



Don Barthélemy de Las Casas, Évêque de Chiapa,  
Protecteur des naturels de l'Amérique. From the  
Paris, 1822, edition by J. A. Llorente,  
*Oeuvres de don Barthélemy de Las Casas.*

# IN DEFENSE OF THE INDIANS

*The Defense of the Most  
Reverend Lord, Don Fray Bartolomé de  
Las Casas, of the Order of Preachers,  
Late Bishop of Chiapa, Against the  
Persecutors and Slanderers of the  
Peoples of the New World  
Discovered Across the Seas*

Translated, Edited, and Annotated by

STAFFORD POOLE, C.M.



NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY PRESS

• DeKalb

We wish to thank the University of New Mexico Press for permission to use the information relating to the dating of this treatise taken from Henry Raup Wagner, *The Life and Writings of Bartolomé de las Casas* (© 1967) p. 279.

We also wish to thank the trustees of The Newberry Library for permission to use the following from the Edward E. Ayer collection:

Mexican calendar motif on half-title page, collected by Waldeck, Ayer Ms. 1271;

*Don Barthélemy de Las Casas* portrait from J. A. Llorente, *Oeuvres de don Barthélemy de Las Casas*, 1822;

Ornamental letters used on openings, from Las Casas, *Brevissima Relación de la Destrucción de las Indias*, Seville, 1552;

Entire set of previously unpublished Indian drawings from the Codex Zempoala (Ayer Ms. 1472) and Codex Tepotzotlan (Ayer Ms. 1479).

#### Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Casas, Bartolomé de las, Bp. of Chiapa, 1474–1566.  
In defense of the Indians.

Translation of a ca. 1552 Latin ms. in the Bibliothèque nationale, Paris  
(Nouveaux fonds Latins, no. 12926)

Includes bibliographical references.

1. Indians, Treatment of. 2. Sepúlveda, Juan  
Ginés de, 1490–1573. 3. Catholic Church in America—  
Missions. 4. Spain—Colonies—Administration.

I. Poole, Stafford, ed. II. Title.

F1411.C425 1974 980'.01 73–15094

ISBN 0-87580-042-4

Copyright © 1974 by Northern Illinois University Press

Published by the Northern Illinois University Press, DeKalb, Illinois 60115

Manufactured in the United States of America

All rights reserved

Designed by Gary Gore

and lacking in the reasoning powers necessary for self-government. They are without laws, without king, etc. For this reason they are by nature unfitted for rule.

However, he admits, and proves, that the barbarians he deals with in the third book of the same work have a lawful, just, and natural government. Even though they lack the art and use of writing, they are not wanting in the capacity and skill to rule and govern themselves, both publicly and privately. Thus they have kingdoms, communities, and cities that they govern wisely according to their laws and customs. Thus their government is legitimate and natural, even though it has some resemblance to tyranny. From these statements we have no choice but to conclude that the rulers of such nations enjoy the use of reason and that their people and the inhabitants of their provinces do not lack peace and justice. Otherwise they could not be established or preserved as political entities for long. This is made clear by the Philosopher and Augustine.<sup>1</sup> Therefore not all barbarians are irrational or natural slaves or unfit for government. Some barbarians, then, in accord with justice and nature, have kingdoms, royal dignities, jurisdiction, and good laws, and there is among them lawful government.

Now if we shall have shown that among our Indians of the western and southern shores (granting that we call them barbarians and that they are barbarians) there are important kingdoms, large numbers of people who live settled lives in a society, great cities, kings, judges and laws, persons who engage in commerce, buying, selling, lending, and the other contracts of the law of nations, will it not stand proved that the Reverend Doctor Sepúlveda has spoken wrongly and viciously against peoples like these, either out of malice or ignorance of Aristotle's teaching, and, therefore, has falsely and perhaps irreparably slandered them before the entire world? From the fact that the Indians are barbarians it does not necessarily follow that they are incapable of government and have to be ruled by others, except to be taught about the Catholic faith and to be admitted to the holy sacraments. They are not ignorant, inhuman, or bestial. Rather, long before they had heard the word Spaniard they had properly organized states, wisely ordered by excellent laws, religion, and custom. They cultivated friendship and, bound to-

1. *Politics*, Book 3, chap. 8, and Book 5, chap. 7 [Las Casas seems to be citing these sources rather loosely]. *De Civitate Dei*, Lib. 2, cap. 21.

gether in common fellowship, lived in populous cities in which they wisely administered the affairs of both peace and war justly and equitably, truly governed by laws that at very many points surpass ours, and could have won the admiration of the sages of Athens, as I will show in the second part of this *Defense*. ✓

Now if they are to be subjugated by war because they are ignorant of polished literature, let Sepúlveda hear Trogus Pompey:

Nor could the Spaniards submit to the yoke of a conquered province until Caesar Augustus, after he had conquered the world, turned his victorious armies against them and organized that barbaric and wild people as a province, once he had led them by law to a more civilized way of life.<sup>2</sup>

Now see how he called the Spanish people barbaric and wild. I would like to hear Sepúlveda, in his cleverness, answer this question: Does he think that the war of the Romans against the Spanish was justified in order to free them from barbarism? And this question also: Did the Spanish wage an unjust war when they vigorously defended themselves against them?

Next, I call the Spaniards who plunder that unhappy people torturers. Do you think that the Romans, once they had subjugated the wild and barbaric peoples of Spain, could with secure right divide all of you among themselves, handing over so many head of both males and females as allotments to individuals? And do you then conclude that the Romans could have stripped your rulers of their authority and consigned all of you, after you had been deprived of your liberty, to wretched labors, especially in searching for gold and silver lodes and mining and refining the metals? And if the Romans finally did that, as is evident from Diodorus,<sup>3</sup> [would you not judge] that you also have the right to defend your freedom, indeed your very life, by war? Sepúlveda, would you have permitted Saint James to evangelize your own people of Córdoba in that way? For God's sake and man's faith in him, is this the way to impose the yoke of Christ on Christian men? Is this the way to remove wild barbarism from the minds of barbarians? Is it not, rather, to act like thieves, cut-throats, and cruel plunderers and to drive the gentlest of people headlong into despair? The Indian race is not that

2. Book 44, near the end.

3. [*Bibliotheca Universalis*], Book 6, chap. 9. [This is probably Book 5, chap. 36.]

barbaric, nor are they dull witted or stupid, but they are easy to teach and very talented in learning all the liberal arts, and very ready to accept, honor, and observe the Christian religion and correct their sins (as experience has taught) once priests have introduced them to the sacred mysteries and taught them the word of God. They have been endowed with excellent conduct, and before the coming of the Spaniards, as we have said, they had political states that were well founded on beneficial laws.

Furthermore, they are so skilled in every mechanical art that with every right they should be set ahead of all the nations of the known world on this score, so very beautiful in their skill and artistry are the things this people produces in the grace of its architecture, its painting, and its needlework. But Sepúlveda despises these mechanical arts, as if these things do not reflect inventiveness, ingenuity, industry, and right reason. For a mechanical art is an operative habit of the intellect that is usually defined as "the right way to make things, directing the acts of the reason, through which the artisan proceeds in orderly fashion, easily, and unerringly in the very act of reason."<sup>4</sup> So these men are not stupid, Reverend Doctor. Their skillfully fashioned works of superior refinement awaken the admiration of all nations, because works proclaim a man's talent, for, as the poet says, the work commends the craftsman. Also, Prosper [of Aquitaine] says: "See, the maker is proclaimed by the wonderful signs of his works and the effects, too, sing of their author."<sup>5</sup>

In the liberal arts that they have been taught up to now, such as grammar and logic, they are remarkably adept. With every kind of music they charm the ears of their audience with wonderful sweetness. They write skillfully and quite elegantly, so that most often we are at a loss to know whether the characters are handwritten or printed. I shall explain this at greater length in the second part of this *Defense*, not by quoting the totally groundless lies of the worst [deceivers] in the histories published so far but the truth itself and what I have seen with my eyes, felt with my hands, and heard with my own ears while living a great many years among those peoples.

4. See the Philosopher, *Posterior Analytics*, Book 1. [Either a very free or an erroneous citation.]

5. [Divi Prosperi Aquitanici Episcopi Regiensis Opera (Lyons, 1539), p. 144].

Now if Sepúlveda had wanted, as a serious man should, to know the full truth before he sat down to write with his mind corrupted by the lies of tyrants, he should have consulted the honest religious who have lived among those peoples for many years and know their endowments of character and industry, as well as the progress they have made in religion and morality. Indeed, Rome is far from Spain, yet in that city the talent of these people and their aptitude and capacity for grasping the liberal arts have been recognized. Here is Paolo Giovio, Bishop of Nócera, in praise of those peoples whom you call dull witted and stupid. In his *History of His Times* he has left this testimony for later generations to read:

Hernán Cortés, hurrying overland to the kingdoms of Mexico after defeating the Indians, occupied the city of Tenochtitlán, after he had conquered in many battles, using boats which he had built, that city set upon a salt lagoon—wonderful like the city of Venice in its buildings and the size of its population.<sup>6</sup>

As you see, he declares that the Indian city is worthy of admiration because of its buildings, which are like those of Venice.

As to the terrible crime of human sacrifice, which you exaggerate, see what Giovio adds in the same place. "The rulers of the Mexicans have a right to sacrifice living men to their gods, provided they have been condemned for a crime." Concerning the natural gifts of that people, what does he assert? "Thus it was not altogether difficult for Cortés to lead a gifted and teachable people, once they had abandoned their superstitious idolatry, to the worship of Christ. For they learn our writing with pleasure and with admiration, now that they have given up the hieroglyphics by which they used to record their annals, enshrining for posterity in various symbols the memory of their kings."

This is what you, a man of such great scholarship, should have done in ascertaining the truth, instead of writing, with the sharp edge of your pen poised for the whispers of irresponsible men, your little book that slanders the Indian inhabitants of such a large part of the earth. Do you quote to us Oviedo's *History*, which bears the approval of the Royal Council, as though Oviedo, as he himself testifies,<sup>7</sup> was not a despotic master who kept unfortunate Indians oppressed by slavery like cattle

6. *Historiae Sui Temporis*, Lib. 34.

7. Book 6, chap. 8.