

Dominican Footsteps in the New World
By Sister Ann P. Stankiewicz, O.P.
Dominican Heritage Lecture Series

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Introduction

Mount Saint Mary holds a special place in my life. Many years ago, I graduated from the Academy. It was on this sacred ground that I entered religious life and became a member of the Dominican Order. My college teaching began as a member of the Mount faculty - a position which I was privileged to hold for 10 years. For these reasons and many more, it is truly an honor to present the Dominican Heritage Lecture here on the campus of Mount Saint Mary College.

The topic of my talk is Dominican Footsteps in the New World. You will be invited to return to the world of the 16th century and to visit the lands of Central America. In our time together, we will do three things:

- The first will involve the telling of the story of Bartolomé de Las Casas - an energetic explorer who lived a long and eventful life;
- Secondly, we will look at the legacy of Las Casas – the Dominican friar
- The last part of the presentation will be a short reflection on the relevance of Bartolomé Las Casas for Mount Saint Mary College.

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Scholars have come to agree that Bartolomé de Las Casas was born in Seville, Spain in 1474. It is believed that the young Bartolomé was a student at Salamanca and received a degree in law from the university. The most interesting family distinction relates to the young man's father. Pedro de Las Casas, a merchant of the day, set sail on Columbus second expedition to the New World. The father probably acquired some property and this served as an incentive for the son to travel across the ocean. In 1502, at the age of 28, Las Casas left Spain for the West Indies.

Bartolomé de Las Casas was to live a long life; he was a different man at different stages in his life. When landing in Hispaniola, he was no reformer and certainly not a revolutionary. Until 1514, he was a priest-colonist chiefly concerned with his own fortune. Because of his efforts to settle an Indian uprising, he was rewarded with his first encomienda. Like other explorers, the young Las Casas became part of the system which distributed Indians to the Spanish settlers. For the most part those who left their native country to establish settlements in the New World did so at their own expense. They expected remuneration for their expenses and labor. The reward came in the form of the encomiendas.

We have a sample document which tells us something of the establishment of the encomiendas. It reads: "I commend to your care (the Indians) in order that you may make use of them on your haciendas and in your mines and transactions in the manner directed by their Highnesses [Ferdinand and Isabella] in their ordinances."

Bartolomé received his share - a "good, big" encomienda in Cuba. His responsibility was to work the Indians, planting crops and washing the sands for gold. There were tributes to be paid to the Spanish Crown. Years later, Las Casas would acknowledge that he paid more attention to the work detail that he did to teaching the Indians the faith. However, he did feed the Indians well and treated them kindly.

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New towns were founded throughout the region - Espanola, Cuba, Trinidad all became Spanish settlements. In each new settlement, the land and the Indians were distributed to the explorers. Although he continued as an ecomendero, Casas views were beginning to change. In his own historical writings of this period, we find accounts of scenes which affected him deeply. In traveling about Cuba, he would visit the native villages and ask how the Indians were. The answer was always the same - "Hungry, hungry, hungry!" All the able bodied men were forced to work in the mines. Women and children were left with little food. Casas stated that in one town "seven thousand children died in three months."

The whole system of holding Indians in servitude had already been denounced by reformers. The Dominican friars had lifted their voices in protest against the practice. They preached against the cruel treatment of the Indians by the Spaniards. In addition, the Dominicans sent representatives to appear before King Ferdinand and intercede for the native peoples.

It seems that during his late twenties or early thirties, Las Casas endured a period of soul-searching or reflection. He made the decision to become a deacon in the church and returned to Rome for his vows. Those who have studied the life of Bartolomé, seems to agree that August 15, 1511 was the date of his true conversion. On this Pentecost Sunday, Las Casas listened to the sermon in which a Dominican priest reflected on the text "I am a voice crying in the wilderness," denouncing Spain's treatment of the Indians. In 1512 Las Casas became the first priest to be ordained in the New World.

Finally, Bartolomé realized that everything that had been done to the Indians - the whole system of allotments or encomiendas was unjust. He must preach against this practice. But to preach freely, he must first give up his own Indians. He went to Velasquez, a friend and fellow explorer, and privately told him of his resolve. Velasquez implored him to reconsider. As explorers, they had come to the new world with the intent of making their fortune and to contribute both to the Crown and their native Spain. These were good ends...

Las Casas declined to reconsider. In Cuba in 1514, he preached a sermon that was to be the turning point in his life. He acknowledged that the Spaniards who were holding Indians as property were living in sin. They must confess their sin and make restitution. Next he dramatically confessed his personal sin and announced that he was giving up his own encomienda.

He was now ready to begin his period of reform projects. Together with the Dominican community in Cuba, Bartolomé preached to the Spanish explorers and implored them to release the Indians. These efforts met with little success.

At this point Las Casas decided on a new approach to seeking justice for the Indians in the new World. He would travel to Spain and plead the cause before King Ferdinand.

We need to remember that in the 16th century Spain was a desperately poor country. The discovery of gold in the new World gave great hope to the King and the people of Spain. The gold could not be mined without the forced labor of the Indians; the encomienda was essential to Spain's success in the New World. King Ferdinand himself, as well as prominent Spanish families had encomiendas in Santo Domingo, Puerto Rico and Cuba.

This was the situation Casas faced when he reached Spain and still his hope was to end the encomienda system and release the Indians from servitude. He hoped that once the Indians were set free, they would be open to conversion to the faith.

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"The destruction of the Indies" (a term which Bartolomé made famous) had already reached appalling proportions on Santo Domingo. An account given by the friars estimated that under the brutal system the native population of the island had diminished from an estimated one million people to less than 18,000 by 1516.

It was on Christmas Eve 1515 that Bartolomé de Las Casas had his conference with the King. He related his purpose and described conditions in the West Indies. Ferdinand listened and promised to meet with him again in Seville. The second audience never took place; the Catholic King became too ill and died on January 25, 1516.

In the years that followed Las Casas tried in many ways to bring an end to the encomienda system and to bring about greater respect for the native people. At one point he pondered the question: Was there some arrangement agreeable to both the Spaniards and the Indians? His plan was to create supervised towns at sites that were accessible to the gold mines. Families of 300 would be allocated an area in which there would be a church, a plaza, streets, houses and a hospital. Every resident would have a plot of land for farming and the remaining land would be held in common for farming and grazing. Attempts would be made to teach Spanish to the Indians. There were rules to be followed in governing the towns. The idea was to continue to make a profit from the gold mines but at the same time to treat the Indians with fairness.

Unfortunately there was little success in the experiment. The Spanish Commissioners resented the oversight of the priest and paid little attention to the protector's plea for better treatment of the Indians. What support he did receive came from the friars. There would be other proposals and renewed efforts but little real success.

Finally, a very discouraged priest left the New World and returned to Spain. He went to stay at a Dominican monastery and took time to reflect on his years in the New World. In 1523 Bartolomé de Las Casas took vows as a Dominican. He was almost 60 years of age. For a long time after his profession Casas seemed dead to the world. It was during this period that he begins his serious writing.

There were some encouraging signs of change. In 1537 Pope Paul III issued an encyclical proclaiming that American Indians were rational beings with souls and that their lives and property should be protected. Another reason for hope was Spain's passage of the New Laws which forbade Indian slavery and sought to end the encomienda system within a generation by outlawing the transference of encomiendas through family inheritance. Las Casas, who was in Spain at the time, directly assisted in the passage of the New Laws. He appeared at court and read selections from his work entitled *The Devastation of the Indies*.

There is general agreement among writers that the New Laws of the Indies came about because of the work of Las Casas. He appeared before the Spanish Council and rendered his first hand account of how the Christians had mistreated the native people. He advised that all the Indians should be taken away from those who held them under encomiendas, and should be put under His Majesty. In this way, the King would obtain many millions in revenue, and the natives would be well-treated and instructed in the faith.

As passed on November 10, 1542, these reform ordinances fell short of Casas' proposals. However, they were epoch making and set in place as a number of reforms. A flat edict started that no additional Indians could be taken into slavery. "We order that henceforth neither by war nor by any other means, even if it be under the guise of rebellion, nor by barter, nor in any other way, shall any Indian whatsoever be made a slave." Another important mandate of the New Laws was that which related to officials of the Spanish government. It was stated that "For the present, all encomiendas held by government officials were revoked outright, and these Indians

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were ordered placed under the Crown at once." One final reform related to private encomiendas. The New Laws stated that upon the death of the encomendero, the owner of slaves, the encomienda would be placed under the Crown. The intention was that by a gradual process all Indians would be put under the Crown; they would be well-treated and instructed in the faith. These reform ordinances quite obviously showed the influence of Bartolomé de Las Casas.

There is one final chapter in the active ministry of our Dominican friars. Following the passage of the New Laws, Bartolomé de Las Casas was made Bishop of Chiapa in Central America. On Passion Sunday 1544, he was consecrated in his native town of Seville. The ceremony took place in the chapel of the Dominican monastery. At the age of 70, the protector of the Indians received the miter - a symbol of his authority as bishop within the Church.

Why did the friar accept an Episcopal appointment? His opponents claimed that he was ambitious for worldly honors. They called him a seeker of power. However, other accounts suggest that Las Casas had a dream. He hoped to establish in his diocese an enlarged mission where the Indians could be directly under the King. His goal would be the peaceful conversion of the natives in his care and the stern admonition of Spanish slaveholders.

With a large band of Dominican friars, about 45, Bishop Las Casas set sail one more time for America. It would be a difficult journey; 5,000 miles of travel on the high seas with physical dangers, boycotts and storms.

Consider how a new bishop is welcomed to his diocese... When Bishop Las Casas landed in Central America, he immediately became aware of the defiance of the settlers and officials in his diocese. The Bishop attempted to admonish the citizens about the treatment of the Indians. He reminded them that the native people were creatures of God and that they possessed an inherent dignity. It was sinful to hold them in servitude.

In response, the people of the diocese refused to release a single slave. To make matters worse, the Spanish settlers would not acknowledge Bartolomé as their bishop and they refused to pay the tithes. For better or worse, Casas would not back down. He had spent his lifetime fighting for Indian rights. He believed that it was his duty as bishop of the diocese to secure those rights.

In the Catholic faith, members of the Church are obliged to go to confession and receive absolution in preparation for receiving Communion on Easter Sunday. The Bishop tried to prepare the people of his diocese for the reception of the sacrament by his homilies. He reminded his flock that every slave must be set free. Absolution would be denied to those who refused to give up their slaves. Further, Las Casas limited the right to hear confessions to two priests who agreed to abide by his directive. This was a terrible time for the new bishop. People held town gatherings to demand his resignation. Members of the clergy, especially those who had encomiendas, defied him.

The Bishop was aware that his work in the New World was coming to an end. He made a legal donation of the churches of the village to the Dominican Order. One biographer summarized the situation with these words. "So ended Casas' stay of a little less than a year in Chiapa. There was no fanfare at his going, and no disturbance either... The real truth is that Bartolomé de Las Casas was driven out by public antagonism toward the author of the New Laws."

When Las Casas returned to Spain, he arranged to live permanently in the Dominican College of St. Gregorio. Within the order, he had a certain prominence as the "father of all the Indians."

The Legacy of Bartolome de Las Casas

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This gathering today takes place in the Founders' Chapel at Mount Saint Mary College. We are here to reflect upon the Dominican Heritage - those contributions that have been made by the men and women who have been members of the Order of Preachers during the past 800 years. Our focus has been on Bartolomé de Las Casas - a Spanish explorer of the sixteenth century.

Father William Hinnebusch has a short history of the Order published in 1975. In the forward, he reminds us of the mission entrusted to the Order - the mission to proclaim the gospel. "The Dominican task is to study, explore, and discover better, more effective, and newer ways of disseminating the gospel message." In what ways did Bartolomé de Las Casas contribute to the legacy of the Dominican Order?

In 1974, the world marked the 500th anniversary of the birth of Bartolomé de Las Casas, the principal organizer and ideologist of the sixteenth century Spanish movement in defense of the American Indians. Conferences were held and scholarly papers were presented. There still exists some controversy about the man and his ideas but there is a growing consensus that Las Casas was truly the preacher.

Central to the ministry of Bartolomé was the belief that all persons are free and rational by nature. He taught that all peoples, no matter how uneducated or savage they might be, were capable of advancing along the road to civilization. The method that is needed in working with all men and women is that of "love, gentleness and kindness." In a famous debate in the later years of his life, Las Casas argued against the doctrine of natural slavery which was the cornerstone of the defense of Spain's Indian wars and the encomiendas. In his rebuttal, Las Casas argued that no nation or race of people were slaves by nature. In his own words, "All people of the world are formed in the image and likeness of God; all have the natural capacity or faculties to understand and master the knowledge that they do not have; all take pleasure in goodness and in happy and pleasant things and all abhor evil and reject what offends and grieves them..." In a truly Dominican manner, Las Casas taught the truth about the nature of the human person.

From its early foundation, the Dominican Order adopted a participatory structure of governance. At the first general chapter on Pentecost Sunday in 1220, it was established that the master general would be the first among equals. All members of the Order would share in the authority and decision-making through the General Chapter.

Las Casas was committed to this democratic form of governance. In his writings, he developed three "democratic dogmas." First, all power is derived from the people; second, power is delegated to rulers in order that they may serve the people; third, all important governmental acts require popular consultation and approval. "No state, king or emperor," wrote Las Casas, "can alienate territories, or change their political system, without the express approval of their inhabitants." This Dominican friar was willing to challenge those in authority from King to the Council of the Indies. The authority to govern brings with it the responsibility to guard and respect all members of the community.

The Dominican is called to the search for truth. When a man or woman enters the Order, they study the history of its founding. One story that is always included is that of Dominic who in his travels came to know the Albigensian heretics. Dominic stayed up all night arguing with the innkeeper. With the rising of the sun, the man gave up the heresy and returned to the Catholic faith. The moral of the story is that the Dominican friar and sister must be well grounded in the truth of the gospel; they must be prepared to lead others to truth. Even to this day, Dominicans place great importance of the study of Theology and Philosophy.

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As stated earlier, Bartolomé was a different person at different times in his life. Early on he was the explorer who came in search of wealth and riches. He shared the bounty given to those who were able to pay taxes to the Crown.

However, once his eyes were open to the abuse of the Indian people, his life would become a quest for bringing truth to the people of his own country. He made 14 trips across the Atlantic. His goal was to persuade the Spanish leaders to find some way to win the Indians to Christianity without enslavement and torture. Even in his final years, Las Casas continued to bring the truth about the American Indians to others by means of his writings.

One final thought about the heritage of our explorer. The Dominican message is "To contemplate and to give to others the fruits of contemplation." Did Las Casas lose sight of the need for reflection? Was he too concerned with his quest for ending the encomienda system? In his days as bishop, was he too heavy handed, too authoritarian? We do not have answers to all of these questions. However, we know that there were times when Las Casas realized the need to step back from activity and spend time in prayer and study. There were the quiet years spent in the Dominican monastery - a period of ten years during which we hear little of this friar. However, the time came to leave the monastery and to take up the challenge once again of bringing about justice in the New World. After the unsuccessful experience as bishop, we know that Las Casas spent more than fourteen years in the Dominican College of San Gregorio in Spain. Casas lived to the amazing age of ninety-two, in failing health but with his mind and spirit undiminished. In the time left to him, he labored to summarize his principles. It was his hope that these principles of social justice would be an inspiration of a new generation of reformers. At the beginning of his ministry Las Casas hoped to bring an end to the encomienda system; in his last writings he was still hammering away at the same idea.

Throughout, he insisted that the Indians were free people and should be treated as such.

Bartolomé de Las Casas was never satisfied with what he had accomplished. "What an unbelievable crusade it was! From his first trip to Spain in 1515 till his last breath, Bartolomé de Las Casas was preeminent among all men having to do with Indian affairs... With enemies galore, he always had powerful friends and his influence at court was enormous... His influence was vast in the Indies, too, though he never achieved his goal. And he left behind a prodigious body of writings, of which at least one, the Devastation of the Indies, has a claim to immortality." (Wagner, pp. 249-250)

Along with so many other defenders of principle and justice, Bartolomé de Las Casas has proven that one individual can make a difference.

Mount Saint Mary College - The Quest for Social Justice

In what way does Bartolomé de Las Casas have a special relevance for Mount Saint Mary College?

As Newburgh is preparing for a new renaissance, you are hearing stories about the Queen City of the Hudson in the 1950's. For many reasons, the historians and sociologists would be needed to help us understand, the city experienced a change in population in the 60's. It seems that too many people came to Newburgh in a short span of years. At the same time factories and businesses were leaving the city. It was difficult for the newcomers to secure jobs. There was a great deal of poverty.

At some point, I returned to the campus to teach a summer course. The young Sisters had organized a program called Summer Adventure. We opened the gates on Gidney Avenue and

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welcomed the children. Our guests had dark skin; they did not share our religion; they were newcomers to the city. However, the opening of the gates was symbolic. The Dominican Sisters were ready and eager to welcome our new neighbors.

However, it was Mount Saint Mary College that really reached out to welcome young men and women who would be the first generation within their family to attend college. It was the commitment of Sister Mary Francis McDonald, Sister Marie Genevieve Love, Mister William McDonough and others who formalized programs that would recruit and guide men and women of diverse backgrounds. This college from its beginning was committed to Catholic Social Teaching which focuses on the dignity of all people and the obligation to seek the common good.

I know that the student body, along with its faculty and administration, continues to work for justice and equality. Habitat for Humanity, volunteer work in New Orleans and Trinidad, tutoring programs in neighborhood schools - these are ways in which you carry on the Dominican mission of working for justice. The newly established San Miguel School is another expression of your commitment to develop leadership within the communities of minority people.

In early fall, your president Sister Ann Sakac and I, with coffee and bagels in hand, were leaving her house and headed for the beautiful river front. A handsome black man with a lively step came walking down Elmwood Place. We exchanged greetings and were about to move on. Suddenly he announced, "I know you!" This gentleman had graduated from Mount Saint Mary College in the early 70's. He is a junior high school teacher in New York City. He proudly announced that he had come to love teaching because of his years at the Mount - years that were spend as a student in the HEOP program.

I have chosen Bartolomé de Las Casas because there are many reasons to believe that you represent those who keep alive the quest for justice and equality for all people.

Let me conclude with the words of your Alma Mater...

Teach us and make us wise

That our life may be well begun;

Kindle our minds and hearts

That our work be nobly done;

Guide us to paths of service

That we may share what you give;

Help us to love Him better

In whose perfect love we live.

Thank you.

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