

A Spaniard Changes His Mind

In 1511, a Dominican friar named Antonio Montesino stood at the front of the church in Hispaniola in the West Indies. He looked out upon the crowd of Spanish colonists in attendance and spoke about the injustice of holding Native Americans as slaves. Montesino scolded the Spanish colonists for treating their Native American slaves with cruelty as they got rich on the work of others.

The listening Spaniards were outraged. They believed the encomienda system was the only way they could make a living in the Americas. Under this system, the Spanish forced Native Americans to work for them. In return, the Spanish were to protect the Native Americans and teach them Christianity.

One person who heard Montesino's words that day responded much differently. Bartolomé de Las Casas was also a Spaniard. He owned land and enslaved Native Americans in the New World. Las Casas saw the truth in Montesino's words. Over the next several years, he observed the cruelties committed by the Spaniards against Native Americans. Las Casas was convinced that he must make major changes in his life. In August 1514, Las Casas gave his own sermon. In it he announced his intention to free his slaves. He also condemned the entire encomienda system. From that point on, Las Casas devoted his entire life to changing the way the Spanish treated Native Americans.



Bartolomé de Las Casas (1474–1566) wanted to reduce Native American suffering under Spanish colonial rule. He spent the rest of his long life fighting for their rights.

Las Casas Takes Up a Cause

Bartolomé de Las Casas was born in Spain in 1474 or 1484 (because he lived so long ago, exact records are lost). His father was a merchant who tried his fortune by sailing with explorer Christopher Columbus on his second voyage. While his father was away, Las Casas studied Latin. In 1502, he traveled to the West Indies with the governor of Seville. He took part in several military expeditions. In 1512 or 1513, he became a priest. When the Spanish conquered Cuba in 1513, Las Casas took part in the campaign. He was horrified by the war's cruelty. Within a short time, he had given his famous sermon and renounced his family's holdings on Hispaniola.

Over the next several years, Las Casas traveled back and forth between Spain and the Americas. He spoke to King Ferdinand of Spain, before the Spanish

Parliament, and to Ferdinand's successor, King Charles I. Through his sincere and passionate pleas, he was able to convince those in power that the treatment of Native Americans had to change. In 1519, with King Charles's blessing, Las Casas went to Venezuela to begin a new settlement. He planned to set up towns of Spanish farmers and Native Americans who would work side by side in partnership. Sadly, the experiment lasted only two years. The settlement's failure was caused partly by resentment of Spanish landowners, who disliked the project from the start.

Las Casas was deeply disappointed. His mission was not successful but his motivation to prevent further harm to the Native Americans was renewed. In 1523, he joined the Dominican religious order and began writing about the horrible treatment of Native Americans he had witnessed. He accused the Spanish of putting their hunger for gold before the well-being of fellow human beings.

Friends Are Made in High Places

Through his writing and speaking, Las Casas began to influence people in high places. Finally, in 1542, King Charles passed the New Laws. These laws basically ended the encomienda system. They also banned the enslavement of Native Americans. Las Casas was sent to Guatemala to enforce the laws. The Spanish colonists were bitterly opposed to change. They believed that ending slave labor in the Americas would cause the collapse of the colonial economy, and they were not hesitant to make their own points known.

In 1545, Las Casas was appointed bishop of a poor region in Mexico. His journey to reach his new home took nearly a year. He was beset with hardships. Las Casas had enemies on every side and was nearly killed by an assassin.

After fighting Las Casas's cause for several years, the colonists won their case. The New Laws were repealed. Las Casas was forced to return to Spain in 1547. There, he became an even more influential figure. His advice was sought often by the Council of the Indies, which was the governing body for the Spanish colonies in the Americas. The king



Charles I of Spain (1500-1558) listened to Las Casas and passed laws to end the encomienda system in the Americas. The move caused major resentment among the Spanish colonists, however, and Charles later repealed the laws.

also depended on Las Casas for guidance regarding issues for Central America.

Never Give Up

Las Casas continued to write against the abuse of Native Americans into his 80s. He fought for Native American rights and equality. In 1550, his theories were tested when he confronted another political figure, theologian Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, in a high-profile, two-part debate. After a panel of 14 famous theologians listened to the arguments of both men, the confrontation continued in 1551. Sepúlveda reasoned that the enslavement of Native Americans was justified because their race was below that of the Spaniards. Las Casas countered that Native Americans were human beings who should have the same rights as any European.

As a result of this public debate, Las Casas succeeded on two counts. He was able to prevent Sepúlveda from publishing his book. He also was able to win a wider audience for his views.

Las Casas was not able to bring about permanent change for Native Americans during his lifetime. He did, however, raise an issue that had been little discussed at the time. He recognized the injustice of European colonization and encouraged fair treatment of all people. His words would inspire later fighters for freedom. These included the Latin American revolutionary Simón Bolívar in the early 1800s as well as important figures in the struggle for Mexican independence around the same time.

Las Casas was a stubborn man who loved to argue. Because his writings were somewhat exaggerated, he angered many people throughout his lifetime—even some fellow Dominicans. No one could deny, however, that Las Casas believed deeply in his cause. He spoke plainly to kings and popes, attempting to get his message across clear and simply without resorting to sly tactics of persuasion. He was the champion of the oppressed and refused to be silenced, right up to the day he died in 1566.

After reading the passage, answer the following questions:

- 1.** According to Las Casas, what caused the death of many Native Americans under Spanish rule?
 - A.** disease and unhealthy conditions
 - B.** loss of land for farming
 - C.** exhaustion and hunger
 - D.** destruction of hunting grounds

- 2.** Antonio Montesino was
 - A.** a famous theologian whom Las Casas debated in 1550
 - B.** a Native American whom Las Casas befriended in the Americas
 - C.** a Dominican friar who had a major influence over Las Casas's view of Spanish colonialism
 - D.** a Spanish colonist who attempted unsuccessfully to assassinate Las Casas

- 3.** Throughout his attempts to win better treatment for Native Americans, Las Casas faced strong opposition from which of the following?
 - A.** King Charles I
 - B.** Spanish colonists
 - C.** The Native Americans
 - D.** Simón Bolívar

- 4.** Describe the Spanish encomienda system and the reasons why La Casas opposed it. Use details from the reading passage to help you develop a well-supported answer.