

Oppression Then and Now: a reflection on Fr. Bartolomé de las Casas OP (1484—1566)

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It is difficult if not impossible to live hopefully the fulness of human life without men and women of vision. But the term 'vision' is, perhaps, too often carelessly used.

Vision is concerned with a better possible future. And it depends upon both imagination and creativity. Yet those who possess it, or are considered to possess it, must be inhabitants not only of what is possible, but also, and more importantly, reflective upon, sensitive to, critical and understanding of, their past and present. Indeed, it is their very rootedness in and conversation with both past and present which essentially ratifies any claim to vision. A paradox rests, therefore, in the fact that men and women of vision, though about a future, are only about that future because of their critical understanding of a past and a radical belongingness to and immersion in a present.

The woman and man of vision are, to be sure, creative and imaginative. But they are, more often than not, wholly unconscious of being people of vision. Dominic and Francis, for example, turned out to be men of vision not because they saw a new future, but heard the cry of a present demand and measured it against a past. For us, then, the men and women of history whom we perceive or name people of vision become 'classical symbols' in our understanding of and quest into the complicated and demanding questions of our own times.

The term 'classical symbols' I adopt from David Tracy's *The Analogical Imagination*, where he says that what makes a text 'classical' is 'its claim to attention on the ground that an event of understanding proper to finite human beings has here found expression.... Every classic lives only if it finds readers willing to be provoked by its claim to attention'¹. The implication here is that the symbol has articulated timeless questions in a particular time, but it only continues to live because others in a new time, having been provoked by the symbol, will continue to ask the same questions in the light of the demands and

aspirations of their own time. Thus the symbol is not kept alive by simply being repeated, but by being forever interpreted.

Dominic and Francis were classic symbols. They have, in varying ways, powerfully articulated timeless questions in the light of their times. We call them men of vision. We must not claim too much for them, for they were in and out of their times. At the same time, we must keep them alive in our collective memory in a living historical conversation rooted in discernment and interpretation. They took hold of the past, immersed themselves in a living experience of their present, decoded from all that some of the timeless questions of humanity, and humbly suggested a possible and perhaps better future by word and action. As other generations attempt to understand or tease out the timeless questions of human existence from the flowing and shifting experience of their times, the woman and man of vision become their encouragement, resource and, at certain historical junctures, their defence.

A man of vision

In this sense, Bartolomé De Las Casas was a man of vision, who produced classical texts, dealt with the timeless questions of the human dignity and liberation of the oppressed. This was not done without immense personal suffering. And, perhaps above all things, it was done not only out of an inherited theory, but also out of a living experience. In his own words, he had seen the 'scourged Christ of the Indies'.

We must never claim too much for the man or woman of the past. But, I believe it right to suggest Las Casas is an intimate part of the significance and inevitability of what we call today Liberation Theology. He posits the fact, at least implicitly, that Liberation Theology was not born in the 20th century and the era of Vatican II, but in the 16th century, when the Council of Trent was summoning the Church to another era. It carries a timeless question. While not claiming too much for him, we must not see him as an isolated individual, divorced from the philosophical and theological pursuit of our times; we must not see him irrelevant either to our praise or critique of Liberation Theology and of the Church in their respective attempts to understand the oppressive forces of the political, the economic, the social, and the cultural, face to face with the poor of history. And, perhaps, we must see in him the inevitable tension and dialectic ready to rise when Church and State, the theological and political, the varying interpretations of the evangelical vision of Jesus, face each other in the painful process of self-understanding and discernment.

The historical context

In 1492 Columbus crossed the Atlantic, believed himself to be on the coast of India but was in fact elsewhere. The elsewhere he called the West Indies. On the traveller's return in the March of 1493, the Spanish court of Ferdinand and Isabella, patrons of the expedition, exploded with joy.

Rome, too, rejoiced. New fields were to be opened for the missionaries of the Gospel. But what nations were to exercise temporal jurisdiction over the newly discovered lands or those yet to be discovered? Venice and Genoa now surrendered their 13th and 14th century seafaring supremacy to Spain and Portugal. By the end of the 16th century what our school textbooks arrogantly used to describe as 'the New World' had been colonised.

On the early voyages, since evangelisation had a high profile, were first Dominican, and then Franciscan, and later Jesuit, missionaries. Indeed, it has been suggested that by 1564, if not earlier, there were somewhere in the region of 800 Mendicants in Mexico. One was faced with a political and social movement drawing upon the sources of power located in three major institutions of society: the Economic, the Military, and the Church.

The tension of gospel, market and war

'Inevitably', according to John H. Elliot, 'the two opposing traditions—that of merchant and that of warrior—came into violent conflict' in this venture of discovery². If this was so between warrior and merchant, we can imagine the serious theological conflict which would emerge with the addition of the missionary.

On the Sunday before Christmas Day 1511, on the island of Hispaniola, a Dominican by the name of Antonio de Montesinos preached a sermon which was to have far-reaching effects.

Tell me, by what right or justice do you keep these Indians in such cruel and horrible servitude? ... Why do you leave them so oppressed and weary, not giving them enough to eat, nor taking care of them in their illnesses? (Because of the work imposed upon them) they fall ill and die, or rather you kill them with your desire to extract and acquire gold every day. Are these not men? Have they not rational souls? Are you not bound to love them as you love yourselves.³

The colonists were outraged. Las Casas made these words and views his own. Four years later he dramatically began a new life.

He had been in the New World as colonist and priest for over a decade. But at that point a new life commenced. He became not only a missionary but also a controversialist. His intellectual output was vast. And no matter what controversies there may have been, and may continue to this day, the essence of his life was that of protagonist for the poor. For it needs to be remembered that the rage engendered took root not only in the colonist's heart, but in the European world itself and in the minds and hearts of European philosophers and theologians.

Where your heart is, there is your treasure

The plundering of the earth is intimately bound up with the plundering of the human spirit. And it needs always to be said such plundering not

only tears apart the life of the oppressed, but also that of the oppressor. The liberation of the oppressed is the liberation of the oppressor. One may remark in passing, the distinction between spiritual and material poverty is too often an escape hatch, not only from my obligations to the poor of this world, but also from the very needs of my own growth in human and Christian maturity. This interaction of the liberation process was at the centre of Las Casas' work.

I believe debates about the nature and validity of varying theologies will always be part of the Christian quest to understand faith. It is in this sense that Liberation Theology has taken a place in our theological 'conversation.' But there is always grave danger of losing the essential point, namely that we are discussing the poor. What is called 'option for the poor' is not a phrase to be harnessed to certain apostolic thrusts. It is not some kind of specialisation. Certainly it is not about the creation of a new school of theological professionals.

It is more about the construction of a Fundamental Theology born of very distinct and specific sources. That is to say, our givenness to the powerless of this world and the power of the powerless continue to reveal the Golgotha and Risen Risen God and become, therefore, motives and proofs for the ever-unfolding credibility of the Christian Community as a true source of God's Revelation.⁴ But even at a deeper level it is concerned with the revelation of God, positively and negatively, in the lives of the oppressed and the oppressors. In the terms of the poor it is about what Casas described as sight of the 'scourged Christ' in the life of the Amerindian. And perhaps, we should also take into account that a proof for the revealed God, in our own times, more often comes into confrontation with idolatry than with what we identify as the forces of atheism. In other words, women and men name the idols of gold, war, oppression, and consumerism, as the forces which have devoured the meaning of God and the process of Christian belief. Indeed, they are calling into question and confronting a perverse definition of God. They set themselves against spiritual and material plundering. For in this idolatrous paradigm the God of Golgotha and Galilee is manipulated, forced to keep alive ideologies and institutions which do nothing but prosper the powerful and offer motivation for a spiritually paralysing individualism. It is, thus, not a question of how or when or whether the wounded and the powerless and the marginalised become part of our political and theological agenda; it is, rather, a question of whether there can be any worthwhile economic, political or theological agenda which does not start with the powerless.

In 1550 a debate took place between Las Casas and Juan de Sepúlveda. The latter was a leading philosopher of the day, devoted to the Aristotelian principle that some are born slaves, others are born masters. The debate took place at Valladolid. Sepúlveda offered five arguments as the basis of his thesis. I think two texts can sum up their positions, though these immediate quotations are not from the text of the

debate. First Sepúlveda’;

The man rules over the woman, the adult over the child, the father over his children. That is to say, the most powerful and perfect rule over the weakest and most imperfect. Those who surpass the rest in prudence and intelligence, although not in physical strength, are by nature the masters. On the other hand, those who are dim-witted and mentally lazy, although they may be physically strong enough to fulfil all the necessary tasks, are by nature slaves. It is just and useful that it is this way. We even see it sanctioned in divine law itself, for it is in the Book of Proverbs: ‘He who is stupid will serve the Wise man’. And so it is with the barbarous and inhumane people (the Indians) who have no civil life and peaceful customs.... War against these barbarians can be justified not only on the basis of their paganism but even more so on their prodigious sacrifice of human victims ... and the impious cult of idols.... What is more appropriate and beneficial for these barbarians than to become subject to the rule of those whose wisdom, virtue, and religion have converted them from barbarians into civilised men.⁵

There were reasoned arguments offered by Las Casas to the contrary, arguments offered throughout his days. I content myself by offering the 28th Proposition of his Juridical Propositions:

The Devil could invent no worse pestilence to destroy all that world and to kill all the people there than the *repartimento* and *encomienda*, the institution used to distribute and entrust Indians to the Spaniards. This was like entrusting the Indians to a gang of devils or delivering herds of cattle to hungry wolves. (These systems were) the most cruel sort of tyranny that can be imagined, and it is most worthy of infernal damnation. The Indians were prevented from receiving the Christian faith and religion. The wretched and tyrannical Spanish ecomenderos worked the Indians night and day in the mines and in other personal services. They collected unbelievable tributes ... forced the Indians to carry burdens on their back for a hundred or two hundred leagues, as if they were less than beasts ...⁶

It has been said that Las Casas did not achieve the victory he sought. But this much must be said, the work of Las Casas did exercise influence in terms of the raising of consciousness at home and in the colonised world. In this manner he proved himself in solidarity with the oppressed, a solidarity for which he paid the price of personal suffering. And certainly the systems I have described collapsed around in 1549. It is true that oppression remained; in this context, however, it is worthwhile quoting the Argentine historian, Albert Salas:

The positive and optimistic posture of Las Casas opened wide

the doors to all the human possibilities of the American Indian. Las Casas did not find in them vices, defects, or abominations that were peculiarly and specifically their own; neither their infidelity nor their idolatry frightened him. On the contrary basis of their total rationality, he sought to gain for them, that human dignity which today none can deny them, although there are places where it continues to be a mere theoretical possibility. In this sense the task accomplished by Las Casas was profoundly useful, and I would say practical. Not practical in the sense that he himself imposed his ideas on the operative reality. Not at all. The efficacy of Las Casas, like that of all thinkers, was the greater the purer and more ideal was his thought. Doctrinaire men like Las Casas are truly effective in their sphere, from which they act upon reality, modifying it by their implacable criticism.⁷

Idealism versus realism

Las Casas has remained, and I suppose I will remain, a controversial figure. This is clear from the enormous literature which his life, work and writings have generated.

Idealist is a word often invoked to describe him.⁸ I suggest this will always be the price paid by all those who stand for a politics and a theology which attempts to see oppression and poverty through the eyes of the poor. In theological terms I think it is a word invoked to cast suspicion upon all those who actually think and act in order to follow through Jesus' view of the Kingdom to its logical conclusion.

Such denigration has, at least, the makings of an escape route from an evangelical conclusion, leaving the God of the poor up for grabs and the Kingdom of Jesus a soft option. It can be used as a term and concept which rubbishes the Christian activist and thinker who has the temerity to enter the world of the political, social, economic, and cultural critique. It attempts to remove debates about education, health, benefits, and care from the scrutiny of the theologian and the philosopher, not to mention the activism of the powerless themselves. Those who have seen the need in our times of bringing theological critiques into the political and the economic forum should, above all things, stay awake to catch the amateur theological thief who comes in the night of a so-called political and economic realism.

Of course, there may well have been ill-conceived ideas in some of Las Casas' thought and work. Perhaps the effort to set up self-supporting communes early in his life, between 1520—1521, is a case in point. But lack of risk too often pays deposits into the bank of a 'status quo' philosophy of life.

There is a peculiar sense in which men and women like Las Casas are in a no-win situation. Benjamin Keen, referring to the 19th century

critiques of Las Casas highlights this:

Conservatives, who often recalled the colonial social order with nostalgia, had no love for the man whose writings had contributed to its downfall. Liberals, impatient with the supposed backwardness of the Indian masses, tended to hold Las Casas and his clerical colleagues responsible for a paternalism that imposed a permanent tutelage upon the Indians and hindered them from developing a capitalist spirit of enterprise and culture.⁹

The second of these positions is not unconnected with that opinion found in certain critics of Las Casas: that once an inferior race comes into contact with a superior and civilised race, the inferior is bound to survive only on the principle of the survival of the fittest. If this shocks us, it should not surprise us. It should not because it is a principle not by any means dead in certain articulations of practical and speculative political philosophies. It is in the blood stream of that monster which carries the name of *racism*.

In fact, Las Casas' own attitude to negro slaves has been a lively subject of debate¹⁰. As I have previously remarked, one must not claim too much for any historical personality. From my own point of view, however, the most important reflection is that for the positions on this issue to be articulated an agitator had been present, had spoken and had acted. This is the crucial and critical fact to be held onto tenaciously. To be sure, I am not suggesting that the only thing that matters is that something is said and done; the 'how' of saying and the 'manner' of doing are important. But one does worry about major statements or disturbing actions being parenthesised or qualified out of existence. And to us of this generation, of this historical era, the problems Las Casas raised are not, to put it mildly, unfamiliar. And, indeed, neither are the words of his 19th century critics.

On being paranoid

I am particularly fascinated by a statement by Prescott accusing Las Casas of domination by a single idea, 'He is always pleading the cause of the persecuted native'.¹¹

This seems to suggest a certain paranoia in Las Casas. I can understand this. I really do believe that those who struggle for liberation and those who search for solidarity with that struggle do become somewhat paranoid. What do I mean? Well, when I read of certain massive urban regeneration schemes in my own Inner City area I immediately want to ask, 'Have you talked with the people?' I mention this example in passing. But it touches upon psychological attitudes endemic in a pervasive powerlessness. Pleading the cause of the powerless and the oppressed cannot be done too often because in us all there is a tendency to tidy things up and surrender to where the political, social, economic and cultural resources are controlled. It's quieter and

easier and superficially peaceful. Indeed, in recent days we have seen our brothers and sisters murdered by moonlight for refusing such quietude, ease and superficial peacefulness of life. Writes Gutierrez:

For Bartolomé de las Casas, salvation—that great, lifelong, concern of his, the ultimate motive for his missionary activity—was bound up with the establishment of social justice. And the link between the two was so profound, as he saw it, that he was led to invert the hierarchy posed by missionaries, on at least two points ... that (the powerful) were placing their own salvation in jeopardy by their behaviour towards the Indians. ... Secondly, Las Casas had the prophetic depth to see the Indians more as poor persons, in the gospel sense, than as heathen. ... His point of departure is the Indian—despised, exploited humankind... (All) break new paths in theology, once they have read the gospel from the viewpoint of the 'scourged Christs of the Indies'.¹²

Concluding thoughts

We have, for the most part, all been born into and brought up in a 'religion of the soul'. This is right and true, as long as it is realised that the soul, the spirit of the human being, can only fully understand itself and finally come to its fulfilment within the ambient of the social. I need the 'other' not to refine me, but to define me. This fact is made clear by the Matthew judgement scene of the hungry, the naked, the sick, the homeless and the imprisoned. All political, economic, social, and cultural theories must be made to facilitate this awesome view of what it is to be human. And theological or philosophical reflections must never be allowed to even give the impression that this reaching for my completion in the social dimension is a betrayal of the spirit.

If I take this seriously I am not so much faced with problems to be solved along the path of life; I am, rather, constantly faced with new questions. The questions rise out of the world's sufferings and joys, oppression and liberation. And they are presented not in articulated theories but in the living praxis of living human beings. Will you join with me in my liberation? Will you heal the wounds of my despair and my anxieties? Is human equality a dream? Is the colour of my skin to be my passage into the margins of society? Must all our problems end in the killing fields? The theory only comes after the appeal of the other and the nature of my response.

We continue to see the 'scourged Christ' in the margins of the world's society. We continue to see that Christ in the Third World and in our own world. We have, too often, turned the 'not yet' of the eschaton into a 'not yet' of living daily despair. It concerns human creativity, health, economic anxiety, human empowerment, equality of opportunity in education and the right to dream realisable dreams, in the lives of millions. If the human soul is created and born to invest in a future

immortality, it is the final blasphemy to deny that soul its right to invest in a mortal tomorrow. To love souls and attempt to by-pass the hard road of social and individual justice is the road to ultimate damnation for us all.

We must not talk about a 'them', about those 'Inner Cities', and those suffering racial abuse. The 'them' and 'those' are us. It is not a question of different communities, it is about a total communion. And we are in sore need not only of a new theology of communion, but also of a politics and economics of communion.

Bartolomé De Las Casas died on 20 July 1566. He had lived through the Lutheran Revolution, the life of Calvin, Henry VIII, the Council of Trent and all their concerns.

He raised the timeless questions of liberation and human dignity and salvation in his times. We must not repeat him for there is no future in repetition. But we must have the courage to continue to interpret in our times the questions he raised. I am more than aware of his shortcomings. But if I so have to choose, I prefer my heroes and heroines to be tattered and frayed at the edges. And whilst the ethical dimension of holiness will always be a concern, there is also the mystical dimension, too often swallowed up in the painful and careful scrutiny of the ethical. By mystical I mean that reality of Christian life, and indeed all true religion and human striving. It is the search to find union with God through a union with the powerless of this world. It is debatable, full of risk, at times defying definition, yet always the stuff of which men and women of vision are made. Without vision the people perish spiritually, politically, socially, economically and culturally.

True vision knows no walls and knows no boundaries, but honours only the vast panorama of God's creation and humanity's potential. Vision rejects, finally, tired ideologies and culturally damp-infested institutions which do nothing but repeat the slick slogans of yesteryear. Indeed, true vision even demands we never fall into the trap of empty repetition. For even our most treasured concepts must never be dispensed from revision. Democracy, for example, is something never fully achieved. It is something always evolving.

One worries in our own days about the perfection we have boasted about to newly liberated countries. Their task is not simply to copy us, but to take us even further. For we may have grown old and those who have experienced new dawns must not become our disciples but our teachers, leading us further along the road of human liberation. For in the lands of the democracies there is oppression. If we believe in God, then God alone is sovereign. And, indeed, uniquely sovereign. It is the paradoxical sovereignty of the vision of Jesus: the Lord of all time and space and yet the Crucified slave of those three hours on a lonely hill.

- 1 *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism*, SCM Press 1981, p. 102.
- 2 *Imperial Spain 1469–1716*, Penguin Books 1963, p. 62.
- 3 Quoted in Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions*, Penguin Books 1971, pp. 170f.
- 4 For a development of this theme cf. Enrique Dussel, *Ethics and Community (Liberation and Theology Series)*, Burns & Oates 1988, chapter 20.
- 5 Quoted in David Englander et al. ed., *Culture and Belief in Europe 1450–1600*, Basil Blackwell 1990, p. 321.
- 6 Ibid p. 329.
- 7 Quoted in Juan Friede & Benjamine Keene ed., *Bartolomé de las Casas in History: Towards an Understanding of the Man and his Work*, Northern Illinois University Press, pp. 53f.
- 8 Cf. Friede & Keene, op. cit., for an historical review, and cf. Gustavo Gutierrez, *The Power of the Poor in History*, SCM Press, p. 218 fn. 58.
- 9 Friede & Keene, op. cit., p. 30.
- 10 'The abolition of Indian slavery was not achieved in a day, and it was tragically to be accompanied by an increasing importation of negro slaves, whose fate disturbed the Spanish conscience much less than the Indians' (J.H. Elliot, op. cit.). I mention this point because there has always been a debate about this and Las Casas's role and attitude. Las Casas actually admitted a neglect in this regard. Cf. Friede & Keene, op. cit.: 'In a work of his maturity, the fruit of long toil and meditation, following a passage in which he criticises his earlier decision, he writes that "the blacks have the same right to freedom as the Indians"'. Elsewhere he declares himself "not sure whether his ignorance and good intention will excuse him before God's judgment seat." ' Cf. G. Gutierrez, op. cit., p. 218 fn 62.
- 11 Friede & Keene, op. cit., p. 34.
- 12 G. Gutierrez, op. cit., pp. 195, 196.

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Between the years 1954 and 1956 I studied Philosophy with the Dominicans at the Angelicum University in Rome. They were wonderfully enriching years for me. So I dedicate this Las Casas Lecture with profound gratitude to the Dominican Order, thanking them for all they have given me and for inviting me to deliver this lecture.