



Seeing, Touching and Speaking the Truth: The First Dominicans in the Americas¹

By Brian Pierce, OP

It was the year 1510, eighteen years after Christopher Columbus had stumbled upon the lands we now call the Americas, that the first group of Spanish Dominican friars arrived on the island of La Española – today Haiti and the Dominican Republic. The first group of four arrived under the dynamic and saintly leadership of the twenty-eight year old vicar provincial, Pedro de Córdoba. By September of that year, there were fifteen or sixteen Dominicans on the island, all of whom had in some way or other been influenced by the spirit of renewal that was emanating from the Dominican priory of San Esteban in Salamanca. The Dominicans were part of the second wave of religious to arrive in the so-called ‘new world,’ the Franciscan friars having arrived a few years earlier. There were also some secular priests working on the island at the time; one of them, whose name would become prominent in the ensuing years, was the young Bartolomé de las Casas.

By the time the Dominican friars arrived in La Española the machinery of the conquest was running at full speed. The basic mandate of the religious and priests sent from Spain to *the Indies* was to bring about the conversion of the indigenous population and to serve the pastoral and spiritual needs of the Spanish colonists and soldiers. Most people, including the friars themselves, probably thought that the presence of the Dominicans would go fairly unheeded – just a few more *padres* to give an air of legitimacy and blessing to the conquest of the Americas. But on that point, everyone was mistaken.

In the opening lines of the First Letter of John, the apostle writes: “What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked upon and touched with our hands concerning the Word of life – for the life was made visible; we have seen it and testify to it... what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you now” (1Jn 1:1-2). There is probably no text which more perfectly captures what happened (what ‘went wrong,’ some might say) in the months following the arrival of the first friars preachers on the island of La Española. Put quite simply, they opened their eyes and their ears; they saw and they listened, they touched and they were touched – by the Word which is life. They were vulnerable enough to be transformed by the suffering and violence being inflicted on the island’s indigenous peoples.

Jordan of Saxony, the second Master of the Order of Preachers, said of St. Dominic, “God had given [Dominic] a special grace to weep for sinners and for the afflicted and oppressed; he bore their distress in the inmost shrine of his compassion, and the warm sympathy he felt for them in his heart spilled over in the tears which flowed from his eyes.” This, I believe, is what happened to the community of Dominicans who arrived in Santo Domingo in 1510. In the words of Gustavo Gutiérrez, the early missionaries “came face to face with...the premature and unjust death of the Indians, along with the oppression and disdain to which they were objected.”² But rather than be dissuaded by these obstacles, these men – committed to preaching the gospel – chose to *testify* to what they were seeing, hearing and touching with their hands. Their testimony took the concrete form of communal preaching, the first and most memorable homily being preached a little more than a year after their arrival on the island. There is probably no other preaching – in over five hundred years of Christian presence in the Americas – that has so impacted the history of the continent than this one, preached by friar Antón de Montesinos, OP. Signed by the entire community, the homily of the fourth Sunday of Advent, 1511 was based on the prophetic preaching of John the Baptist:

I am the voice of Christ crying out in the desert of this island...the most shocking and dangerous voice you have ever heard. You live and die in mortal sin for the cruelty and tyranny done against these innocent peoples. With what right and by which justice do you hold these Indians in such horrible servitude? By what authority do you carry out such detestable wars against the people of these lands – people so meek and peaceful?... Are these not human beings? Do they not have rational souls? Are you not obliged to love them as yourselves? Do you not understand this? Do you not feel this? How can you be in such a profound and lethargic slumber? Be certain that in the state in which you find yourselves you can no more be saved than...those who lack or have no faith in Jesus Christ³

Present in the church that day was the young diocesan priest, Bartolomé de las Casas, who, as an *encomendero*, was entitled to own both land and slaves. Montesinos’ homiletic earthquake shook him to the very roots of his being; his life would never be the same. In fact, eleven years later, in 1522, Las Casas himself entered the Order of Preachers, to add his voice to that of the community that had courageously chosen to speak the truth – and to pay the consequences for that speaking.

Eyes and ears open to Truth

Timothy Radcliffe, OP, former Master of the Order of Preachers, writes in his letter to the Order, 'The Wellspring of Hope' (1995), "We must dare to see what is before our eyes; we must believe that it is where God seems most distant and where human beings are tempted by despair that theology may be done. Yet surely...our words of hope will only have authority if they are rooted in a serious study of the Word of God and an analysis of our contemporary society. In 1511 Montesinos preached his famous sermon against the oppression of the Indians and asked the question, 'Are they not human beings?'...Montesinos was inviting his contemporaries to open their eyes, and see the world differently. For clarity, compassion is not enough. Hard study was needed to see through the false mythologies of the conquistadores and it was the source of Las Casas' prophetic stand."

The Advent homily of 1511 was the fruit of an attentive, contemplative and communal look at the situation in which the friars found themselves ministering. The *truth* which began to reveal itself to them little by little in that first year was *not* the same truth that was being proclaimed by the Empire and its false prophets. The friars' dedication to study and contemplative prayer – fruits of the spiritual and theological renewal that was taking place in the Order back in Spain – gave them the tools they needed to set off on this encounter with truth, to "juntar el derecho con el hecho," as Las Casas often called it, that is, "connecting rights with reality." Learning to see reality as it *truly is* and not only as those who hold the power *say it is*, is the starting place for true spirituality and theology.

One of the most innovative and prophetic characteristics of the first Dominicans on the island of La Española was that they approached the reality in which they lived *communally* – their eyes and ears opened in a collective way. It was out of this *community* experience of study, prayer and analysis, what the Second Vatican Council called "scrutinizing the signs of the times and...interpreting them in the light of the Gospel" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 4), that the dynamic preaching of the friars flowed. These missionaries realized very early on that the fiercest theological and pastoral battles they would have to fight had to do with dismantling the Spanish Empire's neatly constructed world of lies and half-truths regarding the situation of the Indians. The Spanish conquest legitimized the dividing up of the colonies through the *encomienda* system of forced slavery based on the fact that Pope Alexander VI had granted the Crown, in a papal bull dated May 3, 1493, complete sovereignty and authority over the newly-discovered lands. That was only half of the content of the papal decree, however. The pope had

also decreed, “in virtue of holy obedience,” that the native peoples be rightly evangelized. For some reason, this second part of the papal bull got relegated to a place of lesser importance in the early years of Spanish colonialism.

What exactly did it mean, however, to “evangelize” the Indians? To many of the Spaniards, it meant baptizing them – often by force – before sending them off to be worked to death in the gold and silver mines. No matter how many times the pope and the Spanish Crown spoke of winning souls for God in the newly-found lands, the early friars learned very early on that the only god that drove the zeal of the conquest was the god of gold. As one author points out, the Spanish enterprise was “purely and simply economic. It had nothing to do with looking for souls to save, or finding a route to follow to rescue the Holy Places, as political necessities later constrained the king and the viceroy to proclaim.”⁴ This self-serving attitude is sarcastically expressed in an excerpt of a letter that Christopher Columbus wrote to the king and queen of Spain in 1503: “The gold [here in the Indies] is most excellent, and he who fills his coffers with it will be able to do whatever he likes in the world, including flinging souls to paradise.”⁵

It is important, of course, to note that there were many Spaniards who did not share this mentality of conquer and pillage. A great number of Spanish colonizers went to the newly-conquered lands with the hope of beginning a new life. After years and years of war, and having just won its last battles for the re-conquest of its territory from the Moors, many impoverished Spaniards saw the adventure to cross the ocean as a journey of hope – not so unlike the immigrants of our own day. Most Spanish and Portuguese missionaries were truly inspired to go preach the Good News of Christ to those who had not heard the gospel. Their generosity and creativity, their efforts at evangelizing through music and poetry, learning the local indigenous languages, and starting the first libraries and universities in the Americas, cannot be underestimated. The roots of Caribbean and Latin American culture today are intimately intertwined with the deep roots of Iberian culture. Unfortunately, though, the good intentions of many were overwhelmed by the violence of war and destruction. For every seed of Iberian culture that was planted in the new lands, hundreds of expressions of indigenous culture were destroyed forever.

In a letter written around 1516, the Dominicans of La Española give a rather dismal report of the reality: “All of these Indians have been destroyed, soul and body...if they must mine gold, [they] must necessarily perish...all the land is wasted and parched. Thus, they can neither be Christians, nor even remain alive.”⁶ And Las Casas, writing to the Council of the Indies several years later, notes that once the

Spaniards finish with the wars that leave large numbers of innocent Indians dead, they then begin with part two of the plan: “They divide up all the Indians that escaped from the wars, so that little by little, in horrible servitude, digging for gold and pearls and doing other unjust jobs, [the Spaniards] manage to bring an end to their lives once and for all.”⁷ And all this is done, of course, while giving lip service to saving souls for Christ.

Dominicans and Franciscans – speaking in unison

Sometime around May or June of 1517 (six years after the Advent sermon of Montesinos), the mendicant friars of the island – both Franciscans and Dominicans – teamed up and wrote at least two very strong letters to the Regents of Spain, giving vivid details of the local situation and suggesting ways to remedy some of the horrendous abuses being carried out in the Indies. In one of the letters they ask, “Tell us Most Reverend Sirs, where are the innumerable peoples that were here on these islands when they were discovered, and whose numbers were once compared by the discoverers to be [plentiful] like the grasses of the fields?... These people, docile to the faith, simple, humble and obedient... have been carried away to other islands by our Christians (if they can be called Christians) ...to work in the gold mines – better yet, to lose their lives and their souls... destroyed and annihilated by the violence... Neither Pharaoh nor the Egyptian people ever mistreated the children of Israel so cruelly... We *see* that these people have been destroyed, their dry skin stuck to their bones... They will certainly die and fall like leaves from a sapless tree.”⁸

In another letter sent by the two communities of mendicant friars, they write, “The [Christians] go through the land like rabid wolves in the midst of gentle lambs... Greedy and rabid for money and full of other filthy passions, they [have begun] to break and destroy the land... [leaving the few thousand surviving Indians] having more of a likeness to painted corpses than living persons.”⁹ These letters, like the Advent homily of 1511, were signed by all the friars, strengthening the communal witness and prophetic stance of those who risked their lives to speak a word of truth in so difficult a situation.

The combined preaching efforts of the mendicants only fueled the evil scheming of the governor of the island and his greedy companions, who set out to find a way to drive a stake of division between the Franciscans and Dominicans. The authorities of the city of Santo Domingo persuaded one of the Franciscan friars, Alonso de Espinal, whom Las Casas later described as “a zealous and virtuous friar,” to travel to Spain and defend their point of view. They encouraged friar Alonso to “help the King understand

that the Dominican friars had preached against what the King had ordered regarding the Indians, and that by having [the Indians], the island was being populated by Spaniards, the gold was being mined, and the taxes were being sent to His Highness.” Furthermore, he was highly told to point out that it was the preaching of the Dominicans “that had caused such great scandal and upset throughout the island, leaving people’s consciences unsettled.”¹⁰ Of course the ‘unsettled consciences,’ seen by the authorities as something completely negative, were actually just what the Dominicans had hoped would spark a serious examination of conscience on the part of the Spanish colonizers. Says Las Casas, who recounts the story of the recruiting of friar Alonso by the royal authorities, “The good Franciscan *padre*, with his not so small ignorance, accepted the task of ambassador, without realizing that they were sending him so that they could [continue to] hold thousands of innocent people in captivity and unjust servitude.”

The Dominicans, on the other hand, decided to fight fire with fire. After deliberating as a community, they agreed to send Antón de Montesinos to “give an account of his sermon and the reasons that had moved them to preach it.” Las Casas describes – almost humorously – the preparation that each community made to prepare for the trip of its respective emissary. The Franciscan friar, he notes, was flooded with alms and gifts and food for the trans-Atlantic journey, while the Dominicans had to beg for several months just to get enough to pay Montesinos’ passage and provide him with the bare necessities for the trip. Finally, both set sail for Spain, each sent with his particular mission. Friar Alonso, of course, arrived at the royal palace of the King of Spain bearing many important letters from the colonial authorities, and was received, says Las Casas, “like St. Michael, the Archangel, sent by God.” He was seated like royalty in the King’s presence, given ample time to recount his version of the situation.

Montesinos, on the other hand, was turned away on several occasions by the King’s doorman. He persisted, though, and finally, at a moment when the royal doorkeeper inadvertently turned his back, he was able to slide past him and sneak into the King’s presence, at which point he fell to his knees and begged to be heard. While kneeling, he shared in vivid detail the attacks, violence and wars committed against the innocent Indians. He told the king of defenseless persons being burned alive, and recounted the story of a small Indian child being thrown alive into a river. When he finished his litany of atrocities, Montesinos asked, “Your Highness, do you order them to do this? I am quite certain that you do not.” The King responded, “No, for the sake of God, I have never commanded such a thing in all my life.”

Luckily, the stake driven between the Franciscans and Dominicans by the idolizers of power did not remain in place for long. Montesinos decided one day, while

still in Spain, to go to the Franciscan friary with the hope of speaking with friar Alonso. He approached Father Alonso as he left for another audience with the King, asking him pointedly, “Padre, do you have plans for taking more than this lice-filled, ragged habit that you wear with you at the end of your life? Are you looking for anything else in life than to serve God? Why have you gotten involved with these tyrannical men? Can you not see that they have dressed you as a wolf so that you will support their tyranny?... Have you not seen, even better than I, the detestable cruelty and unjust wars that they commit against these people?...Why, Father, do you want to lose all the years that you have worn this habit in religious penitence... just to please, *with your eyes closed*, those who cannot seem to drink enough human blood, [and who are] unable to see the damage they commit against these unfortunate people?”

After the questioning, friar Alonso came to his senses and responded, “Padre, it is for the love of God that you have enlightened me with your charity. I have allowed myself to be tricked by these men. See what you think is best for me to do and I will do it.” Montesinos responded, “Padre, in all your works, viewpoints and words, defend the Indians and speak against those Spanish sinners that you know are destroying the people because of their greed.” From that moment on, says Las Casas in his *History of the Indies*, the two became good friends.¹¹ The mendicant friars were once again together, their voices joined to speak the truth which they had seen, heard and touched with their hands.

Prophet of Truth: the call of Bartolomé de las Casas

Bartolomé de las Casas went through several stages of dismantling his own double standards with regard to the owning of Indian slaves, before fully embracing the truth of what was happening:

I began to consider the suffering and servitude of these people... [and] remembered how one day on La Española, where I had owned Indians with the same carelessness and blindness as in Cuba, a Dominican friar had refused me confession...I proceeded to refute the friar, giving frivolous arguments and vain solutions that had a semblance of truth, but the friar interrupted me with, ‘Enough, Father, truth has many enemies and lies have many friends.’¹²

“If you make my Word your home,” says Jesus in the Gospel of John, “you will indeed be my disciples, you will know the truth and the truth will set you free” (8:31-32).

A few years after having his conscience rattled by his Dominican confessor, Las Casas was preparing a homily for the Feast of Pentecost (1514), and finally broke through to the truth that set him free. It was a text from the Book of Sirach that opened his eyes and heart to the new light of freedom:

Like one who kills a son before his father's eyes is the person who offers a sacrifice from the property of the poor. The bread of the needy is the life of the poor; whoever deprives them of it is a murderer (Sir 34:24-25).

Las Casas recounts the experience:

From the day *the darkness lifted from my eyes*, I never read any book...which did not in some way provide proof of the Indian rights and Spanish injustice. Finally, I decided to preach this, but...I could not freely condemn the *encomienda* system as tyrannical unless I officially renounced my Indians...Even if I treated them as a father treats his children, I could not preach...with a clear conscience. Someone would inevitably blame me with, 'In the last analysis you, too, own Indians; why don't you renounce them since you accuse us of tyranny?' I decided then to renounce them entirely.¹³

Las Casas' painful, yet honest encounter with the different shades of truth in his own heart was precisely what prepared him for a lifetime of writing, preaching and tireless defense of the human dignity of the Indians.

Las Casas and the friars ardently longed for the Indians to know the love of Christ, and they tried in every way possible to share with them the great treasure they carried in their hearts. This was the reason that they felt so heavily the shame of the anti-witness being given by so many of the so-called 'Christians.' Just as they hoped that the Indians would be able to embrace the Good News of Christ, so too did they hope that one day their own Spanish people would embrace the demands of the gospel and end their oppressive hunger for gold. In his introduction to the *History of the Indies*, Las Casas says that he writes to liberate "my Spanish nation from the error it is committing regarding its treatment of the Indian nations."¹⁴ To attain this end, he constantly tried to unmask the deceit inherent in the 'saving souls' argument, openly challenging the validity of a baptism which proclaimed new life in Christ while, paradoxically, leading to the destruction of human beings and their cultures.

A year after "the darkness lifted from [his] eyes," Las Casas was on a ship back to Spain, to continue his tireless defense of the rights of the Indians. In the words of Helen

Rand Parish, “Las Casas literally embarked on his life mission: to tell the truth to the king. Little did he dream that he was going to spend the rest of his days, fifty mortal years, doing just that.”¹⁵ He who had once written to the Council of the Indies in Spain that “God has a memory that is very recent and alive concerning the smallest and most forgotten,”¹⁶ would live his long years with the memory of the Indians, the least and most forgotten of all, forever alive in his heart. Las Casas knew that a major part of his mission was to hold a mirror up before the political and ecclesiastical authorities of his day, forcing them to deal honestly with their own distortion of truth.

Few things caused Las Casas to react more vehemently than the actions and words of those who purposely and deceitfully misinformed the Spanish Crown on the situation in which the Indians were living and dying in the colonies. Unfortunately, even theologians and religious were conscripted into the dirty business of lying. “I see that some have written of Indian things,” writes Las Casas, “not those they witnessed, but rather those they heard about, and not too well...They write to the detriment of truth.”¹⁷ For Las Casas, anything that covered over the truth was an abomination against God. The deliberate campaign of misinformation, he says with great sadness, causes “the truth [to be] suppressed and buried, lest it sound and breathe.”¹⁸ Gustavo Gutiérrez, in his monumental work on the life and preaching of Las Casas, comments on these words in light of the mission that would occupy several decades of passionate preaching by the tireless Defender of the Indians: “To exhume the truth of the Indies will be Bartolomé’s life purpose. The hidden truth, hidden deeper than the mines worked by the Indians, is this: in these abused and despised beings, Christ is present.”¹⁹

Las Casas was always quick to underline the fact that his own testimony was not based on rumor or gossip, but instead rooted in a personal witness of the atrocities being committed against the Indians. “All these great evils,” he said, “are certain and very true, not read about in false histories, nor told about by the tongues of charlatans, but *seen by our very own eyes*.”²⁰ In a reference to one of the many false prophets of the day, a man named Gonzalo Hernández de Oviedo, Las Casas writes, “He was one of the Indians’ greatest foes... having defamed with such horrendous sins such a multitude of... human beings *he never saw or heard of*. For his defamatory work he has caused Christendom to hate all Indians.”²¹ Las Casas does nothing but echo the First Letter of John, insisting that all authentic evangelization must be rooted in a keen attentiveness to the truth, present in the signs of the times: “What we have heard...and seen...and touched with our hands...[this is what] we proclaim.”

Peaceful evangelization – the only way

The first work that Las Casas wrote (ca.1533-34), left unpublished in his lifetime, was a treatise entitled *De Unico Vocationis Modo*, or *The Only Way*. J.A. Barreda considers it to be the ‘doctrinal font’ of Las Casas’ extensive corpus of writings. Written as a proposal for a new way (i.e., the *only* way) to truly bring about a true Christian evangelization, the treatise reflects the dialogue that was going on between the missionary communities working pastorally with the Indians and those in Salamanca who were reflecting on theology and its relationship with the rights of conquered and non-Christian peoples. One author notes that the theological think-tank of Salamanca “existed to unsettle the conscience of kings, bishops, captains, and slave owners in the great drama of the time, the conquest of America.”²² Francisco de Vitoria’s groundbreaking work in the area of international law certainly played an important role in this trans-Atlantic dialogue. *The Only Way* was Las Casas’ beloved child, his great dream for a peaceful, nonviolent mission of evangelization into those indigenous territories yet-scarred by the presence of Spanish soldiers. Las Casas scholar Helen Rand Parish gives a strong argument in favor of *The Only Way* having served as the framework for the papal bull *Sublimis Deus* – a breakthrough in creating laws for the protection of the Indians. In Las Casas’ own words:

There is one way, an only way, to teach a living faith to all, and always; it was established by means of Divine Providence...It must be gentle, attractive, good-willed...The apostles were chosen as *luminarias*, examples for us to imitate...They used no arms, they were not mercenaries. They did not subjugate the world by means of physical force or by massive battalions. They did so through the preaching of Christ crucified, using simple words, loving words that have within themselves a miraculous power.²³

What Las Casas wanted to do was to bring the gospel mandate of love and Jesus’ unconditional respect for all people back into the realm of the Church’s mission. He defended the right of the poor be treated as children of God and human beings – not *after* they had been subjugated and forcefully baptized, but by the simple fact of being human. The endless greed and the violent abuse of power on the part of the Spanish soldiers and colonists polluted any real chance the missionaries had of preaching the gospel. In his heated debates with Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, Las Casas emphatically stated that, “To those who have never received the faith...the first thing to be offered is peace...[and] a preaching benign and gentle, with meekness and humility.”²⁴ And in his letter to the Council of the Indies in 1531, a few years before writing *The Only Way*, Las Casas listed the qualities that must be present in any true evangelization: “...mercy,

sweetness, humility, peace and piety...With the sweetness of their virtues and good works, [the preachers are to] give freely what they have freely received.”²⁵

The model of peaceful evangelization proposed by Las Casas in *The Only Way* was based on Jesus’ sending of the apostles on mission in twos, in humble poverty, to announce the Good News of the Reign of God. Key for friar Bartolomé was the fact that, in the gospel, Jesus sent the disciples out emptied of all power, violence and wealth: “Take neither purse, nor bag, nor sandals,” Jesus warns. “Whatever house you enter, first say, ‘Peace to this house’...Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, because the laborer deserves to be paid. Do not go from house to house. Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and say to them, ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you’” (Lk 10:1-12).

Living in close harmony with the native peoples, in a way that was respectful of their lives and customs was, for Las Casas, the key to offering the indigenous peoples an opportunity to freely choose the gospel. In the eyes of friar Bartolomé, the Indians had the right to choose their own way of life and religious beliefs, and in order to protect this right he completely opposed any use of force in converting the Christians to the Christian faith. Las Casas even went so far as to affirm the right of the Indians to reject the Christian faith and to hold onto their own beliefs. Gutiérrez says that for Las Casas, “To speak of religious freedom is equal to saying that the religious customs of the indigenous peoples, no matter how much they are in disaccord with the Christian faith, cannot be a motive for armed repression by those from the [Iberian] peninsula. It is not only a question of *not* forcing conversion to Christianity, but of respecting the culture and religion of the people.”²⁶

With the words of *The Only Way* inscribed in his heart, and with the necessary permissions from the Spanish Crown, Las Casas began to look for an opportunity to give himself completely to the peaceful evangelization of the Indians. In 1537, with just a handful of friars, and not long after the failed attempt to sail to Peru, the passionate Dominican friar, fifty-three years of age at the time, set off for the land of the Mayas in Guatemala, free of the company of any armed soldiers. His dream to sow the seeds of the gospel of peace in fertile ground had become a reality.

The place where the friars settled to begin their experiment was called Tuzulutlán, which, ironically, translated as ‘Land of War.’ The challenge was great, but so were the hopes. Their desire to preach the compassion of Christ through the example of their very lives gave them the needed strength in the difficult times. As Las Casas had said

many times, “It is impossible to preach by means of death the One who said, ‘I have come that they may have life, and life in abundance’ (Jn 10:10).²⁷ This text of St. John “directs his whole argument: a message of life cannot – under any pretext – be proclaimed through destruction.”²⁸ Las Casas himself was in Guatemala for only a short time, before being called again to Spain, this time to be named bishop of Chiapas. But his dream and his efforts produced the desired results, sinking long-lasting roots into the fertile ground of indigenous America. Today, the Dominican Family continues to accompany the Achí and Q’eqchí Mayan communities of the region, following in the footsteps of the early friars. One sign of the success of those early efforts is that the land of Tuzulutlán is no longer called the Land of War, but is now called *La Verapaz*, the Land of True Peace – a living witness to Las Casas’ untiring efforts.

Present in the community of friars that accompanied Las Casas to Guatemala was Luís de Cáncer who, after serving in La Española and Puerto Rico, was with Las Casas on the failed voyage to Peru and later in Nicaragua. Inspired by the experience in Guatemala, Luís de Cáncer traveled with the now Bishop Las Casas to Spain in 1547 to seek permission to lead a pacifist missionary expedition to the coast of Florida. Their request was granted, but it proved to be difficult to bring together the volunteers needed for the peaceful expedition. After much effort, a small band of friars finally reached the Gulf coast of Florida in 1549. Unfortunately, an earlier expedition led by De Soto (1539-1543) had made the local Indians suspicious of the white-skinned intruders.

Several attempts were made to come to shore, and finally, on June 26, 1549, in what is today Tampa Bay, friar Luís de Cáncer decided to attempt a peaceful encounter with the Indians. “Risking his life in the rough waters [he] jumped overboard and swam to shore. As he arrived he realized he was being watched by some Indians, who rapidly retreated to a small hill. Cáncer fell to his knees and waited. On board, fr Gregorio pleaded with him to come back, but he stood up and approached the Indians...[who] grabbed him...and proceeded to hit him on the head with a wooden club. His last words, ‘Adjuva me, Domine!’ (‘Help me, Lord’), were recorded by Brother Gregorio in his testimony.”²⁹

One can only imagine how the news of his companion’s death must have touched deeply the heart of the elderly Las Casas, who assured those critical of the failed project in Florida that Luís de Cáncer would continue to intercede for the peaceful evangelization of the Indies. Even in the face of apparent setbacks, Las Casas never lost hope. His vision of the face of Christ, hidden in the poor and oppressed, never ceased to strengthen his faith in times of adversity.

Seeing and touching Christ – the legacy

Last year, at the Catholic University in Lima, Peru, a few blocks from the priory where I live, several brothers from my community and I participated in a week of events to celebrate the anniversary of the U.N. Declaration of Human Rights. On one of the days, I attended a photo exhibit, portraying Peruvian children who had suffered during Peru's twenty years of war and internal violence. I was particularly caught by the photo of a young boy, about seven or eight years of age, who was clearly undernourished and poor. Beneath the picture was a quote from the boy, which read: *They know that I exist, but they do not see me.* Even more than the picture itself, the words went right to the depths of my heart. They were so true. He – and so many like him – are invisible in our world. They appear on the flow charts of sociology textbooks and in official national and international statistics, but we do not *see* them. They are numbers, but are they human beings?

This was the very same question that Antón de Montesinos asked in the Advent homily of 1511: “Are these not human beings?” More recently I was looking at a book of photographs on the life of Martin Luther King, Jr. and his involvement with the Civil Rights movement in the United States. In one of the photos there appears a group of African American men participating in a march, each one of them carrying a sign that reads *I am a man.* And finally, during the protests and marches that immigrants from Latin America and other parts of the world have carried out in many cities in the U.S., to protest unjust immigration practices and the building of the separation wall along the Mexico-US border, one could frequently see signs that read: *No human being is illegal.*

This cry on behalf of the dignity of human beings has been sounding forth in the Americas since the Advent homily of 1511. Montesinos asks in the homily, “How can you be in such a profound and lethargic slumber?” A person who is asleep does not see. A person who is asleep cannot love his or her neighbor. In the words beneath the photo of the Peruvian boy: *They know that I exist, but they do not see me.* In the 1500's most of the Spanish Empire was blinded by a deep and numbing slumber – the insatiable hunger for gold and power.

Bartolomé de las Casas has left us a great legacy, a challenge in our following of Christ. He calls us to be awake, to *open our eyes and see.* If we do not see, we cannot be faithful to Truth. As medieval Dominican mystic and prophet, Catherine of Siena, says in one of her prayers (n.19), “Look into the depth...of divine charity. For unless you see you cannot love. The more you see, the more you can love.” As we heard at the beginning of this reflection, in the First Letter of John, we can only proclaim the

Word who is life if we have first seen, heard and touched that Word.

One of the most important and unique pieces of the Christian scriptures is the account of the final judgment in the Gospel of Matthew (25: 31-46). In this parable-like story, the Son of Man divides the nations between those on his right and those on his left, a division based on love of neighbor. The key question that echoes throughout the text is: “Lord, when did we *see* you?” What is curious about this question is that it is asked by both those on the right and on the left. In other words, those nations who responded in loving compassion to “the least of my brothers and sisters” seem to have been as unaware of the presence of the Son of Man in the needy neighbor as those who did not respond. What the text is saying, then, is that authentic love and true justice are not a question of trying to see if Christ is present in *this* neighbor or in *that one*, but of simply *seeing the neighbor* and responding in love. In other words, it is not a guessing game: *I wonder which one is Jesus?* All we are asked to do is *see* and respond: “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of my brothers or sisters, you did it to me” (25:40).

In his *History of the Indies*, Las Casas tells of a painful and very tense dialogue with Bishop Juan Cabedo, the bishop of the island of La Española, who was neglecting the needs of the indigenous poor of the island: “Says Las Casas, ‘Bishop, you have sinned a thousand times by doing nothing about the freedom of the Indians...you eat and drink the blood of your own flock.’ The bishop laughed at Las Casas. ‘You=re laughing, Sir, when you ought to bewail your misfortune.’ ‘Oh, yes,’ said the bishop, ‘I keep tears right here in my pocket.’ Las Casas responded, ‘Real tears are a gift of God, Sir, and you ought to pray to God for tears of blood.’”³⁰

Las Casas’ strong response to the bishop’s flippant disregard for the suffering of the Indians was a direct challenge to his blindness, to his failure to *see* his neighbor and respond in love. Bishop Cabedo is one of the shepherds to which the prophet Ezekiel refers in his stinging prophecy: “Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not the shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep...My sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with no one to search or seek for them” (34:2-6). Las Casas uses the same image in his Letter to the Council of the Indies in 1531: “Why, instead of sending sheep to convert the wolves, have you sent hungry, tyrannical and cruel wolves who tear apart, destroy, scandalize and scatter the sheep? Christ did not do it that way.”³¹ If our eyes are closed, obsessed with our own well being, we can hardly seek out the lost sheep and heal their wounds. Only tears of blood are powerful enough to heal such calloused blindness.

Bartolomé de las Casas and the first Dominican missionaries to the Americas have left us an important legacy as Christians. They have shown us a way to put the Final Judgment of Matthew's Gospel into practice in a concrete historical situation. By risking the opening of their eyes to the plight of the poor and by listening to the cry for justice and life, they teach us what gospel discipleship is about. They touched their neighbor as one touches the body of Christ, and they were transformed.

To live with open eyes, ears, hands, and heart, to *see* God in our neighbor and to *see* our neighbor with the eyes of God is what Christian discipleship is about. As Gustavo Gutiérrez says, summarizing the heart of Las Casas' spirituality: "The crystallized nucleus of the missionary perspective of our friar is *to see* in the Indian, in that *other* of the western world, the poor of which the gospel speaks; and consequently, to be conscious that in every gesture toward the *other* we find Christ himself. This gospel and mystical intuition is the root of his spirituality."³²

I close with a poem by another disciple of Las Casas in our own days: Bishop Pedro Casaldáliga of Brazil – a man of the gospel who has lived his entire life embracing the poor of Latin America and celebrating their dignity as children of God. May his poetry, written shortly before the Fifth Centenary of the arrival of the first Europeans to these lands of the Americas, become flesh in us today.

It will soon be five hundred years, o seer, and today more than ever the continent roars like a volcano of wounds and burning coals. Come back and teach us how to evangelize, the seas swept free of caravels, Holy Father of the Americas, Las Casas!³³

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ENDNOTES

¹ This article was published in the Irish Dominican periodical *Spirituality*, (vol. 13, May/June n. 72, and July/August 2007 n.73). For more information, see the website: www.dominicanpublications.com Part of this article appeared first in a conference given in Albuquerque, New Mexico in September 2006, under the auspices of the DEI Institute.

² Gutiérrez, Gustavo, "Memoria de Dios y Anuncio del Evangelio," *Gustavo Gutiérrez: Acordarse de los Pobres* (Lima: Fondo Editorial del Congreso del Perú, 2003), p.495.

³ Las Casas, Bartolomé de, *History of the Indies*, trans. and ed. Andrée Collard (New York: Harper and Row, 1971),

pp.183-84 (hereafter referred to as *History*).

⁴ Gutiérrez, Gustavo, *Las Casas: In Search of the Poor of Jesus Christ* (NY: Orbis, 1992), p.22.

⁵ Gutiérrez, *Las Casas*, p.23.

⁶ Gutiérrez, *Las Casas*, p.38.

⁷ “Letter to the Council of the Indies, 1531” *Obras Escogidas* (Madrid: BAE, 1957-58), vol. 5, VII, p.48b.

⁸ “Carta de Dominicos y Franciscanos de las Indias a los Regentes de España,” May 1517.

⁹ Gutiérrez, Gustavo, *Dios o el Oro en las Indias* (Lima: CEP, 1989), pp.43-44.

¹⁰ Las Casas, *Historia de las Indias*, cited in *Obras Escogidas*, vol. 2, V, pp. 179-180. This story is told in great length by Las Casas, pp.179-186.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *History*, pp.208-209.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.209.

¹⁴ Gutiérrez, “Memoria de Dios,” p. 501.

¹⁵ *Bartolomé de las Casas: The Only Way*, ed. Helen Rand Parish, trans. Francis Patrick Sullivan, S.J. (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), p.23.

¹⁶ “Letter to the Council,” VII, p.44b.

¹⁷ *History*, p.5

¹⁸ Gutiérrez, *Las Casas*, p.66.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ “Letter to the Council,” VII, p.48b.

²¹ *History*, p.275.

²² Cárdenas, Eduardo, in *Testigos de la Fe en América Latina*, ed. Emil Stehle (Navarra: Verbo Divino, 1982), p. 37.

²³ Las Casas, *Bartolomé de las Casas: The Only Way*, ed. Helen Rand Parish, trad. por Patrick Sullivan, S.J. (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), pp. 68, 128

²⁴ Gutiérrez, *Las Casas*, p.157.

²⁵ “Letter to the Council,” VII, p.49a.

²⁶ Gutiérrez, “Memoria De Dios,” p.505.

²⁷ Gutiérrez, *Las Casas*, p.161

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Rodríguez, Alberto, OP, “Fray Luis de Cáncer: Pacifist Preacher and Martyr” in *INFO* (Southern Dominican Province, 1999), pp.3-6.

³⁰ *History*, p.286.

³¹ “Letter to the Council,” VII, p.49a.

³² Gutiérrez, *Acordarse*, p.513.

³³ Casaldáliga, Pedro, *In Pursuit of the Kingdom*, trans., ed. Philip Berryman (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1990), p.15.