

Bartolomé de las Casas

Bartolome de las Casas was a Spanish priest known for speaking out against Spanish cruelty toward Native Americans. There are two activities here. The first activity is also referenced in the section of activities for middle and high school students. The second activity is based upon a primary source document written by de las Casas: “Of the Island of Hispanola” in “Very Brief Account of the Devastation of the Indies (1542)” taken from *A History of US: Sourcebook and Index, Documents that Shaped the American Nation, Book 11*. Parts of de las Casas’ writing are quite graphic, so be sure to make sure this activity is appropriate for your students. The excerpt is included on the following pages.

ACTIVITY ONE: “OPEN YOUR HEARTS”: A DOMINICAN FRIAR SPEAKS OUT

This activity is based upon a reading excerpt adapted by Bill Bigelow from writings by Bartolomé de las Casas found in RTC (p. 103). In this reading, students hear another alternative view to the ramifications of exploration on the Americas. Guided reading questions and activities are provided in RTC (p. 139). This activity is also referenced in the primary source activity “Bartolomé de las Casas”.

"OPEN YOUR HEARTS"

A Dominican Friar Speaks Out

ADAPTED FROM BARTOLOMÉ DE LAS CASAS

It was the Sunday before Christmas, 1511. The whole city of Santo Domingo would be in church that day, even Christopher Columbus's son, Admiral Diego Columbus. All the important people were invited by the Dominicans to come hear the sermon. Everyone agreed to come. But if they had known what the sermon was to be about, they would have been very angry and would have stayed home.

The Dominican Friar Antonio de Montesinos walked to the pulpit. He stood before them and looked out on the crowded church. "I am a voice crying in the desert!" he shouted. "What is wrong with you?" he called to the people. "You are blind, you are in danger of going to hell. Can't you see?" Then, his voice growing louder, he said: "I have come here to tell you, in the name of Christ, that it is time for you to open your hearts — all of you."

The people in the church were shocked. Some of them were afraid. What in the world was this friar talking about?

Friar Montesinos continued to speak to them angrily.

"Tell me, what right have you to kill the Indians? What have they ever done to you? And why do you make them slaves? You attack them and torture them. Why do you do this?"

"Why can't you feed them and care for them? It is because you are so greedy for gold that you work them to death. You don't even teach them about God or let them go to church.

"Aren't the Indians people? Doesn't the Bible tell you to love them as much as you love yourselves? You are living in a dream! Don't you understand?"

Admiral Diego Columbus and the other rich Spaniards could not believe their ears. Some were too afraid to look up from the ground. Others were shaking, they were so angry. None of them believed what the priest had told them.

Friar Montesinos ended his sermon. He walked down the aisle with his head held high. He was not afraid. He left and went to the small straw house of the Dominicans.

When Friar Montesinos had left the church, all the people began talking to each other. "Who does he think he is?" one man shouted.

"He should be hung!" shouted another.

"No, we cannot hang a priest. But Admiral Columbus, you can order him to stop. Send him back to Spain. Send them all back."

The admiral looked at the man who had just spoken. "No," he said. "First, we must give him a chance to say he is sorry. He must take back what he has said. When he attacks us for using the Indians, he is really attacking the King. It is the King who tells us to use Indian workers. It is very serious to criticize the King. Let us go now to talk to Montesinos."

A group of men arrived at the house of the Dominican friars. They knocked on the door. When a porter answered, Admiral Columbus said, "We have come to see the Superior." Friar Pedro de Cordoba came alone to meet them.

"We have come to speak with Friar Montesinos. He has offended us and he has offended the King," said Diego Columbus.

"I see," replied Cordoba. "But if you have something to say, please tell me. For all the Dominicans agree with what Friar Montesinos said in his sermon today."

"Let us see Montesinos, he is the one we are angry with!" called out a tall, bearded man standing behind Columbus.

"I will tell you once again," said Friar Cordoba. "If you have something to say, please say it now. Say it to me."

"Father, we don't mean to be rude," said Columbus. "But because Friar Montesinos is the one who spoke the words today, we kindly ask to speak to him. We only wish to ask him some questions."

Seeing that the men's tone had changed, Cordoba agreed to go get Montesinos.

Montesinos seemed to be a little afraid when he returned with Friar Cordoba. They all sat down.

Columbus began: "Friar Montesinos, how dare you criticize us like that in church? The King himself gave us the Indians to use as workers. My father and his men spent years fighting the Indians after they attacked Christians. Your sermon was a scandal, an insult to our whole way of life." Columbus paused. He looked directly at Friar Montesinos. "I demand that you take back what you said today. And if you don't, we will take action against you."

Montesinos appeared calm. "What I said today

in my sermon was the result of much thought. It is what all the friars believe. Again I say to you: You are killing off the Indians. You treat them as if they were animals. But they are people, and it is up to the friars to save the souls of all people, Spaniard and Indian. I believe that in doing this, we are serving the King. Believe me, once the King knows what we friars are doing, he will thank us."

These words angered Columbus and the men. They had come to the Indies to get rich by finding gold. How could they find gold without the Indians? Who would work in the mines? Who would work in the fields?

Columbus spoke for the men. "Look, we are warning you. I demand that you preach another sermon next Sunday. And take back what you have said today. If you don't, we shall have you all sent back to Spain."

Now, it was Friar Cordoba's turn to speak. "Of course you can send us back to Spain. This can be easily done." It was true. The Dominicans had very little in the Indies. Besides their rough clothes, they owned nothing except a simple blanket. They slept on straw pads. Everything they owned could be fit into two trunks.

Admiral Columbus saw that his threats did not scare these Dominicans. "Please, Friar Cordoba, Friar Montesinos. Please preach another sermon next Sunday. People are very upset."

Friar Montesinos looked at Friar Cordoba. "Alright," he said. "I will preach another sermon next Sunday. I will do my best to make myself more clear."

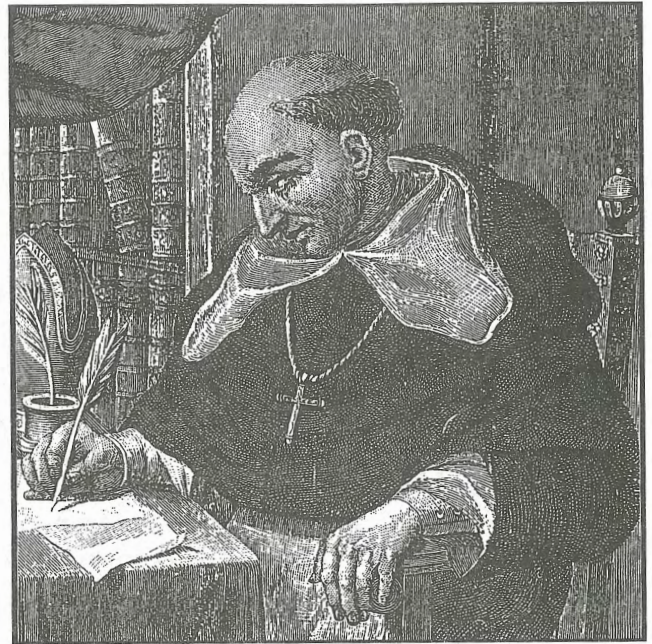
Diego Columbus thanked the friars and the men left. They were happy and joked to themselves as they walked away from the Dominicans' house.

News spread quickly that next Sunday, Friar Montesinos would preach another sermon. People heard that Montesinos had promised to take back everything he had said. The church was crowded with people.

Friar Montesinos walked steadily to the pulpit. "I take my theme from Job 36," he said in a loud, strong voice. "From the beginning, I shall repeat my knowledge and my truth. I will show that what I said last Sunday, that made you so angry, is true."

People in the church looked at each other. They wanted to stop him, but he had already begun. Diego Columbus stared at him with anger.

"With my own eyes, I have seen Indians starving to death. With my own eyes, I have seen people who call themselves Christians whip an Indian to death. Dogs are treated better than Indians. Again, I tell you: You will go to hell if you do not stop. If you don't like what I say, then write to Spain. Do whatever you like. I will not stop saying what I know



The Spanish priest, Bartolomé de las Casas chronicled Spanish abuses of the native Taínos.

is true. It is the only way I know how to serve my God and my King."

Montesinos ended his sermon. Again, he left the church with his head held high.

"He lied to us," said one man. "He promised he would take back what he said last week."

"Yes, let's go back to the Dominicans and order them to preach another sermon," called out someone from the back.

Others became quiet as Diego Columbus spoke: "And what good would that do? He would continue to tell us we are going to hell. I'm tired of listening to that idiot! No, we must tell the King. He will order Montesinos to stop. The King has no wish to be poor like a Dominican friar." The others laughed. "And without the Indians, the King would get no gold. He would lose his power."

When the King received Diego Columbus's letter, he ordered the head of the Dominicans in Spain to come to him. "What is this man causing so much trouble for? You must stop him. And if you don't, I will."

You see how easy it is to fool a king....

— adapted by Bill Bigelow from *Bartolomé de las Casas, History of the Indies, 1542.*

Additional Reading:

Stopsky, Fred. *Bartolome de las Casas: Champion of Indian Rights* (Lowell, MA: Discovery Enterprises, 1992)

Bartolomé de las Casas. A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies. New York: Penguin, 1992 (pb. edition).

ACTIVITY TWO: “OF THE ISLAND OF HISPANOLA”

(Taken from *A History of US: Sourcebook and Index, Documents that Shaped the American Nation*, pp. 12-13). Based on the primary source document provided on the following pages.

1. Introduce de las Casas to the students, discussing who he was and his role in criticizing aspects of Spanish exploration and treatment of indigenous peoples.
2. Preview the following guiding questions with students before reading the excerpt.
 - a. How does de las Casas characterize the indigenous people of Hispanola? Give examples.
 - b. How does de las Casas characterize Columbus and his men? Give examples.
 - c. Why do you think de las Casas calls the explorers “The Christians”?
 - d. Have you ever read an account like this in any history books about Columbus before? If no, why do you think that is?
5. Have students read the selection either individually, in partners, or as a class.
6. In partners have students answer the guiding reading questions.
7. As a class discuss the answers and student responses to the reading.

buy their way out of trouble. By the early 1600s, this sentence in *Magna Carta* was understood to be the origin of the right of habeas corpus—the right not to be held in jail without being accused of a crime.

Magna Carta was originally intended to apply only to the richest, most important men in England: the barons. Common people are hardly mentioned in the great document at all. But at the last minute, the barons changed the wording of important passages such as the one above to say “no freeman” and “any freeman” instead of “no baron” and “any baron.” There were not many freemen in 14th-century England (most people were serfs—peasants bound to the land belonging to a nobleman). But over time, this wording justified extending the rights of *Magna Carta* to all the English people. In the same way, the words “We the People” in the U.S. Constitution have come to apply to all the people, not only to white men, as they did when the Constitution was written.

For more information see
Chapter 29, Book 1, *The First Americans*.

2. Bartolomé de Las Casas, “Of the Island of Hispanola,” in *Very Brief Account of the Devastation of the Indies* (1542)

Bartolomé de Las Casas, the first Spanish priest ordained in the New World, is known for his lifelong efforts to protect Indians from Spanish exploitation. His harsh criticism of the exploitation of natives working in the mines and the maltreatment of Indian women earned him the title “Defender of the Indians.” In 1542, Las Casas denounced Spanish cruelty toward the Indians in his *Very Brief Account of the Devastation of the Indies*. That same year, Emperor Charles I prohibited the enslavement of Indians, but they continued to be exploited. Because of Las Casas’s compassion for the Indians he advised Spain to import African slaves to replace native laborers in New World mines and fields. He later regretted his decision.

In this passage from his book, Las Casas describes the cruel ways that the Spanish conquistadors treated the inhabitants of Hispaniola, the island that now includes Haiti and the Dominican Republic.

God has created all these numberless people to be quite the simplest, without malice or duplicity, most obedient, most faithful to their natural Lords, and to the Christians, whom they serve; the most humble, most patient, most peaceful and calm, without strife

malice: a desire to harm others
duplicity: trickery

nor tumults; not wrangling, nor querulous, as free from uproar, hate and desire of revenge as any in the world. . . .

Among these gentle sheep, gifted by their Maker with the above qualities, the Spaniards entered as soon as they knew them, like wolves, tiger and lions which had been starving for many days, and since forty years they have done nothing else; nor do they afflict, torment, and destroy them with strange and new, and divers kinds of cruelty, never before seen, nor heard of, nor read of. . . .

The Christians, with their horses and swords and lances, began to slaughter and practice strange cruelty among them. They penetrated into the country and spared neither children nor the aged, nor pregnant women, nor those in child labour, all of whom they ran through the body and lacerated, as though they were assaulting so many lambs herded in their sheepfold.

They made bets as to who would slit a man in two, or cut off his head at one blow: or they opened up his bowels. They tore the babes from their mothers' breast by the feet, and dashed their heads against the rocks. Others they seized by the shoulders and threw into the rivers, laughing and joking, and when they fell into the water they exclaimed: "boil body of so and so!" They spitted the bodies of other babes, together with their mothers and all who were before them, on their swords.

They made a gallows just high enough for the feet to nearly touch the ground, and by thirteens, in honour and reverence of our Redeemer and the twelve Apostles, they put wood underneath and, with fire, they burned the Indians alive.

They wrapped the bodies of others entirely in dry straw, binding them in it and setting fire to it; and so they burned them. They cut off the hands of all they wished to take alive, made them carry them fastened on to them, and said: "Go and carry letters": that is; take the news to those who have fled to the mountains.

They generally killed the lords and nobles in the following way. They made wooden gridirons of stakes, bound them upon them, and made a slow fire beneath; thus the victims gave up the spirit by degrees, emitting cries of despair in their torture. . . .

3. From an anonymous Aztec chronicler in Fray Bernardino de Sahagun, *General History of Things in New Spain* (1582)

Much of our knowledge about Aztec life before, during, and after the Spanish Conquest is due to the efforts of a Franciscan priest, Bernardino de Sahagun.

querulous: likely to complain

afflict: to make suffer

divers: different

Apostles: Jesus's first followers

emitting: letting out

For more information see

Chapters 21–24, Book 1, *The First Americans*.