

# Las Casas

(1484-1566)

Dominican priest, writer, defender of the indigenous peoples of Latin America

## FIRST PHASE OF LAS CASAS' LIFE

- 1484 Bartolomé de Las Casas is born in Sevilla.
- 1492 The Muslim kingdom of Granada is conquered by the Spanish kingdoms of Castilla and Aragón.  
Spanish Jews are expelled from Spain.  
Antonio de Nebrija presents his publication of *Gramática de la lengua española* (Grammar of the Spanish Language) to Isabel I, queen of Castilla.  
Colón / Columbus encounters islands in the Western Hemisphere
- 1502 Las Casas sails to the Indies / las Indias.
- 1504 Isabel I la Católica dies.
- 1506 Colón / Columbus dies.
- 1507 Las Casas is ordained as a priest in Rome.
- 1512 The Consejo de Burgos (Royal Council of Burgos) meets in Spain  
The Burgos Laws / las Leyes de Burgos are promulgated; there are 30 laws; among them are:
1. formal liberty (freedom) for the indigenous people of Latin America
  2. formal injunction stating the need for Indians to convert (*el requerimiento*)
  3. Indian villages and inhabitants are granted to Spanish colonists by royal decree (*la encomienda / repartimiento de los indios a encomenderos*)
  4. De facto slavery of Indians is the result of the Leyes de Burgos (*la esclavitud de hecho de los indios*)
- Las Casas attacks all aspects of the Leyes de Burgos.

## SECOND PHASE OF LAS CASAS' LIFE

- 1514 Las Casas undergoes a moral "conversion";  
This is the beginning of the second phase of his life; he meditates on this biblical passage: Eclesiástico 34: 18-22:

Tainted the gifts of he who offers in sacrifice ill-gotten goods!  
Mock presents from the lawless win not God's favor.

The Most High approves not the gifts of the  
godless, nor for their many sacrifices does he forgive their sins.

Like the man who slays a son in his father's  
presence is he who offers sacrifice from the possessions of the poor.

The bread of charity is life itself for the needy; he  
who withholds it is a man of blood.

He slays his neighbor who deprives him of his  
living: he sheds blood who denies the laborer his wages

- 1516 Fernando el Católico dies.  
Las Casas sends his book *Memorial de remedios* (Brief of Remedies) to  
Cardinal Cisneros, who was regent of Spain during this year.
- 1517 Carlos I de Habsburgo ascends the throne of España. He is elected Carlos  
V (Charles V) of the Holy Roman Empire.  
Martin Luther (Martín Lutero) publishes his 95 theses, thus beginning the  
Protestant Reformation against the Roman Catholic Church.
- 1519-1521 Cortés conquers the Aztecs in Mexico.
- 1522 Las Casas becomes a Dominican friar (un dominico).
- 1527 Las Casas begins writing his major work, *Historia de las Indias* (History  
of the Indies).  
Carlos V's son, and the future king, Felipe II is born.
- 1531 Las Casas sends his work, *Carta al Consejo de las Indias*, to the Council  
of the Indies.
- 1541 Ignacio de Loyola founds the Jesuit Order under the direct command of  
the Roman Catholic pope.
- 1542 Las Casas sends another work, *Representación* to Carlos V.  
Las Casas publishes his famous and influential work, *Brevísima relación  
de la destrucción de las Indias* (Very Brief Story of the Destruction of  
the Indies).  
This publication and other declarations by Las Casas are the basic origin  
for the infamous "Black Legend" that denigrated Spain so strongly  
throughout the rest of Europe. Spain's enemies in France and England  
used Las Casas for evidence that Spain was a brutal country.
- 1542-1543 Due to Las Casas campaigning on behalf of Indian rights in the Americas,  
Spain passes a set of New Laws (las Leyes Nuevas). These laws  
protect the Indians to some degree by eliminating the hereditary aspect  
of the *encomiendas*.  
This is a partial victory for Las Casas.
- 1543 Las Casas is made bishop of Chiapas (southern Mexico), a strongly  
indigenous region of New Spain.  
Las Casas sends his work, the *Memorial* to Carlos V.
- 1545 Carlos V revokes the Leyes Nuevas under pressure from powerful interest  
groups in the Americas.

### THIRD PHASE OF LAS CASAS' LIFE

- 1546 Las Casas cuando becomes disillusioned with the Spanish monarchy because of the revocation of the Leyes Nuevas and because of the negative reaction to Las Casas campaign of denunciation of the black slave trade (Las Casas rereads Ecclesiasticus 34: 18-22).
- 1547 Las Casas returns to Spain for the last time.  
Miguel de Cervantes, the author of Don Quixote (1605, 1615), is born.
- 1550-1551 A major public debate is held in the Castilian city of Valladolid between Las Casas and Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda about Spain's treatment of Indians and Africans in the New World.  
Las Casas publishes a work called the *Apología*.
- 1552 Las Casas publishes 8 more treatises.
- 1554 The famous Spanish picaresque novel, *Lazarillo de Tormes*, is published.
- 1555-1564 Las Casas publishes several more works.
- 1556 Carlos V abdicates in favor of his son Felipe II, and then Carlos V retires to the Spanish monastery at Yuste.
- 1558 Carlos V dies.
- 1564 Las Casas sends out his *Carta a los dominicos de Chiapa y Guatemala* (Letter to Dominicans in Chiapas and Guatemala).
- 1566 Las Casas dies.



## NOTES

1. Las Casas is the first great and influential defender of human dignity, freedom on conscience, and civil rights for the indigenous peoples of the Americas.
2. For Las Casas the *encomienda* system is the basis of Spanish tyranny (*la raíz de la tiranía*), since it is the axis around which the entire colonial system functions.
3. Spanish version of Ecclesiasticus 34: 18-22:

Sacrificar cosa injusta es hacer ofrenda rechazada,  
no logran complacencia los presentes de los sin ley.  
No se complace el Altísimo en ofrendas de impíos,  
ni por el cúmulo de víctimas perdona los pecados.  
Inmola a un hijo a los ojos de su padre  
quien ofrece víctima a costa de los bienes de los humildes.  
Pan de indigentes es la vida de los pobres,  
quien se lo quita es un hombre sanguinario.

Mata a su prójimo quien le arrebató su sustento,  
vierte sangre quien quita el jornal al jornalero.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Las Casas, Bartolomé de. *Obras escogidas*. Ed. J. Pérez de Tudela. 5 vols. Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Españoles, 1957-1958.
- Las Casas, Bartolomé de. *Obras completas*. 15 vols. Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1989-1992.
- Abril Castelló, V. "Bartolomé de Las Casas, el último comunero (mito y realidad de las utopías políticas lascasianas)." *Las Casqs et la politique*, 92-123.
- Adorno, R. "El arte de la persuasión: El Padre de Las Casas y Fray Luis de Granada en la obra de Waman Poma de Ayala." *Escritura, Teoría y Crítica literaria*, no. 8 (1979): 167-189.
- Adorno, R. "Bartolomé de Las Casas y Domingo de Santo Tomás en la obra de Felipe Waman Pum." *Revista Iberoamericana*, nos. 120-121 (1982): 673-679.
- André-Vincent, P. *Bartolomé de Las Casas, prophète du nouveau monde*. Paris: Tallandier, 1980.
- Bataillon, Marcel. *Estudios sobre Bartolomé de Las Casas*. Barcelona: Península, 1976.
- Bataillon, Marcel. "Las Casas, ¿un profeta?" *Revista de Occidente* (Madrid), no. 141 (diciembre 1974): 279-291.
- Bataillon, Marcel. *Las Casas et la défense des Indiens*. Paris: Julliard, 1971.
- Bataillon, Marcel. "Las Casas face à la pensée d'Aristote sur l'esclavage." *Actes du XVI colloque international de Tours*, 403-20. Paris, 1976.
- Beozzo, O. "O diálogo da conversão do gentio: A evangelização entre a persuasão e a força." *Actas del Congreso Internacional sobre Bartolomé de Las Casas*. Lima, 1992.
- Brown, R. McAfee. *Bartolomé de Las Casas: A Man for the Next Five Hundred Years*. publication?
- Chang Rodríguez, Raquel. *La apropiación del signo: Tres cronistas indígenas del Perú*. Tempe, Arizona: Center for Latin American Studies, 1988.
- Gutiérrez, Gustavo. *En busca de los pobres de Jesucristo*. Lima: Instituto Bartolomé de las Casas-Rimac, 1992.
- Gutiérrez, Gustavo. *Las Casas: In Search of the Poor of Jesus Christ*, Trans. Robert R. Barr; New York: Orbis Books, 1993.
- Hanke, L. *All Mankind Is One: A Study of the Disputation between Bartolomé de Las Casas and Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda in 1550 on the Intellectual and Religious Capacity of the American Indians*. Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1974.
- Leyes de Burgos*. (1512). Burgos, 1991.
- Manzano y Manzano, Juan. *Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas ante la Junta de Valladolid de 1542*. Madrid: CH, 1948.
- Manzano y Manzano, Juan. *Historia de las recopliciones de Indias*. Madrid: CH, 1950.

- Menéndez Pidal, Ramón. *El Padre Las Casas: Su doble personalidad*. Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1963.
- Parish, Helen Rand. "Introduction: Las Casas's Spirituality—The Three Crises." In *Bartolomé de Las Casas: The Only Way*. New York: Paulist Press, 1991.
- Parish, Helen Rand. *Las Casas: The Untold Story*. Berkeley: University of California Press, in preparation.
- Pérez de Tudela, J. *El Padre Las Casas desde nuestra época*. Santander: Publicaciones de la Universidad Internacional Menéndez Pelayo, 1966.
- Pérez de Tudela, J. "Significado histórico de la vida y escritos del Padre Las Casas: Estudio crítico preliminar." In Bartolomé de Las Casas, *Obras escogidas*, vol. 1: *Historia de las Indias*, i-clxxxviii. Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Españoles, 1957.
- Pérez Fernández, I. *¿ Bartolomé de Las Casas contra los negros?* Madrid: Editorial Mundo Negro, 1991.
- Pérez Fernández, I. *Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas, O.P., Brevísima relación de la destrucción de Africa*. Salamanca: Editorial San Esteban; Lima: IBC, 1989.

[WTL Home](#)

[16th Century](#)

[Hum 2461 Home](#)