



(1484-1566)

### An Early Advocate of Social Justice

In mid-August of **1550**, the Spanish king Charles V summoned a Council of Fourteen to determine how conquests in the New World should be conducted. This decree was issued as a direct result of the preaching of one man – Bartolomé de Las Casas, a 66-year-old Dominican priest who had spent nearly half a century intimately involved in Indian affairs. At the heart of the debate before the Council was the issue of Spanish laws and ‘rights’ to subjugate the Indian people of the New World in order to convert them to Christianity. Las Casas argued that the current practice of waging war on the Indians before preaching the faith to them (so they would be more easily instructed) was not only unlawful but “iniquitous, and contrary to our Christian religion”(Hanke, 1970). On the other side of

the debate stood Juan Gines de Sepúlveda, a Spanish Renaissance scholar. Sepúlveda argued for the Aristotelian doctrine of natural slavery: that part of mankind is set aside by nature to serve those set aside for a life of virtue free of manual labor.

The meeting between these two men came at a time when Spain was the greatest power in Europe, with a far-reaching overseas empire, and Charles V was the Holy Roman Emperor. What made this debate before the Council so unique was that at the zenith of his empire’s strength, Charles V ordered all conquests to cease until it was decided if they were being conducted in a just manner. Although laws were in effect to regulate the overseas conquests, the Council generally agreed that they were not being obeyed. Las Casas petitioned incessantly before the king arguing that the “greed of those who undertake conquests and the timidity and humility of the Indians is such that we are not certain whether any instruction will be obeyed” (Hanke, 1970). Las Casas wrote:

We ... consider that the Indians are truly men and that they are not only capable of understanding the Catholic faith but ... they desire exceedingly to receive it. [W]e declare that ... the said Indians and all other people who may later be discovered by Christians, are by no means to be deprived of their liberty or the possession of their property, even though they be outside the faith of Jesus Christ; and that they can and should, freely and legitimately, enjoy their liberty and the possession of their property; nor should they be in any way enslaved (Hanke, 1951).

As with many champions of social justice, especially those whose lives were based in Christian faith, Las Casas did not begin his adult life as a strong advocate of Indian rights. Born in Seville, Spain in **1484**, Las Casas spent his youth as a scholar, soldier, and slave-owner before joining the priesthood at the age of 28. After years as a slave-owner in the new Spanish colony of Española “discovered” in **1492** by Christopher Columbus, Las Casas renounced the Spanish exploitation of the Indians and began to publicly speak of the horrors that he saw around him. In **1522**, Las Casas entered a Dominican monastery where he wrote voraciously against the dominant ideology of his time – that “inequalities and injustices were to be accepted as part of God’s program for the regeneration of the human race” (Hanke, 1970).

From all appearances, Las Casas, the social reformer and advocate of social justice, fought his battle for Indian rights and self-determination right up until his death in **1566** at the age of 82. What is so striking about Las Casas is not only his personal and spiritual development as an advocate of social justice, but the *era* in which it occurred. For me, this is what truly makes a person a revolutionary – to go against the norm, to raise a voice against the most popular sentiments and beliefs of the time and, ultimately, to make that voice heard. Las Casas did all of this with a vengeance and takes a place in history as a true champion of resistance.

#### References:

- Hanke, L. 1951. **Bartolomé de Las Casas: An Interpretation of His Life and Writings**. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.
- Hanke, L. 1970. **Aristotle and the American Indians**. Bloomington: Indian University Press.