, by the way, that’s another thing you’ve got to be very careful about; none of your *Latin America*; our prickly, patriotic Spaniard, when aroused, admits of no contribution from the Italians and French in the Southern Hemisphere!)

Naturally, a *Wasp* with the slightest modicum of intellectual curiosity must find it rather odd that the fanatical Spaniards and their blood-thirsty conquistadores should have been in any doubt whatsoever as to the lawfulness of their conquests. The English colonists entertained no such foolish ideas; or, rather, in the whole history of the English colonies

¹James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL. D.*, Ed. Percy Fitzgerald, 1 (London, 1924), 279-280.

²Fr Venancio Diego Carro OP produces the same argument in his long article, ‘Los postulados teológico-jurídicos de Bartolomé de las Casas sus aciertos, sus olvidos y sus fallos, ante los Maestros Francisco de Vitoria y Domingo de Soto’, in *Estudios Lascasianos* (Sevilla, 1966), 239. Actually, a much more sensible assessment was given in the sixteenth century by Juan López de Velasco, as has been noted by María del Carmen González Muñoz in her preliminary study of his, *Geografía y descripción universal de las Indias*, BAE (= Biblioteca Autores Espanoles), CCXLVIII (Madrid, 1971), xxiii.

in the North, only Roger Williams, in Rhode Island, doubted if Plymouth had any right to take Indian lands, and even then he retracted most abjectly later.³ Yet, in the case of the Spanish colonial experience the oddness persists to this very day, even in the world of scholarship. The very titles of studies—not necessarily by Spanish hispanists—show how basically different that Spanish experience was and has been regarded. For instance, there is Winston A. Reynolds' *Spirituality of the Conquest of Mexico*,⁴ and Robert Ricard's *The Spiritual Conquest of Mexico*,⁵ to mention but two. So what I want to try to do in this paper is to reach some sort of understanding of how this case came about and what part was played by the famous or infamous Dominican, Bartolomé de las Casas, 'the Apostle of the Indians'.

Bartolomé de las Casas or Casaus was born in Seville five hundred years ago, give or take a few months.⁶ He had a long life. He died in Madrid in 1566. Most of those ninety-odd years, particularly the latter ones, were spent defending the Indians of the New World against exploitation, victimisation and extermination. The standard works of reference and encyclopaedias give a pretty straightforward account of his long career. He was educated for the Church and through his father (who went on Columbus' second expedition), quickly came into contact with the reality of the discovery of the New World, which he himself visited for the first time in 1502, staying till 1506 when he left for Rome. On his return to Hispaniola, he participated in the evangelisation of the Indians as a 'doctrinero'. In 1513 he went to Cuba where he obtained an *encomienda*, the institution 'whereby the Indians of conquered regions were parceled out by royal grant to individual Spaniards, and compelled to render them forced labour in their fields and in the mines'.⁷ However, the visit of three Dominican missionaries to Cuba raised doubts in his mind as to the justice of the whole system. In 1514 Don Bartolomé was preparing a sermon for Whitsuntide and in Chapter 34 of Ecclesiasticus he came across the following verse: 'The sacrifice of an offering unjustly acquired is a mockery: the gifts of impious men are unacceptable.' The sermon was preached; the logical consequences of the conversation were accepted. At the age of forty the world was renounced and the battle for the salvation of the Indians began in earnest. If a bit of Hollywoodese is not out of place, the 'Apostle of the Indians' was born during the Whitsuntide of 1514.

Las Casas returned to the Iberian Peninsula and began a political campaign for the reform of the law and he managed to gain the support of the principal ministers, Cardinal Adrian of Utrecht (the future Adrian VI) and Cardinal Cisneros of Toledo. However, as Las Casas was to learn, support at Court was one thing, but the actual putting

³Lewis Hanke, *The Spanish Struggle for Justice in the Conquest of America* (henceforth *Justice*) (Philadelphia, 1949), 172.

⁴Winston A. Reynolds, *Espiritualidad de la conquista de Méjico* (Granada, 1966).

⁵Robert Ricard, *La conquête spirituelle du Mexique* (Paris, 1933).

⁶Although there would appear to be no documentary proof, M. Giménez Fernández in *Diccionario de historia eclesiástica de Espana*, I (Madrid, 1972), 374, plumps for August, 1474.

⁷Henry Raup Wagner and Helen Rand Parish, *The Life and Writings of Bartolomé de las Casas* (Albuquerque, 1967), xxiv-xxv.

into practice of his suggested reforms was another. Even when he was empowered to put his ideas into practice at Cumaná, in what is now Venezuela, his inability to attract the right sort of financial backing and manpower led to a catastrophic failure. Yet, Las Casas remained totally convinced, that the only lasting and beneficial way to colonise was not by using soldiers led by the upper classes, but rather via agricultural exploitation, in which the Indians would cooperate with members of the Castilian labouring classes. But not all contemporary writers on Indian affairs were so hopeful. The other side of the coin was given by Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, who so despised the Indian that any idea of real cooperation was out of the question :

‘For in truth—he wrote—as all who know the Indies or any part of them will affirm, in no province of the islands or the mainland that the Christians have seen up to now, has there been or is there any lack of sodomites, as well as their all being idolators, with many other vices, and so ugly that many of them for their vileness and hideousness could not be heard without much loathing and shame, nor could I write about them because of their number and filthiness’.⁸

Las Casas, however, interpreted the collapse of his Cumaná experiment as a divine punishment, and on the advice of the Dominican, Domingo de Betanzos (who, as we shall see, had other ideas about the Indians), he joined the Order of Preachers in December, 1522. Till the end of 1526 he lived a life of study, penance and mortification. Then, yet once again, he intervened and took up the pen. He was so convinced of the rationality, the goodness and the beauty, both physical and spiritual, of the Indian, that it became the cornerstone of his life, and to the end of his days he was to write in their favour. So much was this to be the case, that ‘the papers of Las Casas . . . during the last few years of his life were so voluminous that they made it difficult for visitors to get in and out of his cell in San Gregorio monastery in Valladolid’.⁹ When he had no choice but to intervene, the situation must have been truly appalling. David M. Davidson has recently written :

‘Demographic studies suggest that the indigenous population of central Mexico alone, which may have been as high as 25,000,000 in 1519, had decreased to around 1,075,000 by 1605. The spread of European diseases, wars, relocations, and the ecological changes wrought by the Spanish settlement and control all contributed to the decline’.¹⁰

In spite of the opposition of powerful vested interests, Las Casas persisted. With the collaboration of the Dominican Bishop of Tlascalala, Friar Julián Garcés,¹¹ he wrote *De unico vocationis modo omnium gentium ad veram religionem* (later published in 1539), as a result of

⁸Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, *Historia general y natural de las Indias*, BAE, CXVII (Madrid, 1959), 72.

⁹L. Hanke, *Justice*, vii.

¹⁰David M. Davidson, ‘Negro Slave Control and Resistance in Colonial Mexico 1519-1650’ in *Maroon Societies*, edited by Richard Price (New York, 1973), 83.

¹¹*Diccionario de historia eclesiástica de España*, I (Madrid, 1972), 376 and II (Madrid, 1972), 971.

which Bernardino de Minaya, OP, obtained from Paul III the Bull *Sublimis Deus* of June 2, 1538, in which not only was the rationality of the Indians dogmatically affirmed, but also their capacity to receive the faith and the sacraments. This Roman highwater mark in the career of Las Casas was soon followed by a Castilian one. On November 20, 1542, Charles V promulgated the New Laws of the Indies and followed this by a reorganisation of the Council of the Indies (February 5, 1543), whilst in the following July Las Casas accepted the Mexican bishopric of Chiapas. Furthermore, he had been recently provided with a magnificent opportunity yet once again to put into practice his ideas on peaceful conversion.

This time, the scenario was to be the 'Tierra de Guerra', the Land of War, in Guatemala. Again, I would say that the film-script metaphor is not far-fetched. The story as told by Lewis Hanke, the great North American Lascasist scholar, anticipates the very best of the Hollywood tradition, all sound-track music and local colour: 'The two requests Las Casas made were modest, and Governor Alonso Maldonado speedily granted them: that the Indians won by peaceful methods should not be divided among the Spaniards but should depend directly upon the crown, with only moderate tribute to pay, and that for five years no Spaniard except Las Casas and his brother Dominicans should be allowed in the province, in order that secular Spaniards might not disturb the Indians or provoke scandal.

'Having concluded this agreement with the Governor, Las Casas and his companions—Friars Rodrigo de Andrada, Pedro de Angulo, and Luis Cáncer—spent several days praying, fasting, and undergoing other spiritual disciplines and mortifications. Then they carefully planned their approach and began by composing some ballads in the Indian language of the Tierra de Guerra. These ballads were virtually a history of Christianity, for they described the creation of the world and the fall of man, his exile from Paradise, and the life and miracles of Jesus Christ. Las Casas then sought and found four Christian Indian merchants accustomed to trading in the Tierra de Guerra and patiently taught them by heart all the verses, and trained them, moreover, to sing them 'in a pleasing manner'.

'At last, in August 1537, the Indians set out alone with their merchandise, to which Las Casas had added some Spanish trinkets, such as scissors, knives, mirrors and bells, which had proved popular with the natives. The merchants went directly to the great chieftain of the tribes in the Tierra de Guerra, a war-like person, highly respected and feared by all. At the end of the day's trading, one of the merchants called for a tepenastle, an Indian stringed instrument, and the group proceeded to sing all the verses they had learned. The novelty of the situation, the harmony of instrument and voices, and the new doctrine—especially the statement that the idols they worshipped were demons and that their human sacrifices were bad—excited great wonder and admiration among the Indians.

'For the succeeding eight nights the merchants repeated their per-

formance, gladly acceding to requests from the audience to sing some well-liked part over again. When the Indians wanted to know more, they were told that only the friars could instruct them. But what were friars? The merchants thereupon described them: men dressed in black and white robes, unmarried, their hair cut in a special fashion—men who wanted neither gold, feathers nor precious stones, and who day and night sang the praises of their Lord before beautiful images in churches. Only these holy men—not even the great lords of Spain—could instruct the Indians, and the friars would come most willingly if invited. The chieftain was content with all that he had been told and sent his younger brother to ask the friars to come and teach them, instructing him, however, to observe secretly whether the friars behaved as well as the merchants alleged’.

It was friar Luis Cáncer who was chosen to visit the chieftain and he succeeded in convincing him. In spite of powerful Spanish detractors the Las Casas experiment enjoyed official support. Various Indian chieftains were converted and asked by the Crown to participate in the conversion of neighbouring tribes, for which they received coats-of-arms! Tuzulutlán, Tierra de Guerra, the Land of War, was officially christened Tierra de Verapaz, the Land of True Peace. Unfortunately, as Hanke writes:

‘The end of the experiment is chronicled in a sad letter sent by the friars to the Council of the Indies on May 14, 1556. They were writing, says the report, in order that the King might clearly understand what had happened. For years the friars had worked strenuously despite the great heat and hardness of the land—they had destroyed idols, built churches and won souls. But always ‘the devil was vigilant’ and finally he stirred up the pagan priests who called in some neighbouring infidel Indians to help provoke a revolt. The friars and their followers were burned out of their homes and some thirty were killed by arrows. Two of the friars were murdered in the church and one sacrificed before a pagan idol. . . . Subsequently the King ordered the punishment of the revolting Indians (sic), the Land of True Peace became even poorer, and the possibility of winning the Indians by peaceful means alone faded away’.¹²

If the Devil was vigilant, so was the good Bishop; but as Wagner says of the years 1544 to 1547 when he was active in his bishopric, his ‘letters to Prince Philip are a running commentary on his disheartening experience as a bishop’.¹³ He returned to the Peninsula to defend the Indian cause at Court, and it certainly needed defending, because Dr Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, Charles V’s chaplain and chronicler had produced a treatise in elegant Latin with the title *Democrates alter, sive de justis belli causis apud Indos*. Sepúlveda, educated in Italy and one of the great humanists of his day, argued on the basis of Aristotle and the Bible in favour of the inferiority of the Indian. The ensuing discussion led to the famous disputation of Valladolid of August–September, 1550, the appointed judges being the three great Dominican

¹²L. Hanke, *Justice*, 78–81.

¹³Wagner and Parish, *op. cit.*, 270.

theologians, Domingo de Soto, Melchor Cano and Bartolomé Carranza, the Franciscan Bernardino de Arévalo, councillors of the Indies and some bishops, making a total of fifteen judges in all. The main aim of both disputants was similar in that both were Aristotelians; Las Casas tried to show that Aristotelian classifications of natural slaves were inapplicable to the Indians, Sepúlveda arguing that they were. The fifteen jurists, theologians and councillors were divided. A new junta met months later in 1551 with the same result, the modern opponents of Las Casas making great play on the fact that not one of the three Dominicans pronounced publicly in his favour.¹⁴

The final years were not years of rest. He had created many enemies. His intemperate language and his threats of divine punishment alienated many. The bitter and sarcastic letter of the venerable Franciscan, Toribio de Motolinía, to the Emperor Charles V, dated January 2, 1555, shows that Las Casas did not even have the support of all the friars who loved the Indians as much as he did :

‘For he [Las Casas] thinks that he alone is right and everybody else is wrong, for he is also saying quite literally the following words : “All the conquerors have been robbers, kidnappers and the most evil and cruel men that have ever been. . .”. And I am astonished that Your Majesty and the members of your Councils have been able to put up with such a tedious, uneasy and importunate person. . .’.¹⁵

So Las Casas continued the struggle and his final years were spent writing. It is to these years that we owe the completion of his most serious works. Back in 1542, in order to influence opinion in favour of reform, Las Casas had produced an extraordinary piece of propaganda that was to become a principal pillar of the *leyenda negra* or black legend of Spain’s role in world affairs. This *Very Brief Account of the Destruction of the Indies* has had a very long bibliographical history in all the major European languages. The celebrated Latin edition, containing seventeen plates illustrating the alleged atrocities committed by the conquerors, drawn by Jodocus a Winghe and engraved by Theodore de Bry, was printed at Frankfort in 1598 under the title *Narratio regionum Indicarum per Hispanos quosdam devastatorum verissima*. Fortunately for Las Casas’ reputation as a historian, much more sober are the works he finished in the final years of his life, particularly his *Apologetica historia* and his *Historia de las Indias*, which two books, as Wagner says : ‘were the fulfilment of a single great project begun long ago in his early monastery days—to write the entire history and description of the Indies’.¹⁶

¹⁴Ramón Menéndez Pidal, *El Padre Las Casas: su doble personalidad* (Madrid, 1963), 216-217.

¹⁵Toribio Motolinía, O.F.M., *Memoriales e Historia de los Indios de la Nueva España*, BAE, CCXL (Madrid, 1970), 337.

¹⁶Wagner and Parish, *op. cit.*, 195. With reference to the *Brevisima Relación de la Destrucción de las Indias*, I had the good fortune to find that the University of Leeds’ Library copy of Hanke’s *Justice* happens to be the late Prof. E. Allison Peers’ own personal copy, with his own marginal comments in pencil. I think it is worth recording that his comment on Hanke’s assessment that: ‘No one today would defend the statistics Las Casas gave, but few would deny that there was considerable truth in his main charges’ (p. 89), is reduced to one heavily punctuated word: ‘What?!’

Clearly, such a controversial figure as Las Casas was also going to have a long but somewhat chequered bibliographical history, but it is fair to say, I think, that scholarly interest in him has only really flowered in the twentieth century. However, the image that emerges is somewhat disjointed if not fragmented, and Helen Rand Parish explains why :

'The answer lies partly in the fact that these other eminent scholars were students of institutions and ideas, and not primarily biographers. Most of them have been interested in interpreting Casas¹⁷ according to a particular point of view. Dr Hanke's¹⁸ main concern was the theoretical background of the reform movement, and he portrayed Casas in that light. Professor Giménez Fernández¹⁹ was busy rebuilding the corrupt Flemish court [of Charles V] and the venal colonial bureaucracy, and he placed Casas in that setting. There were pro-Casas writers, as was Father Manuel Martínez,²⁰ who wanted to vindicate his fellow Dominican. Notable in the opposite camp, the 'debunkers', have been Professor Marcel Bataillon,²¹ so intent on the ideological tapestry of the age that he belittles Casas' role as missionary and bishop and reformer; and most recently Menéndez Pidal,²² who has tarnished his own great reputation by an attack on Casas as a paranoid. Serving as a bridge between the two groups, Juan Pérez de Tudela Bueso²³ has made a valuable summary of much of this interpretative work, and added expositions of his own'.²⁴ Naturally, this resumé does not include those historians who have tackled the subject from other points of view. Americo Castro is not mentioned. Angel Losada, for instance, who is reduced to a mention in a footnote, studied the life and career of Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, and he protests bitterly and somewhat hopefully :

'As time goes by the figure of Las Casas gets smaller whilst Ginés de Sepúlveda's gets proportionately bigger. And it is about time that justice was done to us. It is sad that after such a long time, when the works of Las Casas (which are anti-Spanish when all is said and done) have had the honour of several reprintings, whilst those of Sepúlveda have re-

¹⁷Parish explains this usage in the following manner: 'Though the whole world says "Las Casas", Wagner alone stubbornly said "Casas". . .' (p. xviii), all of which is not strictly accurate because Prof. Giménez Fernández also uses the 'Casas' form, which Las Casas himself did.

¹⁸Lewis Hanke, *op. cit.* (Philadelphia, 1949), as well as, *Bartolomé de las Casas, Bookman, Scholar and Propagandist* (Philadelphia, 1952), later translated into execrable 'Spanglish' by the aptly named Antonio Hernández Travieso (*travieso* = naughty), under the title *Bartolomé de las Casas. Pensador político, historiador, antropólogo* (Buenos Aires, 1968), apparently, having previously appeared in Havana in 1949.

¹⁹Manuel Giménez Fernández, *Bartolomé de las Casas, I: Delegado de Cisneros para la reformación de las Indias, 1516-1517* (Sevilla, 1953); and later *II: Capellán de S. M. Carlos I, Poblador de Cumaná, 1517-1523* (Sevilla, 1960).

²⁰Manuel María Martínez OP, *Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, el gran calumniado* (Madrid, 1955), and, *Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, padre de América: estudio biográfico crítico* (Madrid, 1958).

²¹Marcel Bataillon, *Etudes sur Bartolomé de las Casas* (Paris, 1965).

²²Ramón Menéndez Pidal, *op. cit.*, of which Parish says stingingly (p. xviii), in a footnote: 'Menéndez Pidal suffers from the familiar madness that afflicts some patriotic Spaniards at the mere mention of Casas' name. . .'

²³Preliminary study to Bartolomé de las Casas, *Obras*, BAE, XCV (Madrid, 1957), ix-clxxxviii.

²⁴Wagner and Parish, *op. cit.*, xvii-xviii.

mained forgotten until our days'.²⁵ Even the non-specialist gets the feel of the bitterness that this subject still generates, in the remark of Demetrio Ramos, when he says :

'Giménez Fernández . . . in his praiseworthy Lascasian vindication is determined to vituperate all those who are opposed to him'.²⁶ From this point of view, the saddest figure of all was to be the late Don Ramón Menéndez Pidal, President of the Royal Academy of Language and of the Royal Academy of History, and Spain's leading medievalist. He produced a vicious attack on Las Casas in 1940, and was to choose the first number of the Falangist review, *Escorial*, in which to publish his views. Later he was to explain that he had come to see Las Casas' fault not so much as a moral one as an intellectual one. In the bitter discussion that ensued, following the best academic traditions, the most concentrated venom and scorn was reserved for the footnotes. So that it is no surprise that Don Ramón's footnotes are a real give-away, if a give-away is necessary. For example, he explains his participation in the Falangist *Escorial* in the following manner :

'The suggestion came from the only ones who, at a very difficult time in my life, in the Spain of those years, showed themselves to be my friends. I am saying this to answer a deliberate insinuation of my admired friend L. Hanke in his *Biography* (sic) of Las Casas, number 748'.²⁷

Even more telling is the later footnote :

'Giménez [Fernández] is unchangeable even down to the smallest detail. Bataillon corrects the phrase *deus et machina* (*et* instead of *ex*) which he likes to use so frequently in volume I; nevertheless, the author does not give in; in volume II we again find repeated the unfortunate *deus et machina* on page 1087, and before, more times. With regard to me, I regret, in that volume II, the notes 670 and 964'.²⁸

The Dominican historian, Fr Vernancio Diego Carro, is even more explicit in his footnotes :

'Among the latest writers alluded to there appears, unfortunately for him, R. Menéndez Pidal, admired in other fields, but who in his old age has decided to plough his own furrow (*meter la hoz*) 'in a field that has always been foreign to him', and has come 'terribly unstuck' in his diatribe against Las Casas. There is no need to bother about him; specialists do not take him seriously or allow him any authority what-

²⁵ Angel Losada, *Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda* (Madrid, 1949), 256. The late and lovable Don Americo Castro, I wish to deal with in a separate article.

²⁶ Demetrio Ramos, 'El problema de la fundación del Real Consejo de las Indias y la fecha de su creación' in *El Consejo de las Indias en el siglo XVI* (Valladolid, 1970), 32.

²⁷ Menéndez Pidal must be referring to the *Bibliography*, i.e., Lewis Hanke and Manuel Giménez Fernández, *Bartolomé de las Casas, 1474-1566: Bibliografía crítica y cuerpo de materiales para el estudio de su vida, escritos, actuación y polémicas que suscitaron durante cuatro siglos* (Santiago, Chile, 1954).

²⁸ Note 670 refers to the article in *Escorial* as 'his opportunist essay'; note 964 is much more patronising or ruthless, according to taste, with phrases like, 'even taking into account the absolving excuse of his enthusiasm, the enthusiasm of a neophyte'. But the hardest knock of this note for Don Ramón must have been the comparison or rather coupling with 'Carbia and Anzoategui and other such writers, who have had recourse to such means to acquire a name for themselves in certain chauvinist circles'. See, M. Giménez Fernández, *op. cit.* II (Sevilla, 1960), 208 and 273.

soever in this subject. One of them, M. Giménez Fernández, has pulverised (*triturado*), page by page, his unfortunate lampoon. . . . With regard to the theological and juridical aspects, *a propos* Vitoria and company, we can only say that the field is as closed to Menéndez Pidal, as though it were the book with seven seals'.²⁹

Here, it seems to me, we have one of the major difficulties not only of Lascasian studies in particular, but also Spanish history in general, that is, that historians, or, possibly more accurately, the interpreters of Spanish history, reveal to us more about themselves than they do about Spanish history. Far be it for me to presume to be the exception proving the rule; in any case, such airs are ill-becoming to the writer of modest article-essays.

Bartolomé de las Casas was the product of his age; trite but nonetheless true. He was also, in a strange if not perverse way, 'a simple man' in the way that John XXIII was 'a simple man'. Now, clearly, unless one is light in the head, this does not mean that 'good Pope John' was still the peasant boy, Angelo Roncalli, from Sotto il Monte, even after a brilliant career in the papal diplomatic service, and neither does such an appellation belittle or deny the historical fact that he was a magnificently astute political animal. Survival at the top for any length of time—even just getting to the top—in any sphere of human activity and endeavour requires staying power. Exactly the same must be said about Las Casas, once we get rid of the blinkers, whether they be the liberal variety of Hanke, the Catholic variety of Giménez Fernández or the nationalistic variety of Menéndez Pidal; neither saint nor sinner, but a good, honest-to-God operator.

Obviously, it is hopeless to try to get any sort of overall view unless we try to place Bartolomé de las Casas in his period. 1492 in an Iberian context was not singular solely because of the discovery of America, it was also the year in which Granada fell and the Jews, who would not embrace Catholicism, were expelled. In other words, the discovery of America was not an isolated event; it was not just a thing that happened. On the contrary, it can be seen and has been seen as the culminating point of a particular aspect of Iberian history, namely, the Reconquest.

Throughout the Middle Ages the three main religious groups of Christians, Moors and Jews, had co-existed in the Peninsula. The steady advance of the Christians brought with it the collapse of the religious equilibrium. The fifteenth century saw a marked rise in anti-Jewish feeling coinciding,³⁰ not surprisingly, with the determination to liquidate the Moorish kingdom of Granada. Success posed the problem of assimilation of powerful and politically dangerous religious minorities. Thus we see that the problem of evangelisation has been an Iberian problem long before it became an American one. It is against this background that one must understand the role of the Religious Orders in the Peninsula, and afterwards in America.

²⁹Venancio Diego Carro OP, *op. cit.*, 237-238.

³⁰Albert A. Sicoff, *Les controverses des statuts de 'pureté de sang' en Espagne du XVe au XVIIe siècle* (Paris, 1960), *passim*.

The great Mendicant Orders were founded to reform the Church and to meet the threat of the prevalent heresies of Western Europe of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. In the Peninsula in the fifteenth century they were to be used against the religious minorities, and in the sixteenth century against the paganism of the New World. Menéndez Pidal claims that until Francisco de Vitoria lectured on the subject in Salamanca in 1539, everyone was convinced that Spanish dominion in the Indies was legally based on Alexander VI's Bull *Inter coetera* of May 4, 1493.³¹ What the Bull certainly did do was to make Their Catholic Majesties responsible for the spiritual welfare of the Indians. Thus, from the very beginning, the expeditions to the New World included evangelising contingents. The Council of the Indies, which was founded in March 1523, accepted Christianisation as a duty imposed by the Bull and insisted upon by the Crown.³² Of the three original missionary Orders the Franciscans, Dominicans and Mercedarians, the Council recognised the first two, and later included the Augustinians (1533), the Jesuits (1565) and the Carmelites (1582). However, the same Council refused the Hieronymites permission to engage in missionary activity in America and, from 1568, no longer regarded the Mercedarians as a missionary Order. Throughout the sixteenth century the Council of the Indies organised approximately 483 missionary expeditions, sending roughly 5,150 religious.³³

Bearing all this in mind, the decision of Las Casas to join the Order of Preachers in particular needs some sort of explanation. In the thirteenth century the Dominicans had soon replaced the Cistercians in the struggle against the Albigensian heretics and, consequently, played a leading part in the medieval Inquisition. The same Dominican weapons of learning, holiness and poverty were to be used in the Peninsula. When the Spanish Inquisition was founded in an attempt to resolve the problem posed by insincere conversions from Judaism, it was entrusted to the Dominicans, and as Henry Charles Lea has rightly observed: 'Although the Spanish Inquisition was founded for the suppression of crypto-Judaism, it promptly vindicated its jurisdiction over all aberrations from the faith'.³⁴ And this is where Lea gives us a very important clue, because unless we take into account the growth in power of the Religious Orders during this period, particularly of the Dominicans, it seems to me that the career of Las Casas remains incomprehensible.

³¹Ramón Menéndez Pidal, *op. cit.*, 118.

³²Pedro Borges Morán, 'El Consejo de Indias y el paso de misioneros a América durante el siglo XVI' in *El Consejo de las Indias en el siglo XVI* (Valladolid, 1970), 181-182.

³³Pedro Borges Morán, *op. cit.*, 183 and 188. The Carmelite historian, B. Velasco Bayón, in his preliminary study to P. Antonio Vázquez de Espinosa, *O. Carm., Compendio y descripción de las Indias Occidentales*, BAE, CCXXXI (Madrid, 1969), x-xii, says that it was the Royal *Cédula* of March 17, 1553, that entrusted the conversion and instruction of the Indians to the Orders of St Dominic, St Francis and St Augustine alone. That the other Orders were expressly excluded in 1560, in spite of Adrian VI's *Omnimoda* of 1522; only the Society of Jesus was allowed to join the ranks of the other three Mendicant Orders in 1560.

³⁴Henry Charles Lea, *A History of the Inquisition of Spain*, IV (New York, 1907), 138.

Under the Spanish Hapsburgs the Dominicans always held the Royal Confessional. The Confessors Royal not only had seats on the Supreme Council of the Inquisition, but they were also on the very influential select committee of the all-powerful Council of Castille known as the *Cámara* or Chamber of Castile, which means that they had a strong say also in both ecclesiastical and royal policy and patronage. Add to this their influence at the major Castilian universities through their colleges of San Esteban at Salamanca, San Gregorio at Valladolid and Santo Tomás at Alcalá de Henares, as well as their interest in the missions, both Andalusian and American, then both Las Casas' choice of Order and the way he operated becomes more readily explicable. From this point of view, it should not be too rash to conclude that Las Casas had tried to go it alone, failed and then decided to operate within the Dominican tradition. Marcel Bataillon has pointed out in this respect the significance of his choice of San Gregorio in Valladolid as a base,³⁵ and the whole of Fr Carro's study emphasises the importance of his links with San Esteban in Salamanca.³⁶ So, Bartolomé de las Casas must not be seen as a solitary champion. Indeed, he was not even an initiator: his Whitsuntide sermon of 1514 had a Dominican precedent.

On the Sunday before the Christmas of 1511, the Dominican, Antonio de Montesinos, preaching to a congregation of colonists in Hispaniola, chose as his text: 'I am a voice crying in the wilderness', and gave a sermon that was to go down in Spanish American history as the first public protest against the Indian policy. The Dominican's message was frighteningly direct:

'In order to make your sins against the Indians known to you I have come up on this pulpit, I who am a voice of Christ crying in the wilderness of this island, and therefore it behoves you to listen, not with careless attention, but with all your heart and senses, so that you may hear it; for this is going to be the strangest voice that you ever heard, the harshest and hardest and most awful and most dangerous that ever you expected to hear. . . . This voice says that you are in mortal sin, that you live and die in it, for the cruelty and tyranny you use in dealing with these innocent people. Tell me by what right or justice do you keep these Indians in such a cruel and horrible servitude? On what authority have you waged a detestable war against these people, who dwell quietly and peacefully in their own lands? . . . Why do you keep them so oppressed and weary, not giving them enough to eat nor taking care of them in their illness? For with the excessive work you demand of them they fall ill and die, or rather you kill them with your desire to extract and acquire gold every day. And what care do you take that they should be instructed in religion? . . . Are these not men? Have they not rational souls? Are you not bound to love them as you love yourselves? . . . Be certain that, in such a state as this, you can no more be saved than the Moors or Turks'.

The storm of protest from the Spanish colonial establishment was

³⁵M. Bataillon, *Etudes sur Bartolomé de las Casas* (Paris, 1965), 316, refers to San Gregorio as 'the best nursery of spiritual Dominicans'!

³⁶Venancio Diego Carro OP, *op. cit.*, *passim*.

transmitted to the Dominican superior, Pedro de Córdoba. On the following Sunday, Fr Montesinos preached again; this time on the disquieting text 'Suffer me a little, and I will show thee that I have yet to speak on God's behalf'. Rather than explaining away his previous sermon with dialectic subtleties, he proceeded to belabor the colonists anew, with even more passion than before, warning them that the friars would no more receive them for confession and absolution than if they were so many highway robbers. And that they might write home what they pleased, to whom they pleased'. Both Ferdinand the Catholic and Alonso de Loaysa, Dominican Provincial of Castile, threatened stern measures,³⁷ but the friars were not to be silenced.

It would be silly of me to suggest that there was no division of opinion among the Orders and even within the Orders, whether in the Peninsula or in the New Continent. The case of Motolinía previously mentioned was not unique. For instance, the first Archbishop of Granada, the Hieronymite, Alonso de Talavera, a *converso* or New Christian, was against the forcible conversion of the Moors, but he was overruled by the Archbishop of Toledo, the Franciscan, Jiménez de Cisneros, an Old Christian. In the case of the celebrated Friar Bernardino de Sahagún, Professor Ballesteros-Gaibrois makes the point that, in spite of great opposition within the Franciscan Order, he persisted in his, what to us now seem to be, incredibly enlightened missionary views.³⁸ Within the Dominicans, Domingo de Betanzos, Las Casa's own counsellor, apparently, until he was dying regarded the Indians as *bestias*. Indeed, his case is both instructive and enlightening with regard to how the Order operated.

In the convent of San Felipe in Sucre in Bolivia the following authentic notarial account was discovered :

'In the very noble city of Valladolid on September 13, in the year of Our Lord 1549, before me, Antonio Canseco, notary public of Your Majesties, being in the monastery of San Pablo of the Order of Preachers, in a room in that monastery there was an old man with head and beard shaven, lying in bed apparently ill but in his right mind, called Friar Domingo de Betanzos. And he handed over to me, the aforesaid notary public, a sheet of paper on which he told me he had written and declared certain matters, which concerned his conscience, and which related especially to the affairs of the Indies, which manuscript and declaration he delivered to me'. As Hanke comments :

'Now on his deathbed he believed that he had erred "through not knowing their language or because of some other ignorance" and formally retracted the statements in the memorial. . . . His Dominican brothers, who doubtless were largely responsible for the whole episode, hastened to make sure that his final statement was made public and that the Council of the Indies received a duly certified copy'.³⁹ In my

³⁷Lewis Hanke, *Justice*, 17-18.

³⁸M. Ballesteros-Gaibrois, 'Fray Bernardino de Sahagún y su obra', in *Folia humanística*, III (1965), 43.

³⁹L. Hanke, *Justice*, 12, and the original Spanish text of the notary in the same author's, *Bartolomé de las Casas* (Buenos Aires, 1968), 15-16.

opinion, this is where we can see how the Dominican tradition, or should it be the Dominican connection, operated. This is the point that Menéndez Pidal missed. It was not necessary for the Dominicans of the Junta of Valladolid to vote for Las Casas to be the real victor of the disputations of Valladolid. Father Francisco de Vitoria, the great intellectual luminary of the Order, had already lectured on the Indian question at Salamanca.⁴⁰ The Emperor's Confessor, Domingo de Soto, had also lectured at Salamanca and approved Las Casas's doctrine.⁴¹ Carranza, the confessor of the future Philip II, was a personal friend and had very close links with the whole San Gregorio set.⁴² It was not a question of agreeing with every single point of Las Casas's argument. The main points—the rationality of the Indians and the supreme responsibility and obligation of His Catholic Majesty not the Pope⁴³—had already been agreed upon. So it is much more a question of understanding how a well placed and a very well connected pressure group operated in the Catholic Monarchy, rather than confusing it with a modern monolithic political party exacting total ideological conformity. Giovanni Papini, I think it was, who pointed out somewhere, that the Spaniards were the first people to govern by means of paper. Undoubtedly, the political and administrative needs of the Catholic Monarchy encouraged and fostered the development of conciliar government. Where Las Casas was superb was in his exploitation of the new system: the bombarding of the authorities with memorials and petitions. He was a pioneer in the difficult art of preparing and organising opinion. This was how, it seems to me, the Dominicans operated, and Las Casas was one of their star operators. Fr Venancio Carro has made the point of Las Casas' debt to the Dominican tradition so forcefully—indeed, as he himself recognises, almost too forcefully—that it requires no further elaboration from me, except for an aspect, understandably perhaps, not touched upon by him.⁴⁴ Here, I am referring to the fact that the very existence of a Dominican tradition meant that Las Casas was to benefit historiographically from the labours of fellow Dominican historians, like Friar Antonio de Remesal.

The Jesuit historian, Carmelo Sáenz de Santa María, among others,

⁴⁰The best recent account of Vitoria's doctrine in English is to be found in Bernice Hamilton, *Political Thought in Sixteenth-Century Spain* (Oxford, 1963), who makes the point (p. 169), that 'Vitoria's treatises on the Indians are, of course, a classical statement of the rights of backward peoples to be treated as men. His final summary of the duties of an imperial power is both so cogent and so far-seeing that in this century we have seen colony after colony achieving independence before it could be put into practice'.

⁴¹Venancio Diego Carro OP, *op. cit.*, 115.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 112-113.

⁴³The major Dominican school of thought, and the Jesuits—Francisco de Vitoria, Domingo de Soto, Las Casas, Acosta, Covarrubias, Vázquez de Menchaca, Domingo Báñez, Luis de Molina—were all against the universal temporal sovereignty of Pope or Emperor; whilst Palacios Rubios, Sepúlveda, Gregorio López de Bobadilla defended the Pope's claims. See Miguel Ángel Ochoa Brun's preliminary study to Juan de Solórzano y Pereyra, *Política Indiana*, BAE, CCLII (Madrid, 1972), lii.

⁴⁴Venancio Diego Carro OP, *op. cit.*, 117, says literally, that 'fortunately for Las Casas, the theological-juridical tradition on which he was raised . . . was manifestly triumphant. . .'. Carro's stress on Las Casas's debt to the Dominican Order is to be found on page 220, as well as the admission that this might take away some of the personal merit from Las Casas.

has shown, most convincingly, that the traditional account of the Guatemalan Verapaz experiment is based on the history of the Dominican, Antonio de Remesal, which, in turn, is based on an account sent to him by another Dominican, Salvador de San Cipriano. After his close analysis of Chapters XV and XVI of Remesal's history, it is difficult not to accept Sáenz de Santa María's description of the whole traditional account as a 'pantomime'. To mention just a few inconsistencies, Luis Cáncer, the future martyr of Florida, could not have been in Guatemala when the experiment began; neither Las Casas, Cáncer, Angulo nor Ladrada (or Andrada) knew any of the Guatemalan languages.⁴⁵

Clearly, the whole question of Las Casas needs a good dose of demythologising. However, this does not mean that it is necessary to take sides in the twentieth century Lascasian slanging match. Rather, we have to realise, with true historical detachment, that his was a sixteenth century Messianism as powerful as Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo's.⁴⁶ Furthermore, his was a compassion for the Indians as totally Christian as any today. The French Dominican, Fr André-Vincent has recently shown how the thought of Thomas Aquinas was made by Las Casas the intellectual foundation of a basic intuition that was to give meaning to the whole of his life; for as Père André-Vincent says:

'Une intuition fondamentale traverse la vie de Las Casas: elle est sous-jacente à toute son oeuvre; évoquée souvent d'un mot, elle jaillit parfois sous sa plume en traits de feu avec l'image du Christ outragé, flagellé, crucifié dans les Indiens. La vérité de cette vision est celle du Corps mystique dont les païens sont membres par l'appel du Christ'.⁴⁷

For the Mystical Body of Christ was the reality for Las Casas, whether in the sphere of evangelisation or politics.⁴⁸ His life, thought and work were Christocentric. The mortal sin of oppression was real and it was the sin of the Catholic Monarchy as a whole. God would not be mocked. Here it the basic ambiguity: the ambiguity of love and hate. For this reason it is essential to see him as a prophetic, sixteenth-century figure of an ambiguity and irony that, from an historical point of view, are quite sobering, if not frightening. It is not just a matter of rhetoric, as we may see if we pay heed to David M. Davidson:

'Although the crown soon made concessions to the colonists' demands for workers by sanctioning forced wage labor (the *repartimiento*), and by failing or refusing to thwart the spread of debt peonage, it hoped to fill the need with African slaves. Royal decrees throughout

⁴⁵Camelo Sáenz de Santa María SJ, 'Remesal, la Verapaz y Fray Bartolomé de las Casas' in *Estudios Lascasianos* (Sevilla, 1966), 329-349, particularly, 344-348. However, not all our illusions are shattered. The Dominicans did use music. Sáenz de Santa María not only comments in his introductory study to Fray Antonio de Remesal OP, *Historia general de las Indias Occidentales y particular de la gobernación de Chiapa y Guatemala*, BAE, CLXXV (Madrid, 1964), 12, on Juan Cabezas Altamirano OP, Bishop of La Habana, and later of Guatemala, who had a negro orchestra in his service, but also wonders if they did not introduce the *marimba* into Guatemala.

⁴⁶Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, *op. cit.*, 179-180.

⁴⁷Ph.—I André-Vincent OP, 'L'intuition fondamentale de Las Casas et la doctrine de Saint Thomas', in *Nouvelle Revue Théologique*, 96 (1974), 944.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 952.

the late sixteenth century prohibited the use of Indians in certain industries considered detrimental to their health, especially sugar processing and cloth production, and ordered their replacement by Negro slaves. African labor was also encouraged for the mines'. The result being: 'It is now fairly certain that in the period 1519-1650 the area [of Mexico] received at least 120,000 slaves, or two thirds of all the Africans imported into the Spanish possessions in America.'⁴⁹

What a terrible, sick irony of history that because of the very success of the 'Apostle of the Indians', Las Casas and his beloved Indian of the sixteenth century should be replaced by St Peter Claver and his beloved Negro in the seventeenth; and how fitting, in a perversely, contradictory Christian way, that the Jesuit 'Apostle of the Negroes' himself should die so poorly tended in Cartagena de las Indias.⁵⁰

⁴⁹David M. Davidson, *op. cit.*, 83.

⁵⁰*Butler's Lives of the Saints*, III (London, 1956), 519-524.



AN APPEAL TO ALL GOVERNMENTS

We should like to express the humble and sincere desire that in this present Holy Year, in accordance with the tradition of previous Jubilees, the proper authorities of the different nations should consider the possibility of wisely granting an amnesty to prisoners, as a witness to clemency and equity, especially to those who have given sufficient proof of moral and civic rehabilitation, or who may have been caught up in political and social upheavals too immense for them to be held fully responsible.

POPE PAUL VI.