

BARTOLOMÉ DE LAS CASAS

In Defense of the Indians (c. 1550)

Hernando Cortés and subsequent conquistadores of the Americas acted upon the belief that conquest of the New World's native peoples so as to increase Spanish wealth and sovereignty was justified by the expansion of civilization and Christianity. Some Catholic missionaries, however, protested against the plundering of Indian property, the enslavement of Indians, and other atrocities. Pope Paul III responded in 1537 by issuing a papal bull calling for the Indians to be treated humanely. Then Charles, king of Spain, called for an assembly in 1542 to determine what was going on in the New World and what should be done. Those infuriated by the resulting proposed reforms recruited their own apologists, and foremost among such defenders was the theologian and royal historian Ginés Sepúlveda. One of Sepúlveda's ablest foes was the Dominican priest Bartolomé de Las Casas (1474–1566). Las Casas spent most of his ninety-two years in the New World intent upon converting and defending the natives. According to Las Casas, Sepúlveda proclaimed that because the Indians were barbaric, ignorant, incapable of higher learning or reasoning, and prone to vice and cruelty, there was just cause for their subordination and, should they resist that, subjugation by the forces of those wiser and more virtuous. After summarizing Sepúlveda's position, Las Casas refuted it point by point as he argued against Sepúlveda and other "Persecutors and Slanderers of the Peoples of the New World Discovered Across the Seas."

From Chapter 4, *In Defense of the Indians*, translated and edited by Stafford Poole, C. M. Used with permission of Northern Illinois University Press.

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From the fact that the Indians are barbarians it does not necessarily follow that they are incapable of government and have to be ruled by others, except to be taught about the Catholic faith and to be admitted to the holy sacraments. They are not ignorant, inhuman, or bestial. Rather, long before they had heard the word Spaniard they had properly organized states, wisely ordered by excellent laws, religion, and custom. They cultivated friendship and, bound together in common fellowship, lived in populous cities in which they wisely administered the affairs of both peace and war justly and equitably, truly governed by laws that at very many points surpass ours, and could have won the admiration of the sages of Athens. . . .

Now if they are to be subjugated by war because they are ignorant of polished literature, let Sepúlveda hear Trogus Pompey:

Nor could the Spaniards submit to the yoke of a conquered province until Caesar Augustus, after he had conquered the world, turned his victorious armies against them and organized that barbaric and wild people as a province, once he had led them by law to a more civilized way of life.

Now see how he called the Spanish people barbaric and wild. I would like to hear Sepúlveda, in his cleverness, answer this question: Does he think that the war of the Romans against the Spanish was justified in order to free them from barbarism? And this question also: Did the Spanish wage an unjust

war when they vigorously defended themselves against them?

Next, I call the Spaniards who plunder that unhappy people torturers. Do you think that the Romans, once they had subjugated the wild and barbaric peoples of Spain, could with secure right divide all of you among themselves, handing over so many head of both males and females as allotments to individuals? And do you then conclude that the Romans could have stripped your rulers of their authority and consigned all of you, after you had been deprived of your liberty, to wretched labors, especially in searching for gold and silver lodes and mining and refining the metals? And if the Romans finally did that, as is evident from Diodorus, [would you not judge] that you also have the right to defend your freedom, indeed your very life, by war? Sepúlveda, would you have permitted Saint James to evangelize your own people of Córdoba in that way? For God's sake and man's faith in him, is this the way to impose the yoke of Christ on Christian men? Is this the way to remove wild barbarism from the minds of barbarians? Is it not, rather, to act like thieves, cut-throats, and cruel plunderers and to drive the gentlest of people headlong into despair? The Indian race is not that barbaric, nor are they dull witted or stupid, but they are easy to teach and very talented in learning all the liberal arts, and very ready to accept, honor, and observe the Christian religion and correct their sins (as experience has taught) once priests have introduced them to the sacred mysteries and taught them the word of God. They have been endowed with excellent conduct, and before the coming of the Spaniards, as we have said, they had political states that were well founded on beneficial laws.

Furthermore, they are so skilled in every mechanical art that with every right they should be set ahead of all the nations of the known world on this score, so very beautiful in their skill and artistry are the things this people produces in the grace of its architecture, its painting, and its needlework. But Sepúlveda despises these mechanical arts, as if these things do not reflect inventiveness, ingenuity, industry, and right reason. For a mechanical art is

an operative habit of the intellect that is usually defined as "the right way to make things, directing the acts of the reason, through which the artisan proceeds in orderly fashion, easily, and unerringly in the very act of reason." So these men are not stupid, Reverend Doctor. Their skillfully fashioned works of superior refinement awaken the admiration of all nations. . . .

In the liberal arts that they have been taught up to now, such as grammar and logic, they are remarkably adept. With every kind of music they charm the ears of their audience with wonderful sweetness. They write skillfully and quite elegantly, so that most often we are at a loss to know whether the characters are handwritten or printed. . . .

Now if Sepúlveda had wanted, as a serious man should, to know the full truth before he sat down to write with his mind corrupted by the lies of tyrants, he should have consulted the honest religious who have lived among those peoples for many years and know their endowments of character and industry, as well as the progress they have made in religion and morality. Indeed, Rome is far from Spain, yet in that city the talent of these people and their aptitude and capacity for grasping the liberal arts have been recognized. Here is Paolo Giovio, Bishop of Nocera, in praise of those peoples whom you call dull witted and stupid. In his *History of His Times* he has left this testimony for later generations to read:

Hernán Cortés, hurrying overland to the kingdoms of Mexico after defeating the Indians, occupied the city of Tenochtitlán, after he had conquered in many battles, using boats which he had built, that city set upon a salt lagoon—wonderful like the city of Venice in its buildings and the size of its population.

As you see, he declares that the Indian city is worthy of admiration because of its buildings, which are like those of Venice.

As to the terrible crime of human sacrifice, which you exaggerate, see what Giovio adds in the same place. "The rulers of the Mexicans have a right to sacrifice living men to their gods, provided they have been condemned for a crime." Concerning the natural gifts of that people, what does he

assert? "Thus it was not altogether difficult for Cortés to lead a gifted and teachable people, once they had abandoned their superstitious idolatry, to the worship of Christ. For they learn our writing with pleasure and with admiration, now that they have given up the hieroglyphics by which they used to record their annals, enshrining for posterity in various symbols the memory of their kings."

This is what you, a man of such great scholarship, should have done in ascertaining the truth, instead of writing, with the sharp edge of your pen poised for the whispers of irresponsible men, your little book that slanders the Indian inhabitants of such a large part of the earth. . . .

From this it is clear that the basis for Sepúlveda's teaching that these people are uncivilized and ignorant is worse than false. Yet even if we were to grant that this race has no keenness of mind or artistic ability, certainly they are not, in consequence, obliged to submit themselves to those who are more intelligent and to adopt their ways, so that, if they refuse, they may be subdued by having war waged against them and be enslaved, as happens today. For men are obliged by the natural law to do many things they cannot be forced to do against their will. We are bound by the natural law to embrace virtue and imitate the uprightness of good men. No one, however, is punished for being bad unless he is guilty of rebellion. Where the Catholic faith has been preached in a Christian manner and as it ought to be, all men are bound by the natural law to accept it, yet no one is forced to accept the faith of Christ. No one is punished because he is sunk in vice, unless he is rebellious or harms the property and persons of others.

No one is forced to embrace virtue and show himself as a good man. One who receives a favor is bound by the natural law to return the favor by what we call antidotal obligation. Yet no one is forced to this, nor is he punished if he omits it, according to the common interpretation of the jurists.

To relieve the need of a brother is a work of mercy to which nature inclines and obliges men, yet no one is forced to give alms. . . . Therefore, not even a truly wise man may force an ignorant barbarian to submit to him, especially by yielding his liberty, without doing him an injustice. This the poor Indians suffer, with extreme injustice, against all the laws of God and of men and against the law of nature itself. For evil must not be done that good may come of it. . . .

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REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Las Casas argues that although the Indians are barbarians according to certain definitions, it does not follow that others must rule them. Why not?
2. How does Las Casas use historical and religious examples to turn the argument against those who would subjugate the Indians by force? How does he make ethics a part of his argument?
3. What does Las Casas offer as evidence that the Indians were not as barbaric as their enemies proclaimed?