


BIOGRAPHY

Bartolomé de Las Casas

One of the few voices to speak out on behalf of the Native Americans was Father Bartolomé de Las Casas.

As you read about the enlightened vision of Las Casas, think about how a system that creates a class of involuntary laborers limits both the laborers and their masters.

The champion of Spain's Native American subjects, the Dominican priest Bartolomé de Las Casas, spent most of his life in America. Born to a noble family in the Spanish city of Seville, he studied law at the University of Salamanca, and moved to Española in 1502. Once established, he began collecting material for his major work, *Historia de las indias*. This history, which Las Casas began in 1527, would take him a lifetime; he was still working on it in 1563, three years prior to his death at the age of 92.

After several years, Las Casas left Española for Cuba. In Cuba, he was regarded as a conquistador and was rewarded with a tract of land. Under the *encomienda* system, the people who lived on the land were required to provide him with labor and tribute (food) in exchange for protection and religious indoctrination to save their souls.

For several years, he felt quite confident about the legitimate right to subjugate the Native American workers on his land. Then he encountered a Dominican missionary priest in the confessional. The priest refused to grant Las Casas absolution on the grounds that he was an exploiter of the Native Americans. As a result, Las Casas began to question the justice of the *encomienda* system. The more he reflected, the more he became aware of the immorality of a system that enslaved humans beings.

In 1515 Las Casas returned to Spain where he defended the interests of the Native Americans. He found King Ferdinand ill and uninterested in hearing what he had to say. The most Las Casas was able to accomplish was to gain passage of a law which placed the Native Americans under the protection of the friars. Las Casas returned to Cuba and joined the Dominican order in 1524. He continued to accuse the conquistadores of “endless crimes and offenses against the Native Americans who were the king’s subjects.”

For the next 50 years, Las Casas decried the “destruction of the Indies” in two continents. In Spain, the priest raged against slaveholders; in America, he defended the slaves. He had—for his time—a rather enlightened vision of how relations should be between conquerors and the conquered. He believed that the Spaniards had the responsibility for maintaining order and justice, and for teaching the Catholic religion, but that the people should be allowed to maintain their homes, fields, and local political order. These ideas on master-slave relationships, along with Las Casas’s principal demands for humane treatment, were incorporated into the Laws of the Indies in 1542. Under these laws, the *encomienda* system was legally abolished, although it remained for all practical purposes in another form for many years.

Questions to Think About

1. What factors caused Las Casas to renounce his holdings and devote his life to defending the interests of Spain's Native American subjects?
2. **Expressing Problems Clearly** Las Casas said that the system of the *encomienda* deprived “both masters and subjects of their freedom and of their lives.” What did he mean?