A Stumbling Block:

Bartolomé de Las Casas as Defender of the Indians



Mariano Delgado

Translated by Martha A Matesich

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Introduction

Bartolomé de Las Casas (1484–1566), a Dominican and bishop called 'a credit to humanity' by the Chilean Nobel Prize winner for literature, Gabriela Mistral, wrote the first missiological treatise and the first ethnology in comparative religion and culture of the modern era, in addition to works on history and international law, memorials and letters. In these writings he treated almost all the questions raised by the first globalization of the world in the Age of Discovery. He defended peaceful evangelisation, the unity of humankind, and the rights of the indigenous peoples, as well as the dignity and logic of their religions and cultures. A Christian like Bartolomé de Las Casas, who, in the face of the combination of missionary work and colonialism, understood Christianity as 'a message of freedom' and as 'a liberating force'—that is, as the religion of the Good Shepherd (Jn 10:10) who came 'that they may have life, and have it abundantly'—who loved the truth, who had compassion with the suffering of others and showed mercy, and who experienced a hunger and thirst for justice, such a Christian is, as we confront the second globalization, our contemporary.

Las Casas, feeling a 'moral uneasiness' at the sight of the injustice and suffering that hurt the weakest most, understood the church as a 'guardian of justice which does not tolerate injustice in herself or in others'. His 'indignation', following in the tradition of the 'revolt of conscience' of the Dominicans in the tiny church of Santo Domingo in Advent of 1511, belongs to those events of world history that we should keep alive forever in our collective memory. Las Casas and the Dominicans show us that a 'prophetical Christianity' belongs to the indispensable spiritual roots of our civilization. Today this 'moral

uneasiness' must be deepened among Christians in particular who are to bear witness to the 'messianic program' of Christ proclaimed in the synagogue of Nazareth (*cf* Lk 4:18f): 'According to the words once written in the prophecy of Isaiah, this program consisted in the revelation of merciful love for the poor, the suffering and prisoners, for the blind, the oppressed and sinners' (*Dives in misericordia* 8).

Bartolomé de Las Casas has become an important figure in the history of the church and of humanity and in the history of literature and of art. Las Casas, who called himself 'a Christian, a religious, a bishop, a Spaniard' (Las Casas, *In Defense*, 21)—note the sequence—is above all else, however, a 'prophet' in the biblical sense of the word: one called by God who persistently—conveniently as well as inconveniently—reminds his contemporaries of the demands of the word of God in the face of the injustice which causes the suffering and misery of one's neighbor. Many such witnesses have been officially recognized and canonized by the church. Others, though, have been covered with the cloak of slander to this day; they are still waiting for us to muster the courage to pull off this cloak and to incorporate their irksome witness into the prophetic tradition of the Church.

I would like to thank Ms Martha M Matesich for the English translation and Mr Hilary Regan, director of the ATF Limited/ATF Press, for including this slim volume in their publishing program. The book is dedicated to the memory of those courageous Christians from the Order of Preachers who, in the past 800 years—similar to Bartolomé de Las Casas—have proclaimed the Gospel as good news for the poor and have discerned their hunger and thirst for justice.

Fribourg, Easter 2017
Mariano Delgado

Translator's note:

This book has been written for a wider audience and thus contains as few references as possible. If the texts of Las Casas quoted by the author in German are available in English translations, then these English translations have been used. Quotations not found in the English translations of Las Casas' works have been translated from the German texts as they appear in the German edition of this book. These texts can be found either in the four-volume German collec-

tion of Las Casas' writings, Bartolomé de Las Casas, *Werkauswahl* (abbreviated *WA*) or in the Spanish-Latin edition of the complete works of Las Casas, *Obras completas* (abbreviated *OC*). All sources appear in parentheses directly following the quotations or references and include the abbreviations *WA* or *OC* followed by the volume number and page number or, alternatively, the name of the author, the abbreviated book title, and the page references. Quotations from non-English books have been translated from the German. A complete list of all the works appears at the end of the book. Bible passages, other than those quoted in a Las Casas' text, have been taken from the *New Revised Standard Version*.

Since all the English translations of Las Casas' works and much of the secondary literature use the term 'Indian' for the indigenous peoples of the Americas, this term is also used consistently throughout this book. Most of the secondary literature uses the term 'memorial' for the memoranda written by Las Casas and by others which were addressed to the king or the councils and often included petitions or a remonstrance. For this reason the term is also used here. The following Spanish expressions appear frequently in the German original and are common in English books on the Age of Discovery:

> *encomienda*: an allotment of a certain area of land and the granting of the right to Indian labor; the grantee was responsible, though often only in theory, for paying the Indians for their services and for their catechization and welfare *encomendero*: the holder of an *encomienda*.

I would like to thank Margarethe Helmer and Mickey Edwards for editing my English translation. Their corrections and suggestions have greatly improved the readability of the English text.

Martha M Matesich

Chapter 1
Conversion and Spirituality

Born in Seville

We know little about the childhood and adolescent years of Bartolomé de Las Casas. What did he do and where did he live before his arrival in Santo Domingo in 1502? Today it is assumed that he was born in Seville in 1484 (and not in 1474), probably on the Feast of St Martin (November 11). He was thus a nine-year-old child when he first saw the Indians and the exotic birds which Columbus had brought back after his first voyage; and Las Casas was eighteen years old when he set sail for the New World to accept the inheritance of his father in Hispaniola who, together with Las Casas' uncle, had gone there on the second voyage of Columbus in 1493 to seek his fortune. Later Las Casas wrote that in that year of 1493 he had seen many new things in Seville 'which one had never seen or heard of before in Spain' (*OC* 4: 829).

Seville was the port of departure and port of destination during the first centuries of the discovery, conquest and evangelization of the New World. We can assume that the young Bartolomé saw the ships put to sea and dock and that he also dreamt of the New World, especially after his father had brought him a young Indian as a present. By order of Queen Isabella, this youth was returned to the Caribbean in 1500 along with the other slaves Columbus had abducted. But we can see in this relationship of the young Bartolomé with an Indian the stirring of his sympathy for the peoples of the New World.

Some authors, in a derogatory undertone, dismiss Las Casas as an 'autodidact'. As a matter of fact, we hardly know anything about his studies before he entered the Dominican order in 1522. The main thing is that his knowledge of Latin (he frequently wrote Spanish

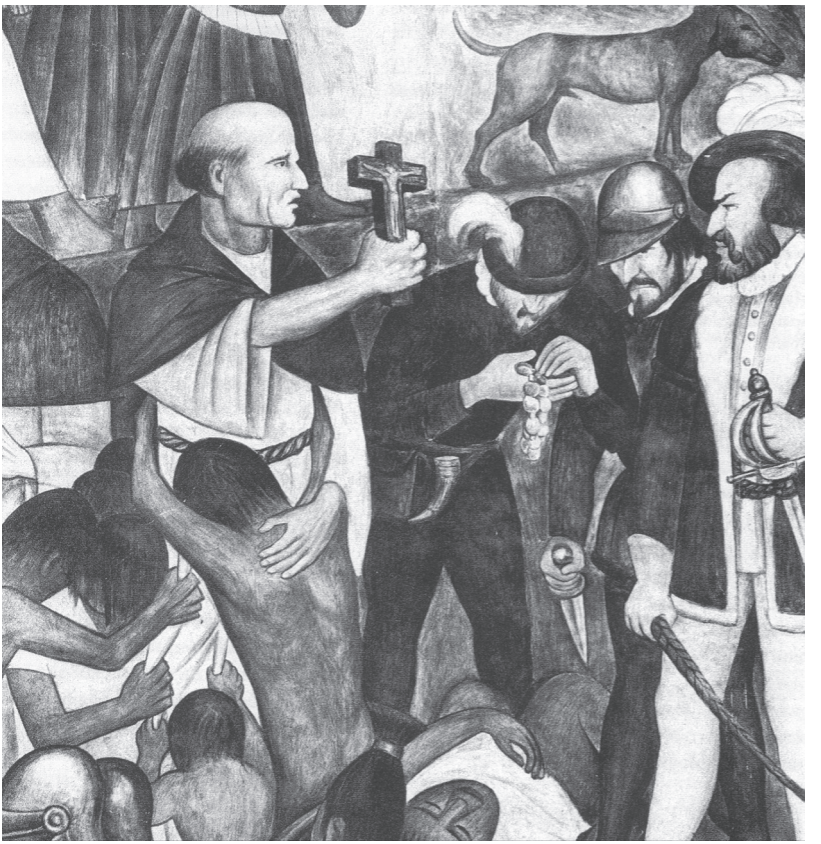
with a Latin syntax) and of both Roman and Canon law, as well as his humanistic culture and common sense equipped him to give outstanding responses to the questions arising from the Spanish expansion.

Las Casas grew up in a Spanish context which, since the conquest of Granada and the discovery of the New World (1492), had its center of gravity in the south and was opened up toward the Atlantic. The axis of history had rotated, as if through divine providence, and Spain had now been called to lead—and was ready to lead! After the events of 1492 it seemed that an actual *translatio imperii*, a transfer of imperial power to Spain, had occurred. It suffices here to quote a statement made in 1499 by Antonio de N(L)ebrija (1442–1522), the humanist and imperial chronicler of Ferdinand the Catholic: 'Corresponding to the movement of the heavens, all empires and monarchies began in the East, migrated across India and the Assyrians, then through Greece and Italy to the West, where they came to a halt.'

Nebrija (1499, Prologue to his *Gramática*) did not make this statement without good reason; he wanted to claim the leadership role in Christianity for the Catholic kings of Spain whose wonderful empire was something new, something which had never existed before. In 1509 he explicitly stressed that, although the title of emperor was in German hands, the imperial power was de facto in the hands of the Spanish kings who, after they had already become the rulers of large parts of Italy and the Mediterranean islands, were now proceeding to carry the fighting to Africa. They had also already reached the islands bordering on India, the so-called 'New World', by having their fleets set sail towards the west, following the movement of the heavens. It was in this imperial, yet simultaneously egalitarian Spain where, according to the motto *plus ultra*, anything seemed possible if one were courageous enough and where everyone, whether a second Agamemnon or his swineherd, considered himself capable of ruling the world, that Bartolomé de Las Casas grew up. Here his childhood dreams were nourished before he sailed to the New World.

It all began with a prophetic sermon

In 1502 Las Casas came to the New World to take possession of his father's estate. During the years that followed he was a gold prospector and *encomendero* (slaveholder). After his ordination in 1507 he



Las Casas holds out the cross to Cortés, the conqueror of Mexico, in order to ward him off, while the Indians find refuge with him; detail of a fresco by Diego Rivera in the National Palace of Mexico (reproduced in *WA* 3/2: 64).

was also chaplain to the Spanish soldiers and settlers, first on the island of Hispaniola (today Haiti and the Dominican Republic) and then, beginning in 1512, in Cuba where he participated in its conquest. At the portentous age of thirty he found himself in a situation like Dante's, that is 'in a dark wood, where the straight way was lost' (*The Divine Comedy*, Canto 1). He had been baptised, indeed ordained a priest, and had, as he put it, a 'compassionate heart' (*WA* 2: 262); nevertheless, like so many 'professional' Christians, he had not been converted. He thought he believed, and yet he had not discov-