**Essay about the encomienda system and Bartolome de Las Casas role regarding Black Slavery**

**You only have to read what is highlighted in red!**

**Introduction**

“We came here to serve God and also to get rich.”
     -Bernal Diaz del Castillo

     When Cristobal Colon “discovered” the New World, Spain began its economic and spiritual conquest of America. Gold, God and Glory have been the over simplification of Spanish goals; yet, there is some truth in the matter. The Roman Catholic Church served as a participant in the conquest of the Indies; however, what is the specific role of the Church in the West Indies. Secular clergy  and regular clergy,  such as the Dominicans and Franciscans, sought to “evangelize” the Amerindians next to the economic endeavors of the conquistadors. Bartolome de Las Casas witnessed the brutality and decimation of the native peoples. Las Casas is an example of an individual who challenged the balance of economics and evangelization in the New World. This paper will first examine the history of the institutional Church before 1511 in the Indies. It will then examine the establishment of the encomienda as a tool for catechesis of church doctrine and Spanish acculturation. Finally, it will look at the life of Bartolome de Las Casas, and his struggle for justice in the New World.

**The Background History of the Institutional Church in the Indies**
    The history of the institutional church in Santo Domingo began with the arrival of Father Bernard Boyl  in 1493.  Boyl was a member of the religious order Minims.  King Ferdinand on June 25, 1493 secured a papal bull, Piis Fidelium, appointing him as Vicar Apostolic  in the Indies. Boyl left Cadiz for America on September 25, 1493, on the second Columbus expedition most likely accompanied by other priests. Once on the island of Hispaniola, Boyl saw the effects of the conquistadors. He quarreled with Columbus over the harsh treatment of colonists and Indians. Boyl saw that the situation for evangelization and catechizing was impossible. Within six months, Boyl left defeated for Spain on Dec. 3, 1494.
 Bernard Boyl once he returned to Spain faded into the background. His story exemplifies the fine line between economic pursuits and the ideal of Christian evangelization. Nevertheless, Spain took her role in the New World seriously. On matters of evangelization it was Queen Isabela who spoke out on the Christian motive, “...Isabela and Ferdinand as the ‘catholic Kings’ supported the warrant from the Pope, based their original rights and obligations in the Indies on their Christianizing mission; the Queen taking this duty seriously.”  Queen Isabela saw the problem clearly. It was one of trying to reconcile economic needs with the professed Christian purposes of Spanish Imperialism.

 “There can be no question that the obligation to Christianize
 the Indians, as originally enunciated by the papacy, was taken
 seriously by the queen. On the other hand, her condemnation
 of  Indian slavery. . .was neither uncompromising nor disinterested.
 On a number of occasions the queen countenanced, and even
 demanded a share in, the trade of Indian captives as slaves. It is
 true that formal enslavement, in the queen’s view, was not to affect
 the entire native population. It was rather a punishment meted to
 resisting, rebellious, or cannibalistic individuals and tribes. The queen
 explicitly took the position that the Indians innocent of
 punishable crimes were 'free' crown subject.”

    However, like other subjects they were liable to pay tribute, and if that meant one needed to work in order to pay, so be it. Thus “free” Indians became available for encomienda assignments. After her death in 1504, the Christian responsibility of Spain fell further into the background in these early years.
 Subjugated under the Spanish flag, the Roman church followed Spanish law. Under the Royal Patronato, Spain received the right of the New World. Spain controlled which religious, bishops, and secular clergy that could serve in the New World. This Patronato, “...consolidated and exercised authority in all matters related to the Spanish colonies: religious, economic, administrative, political and military.”  In the New World, the Council of the Indies held power.
     In order to understand the conquest, one needs to examine carefully sixteenth century Spain. “In Spain there existed, therefore, something akin to a temporal messianism in which the destiny of the nation and the destiny of the Church were believed to be united....Hispanic Christianity, it was believed, was unique in that the nation had been elected by God to be the instrument for the salvation of the world.”  Spain saw their role in conquest as a missionary effort in Christianizing the world. However, wealth and prosperity blurred the vision of sixteenth century Spain.

“According to the laws and decrees emanating from the Spanish Crown
 and from the Supreme Council of the Indies, the purpose of the conquest
 of the Americas was essentially missionary. But in actuality this missionary or  evangelistic purpose was often negated by the actions of those who engaged
 in the conquest, actions which in reality were contrary to the laws.
 Latin America was characterized by a ‘perfect legalism’ in theory, and a
 shameful illegality and an inadequate application of the laws in fact.”

     Spain had experience in conquest through the fighting with the Moors. There position followed suit in the Indies. It was a part of their history, that is, by occupying an area militarily and pacifying the Spanish achieved expansion. Spain then formed a government and the people who lost converted to the religion of the conqueror, such as Catholicism. The same story is found in the Roman Empire, the Medieval Crusades and the Arab caliphates.
     In Santo Domingo, the early years proved futile in the attempt to Christianize the native peoples due to the complexity of administrative problems. “The greatest administrative problem facing the Church in the sixteenth century was that of alleviating conflict between missionary clergy and bishops over jurisdiction, power to administer the sacraments in Indian parishes, and line of authority to the king.”  There was much dispute between the regular clergy and the secular clergy concerning who was in charge. More priests were in regular orders than secular. However “the American Church in turn was denied any right to communicate directly with Rome or with any other European prelate.”  All concerns were directed to Spain, and under the authority of Spain. As a result, “...the evangelization of the island of Santo Domingo did not really begin until 1500 with the coming of a Franciscan mission, which was augmented in 1502 by the arrival of an additional seventeen religious.”  However, the Franciscans appeared to have accepted the encomienda system and worked under its administration. The encomienda system would become the umbrella under which missionization would be attempted.

**Encomienda as Christianizing Agent**
     In the early years in the Caribbean, the Spanish established the encomienda system granting subjects the right to control the labor and collect tribute from Indian communities as a reward of their service to the Spanish crown. Columbus was the first to use this system as a way of pacifying unsettled conquistadors who would rather look for gold than work in a settlement. When Governor Nicolas Ovando ruled in the Indies, the encomienda system became firmly established. In theory, it did not give the grantee, or encomendero the legal right to own land, but to use land. It also did not give the encomenderos legal jurisdiction of the Indians, although many assumed that right. The encomendero, in gratitude for the use of lands and labor, promised to settle down and have a family near Spanish villa and protect the Indians. Furthermore, it was the responsibility of the encomendero to arrange for the conversion of the natives to the Roman Catholic faith. “After the first few years, for the conquest period as a whole, the primary tie between the Spaniards and the indigenous people of America was an institution which has come to be called the encomienda.”  It is this specific aspect of the encomienda that will be examined within this section.

    In the early days in the Caribbean settlements, the Spanish gathered Indians into areas regulated by the encomenderos. James Lockhart states that,
 “...there began in the Caribbean the Spanish attempt to
 nucleate the Indians more highly and to reorganize their
 settlements on the model of Iberian towns, while respecting
 indigenous units where possible.  Governors, priests and
 encomenderos could all, for their various purposes, readily
 agree on the desirability of having the Indians close together
 and behaving more like Spaniards.”

    The Spanish organized their settlements into urban-like centers. Colonists, recruited by the Spanish government, lived in these communities. In order to come to the New World the colonist needed to be Castilian, Catholic and an upright Spanish citizen. Under the encomienda system it was the responsibility of the colonists to assist in the task of acculturating the Indians as a future member of Spanish society. The Spanish government assigned a cleric to the encomienda, or perhaps even served as an encomendero, like Bartolome de Las Casas. This loose organization of the encomienda as a catechetical tool had little or no effect upon native conversions. “The Indians were to be brought so that they might be instructed in the Christian faith, but there is little evidence of such interest until the Dominicans took their stand for human rights in 1512.”   Securing more gold added to the need for revenue was more important than preserving native peoples. Economic interest superseded spiritual interest. As a result, “...nothing was done...to remove the rigors and excesses, and almost nothing came of any mission of Christian faith.”  The encomienda system focused on the welfare of the Crown and individuals, neglecting the physical, and spiritual need of the native peoples.
     The Spanish justified their position of ‘enslaving’ the Indians in a variety of ways. First of all, perhaps a matter of semantics, the conquistadors did not view the encomienda Indians as slaves. It was a time of confusion and mistrust. The official policy on the Indians issued by the Crown was one way viewpoint and six thousand miles away the loyal subject’s lived their lives in the manner that brought the most profit for them. The colonialists took the position that justified their use of the Native American’s as slaves. The question of whether the Indians were human or not, freeman or slave was for the theologians and philosophers to argue over as long as there was no real change in their encomiendas. Their view took the position that “...a slave is bought and sold individually for a price; in the Latin American context he was always removed from his geographical and ethnic origins and lived in close and permanent association with Europeans.”  Secondly, if it was slavery in their view, they were non-Catholics. “In the Iberian heritage, non-believers taken in just battle could be enslaved, and there were to be set procedures of official branding, registry, and payment to the Crown of duties on the new slaves.”  The Requerimiento was a document established by the Spanish crown to insure that Indians were not taken into slavery against their will. This document, read in Spanish, informed the Indians that they were now part of Spain and needed to conform to Spanish rule and accept the Catholic faith. Basically, if the Indian resisted Spanish entry into their lands, then the Spanish could enslave them justly.
     Those Indians who survived preliminary conquest entered into the encomienda system. “The full blown, classic form of the encomienda was never attained in the Caribbean, ...but the essential structure came into being and traditions were established which the mainland encomienda would continue unbroken.”  Christianizing the Indians was one priority of the encomendero; it was his responsibility to employ a cleric.

“Furthermore, according to the historian Juan Solorzano Pereira,
 if the Indians received proper instruction from missionaries, the fact
 that they were indeed clever and many were docile meant that they
 would learn the new religion more quickly. Thus, it was in the interest
 of the Spanish monarchs to see the orderly, responsible treatment of
 the Indians, so that they would become Christians. This would, of course,
 also mean that the Spanish monarchs should insure that only suitable
 Europeans enter the New World.”

     The Church organization was urban centered. High ranking secular clergy served in the urban parishes. It was a prestigious position to work in the urban area. Usually the lower ranking clerics worked in the countryside instructing the encomienda natives. Obviously there was a tension between those “stuck” in the encomienda and those in the urban centers. The lower ranking clergy were similar to the estancieros within the encomienda staff, that is, “most recently arrived, least well trained and connected, often discontent and frequently shifting positions in hope of finding urban employment.” It is suffice to say that there was a lack of commitment along with self-serving motivational factors upon those catechizing the Indians.
     The ideal example of the rural parish was built near an Indian settlement, inducting the cacique’s authority to build churches and insure participation. However, it was a different story in the early days. “Nevertheless, in the first generation the parish was included within the encomienda, integrated with, dependent upon, and subordinate to it, rather than parallel. The encomienda almost always preceded the parish in time, and the original parish shapes were simply those of encomiendas.”
     Although there are similarities to the institutional mission system, the encomienda was not a mission. Encomenderos contracted with clerics who would serve on their encomienda by paying their salaries and providing them with supplies. There was one cleric on an encomienda who would reside in the cabecera. There he would begin to build a church, and hold Mass. The cleric would administer sacraments and also educated the children of local wealthy Spaniards. Priests used Indians as sacristans, singers or general aides. It was out of these centers that the cleric would sometimes visit outlying areas of natives and attempt to build churches but this process was slow.   These priests were not missionaries, but entitled doctrineros, instructors in the Christian faith.  “Though the ecclesiastics generally accepted the encomienda as the framework of their rural activity -the Dominicans under protest, the Franciscans somewhat more willingly, the seculars without comment- all had some reason to resent a system which rendered them in certain ways subordinate and dependent.”
     In the encomienda there were no regulations in order to protect the Indians. Of course, the Crown wanted to convert the Indians, but at the same time they needed gold from the mines, and crops to feed the colonists. Eventually when the Dominicans arrived in Santo Domingo in 1510, the issue of injustice came to the forefront. However, it was almost too late to change this system in the Caribbean. With the arrival of the Dominicans, the native peoples were already in decline. “It had been nineteen years now since the inhabitants of the so-called Indies had begun to suffer foreign occupation, with its attendant abuse, exploitation and death at the hands of the discoverers...”
     The decimation of the native peoples was recorded in several eyewitness accounts. The Dominicans wrote that, “how can so very many people that there had been on this island, according to what we have been told, in such a brief time, a space of fifteen or sixteen years, have so cruelly perished?”  Historian, Peter Martyr D’Anghiera  wrote in 1516 in Decade III that “the number of these unfortunates has diminished immensely; many say that once upon a time a census was made of more than a million two hundred thousand [the allusion being the enumeration by the Adelantado in 1496], how many there may be today gives me horror to say.”  The natives were dying under the encomienda system due to church and government. It was the regular clergy who took action. “The missionary Church opposed this state of affairs from the beginning, and nearly everything positive that was done for the benefit of the indigenous peoples resulted from a call and clamor of the missionaries. The fact remained, however, that widespread injustice was extremely difficult to uproot.”  It was at this time that the Dominicans, specifically, Antonio de Montesinos, and Bartolome de Las Casas began to challenge the Spanish system of the encomienda.

**Las Casas and the Dominicans**

      Bartolome de Las Casas was born in the city of Seville.  Bartolome was a son of a merchant who had accompanied Christopher Columbus on his second voyage, Las Casas himself went to America in 1502 with Governor Ovando, and in 1512 participated in the conquest of Cuba. Educated in law and thought, Las Casas received his degree as a Doctor of Law at the great University of Salamanca. Later he would study theology and ordained a Catholic priest in Spain.
 Las Casas himself was the owner of several encomiendas in Cuba. It was a Dominican friar named Antonio de Montesinos, “who delivered the first important and deliberate public protest against the kind of treatment being accorded the Indians by his Spanish countrymen. This first cry on behalf of human liberty in the New World was a turning point in the history of America.”  It was Montesinos who influenced Las Casas to give up his encomiendas and join in the growing protest of the native peoples of America.  “The Dominicans found their great ally in Las Casas in 1515 when he abandoned Cuba to go to Spain to begin the defense of Indian rights, accompanied by Montesino.”
     In 1522, Las Casas joined the Dominican order under the direction of Pedro de Cordoba.
 Bartolome de Las Casas spent over fifty years as an outspoken human rights activist. For example, “On December 12, 1519, Las Casas was granted the privilege of defending the Indian cause in the court of Barcelona, presided over by Charles V.”  He was arguing against Father Juan de Quevedo, OFM, Bishop of Panama. A person very much influenced by medieval European thought, Las Casas, breaks away from the contemporary views and promotes a new world view that challenged both the church and the crown for over three hundred years.
     It was Christmas 1511, when a Dominican friar named Antonio de Montesinos preached the first important and deliberate public protest on behalf of human liberty. On the island of Hispaniola, Montesinos declared he was the “voice crying in the wilderness,” protesting to the colonial leaders directly while they sat in church. Las Casas tells us that it was the “best people” who heard Montesinos’ sermon. “Before a congregation of the governor, officials and citizens of Santo Domingo he declared that they were living in mortal sin because of their treatment of the Indians, who should become their Christian brothers.”

Montesinos thundered, according to Las Casas:
 “In order to make your sins against the Indians known to you
 I have come up on this pulpit, I who am the voice of Christ
 crying in the wilderness of this island, and therefore it behooves
 you to listen, not with careless attention, but with all your heart
 and senses, so that you may hear it; for this is going to be the
 strangest voice that ever you heard, the harshest and hardest and
 most awful and most dangerous that ever you expected to hear...
 This voice says that you are in mortal sin, that you live and die in
 it, for the cruelty and tyranny you use in dealing with these innocent
 people. Tell me, by what right or justice do you keep these Indians
 in such a cruel and horrible servitude? On what authority have you
 waged a detestable war against these people, who dwelt quietly and
 peacefully on their own land?...Why do you keep them so oppressed
 and weary, not giving them enough to eat nor taking care of them in
 their illness? For with the excessive work you demand of them with
 your desire to extract and acquire gold everyday. And what care do
 you take that they should be instructed in religion? ...Are these not
 men? Have they not rational souls? Are you not bound to love them
 as you love yourselves? Be certain that, in such a state as this, you
 can no more be saved than the Moors or Turks.

    This was not what the colonists wanted to hear and their protests went not only to the house of the governor, but to the palaces of Spain. Protests were sent to Spain in order to recall the Dominicans. By March of 1512, Montesinos' superior in Spain ordered him to be silent, and soon a royal decree followed from the King himself, although Montesinos did continue to fight the cause.
     In the early days of Las Casas in the New World, he would have opposed people such as Montesinos. It was more than two years after Montesinos’ sermons that Las Casas would have his own awakening. In 1514, near his estate in Cuba while pondering the scripture verse from Ecclesiastics: “He that sacrificeth of a thing wrongfully gotten, his offering is ridiculous, and the gifts of unjust men are not accepted.”  Las Casas became convinced that everything done to the Native Americans was wrong. He saw it to be a matter of justice, that what the Spanish had done so far to the Indians was nothing short of being tyrannical.
 Las Casas acted immediately to change his life. He gave up his encomiendas, and preached a sermon at Sancti Espiritus, against his fellow Spaniards which shocked them as much as had the sermons two years earlier by Montesinos. From this point on Las Casas devoted his life to the defense and betterment of the Indians. In every book he read “whether in Latin or Spanish, he found additional reasons and authorities to prove and corroborate the justice of those Indian people and to condemn the robbery evil, and injustice committed against them.”
     At the age of forty, Las Casas begins a fifty-year quest to do battle with those Spaniards who would continue to enslave and bring injustice to the Native peoples. A new beginning for Las Casas, but for Montesinos, little is known except for what we know through Las Casas’ writings such as Historia de Las Indies. It appears to be that Montesinos after the royal order to be silent went to Venezuela, where he died while working amongst the Indians. With Montesinos’ silence, a new voice is heard, louder than before. A voice that would defy and challenge the royal throne itself.
     Realizing that the encomienda system was difficult to change Las Casas along with different religious clergy attempted to establish separate communities for the Indians. Influenced by Sir Thomas More’s book Utopia, Las Casas presents projects to the Crown in 1516-1518 that would bring changes to the Indies. “To this last task, Bartolome devotes his Memorial de Remedios 1516, the cleric presents what has been called as a ‘community schema’. He recommends a project for the establishment, in mutual respect, of free communities of Indians on the one hand, and villages of Spanish peasants on the other, which would maintain relationships of peaceful co-existence and mutual assistance.”
     Las Casas presents his plan in detail, concerning the size of Indian villages, and which officials should be put in charge, including government organized by native chiefs. Las Casas discusses a variety of plans Memorial de Remedios which

 “...indicates the distances between the settlements, the hours of
 the working day (with a four hour break each day), the suitability
 of a sand clock in each community lest the Indians ‘work too long.’
 It determines how the Indians are to receive Christian instruction
 and insists on the opportunity for young native to become ‘clerics
 or friars’ if they so desire. It declares the need for physicians,
 pharmacists, and school teachers.”

Las Casas envisioned isolated communities for two basic reasons, that is, first to provide protection for the Indians from the encomienda system, and secondly, to evangelize the natives. According to Dussel “Bartolome de Las Casas was the first to propose a peaceful evangelization, that is, that the missionaries should go to the Indians before the military.”
     According to the historian Oviendo in 1516, Franciscans established themselves in Cumana and the Dominicans at Piritu, eighteen leagues farther west.  Although this community seemed promising, Spanish ships soon appeared apprehending Indians as slaves. Seeing relatives taken by the Spanish to Hispaniola, the Caribs rose up in protest and killed the Dominicans. The Dominicans later established another mission and the exact same thing happened. Indians were captured as slaves and in 1519, there was another Indian revolt where the Caribs rose up to kill all Christians near Cumana, over 80 people died.  These are examples illustrating the economic interest of Spain, which superseded spiritual work. Spanish ships looked for labor to replace the declining Indian population near the urban centers. Dussel explains that, “...the exploitation of these precious metals along with the agricultural production of the colonies instituted an economic social system with artificial and monopolistic privileges that impeded the work of evangelization.”
     Although Las Casas did not enter the Dominican Order until 1522, he too by this time sought approval from the King “...the right to begin ‘villages of free Indian’ communities of Spanish and Indian peasants that were proposed as the initiation of a new civilization in America.”   Arguing for Indian rights in Spain, Las Casas received permission to set up a community in none other than Cumana; less than a year after the prior Indian revolt and death of eighty Christians. Suffice to say that Las Casas with his several peasants failed in Cumana by 1522, due to the “...questionable selection of colonists who accompanied Las Casas, his own concessions of capitulation, the disaster which befell the Franciscans...the interests created by the encomenderos of Santo Domingo, and finally an attack by the Indians themselves on the settlement.”  It was after this failure that Las Casas entered the Dominican Order and begin to write and debate repeatedly for Indian rights.
     Las Casas was not one to give up when he believed he was right. Following his failure in Venezuela, Las Casas went to Guatemala where he began to write his first treatise, The Only Method of Attracting All People to the True Faith. It was based upon the words of Christ, “Go and teach all nations.” Pope Paul III, in the papal bull, Sublimis Deus, The Words of Christ, issued on June 9, 1537, at the same time that Las Casas published his book, they agreed with one another that the American Indians were worthy of receiving baptism.

Las Casas at that time was preaching in Guatemala:

 “The sublime God so loved the human race that He not only
 created man in such ways that he might participate in the good
 that other creatures enjoy, inaccessible and invisible Supreme Good
 and behold face to face...all are capable of receiving the doctrines
 of the faith....we....consider that the Indian are truly men and are
 capable of understanding the Catholic faith but, according to our
 information, they desire exceedingly to receive it.”

     Las Casas was a true crusader for the Native American cause. He confronted not only the philosophers, theologians and jurists, but he challenged the very authority of the Crown itself. He fought to promote the belief that the Indians are fully human, rational beings capable of doing anything once they were taught. As human beings they have souls, and they were candidates for entrance into the Church via baptism.
     Las Casas also felt that just because the Indians were not Christians, “they are by no means to be deprived of their liberty or the possession of their property, even though they live outside of the faith of Jesus Christ; and that they may and should, freely and legitimately, enjoy their liberty and the possession of their property; nor should they be in any way enslaved...”

 In recent years, some historians blame Las Casas for the introduction and perpetuation of black slavery in the Caribbean. It is easy in the twentieth century to look back and place fault on one historical figure due to their sixteenth century mentality. As early as 1501, the King introduced black slaves into the Caribbean

 “...in a letter to the governor of Hispaniola, in which he said: ‘In
 view of our earnest desire for the conversion of the Indians to our
 Holy Catholic Faith, and seeing that, if persons suspect in the Faith
 went there, such conversion might be impeded, we cannot consent
 to the immigration of Moors, heretics, Jews, reconverts, or persons
 newly converted to our Holy Faith, unless they are Negro or other
 slaves who have been born in the power of Christians who are our
 subjects and nationals and carry on our express permission’.”

Eric Williams writes that there were seventeen Christian blacks brought to the Caribbean. Most of these black slaves worked in the mines. Due to the Indian decline, Ferdinand commented that “...he needed a hundred more so that ‘all of these be getting gold for me.”
     Many officials, religious and individuals requested the importation of Black slaves, even those from Africa. In 1518, Licenciado Zuazo expressed his concern about the decline of the Indian population “...that of a million one hundred and thirty thousand at the beginning there were then remaining eleven thousand and that in three or four more years there would be none.”  Another official Gil Gonzalez Davila blamed the Indian decline on the colonists for not taking suitable care of them. He blamed them “...first because of being delicate people...suffered from a change of place and secondly, because the vecinos, being uncertain how long these Indians would be at their disposal, did not look after them properly.”  The Dominicans, along with others realized that the Indians could not survive the labor. Zuazo stated that, due to his experience with Blacks, they could work harder.  Las Casas requested black slavery and blamed as promulgating the start of black slave trade. Some historians surmise that Las Casas refused to sacrifice Spanish economic greed on the native peoples, but transferred economic needs to sacrifice the Black people.  Despite the injustice to the Blacks, this dismisses Las Casas as a racist, again placing a sixteenth century man in the realm of twentieth century thought.
     According to Gustavo Gutierrez, Las Casas was acting in an age which accepted slavery; many petitioned for black slaves. In 1516, Las Casas in his Memorial de Remedios, asks the King “...to maintain in the mines of the communities that he, Bartolome is proposing ‘some twenty blacks or other slaves’...what he means by ‘other slaves’ is specified...when he asks the King to grant the colonists permission to "...have black and white slaves that they may bring from Castile.”  Las Casas requests Black slaves three more times all limited to those slaves in Spain that were Christian. Once though in 1531, he requests license from the King for four hundred Blacks from Africa. His last request was in 1543. He wanted them to serve in Chiapa when he served as bishop.
     Las Casas had a change of heart shortly after in 1543. On a return trip from Spain, Las Casas stayed in Lisbon. The injustices of African slavery confronted Las Casas; he began to change his mind and regret his previous requests. Gutierrez writes that, “...Bartolome regrets what he had written years before, ‘oblivious’ he says, ‘of the injustice with which the Portuguese take them and make them slaves.’”   He began to rewrite his Historia de Las Indias to include the slave trade. Bartolome writes that “...after he found out, he would not have proposed it for all the world because blacks were enslaved unjustly, tyrannically, right from the start, exactly as the Indians had been.”
    Las Casas repents of his former proposals. Las Casas, although people make him into a man ahead of his times, was a part of an unjust prevailing system which at that time was accepted socially and justified philosophically and theologically.  He was a product of his times.

Las Casas also debated the claim of Spain’s legitimate right to rule in America. According to Las Casas, Spain’s title was based on a papal grant from a donation made by Pope Alexander VI in 1493. This grant appointed King Ferdinand and Queen Isabela and their successors as the

 “lords of the islands and mainland to be discovered or to be
 discovered with full, free, ample and absolute authority and
 jurisdiction. In spite of this, Las Casas maintained that the pope
 thereby entrusted the Spanish monarchs with only a missionary
 task and granted power and privilege as would enable them to
 achieve this limited objective. Failure to Christianize the Indians,
 insisted Las Casas, not merely jeopardized Spain’s title but
 indeed invalidated it.”

Spain’s only rightful claim upon America according to Las Casas’ arguments was that of promoting the Christian faith. He believed that anything other than evangelization of the Native Americans was a moral violation of the Indians’ God given rights. As such, it was the duty of the Crown to insure that every ounce of gold, silver or jewel extracted from the New World by force or at the detriment of the Indians, be returned immediately.   The response of the Emperor Charles V, was one that recognized no such interpretation and felt no qualms of conscience as he reaffirmed Spain’s claim to America.
     It is important to note that even as outspoken and challenging Las Casas was he never was silenced or his writings censured by the Church or Crown. In fact, it was the Emperor Charles V, who gave Las Casas the title Protector of the Indians. Furthermore, Las Casas was able to get Charles V to promulgate the 1542-1543 reforms known as the New Laws, even though little real change came about for the Indians immediately.
     These New Laws, formal title of these laws were the Laws of Burgos, were an actual milestone in the development of human rights for the Native Americans. These laws were a legitimate attempt by the King and the Council of the Indies to standardize Spain’s colonial governing bodies and the procedures that they were to follow in acting in the name of the Crown. Just and moral treatment was the order of the day whether one was in Cuba, Peru, Guatemala or in Mexico City. Some of the main points in the New Laws are:
1) A flat edict forbidding all taking of Indian slaves in the future against their will. There was a call for the audencias to make “swift inquiry”...into the lives of the existing Indian slaves. Slave owners were called upon to prove legitimate title to their claim. If legitimate ownership could not be proved the Indians were to be set free immediately. Those who held legitimate title were encouraged to free their Indian slaves.
2) Indians were shifted from the encomienda and were ordered placed under the Crown at once. All public officials from the viceroy down, the clergy, the monasteries, hospitals, the mint, the treasury, etc. also all private encomenderos who held Indians without due title or mistreated them lost use of the natives.
3) After the death of an encomendero, all ties end and the Indians were to be placed under the Royal Crown. Under the law all Indians who were put under the royal protection of the Crown were to be well treated and instructed in the faith.
     The following year, 1544, Las Casas was bishop of Chiapa in New Spain, and he returned to America to take part in the struggle himself. He did not even succeed in enforcing the New Laws in his own Diocese. With a sense of personal failure, Las Casas resigned after less than three years of being Bishop of Chiapa. Las Casas returned to Spain for the last time in 1547.
     After his arrival in Spain, he took up residence in Valladolid. In 1551, he made permanent arrangements to live at the Dominican College of San Gregorio at Valladolid. This would be Las Casas’ residence for the next fifteen years until his death in 1566. It would be here at San Gregario that Las Casas would compose his major written works: De Unico Vocationis Modo, a Latin treatise on the theory of evangelical conquest; Apologetica Historia, a detailed description of Indian abilities; and Historia de Las Indias, a condemnation of 30 years of poor colonial policy. He also wrote many doctrinal treatises, letters, memorials, and pamphlets, of which the most famous, Brevisima Relacion De La Destruccion De Las Indias, which is a stern indictment of the cruelty of the conquistadors.   This work due to its sensationalism was immediately translated into all the languages in Europe, and was widely circulated. It was this small tome that would be used by the English and others in the development of the Black Legend.
     In 1566, Bartolome de Las Casas at the age of 92, died in Valladolid, Spain. His death signaled the real beginning to the impact of a man who had lived during the greater part of Spain’s infancy and adolescence as a colonial power in America. Yet, it is not the living or the observing which made Las Casas an important historical figure. It was Las Casas as the preserver, the chronicler, the author and historian which comes to the forefront.
     With his humanitarian ideals, moral and ethical integrity, as well as his high sense of justice, Las Casas passes on to each new generation the obligation to fight injustice and man’s inhumanity to his fellow man. The role of the Church in the Caribbean in the years 1511-1540 illustrates the struggle between economic pursuits, and evangelization. Unjust economic pursuits shadowed futile attempts to evoke change. The experience that the Spanish received in the Caribbean helped to form further tools for catechizing the native peoples, such as the mission system in Northern New Spain. Las Casas portrays a sixteenth century man who could not change the system in his time, yet spoke out. He gives us the challenge to examine the injustices in the world today, to challenge the institutions and our leaders, to call for reform in our laws and way of living. It is up to the individual now to examine the injustice and decimation of a people in the sixteenth century to understand injustice as one approaches the twenty-first century.  Las Casas reminds us of the importance for us to know our story, preserve it and hand it on to future generations.

**Footnotes**

     Secular clergy are ordained priests who serve normally in a canonical parish whose faculties to minister and function are directly under the jurisdiction of a local bishop. In the case of the West Indies, secular clergy were under the jurisdiction of the Spanish Crown and the Archbishop who was directly a part of the Royal Court.
      Regular clergy are members of a religious order such as the Dominicans, Franciscans, or Jesuits. Members are directly responsible to their immediate supervisor. Many regular clergy went to the New World to evangelize the native peoples.
  Boyl is also spelled Buyl in some sources.
  Minims is a mendicant order founded by St. Francis de Paola in 1435 in Paola, Italy.
  Vicar Apostolic is normally a priest who has bishop-like powers in an area with no resident bishop or a defined ecclesiastical jurisdiction. For example, Father Junipero Serra, OFM who founded the first of the California Missions was Vicar Apostolic of Alta California.
  Carl Otwin Sauer, The Early Spanish Main  (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 196.
   Charles Gibson, Spain In America (New York: Harpers and Row Publishers, 1966), 51-52.
  Enrique Dussel, A History of the Church in Latin America: Colonialism to Liberation, 1492-1979, trans. Alan Neely. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1981), 39.
  Ibid, 38.
  Ibid, 39.
  Ibid, 43.
  Richard Greenleaf, ed., The Roman Catholic Church in Colonial Latin America (Tempe, Arizona: Center for Latin American Studies, 1977), 4.
  Dussel, 39.
  Ibid, 47.
 James Lockhart, Early Latin America: A History of Colonial America and Brazil, Cambridge Latin American Studies (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 68.
  Ibid, 73.
  Sauer, 160.
  Ibid, 197.
  Lockhart, 71.
  Ibid, 72.
  Ibid, 68.
  James Muldoon, The Americas in the Spanish World Order: The Justification for Conquest in the Seventeenth Century, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994.), 57.
  Lockhart, 107.
  Ibid, 108.
  Ibid, 108.
  Ibid, 109.
  Gustavo Gutierrez, Las Casas: In Search of the Poor Jesus Christ, trans. Robert R. Barr. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1993.), 27.
  Ibid, 28.
  A historian of the Spanish discoveries in the New World. Under Charles V, he became a member of the Council of the Indies in 1518 and later a royal chronicler in 1520.
  Sauer, 202.
  Dussel, 45.
  Lewis Hanke, The Spanish Struggle for Justice in the Conquest of America  (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1949), 17.
  Sauer, 197.
  Dussel, 48.
  Sauer, 197.
   Hanke, 17.
   Hanke, 21.
   Hanke, 21.
  Gutierrez, 76.
  Gutierrez, 76.
  Dussel, 45.
  Sauer, 192.
  Ibid, 192.
  Dussel, 45.
  Ibid, 48.
  Ibid, 48.
   Hanke, 72.
   Hanke, 72.
   Hanke, 125.
  Eric Williams, From Columbus to Castro: The History of the Caribbean (New York: Random House Inc., 1970.), 41.
  Sauer, 206.
  Ibid, 202.
  Ibid, 202.
  Ibid, 207. “Negroes had proved hardy in the gold fields. They were next thought of to replace the Indians who had been relieved of forced labor. Las Casas, who had been in Spain during the regency of Cisneros, recalled that the vecinos of the island had asked him in 1517 to give his support to the introduction of Negro slaves, to which he agreed as protection for the Indians, the Casa de Contratacion approving the importation of four thousand.”
   Williams, 36-37.
  Gutierrez, 324.
  Ibid, 325.
  Ibid, 327.
  Ibid, 327. Gutierrez cites Historia de Las Indias, Book Three, Chapter 102.
  Ibid, 325.
   Hanke, 153.
  Ibid, Chapter X.
  Ibid, Chapter VIII.
  Gutierrez, 89.
   Hanke, 98.
  Ibid, 98.