

Short Report On the Destruction of the Indies

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This Short Report On the Destruction of the Indies by Father Bartholomew de Las Casas was written in 1546. It gives a sense of why many today regard him as the "father of liberation theology". Las Casas accompanied Christopher Columbus to the new world in 1502, but soon sickened at the treatment the native Arawaks (or Taino) indians suffered at the hands of the Spanish.

AS DIVINE PROVIDENCE has ordained that in his world, for its government, and for the common utility of the human race, Kingdoms and Countries should be constituted in which are Kings almost fathers and pastors (as Homer calls them), they being consequently the most noble, and most generous members of the Republics, there neither is nor can be reasonable doubt as to the rectitude of their royal hearts. If any defect, wrong, and evil is suffered, there can be no other cause than that the Kings are ignorant of it; for if such were manifested to them, they would extirpate them with supreme industry and watchful diligence.

It is seemingly this that the divine Scriptures mean in the Proverbs of Solomon, "qui sedet in solio iudicii, dissipat omnia malum intuitu suo:" because it is thus assumed from the innate and particular virtue of the King, namely, that the knowledge alone of evil in his Kingdom is absolutely sufficient that he should destroy it; and that not for one moment, as far as in him lies, can he tolerate it.

As I have fifty, or more, years of experience in those countries, I have therefore been considering the evils I have seen committed, the injuries, losses, and misfortunes, such as it would not have been thought could be done by man; such kingdoms, so many and so large, or to speak better, that most vast and new world of the Indies, conceded and confided by God and his Church to the Kings of Castile, that they should rule and govern it, that they should convert it, and should prosper it temporally, and spiritually.

When some of their particular actions are made known to Your Highness, it will not be possible to forbear supplicating His Majesty with importunate insistence, that he should not concede nor permit that which the tyrants have invented, pursued and put into execution, calling it Conquests; which, if permitted, will be repeated; because these acts in themselves, done against those pacific, humble, and mild Indian people, who offend none, are iniquitous, tyrannous, condemned and cursed by every natural, divine, and human law.

So as not to keep criminal silence concerning the ruin of numberless souls and bodies that these persons cause, I have decided to print some, though very few, of the innumerable instances I have collected in the past and can relate with truth, in order that Your Highness may read them with greater facility.

Although the Archbishop of Toledo, Your Highness' Preceptor, when Bishop of Cartagena, asked me for them and presented them to Your Highness, nevertheless, because of the long journeys by sea and land Your Highness has made, and of the continual royal occupations it may be that Your Highness either has not read them or has already forgotten them.

The daring and unreasonable cupidity of those who count it as nothing to unjustly shed such an immense quantity of human blood, and to deprive those enormous counties of their natural inhabitants and possessors, by slaying millions of people and stealing incomparable treasures, increase every day; and they insist by various means and under various feigned pretexts, that the said Conquests are permitted, without violation of the natural and the divine law, and, in consequence, without the most grievous mortal sin, worthy of terrible and eternal punishment. I therefore esteemed it right to furnish Your Highness with this very brief summary of a very long history that could and ought to be composed, of the massacres and devastation that have taken place.

I supplicate Your Highness to receive and read it with the clemency, and royal benignity he usually shows to his creatures, and servants, who desire to serve solely for the public good and for the prosperity of the state.

Having seen and understood the monstrous iniustice done to these innocent people in destroying and outraging them. without

cause or just motive, but out of avarice alone, and the ambition of those who design such villainous operations, may Your Highness be pleased to supplicate and efficaciously persuade His Majesty to forbid such harmful and detestable practices to those who seek license for them: may he silence this infernal demand for ever, with so much terror, that from this time forward there shall be no one so audacious as to dare but to name it.

This - Most High Lord - is most fitting and necessary to do, that God may prosper, preserve and render blessed, both temporally and spiritually, all the State of the royal crown of Castile, Amen.

The Indies were discovered in the year fourteen hundred and ninety- two. The year following, Spanish Christians went to inhabit them, so that it is since forty-nine years that numbers of Spaniards have gone there; and the first land that they invaded to inhabit, was the large and most delightful Isle of Hispaniola, which has a circumference of six hundred leagues.

There are numberless other islands, and very large ones, all around on every side, that were all - and we have seen it - as inhabited and full of their native Indian peoples as any country in the world.

Of the continent, the nearest part of which is more than two hundred and fifty leagues distant from this Island, more than ten thousand leagues of maritime coast have been discovered, and more is discovered every day; all that has been discovered up to the year forty-nine is full of people, like a hive of bees, so that it seems as though God had placed all, or the greater part of the entire human race in these countries.

God has created all these numberless people to be quite the simplest, without malice or duplicity, most obedient, most faithful to their natural Lords, and to the Christians, whom they serve; the most humble, most patient, most peaceful, and calm, without strife nor tumults; not wrangling, nor querulous, as free from uproar, hate and desire of revenge, as any in the world.

They are likewise the most delicate people, weak and of feeble constitution, and less than any other can they bear fatigue, and they very easily die of whatsoever infirmity; so much so, that not even the sons of our Princes and of nobles, brought up in royal and gentle life, are more delicate than they; although there are among them such as are of the peasant class. They are also a very poor people, who of worldly goods possess little, nor wish to possess: and they are therefore neither proud, nor ambitious, nor avaricious.

Their food is so poor, that it would seem that of the Holy Fathers in the desert was not scantier nor less pleasing. Their way of dressing is usually to go naked, covering the private parts; and at most they cover themselves with a cotton cover, which would be equal to one and a half or two ells square of cloth. Their beds are of matting, and they mostly sleep in certain things like hanging nets, called in the language of Hispaniola 'Hamacas.'

They are likewise of a clean, unspoiled, and vivacious intellect, very capable, and receptive to very good doctrine; most prompt to accept our Holy Catholic Faith, to be endowed with virtuous customs; and they have as little difficulty with such things as any people created by God in the world.

Once they have begun to learn of matters pertaining to faith, they are so importunate to know them, and in frequenting the sacraments and divine service of the Church, that to tell the truth, the clergy have need to be endowed of God with the gift of pre-eminent patience to bear with them; and finally, I have heard many lay Spaniards frequently say many years ago (unable to deny the goodness of those they saw,) certainly these people were the most blessed of the earth, had they only the knowledge of God.

Among these gentle sheep, gifted by their Maker with the above qualities, the Spaniards entered as soon as they knew them like wolves, tigers and lions which had been starving for many days, and since forty years they have done nothing else; nor do they otherwise at the present day, than outrage, slay, afflict, torment, and destroy them with strange and new, and divers kinds of cruelty, never before seen, nor heard of, nor read of, of which some few will be told below: to such extremes has this gone that, whereas there were more than three million souls, whom we saw in Hispaniola, there are today, not two hundred of the native population left.

The island of Cuba is almost as long as the distance from Valladolid to Rome; it is now almost entirely deserted. The islands

of San Juan (Puerto Rico) and Jamaica, very large and happy and pleasing islands, are both desolate. The Lucaya Isles lie near Hispaniola and Cuba to the north and number more than sixty, including those that are called the Giants, and other large and small Islands; the poorest of these, which is more fertile, and pleasing than the King's garden in Seville, is the healthiest country in the world, and contained more than five hundred thousand souls, but today there remains not even a single creature. All were killed in transporting them to Hispaniola, because it was seen that the native population there was disappearing.

A ship went three years later to look for the people that had been left after the gathering in, because a good Christian was moved by compassion to convert and win those that were found to Christ; only eleven persons, whom I saw, were found.

More than thirty other islands, about the Isle of San Juan, are destroyed and depopulated, for the same reason. All these islands cover more than two thousand leagues of land, entirely depopulated and deserted.

We are assured that our Spaniards, with their cruelty and execrable works, have depopulated and made desolate the great continent, and that more than ten Kingdoms, larger than all Spain, counting Aragon and Portugal, and twice as much territory as from Seville to Jerusalem (which is more than two thousand leagues), though formerly full of people, are now deserted.

We give as real and true reckoning, that in the said forty years, more than twelve million persons, men, and women, and children, have perished unjustly and through tyranny of the Christians; and I truly believe, nor think I am deceived, that it is more than fifteen.

Two ordinary and principal methods have the self-styled Christians, who have gone there, employed in extirpating these miserable nations and removing them from the face of the earth. The one, by unjust, cruel and tyrannous wars. The other, by slaying all those, who might aspire to, or sigh for, or think of liberty, or to escape from the torments that they suffer, such as all the native Lords, and adult men; for generally, they leave none alive in the wars, except the young men and the women, whom they oppress with the hardest, most horrible and roughest servitude, to which either man or beast can ever be put. To these two ways of infernal tyranny, all the many and divers other ways, which are numberless, of exterminating these people, are reduced, resolved, or sub-ordered according to kind.

The reason why the Christians have killed and destroyed such infinite numbers of souls is solely because they have made gold their ultimate aim, seeking to load themselves with riches in the shortest time and to mount by high steps, disproportioned to their condition: namely by their insatiable avarice and ambition, the greatest, that could be on the earth. These lands, being so happy and so rich, and the people so humble, so patient, and so easily subjugated, they have had no more respect, nor consideration nor have they taken more account of them (I speak with truth of what I have seen during all the aforementioned time) than, - I will not say of animals, for would to God they had considered and treated them as animals, - but as even less than the dung in the streets.

In this way they cared for their lives - and for their souls: and therefore, all the millions above mentioned have died without faith, and without sacraments. And it is a publicly known truth, admitted and confessed by all, even by the tyrants themselves, that the Indians throughout the Indies never did any harm to the Christians: they even esteemed them as coming from heaven, until they and their neighbors had suffered the same many evils, thefts, deaths, violence and visitations at their hands....

I was induced to write this work, I, Fray Bartolomeus de las Casas, or Casaus, friar of Saint Dominic, who by God's mercy do go about this Court of Spain, trying to drive the hell out of the Indies, and to bring about that all those numberless multitudes of souls, redeemed with the blood of Jesus Christ, shall not hopelessly perish for ever; moved also by the compassion I feel for my fatherland, Castile, that God may not destroy it for such great sins, committed against His faith and honor against fellow creatures. A few persons of quality who reside at this Court and are jealous of God's honor and compassionate towards the afflictions and calamities of others, urged me to this work although it was my own intention which my continual occupations had never allowed me to put it into effect.

I brought it to a close at Valencia the 8th of December 1542, when all the violence was more terrible, and the oppression, tyranny, massacres, robberies, destructions, slaughter, depopulation, anguish, and calamity aforesaid, are actually at their height in all the regions where the Christians of the Indies are; although in some places they are fiercer, and more abominable than in others.

Mexico and its neighborhood are a little less badly off; there, at least, such things dare not be done publicly, because there is somewhat more justice than elsewhere, although very little, for they still kill the people with infernal burdens.

I have great hope, for the Emperor and King of Spain our Lord Don Carlos, Fifth of this name is getting to understand the wickedness and treachery that, contrary to the will of God, and of himself, is and has been done to those people and in those countries; heretofore the truth has been studiously hidden from him, that it is his duty to extirpate so many evils and bring succour to that new world, given him by God, to one who is a lover and observer of justice, whose glorious, and happy life and Imperial state may God Almighty long prosper, to the relief of all his universal Church and for the final salvation of his own Royal soul. Amen.

Since the above was written, some laws and edicts have been published by His Majesty, who was then in the town of Barcelona, in the month of November, 1542, and in the town of Madrid the following year; these contain such provisions as now seem suitable to bring about the cessation of the great wickedness and sin committed against God and our fellow creatures, to the total ruin and destruction of that world.

After many conferences and debates amongst conscientious and learned authorities, who were assembled in the town of Valladolid, His Majesty made the said laws; acting finally on the decision and opinion of the greater part of all those who gave their votes in writing, and who drew nearer to the law of Jesus Christ, as true Christians. They were likewise free from the corruption and foulness of the treasures stolen from the Indies that soiled the hands and still more the souls of many in authority in their blindness, had committed unscrupulous destruction.

When these laws were published, the agents of these tyrants, then at Court, made many copies of them; they displeased all these men who considered that they shut the doors to their participation in what was robbed and taken by tyranny; and they sent the copies to divers parts of the Indies.

None of those who there had charge of robbing the Indians, and of finishing their destruction by their tyranny, had ever observed any order, but such disorder as might have been made by Lucifer; when they saw the copies, before the arrival of the new judges who were to execute them, it is said and believed that they had been warned of what was coming by those in Spain, who have till now encouraged their sins and violence. They were so agitated, that when the good judges who were to carry out the laws arrived, they resolved to set aside shame and obedience to the King, just as they had already lost all love and fear of God.

They thus determined to let themselves be called traitors, for they are cruel and unbridled tyrants, particularly in the kingdoms of Peru, where at present, in this year 1546, such horrible, frightful, and execrable deeds are committed, as have never been done, either in the Indies or in the world; not only do such things happen among the Indians whom they have already all or nearly all killed, but among themselves. In the absence of the King's justice to punish them, God's justice has come from heaven to bring dissension amongst them and to make one to be the executioner of the other.

Shielded by the rebellion of these tyrants, those in all the other regions, would not obey the laws and, under pretext of appealing against them, have also revolted; they resent having to abdicate the dignities and power they have usurped, and to losing the Indians whom they hold in perpetual slavery.

Where they have ceased to kill quickly by the sword, they kill slowly by personal servitude and other unjust and intolerable vexations. And till now the King has not succeeded in preventing them because all, small and great, go there to pilfer, some more, some less, some publicly and openly, others secretly and under disguise; and with the pretext that they are serving the king, they dishonor God, and rob and destroy the King.

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