

LAS CASAS, FRIEND OF THE AMERICAN INDIANS

I

Every true American should recall, again and again, the memorable events that stand out prominently on the first pages of his country's history. On the 12th of October, 1492, Christopher Columbus, the great Italian explorer, first set foot upon the shores of the New World. The great discoverer always treated the inhabitants with justice and manifested wonderful charity towards them. Consequently, the white man and the Indians soon became attached to one another. It was the misfortune of Columbus, however, to be followed by men who entirely disregarded all principles of justice and looked upon the inhabitants as an inferior race, deeming them incapable of being civilized. Deeds of violence were frequently perpetrated against them by the Spaniards and they were constantly subjected to the most cruel treatment. Indeed, among all the records of human cruelty there are none more revolting than those which tell of the persecution of the natives of the West India islands by the early Spanish settlers.

An exception, however, must be made in behalf of certain individuals, noted for their holy zeal and devotion, who devoted their entire lives to the conversion of this unhappy race. The Dominican Fathers who accompanied the earliest settlers to the Indies stand out prominently in connection with this noble cause. This was their primary object in coming hither, and they faltered not in carrying on their zealous work. Among them there is one, however, who stands out as a light on a hill-top; one who devoted not one or two, but seventy years of his life to this holy work; one who feared neither enemies nor death nor was for a moment dismayed by all the obstacles he had to encounter. Bartholomew Las Casas is the personage to whom I refer, and a short sketch of his life is attempted in this article.

Bartholomew Las Casas was born at Seville in 1474 at the beginning of the remarkable reign of Ferdinand and Isabella. Not much is recorded of his youth. Some writers assert that at the age of nineteen years he accompanied his father on Columbus' famous voyage of discovery to America. Whether this be true or no, it is certain that his education was not neglected, his early studies having been made at the University of Salamanca, where he made a wonderful record not only in theology but also in canon and civil law.

The exceptional qualities of mind and heart which he manifested at the University having recommended him to Don Nicholas D'Oorando, this distinguished knight, who had been appointed by the Court of Castile viceroy of Hispaniola, or St. Domingo, chose Las Casas to accompany him thither in 1502. Although in sacred orders, Las Casas was not ordained till his arrival in America. Receiving letters of invitation from Diego Velasquez, governor of Cuba, to make that island the theatre of his missionary zeal, Las Casas obtained a place in the governor's council and an appointment as pastor of Zaguarama. It is said that these dignities were conferred upon him merely to enable him to gain the confidence of the natives, and under pretence of defending them, deprive them of their liberty. Not knowing the snares that had been laid, and wishing to please his benefactor, Las Casas for a time threw himself into the enterprise. He soon discovered his error, however, and began to act cautiously. Subsequently, he openly condemned the injustice of his countrymen and blamed himself for having appeared, even unconsciously, to sanction it. He resigned his dignities and resolved from that moment to undergo all hardships and dangers in order to obtain freedom for the natives, until now crushed by a ruthless tyranny. He soon formed a friendship with certain Dominican Fathers lately established in the island of Hispaniola, who warmly encouraged him in his good resolution and urged him to use all his influence to remove what they regarded as the greatest obstacle in the way of the conversion of the natives—their harsh treatment by the Spaniards. To put an end to all this, and to render honorable the ministry of those who exposed themselves to all dangers to gain souls to Christ, it was necessary in the first place to abolish a number of abuses.

The principal abuse, and the one most difficult to correct, was the system of repartimientos. These embraced certain districts of country which the Castilian noblemen appropriated to themselves, according to their individual discretion or the will of the governor. To each repartimiento was also assigned a certain number of Indians who were to cultivate the lands and labor in the mines for the benefit of their new master. As it was through this system that the greatest abuses arose, it was the particular aim of the Dominican Fathers to do away with it.

Having the abolition of this system in view, certain Dominican Fathers were dispatched to Spain to plead the case of the poor natives, while Spanish legates were sent by the exploiting

colonists for the purpose of promoting their evil designs. On a certain day a council was assembled before which both parties pleaded their respective causes with much warmth. Those who spoke in favor of the Indians insisted strenuously upon the principle that all men are born free and that no Christian nation is permitted to deprive of their liberty a people who had done them no wrong. The other party opposed these principles by arguments more plausible than solid—arguments by which no just man allowed himself to be deceived. The King, having heard the statements that were brought forward by both sides, in order to satisfy his conscience decreed that the clause in the last will of Queen Isabella providing for the just treatment of Indians should be more faithfully executed. It was expected that this concession would satisfy all parties; consequently, the new regulations in favor of the Indians went into effect in 1511.

Las Casas heard the tidings from Spain with singular satisfaction. He resolved to publish in person the royal ordinances, to have them executed if possible, and to oppose himself as a wall of brass to the violence and cruelty of which he continued to be an unwilling witness. He never flinched in the execution of this resolution during the fifty-five remaining years of his life. Nether human respect, nor danger nor labor nor fatigue could lessen in the least degree the ardent zeal by which he was consumed. He labored night and day to procure the release of the natives of Hispaniola from bondage and, at the same time, to assure their conversion to the true faith.

II

Having labored in the island of Cuba for a time, filled with compassion for the woes of the poor natives, Las Casas persuaded himself that the King was not rightly informed of the true state of things in the New World and that it was necessary to have a personal interview with him. He accordingly set out for Spain, and arrived at Seville about the end of the year 1515. After receiving letters of introduction to his Majesty from the worthy friar Diego Deza, the friend of Columbus, who was now Archbishop of Seville, he lost no time in presenting himself at the royal court which was then held at Placentia. Whilst presenting his letters to the King he took occasion to tell him that he had come from Hispaniola for no other purpose than to inform His Majesty correctly of the cruelties practiced upon the native

inhabitants of that island. Time did not permit Ferdinand to have an interview with him then, but he promised to give him an audience at a more favorable opportunity. Las Casas, in the meantime, addressed himself to Father Matienzo, the King's confessor, and a member of the Dominican Order. Knowing that Ferdinand's spiritual director possessed great influence, he felt that no one could plead his cause better at the court. He explained in detail the cruelties perpetrated by the Spaniards in the West Indies and begged the reverend Father, in the name of God, to undertake the defense of religion, justice and innocence. Matienzo took an accurate account of everything that Las Casas said and forwarded a faithful report to the King, who in return sent word to him that he would grant him a lengthy interview at Seville. Las Casas received the news with much joy and immediately betook himself to Seville. On his arrival there he was shocked to learn of the death of King Ferdinand, which occurred on the 23rd of January, 1516. He was not disheartened by this untoward event, but kept his usual courage. He tried to accomplish his object through some other source and fortunately failed not in the attempt.

King Ferdinand now being dead, Las Casas resolved to go to Flanders to give Prince Charles (Charles V) correct information on the state of affairs in the Indies. Before doing so, however, believing that his success would be all the greater if he could make secure the support of the celebrated Cardinal Ximenes, who had just been declared Regent of Spain, he visited Madrid for this purpose. He was kindly received by the Cardinal but did not get his approval for a journey to Flanders. After several special audiences with His Eminence he was permitted to plead his case before a convention of the highest dignitaries of Church and State. Las Casas' statements were carefully considered and finally approved by the assembly. Cardinal Ximenes listened with willing ear to all the proposals made by Las Casas, and, realizing his position and worth in the West Indies, conferred upon him the honorable title "Protector-General" of the Indies with a salary of 100 pesos. With new regulations ready for execution, an honorable position and more missionaries, Las Casas set sail for San Domingo.

He resumed his work with more zeal than ever, but was shortly to suffer another setback from the uprisings and dissensions among the Spaniards and Indians. The authority with which the great Cardinal had invested him proved useless. The

Commissioners who were to assist him in his work either could not or would not cooperate with him. Singlehanded, Las Casas endeavored to carry out his plans. His efforts meeting with little or no success, he decided to return to his native land and once more plead the cause of the unfortunate indians. On the first day of May, 1517, he departed for Spain.

Many and great changes had taken place in Spain since his last visit. His friend, Cardinal Ximenes, had died; powerful Flemish noblemen had been clamoring at court (after the example of the Spanish grandees) for privileges in the Indies. The young King—Charles V had now assumed the government of his vast dominions—little realizing the consequences that would attend the granting of their demands, unwittingly assented. Friends he doubtless had at court, but their influence was checked by his enemies. The many urgent affairs at court, and the intriguing that was a source of constant anxiety to him, combined to defer Las Casas' long-sought audience.

A day was finally named when Las Casas could state the Indians' case. All during his plea the King sat motionless, visibly affected by his words. Steps were immediately taken to formulate new regulations in favor of the Indians. Las Casas was to continue "Protector General of the Indians" and one hundred leagues of territory on the American coast were granted him for his own purposes. In his last audience with His Majesty he obtained many other favors. Upon his return to the Indies he published the decrees made by order of the King.

III

Long detached from the world and from those who followed its maxims, Las Casas now determined to consecrate the remainder of his life to God in some religious order. After much deliberation and prayer, he was guided towards the Dominicans. In the year 1522 he sought and obtained admission and immediately commenced his novitiate. The great affair of his soul's salvation absorbed his thoughts night and day. Nothing short of perfection seemed to satisfy him. It would be interesting to know how he spent his novitiate days, but history tells us nothing of this. We next hear of him and his zeal in the conversion of the Indians; his mortification and vigils, and finally his election as Prior of the Convent at San Domingo. This is truly remarkable when it is remembered that he was a member of the Order but eight years.

In 1530 the dread news of Spanish conquest reached the holy friar. This he well knew meant more persecution for the Indians. Again he distinguished himself by his tireless labors and boundless zeal on behalf of his proteges. Convinced that more stringent laws were necessary to insure their safety, he sailed once more for Spain. This time he presented to the King and his Council a memorial entitled: "The Destruction of the Indies by the Spaniards." This was nothing more than a diary in which were recorded sketches of the scenes of violence and destruction he personally had witnessed. The memorial, a strong arraignment of the prevailing conditions, drew from Charles V another and stronger edict in favor of the Indians.

He did not remain at San Domingo on his return from Spain, but hastened to Mexico, to publish the edicts in the newly-conquered parts. He tried to convince the leaders of the invading armies that the decrees were to be enforced. He traversed the vast kingdoms of Peru and Guatemala and the neighboring provinces, everywhere exercising the double function of Missionary-Apostolic and Protector of the Indians. He allowed himself no relaxation from the Dominican Rule. What opportunities for practicing the virtues and Beatitudes! Amidst the cruelties which he was called upon to witness daily when in Mexico, he worked wonders with the poor Indians; encouraging them to bear all for Christ, for "relief was near at hand." His serene face was an inspiration to the Indians; his word, law; his piety and example their guide.

It was about this time that he became acquainted with the Bishop of Guatemala, Francisco de Marroquin, at whose request he undertook another voyage to Spain. Charles V had recently gone to Germany. Las Casas, however, did not remain inactive. Thanks to loyal friends at court, the atrocities and outrages of the Spaniards were now proverbial throughout Europe. He continued to make known the condition of the Indians. At his next audience with His Majesty new edicts and regulations in their behalf guaranteed the liberation of a great number from bondage. Still another honor was in store for the friar. As a proof of his friendship with Las Casas, the King succeeded in having him made first "Bishop of Chiapa," then the capital of Mexico. At first he declined the honor, but later, on the advice of friends, accepted the office. His consecration followed in the Cathedral of Seville on Passion Sunday in the year 1544.

With characteristic zeal he entered upon the discharge of his multifarious duties. Neither his advanced age nor the vastness of his diocese nor the many surrounding dangers could mitigate his ardor in the least. With two chartered vessels, some members of his Order and a few Indians, he set forth for the "New World."

He had hoped that the latest edict, which had been published in the conquered provinces, would have the desired effect, but was disappointed upon landing to find the same lamentable conditions prevailing. Again he set to work to correct abuses and evils, and again his work was to no purpose. Not infrequently he was threatened with personal violence and death; imprisonment was often hinted at "if he did not desist meddling" in Spanish affairs. But the word of God could not be enchained. A word from Las Casas often silenced his enemies and struck terror to their calloused hearts. No one could intimidate him, for he was ever mindful of those words: "If God be with us who will be against us."

What a wonderful career had been his! Not only a missionary was he, but friend, father, protector to the Indians. Aye, a martyr for them! To secure their freedom was his life work. No more ungrateful mission was ever undertaken by man. Opposition there was from the start, and that from his countrymen. Treachery and misrepresentation were never lacking. It was not because of these that Las Casas now decided to return to Spain and resign into the hands of his sovereign the dignity he had so graciously bestowed upon him, but rather that some more capable disciple might replace him. He felt that his end was near and his only wish now was to spend these last days in his convent. Here, we venture to say, he spent fifteen years of prayer for his Indians, edifying his brethren by observance of the strictest kind.

In the annals of Christianity, no man stands out more distinguished by devotion to a noble ideal than that of Las Casas. Almost fifty years of his life were spent in hardships and constant suffering, in a newly-discovered country, among people who until then were unknown to Europe. May posterity give to this Christian hero what is certainly his due for advancing the temporal and spiritual interests of the aborigines!

—Bro. Cyril Therres, O. P.