

Bartolomé de las Casas

Bartolomé de las Casas, a Dominican friar, writer, and advocate for the humane treatment of the indigenous people of the Americas, was one of the most important religious figures of the 16th-century Spanish world. As Spain struggled to develop a policy regarding the peoples of the New World, Las Casas, spent years attempting to expose the abuses that the native population was subjected to under the encomienda system. He also devoted a great deal of energy trying to convince the Spanish Crown that its mission to spread the Christian faith in the Americas did not have to deprive indigenous people of their freedom, sovereignty, and property rights.

"On the mainland, we know for sure that our fellow-countrymen have, through their cruelty and wickedness, depopulated and laid waste an area which once boasted more than ten kingdoms, each of them larger in area than the whole of the Iberian Peninsula. The whole region, once teeming with human beings, is now deserted over a distance of more than two thousand leagues: a distance, that is, greater than the journey from Seville to Jerusalem and back again.

At a conservative estimate, the despotic and diabolical behaviour of the Christians has, over the last forty years, led to the unjust and totally unwarranted deaths of more than twelve million souls, women and children among them, and there are grounds for believing my own estimate of more than fifteen million to be nearer the mark...

The reason the Christians have murdered on such a vast scale and killed anyone and everyone in their way is purely and simply greed. They have set out to line their pockets with gold and to amass private fortunes as quickly as possible so that they can then assume a status quite at odds with that into which they were born."

-A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies, Bartolome de las Casas

<http://www.pbs.org/kcet/when-worlds-collide/people/bartolome-de-las-casas.html>

1. Does Bartolome de las Casas agree with the treatment of South & Central Americans? Circle the key words that tell you how he feels.

2. What are some effects of Spanish colonization in South and Central America?

3. How does de las Casas explain the cause for such poor treatment of Native Americans?