

## Bartolomé de Las Casas and the Valladolid Debate

### Opposition to Spanish Rule

Spanish priests worked to spread Christianity in the Americas. They also pushed for better treatment of Native Americans. Priests spoke out against the cruel treatment of natives. In particular, they criticized the harsh pattern of labor that emerged under the *encomienda* system. “There is nothing more detestable or more cruel,” Dominican monk Bartolomé de Las Casas wrote, “than the tyranny which the Spaniards use toward the Indians for the getting of pearl [riches].”

**African Slavery and Native Resistance** The Spanish government abolished the *encomienda* system in 1542. To meet the colonies’ need for labor, Las Casas suggested Africans. “The labor of one . . . [African] . . . [is] more valuable than that of four Indians,” he said. The priest later changed his view and denounced African slavery. However, others promoted it.

Opposition to the Spanish method of colonization came not only from Spanish priests, but also from the natives themselves. Resistance to Spain’s attempt at domination began shortly after the Spanish arrived in the Caribbean. In November of 1493, Columbus encountered resistance in his attempt to conquer the present-day island of St. Croix. Before finally surrendering, the inhabitants defended themselves by firing poison arrows.

## The Valladolid Debate



Location of the town of Valladolid



Bartolomé de Las Casas

The Spanish discovery and subsequent conquest of the New World inspired a serious, if not heated, intellectual controversy regarding the rationality and Christianization of the Indians.

The debate reached its height in 1550, when the King of Spain, Charles V, ordered a junta, a group of jurists and theologians, to meet at Valladolid in order to hear the arguments in favour and against the use of force to incorporate the Indians into Spanish America. On the one side was one Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, a prominent humanist and Greek scholar who justified conquest and evangelization by war. His opponent, Bartolomé de Las Casas, in

contrast, was a staunch advocate of peaceful and persuasive conversion. So it was that the most powerful man, Charles V, leader of the most powerful nation in the world, Spain, suspended all wars of conquest until a group of intellectuals grappled with the morality of Spain's presence and enterprises in America.

### **Results of the debate**

For example, Sepúlveda's arguments in favour of war as a means of pacification partly influenced the Council of the Indies in its policies of "war by fire and blood." But the Las Casas' movement against the advocates of conversion by force also found some backing both in New Spain and Peru. In northern New Spain, or the Chichimeca area, judge Alonso de Zorita and the Franciscan Jacinto de San Francisco adopted peaceful policies to pacify and convert the nomadic tribes. In the meantime, the debate led to a more serious study of Native American cultures. More and more missionaries, particularly Bemardino de Sahagün, came to learn Indian languages and culture, in the process documenting the natives' rationality and overall way of life.

#### **Factfile about Las Casas**

Bartolome de Las Casas (1484 – 1566), was born in Seville, Spain. He was there when Christopher Columbus got to Seville in 1493 after Columbus' first trip to the Americas. His father, Pedro de las Casas, and his uncle went to the Americas in the second voyage of Columbus that left in November 1493. With his father, he went to the Caribbean island of Hispaniola in 1502 together with Nicolás de Ovando, the new governor of the island. In 1506 he went to Rome, Italy, where he became a Catholic priest.

He went back to Hispaniola in 1508 and moved to Concepción de la Vega, in the Cibao valley, and got an encomienda (land with the indigenous people living there). Then he went in 1513 to Cuba and the governor Diego Velázquez gave him an "encomienda". But soon Las Casas began to understand that the native people (Taínos in Cuba and Hispaniola) were treated as slaves in a very bad way, and he began to defend the native people. He later became the first Bishop of Chiapas, Mexico.

#### **Exercises**

1. What aspects of the encomienda system did Spanish priests oppose?
2. What was a junta?
3. Who headed the two opposing sides at Valladolid debate? What were their main arguments or intellectual positions?
4. Describe two positive outcomes of this debate.