

In Evangelical Solidarity with the Oppressed

The Fifth Centenary Anniversary of the Arrival of the Order in America

INTRODUCTION

“Lessons of humanism, spirituality and effort to raise man's dignity, are taught to us by Antonio Montesinos, Córdoba, Bartolomé de las Casas They are men in whom pulsates concern for the weak, for the defenseless, for the natives; subjects worthy of all respect as persons and as bearers of the image of God, destined for a transcendent vocation. The first International Law has its origin here with Francisco de Vitoria.”

Pope John Paul II. Homily, Santo Domingo, January 25, 1979

Who were these friars who announced the Gospel? Under what circumstances did they announce the Word of God? What did their preaching achieve? What challenges did they face? What were they announcing? What methods were used for evangelization?

It is important to try to answer these questions – not only for our sake as Dominican men and women, but also for the sake of the Church – because clear proclamation of the gospel will always find opposition.

In our discussion of the topics described below, we have tried to add as few words as possible. Rather, it is our belief that the writings of the first Dominicans in the “New World” speak for themselves. The detailed and insightful reading of their testimonies will challenge our daily routine and encourage us to rediscover the novelty of the Gospel.

It is true that the forces which presently repress or deny human dignity and the agents that enforce such situations are different from those that existed five centuries ago. Nonetheless, around the globe on every continent large sectors of people continue to be oppressed, rejected, marginalized and reduced to nothing. We need to dust-off the profound understanding of the Gospel that our Dominican tradition gives us so that our preaching gains credibility.

The firm option for the oppressed that inspired our brothers, the principles that supported them, and the Evangelical praxis that they initiated, have the potential to help us. Provided, of course, that we have the courage to examine our methodology and our ways of doing things.

The following eight sections make up this booklet:

- Historical and ideological conditions in the “New World”
- Denouncement: the sermon of Montesinos
- The friars of the first community
- The Word of God: documented in letters
- The project of peaceful Evangelization
- Bartolomé de Las Casas: from *encomendero* cleric to Dominican friar
- Study sessions during the mission of the first community
- The legacy of the first Dominican community in America

Following these sections,we have included a bibliography. These resources provide all of us with the opportunity to deepen our knowledge so that the memory of the first Dominicans in America serves both as a challenge and as an opportunity for renewed faith in Christ, our Father Dominic and our older brothers in the Order.

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I. HISTORIC AND IDEOLOGICAL CIRCUMSTANCES IN THE "NEW WORLD"

"Those who came to Castile were not fearful of God, rather they were seeking money at all costs. The Christians like to dress in silk, even their shoes, and not only they, but their mules, too. We think, if we could wring out that silk, the blood of the Indians would flow. This was the real reason to found the "repartimientos" and not the reason they feign."

Letter of the Dominicans to Chancellor Xevres.

On August 3, 1492, Columbus undertook a journey toward the Occident looking for a new route to the East. On the way, he came across an unexpected world. They, the explorers, talked about the "discovery" of a "new world", but in reality, there was nothing new about that world: it had already been discovered and inhabited.

Everything was foreign to the new arrivals: the geography, the climate, the inhabitants, the rich resources, the customs, the religion, the social organization... They were convinced that they had arrived in India, and in fact, they named those lands the West Indies. Consequently, their inhabitants would be called "Indians".

BULL OF DONATION

"Making use of the fullness of the apostolic succession and with the authority of Almighty God, which we have on this earth and which was given to blessed Peter, and as Vicar of Christ, and in this time, we give, cede and perpetually assignate to you and your heirs and successors in the kingdoms of Castile and Leon, all and each of the isles and lands which, known and unknown up to this moment, have been found by your emissaries and the ones to be found in the future and that right now are not under any other Christian lord."

Bull of Alexander VI, 1493

At once, the tragedy began: the "unknown" became unrecognized, unacknowledged; the foreign became the enemy to be conquered, in order to impose the way of life and faith of the conquistadores, which they considered to be universal.

In virtue of the donation of the "new world" received from Pope Alexander VI, the Crown of Castile signed the so called "capitulations", which would make possible new expeditions of conquest, ordered toward the effective incorporation of the territories to the domain of the kings. The capitulation was a special contract which allowed the explorer, though working on his own, to travel in the name of the Crown, receive from it certain titles and retain a certain portion of the wealth obtained. It was understood, of course, that all of that was in exchange for increasing the royal treasury.

In everything that happened from then on, the exercise of the Royal Patronage had a tremendous influence and, as a consequence, the Crown of Castile enjoyed rights such as fixing the boundaries for

LAST WILL OF ISABELLA, THE CATHOLIC

“When the Islands and Lands of the Ocean Sea, discovered or yet to be discovered, were given to us by the Holy See, our main intention was to make an effort to procure, to induce and to bring the peoples from there, and to convert them to our holy Catholic Faith (...) to teach and instruct them in good morals, and to do it with great diligence. Therefore, I ask the King, my Lord, with great affection, and entrust and command the Princess, my daughter and the Prince, her husband, that thus they act, and fulfill it, and that this ought to be their main goal, and that they put in it a great diligence, and that they should not permit or give an occasion that the Indian citizens and dwellers of the said islands and firm land, acquired or to be acquired, receive any harm in their persons or in their possessions, even more they must order that they should be well and justly treated (...) because thus it was urged and commanded to us by the apostolic letters of the said grant.”

Queen Isabella died in 1504, having left instructions in her will to the effect that the Indians must be given a good and just treatment. However, the motive of the majority of the Castilians who had gone to the Indies to establish themselves there was none other than the thirst for gold, that is to say, to get rich as soon as possible.

the dioceses; proposing the authorities for the same, including the bishops; and collecting and administering the ecclesiastical alms. One might even say that in general the Church came to lose her ability to act autonomously: to have rights in the “new world” her decisions had to be accompanied by the approval, the “pase regio”, of the Crown.

In 1503 the Catholic King and Queen, Ferdinand and Isabella, named Bishop Juan Rodriguez de Fonseca, who became the chief defender of the “encomiendas”, as an advisor in all the matters concerning the Indies. In 1516 the Committee of the Indies was set up. It was later called the Council for the Indies, an organization responsible for all matters concerning the “new world”, including the propagation of the Faith. The Crown had the obligation of sending the missionaries needed, and of financing their voyage; though the religious, in virtue of their vow of poverty, would live off the alms of the people once they reached their destiny.

DENOUNCEMENT OF THE ENCOMIENDAS

“The Christians have shared them among themselves, saying that they do that in order to teach them the things of the Faith, but they have not taught them because none of them knows the Faith. The Christians to whom the Indians have been entrusted and among whom they have been divided, have been and are ignorant. They have also been living there, giving a bad example of lust, violence, blasphemy, of various cruelties; and, if they have compromised the health of their own souls with their bad public lives, how can they look after or provide for those of their neighbors?”

Letter of the Dominicans to King Carlos I

In fact, to secure cheap labor, they introduced the system of the *encomiendas*, known since the Middle Ages, which was based on the servitude of workers to a landlord. To each Castilian, according to his ability or influence, a number of Indians was assigned. The land belonged to the Crown and the exploitation of the estates and mines was the responsibility of the *encomenderos*, who forced the Indians to do the work. Using the Christianization of the Indians as a pretext to convince the Queen of the convenience of this system, they argued that, thanks to the contact of the Indians with the Christians, and through their good example, the Indians would more easily accept the Faith and the customs of Castile. *Encomiendas* were assigned to certain people, including important persons who lived in Castile, among whom was the King himself.

The reality is that the *encomiendas* turned into a system of slavery and exploitation of the Indians. With good reason the Dominicans preferred to talk of the “*repartimientos*”, denouncing their injustices and fighting to eliminate them. As they wrote in one of their letters to the Hieronymite monks, when they were commissioned to deal with matters of the Indies, “The first thing is that we do not see how this manner of dealing with the Indians can be licit”.

It is fitting to point out that some of the consequences of that colonial system were the destruction of the Indian population, as well as the ruin of their culture and their ways of socio-political organization. Likewise, the amalgamation of the movement of evangelization, on the one hand, with, the process of colonization, on the other hand, brought about the surrender of the Indians; Church and State, the cross and the sword... an explosive mix. Again, the observation of Saint Jerome, about the transformation of Christendom as the official religion of the Roman Empire, was true: “Since the Church came to be under Christian emperors, she has grown, yes, in power and riches, but she has diminished her moral strength.”

TO REFLECT AND DIALOGUE

1. Can it be affirmed that the fact that the Church would delegate to a political power the most fundamental work entrusted to her, which is that of evangelization, represented a diminishment of the Church? Could it be that in such circumstances, to accept the Christian Faith was equivalent to becoming a vassal of the Crown of Castile?
2. Globalization entails, among other things, new financial and economic problems, cultural and religious tensions, migrations, new vulnerabilities of ethnic groups... In what measure can the processes of globalization be considered like the eruption of a new world? Are we exempt from relational systems that could be considered colonial?

2. THE DENOUNCEMENT: THE SERMON OF MONTESINOS

“Are these not men? Have they not rational souls? Are you not bound to love them as you love yourselves? Don’t you understand this? Don’t you feel it?”

Sermon by Fr. Antonio de Montesinos

It was September, 1510, when the first Dominicans arrived at Hispaniola, the name given to the island of the Caribbean Sea, currently occupied by the Dominican Republic and Haiti.

Their objective consisted in the pastoral care to the Spaniards and, specially in the evangelization of the natives. Consequently, as soon as they arrived they came in direct contact with them, especially with the “naborias” as those who were servants in the homes of the Spaniards were called. Very soon the Dominicans became aware of the bad treatment received, and the abuse committed against, the inhabitants of that island.

Juan Garces, a Spaniard, who was being sought by justice because he had killed his Indian wife, asked asylum at the convent of the Dominicans and ended up asking for the Dominican habit of the lay brothers. He, who knew so well such injustices by personal experience, informed the friars about the injustices and abuses with great detail and precision.

Confronted with such a degree of submission and oppression of the Indians, the Dominican community dedicated countless hours in meetings to study the problem in depth, until they decided to make a public denouncement of the atrocities. They could not keep silent. “They felt they had an obligation to do so because of the profession they had made.”

They prepared the denouncement in the form of a sermon, to which they gave long and hard deliberation, with the participation of the whole Community. Once they decided on the text and wrote it down, it was signed by each one of the members of the community. Fr. Pedro de Cordoba, who was the vicar, commissioned Fr Antonio Montesinos to preach it at the High Mass on the Fourth Sunday of Advent which was December 21, 1511, just a little more than a year from the day of their arrival at the island.

In spite of the fact, as we have said, that it was a written sermon, the original text was not preserved, but only an extract which, later on, Fr. Bartolome de Las Casas would incorporate in his work on the History of the Indies (Book III, chapter 4), where one can read:

“Sunday arrived and at the time for preaching, Fr Antonio de Montesinos got up in the pulpit and took as the theme for the sermon, which was written and signed by all the other brothers, “Ego sum vox clamantis in deserto”.

“I am the voice of Christ crying in the desert of this island, therefore, it is right that you listen attentively (...) All of you are in mortal sin and in it you live and will die for the cruelty with which you treat these innocent people.

Tell me, by what right or justice do you keep these Indians in such cruel and horrible servitude...? By what authority have you declared such detestable wars on this people who were living, calmly and peacefully on their lands, where you have allowed an infinite number of them to be consumed in their sickness, resulting in death and destruction never heard of before? Through the excessive work you demand of them, they fall ill and die, or rather, you kill them with your desire to extract and acquire gold every day. And what do you care if someone instructs them in the Faith and that they know their God and Creator, are baptized, attend Mass, keep holy days and Sundays? Are these not men? Have they not rational souls? Are you not bound to love them as you love yourselves? This, do you not understand? This, do you not feel? Are you in such a profound sleep that you are lethargic? Be certain that in such a state as you are, you can no more be saved than the Moors or Turks who lack and do not want the Faith of Jesus Christ.”

The key points of the denunciations made by Montesinos in the name of all his community must be understood in the light of judicial practice and can be structured in the following manner:

1. The oppression to which they were submitting the Indians was so grave that it could be compared with the pronouncement of a guilty verdict for some crime committed. Thus it supposes the right of an authority to judge and give sentence, as well as the right to execute it. That is why the brothers would ask: “With what right, with what authority and with what justice does all this happen?”

2. The principal root of the abuse committed against the Indians and, therefore, the fundamental reason for the denunciations, consisted in the lack of acknowledgement of the human dignity of the Indians. And so, the questions: “Are these not persons? Do they not have rational souls?” The other arguments, like the need to evangelize the Indians and baptize them, presuppose the previous ones.

3. The Spaniards, obsessed by the thirst and eagerness for gold, forgot that their Christian responsibility obliges them to love the Indians as they love themselves and to announce the Good News to them, so that they know, love and worship the God of Jesus Christ.

4. It was the community of friars, therefore, who in the name of human dignity and Christian duty, could and must give the following sentence against the colonizers:

- All of you are in mortal sin; in it you live and in it you die.
- In the state you are, you cannot be saved, as your behavior is equal to a lack of faith in Jesus Christ, and you have no desire for it.
- If you continue mistreating the Indians, know for sure that the sins you confess will not receive our absolution.

FOR REFLECTION AND DIALOGUE

1. Pope John Paul II wrote in his encyclical *Redemptor Hominis* that “The name for that deep amazement at man’s worth and dignity is the Gospel, that is to say: the Good News. It is also called Christianity.” Does our being Christian make us sensitive to acknowledge the dignity of every human person and to fulfill the commitment we have to defend the rights that follow from that dignity?
2. In his speech at the General Assembly of the United Nations on the occasion of the celebration of the 60th Anniversary of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, Pope Benedict XVI presented such rights as “the common denominator for all men and for all peoples; a universal guide that all can know and on the basis of which all can understand one another.” This is necessary in our day. Are we familiar with that Declaration and do we do everything we can to spread its message and practice it?
3. In another discourse, this time to the members of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences (May 4, 2009), the Pope emphasized the importance of social rights in calling attention to “one of the most critical social problems in recent decades, as is the growing consciousness - which has arisen, due, to a certain extent, to globalization and the present economic crisis - a glaring contrast between the fair allocation of human rights and the unequal access to the means of achieving those rights. For us, Christians, who regularly ask the Lord to ‘Give us our daily bread’, it is a shameful tragedy that one fifth of humanity go hungry”. Do we acknowledge the importance that social rights have, along with civil and political rights, for an effective respect for the dignity of the human person?
4. What persons around us suffer from the undervaluation of their human dignity and vulnerability in regard to their human rights? Which are the groups most affected? What false arguments are used to justify the unjustifiable? What attitude do we adopt as a group of Dominicans before such atrocities?
5. The first Dominicans who arrived at Hispaniola defended the truth that the Indians had “rational souls”, which in the language of the times, meant their human dignity. Most probably they had learned from St. Thomas that because, “to exist with a rational nature is of the greatest dignity, every rational being is called ‘person’”; therefore “in the very word ‘person’, proper dignity is expressed.” Do we know and cultivate dutifully the tradition of our Order?

3. THE FRIARS OF THE FIRST COMMUNITY

“There is nothing which gives so much liberty of word, nothing which can give so much encouragement in dangers, nothing which can make men stronger, than to possess nothing, not to carry anything with us. Whoever wants to have great strength must embrace poverty, despise this present life, and think that death is nothing. Such a one would be able to do more good for the Church than all the rich and the mighty, much more than those who lord it over everything.”

St. John Chrysostom. Homily II on Priscila and Aquila

We do not know if Bartolome de Las Casas had knowledge of that homily of St. John Chrysostom, but it matters little, because the considerations just quoted constitute part of the common experience and of evangelical wisdom. What is true is that after having referred to the sermon of Montesinos, Bartolome de Las Casas wrote (of the Dominicans) in his History of the Indies: “With his companion he goes to his straw hut, where as fate would have it, they did not have anything to eat, other than some broth made out of some kind of cabbage, without any oil, which sometimes they had.”

Indeed, “as fate would have it”, the sermon of the Dominicans, as one can well imagine, had caused a tremendous commotion and immediately a protest was organized to put pressure upon the Dominicans through the maximum authority of the island. When the governor, Diego Columbus, visited the hut of the Dominicans to threaten them, that if they did not retract their sermon, they could gather their things to embark back to Spain, Pedro de Cordoba was able to respond to him: “Truly, sir, that would not take us very long to do.”

“Thus it was that the possessions of the friars were limited to a handful of things. For house, they had a hut loaned to them by somebody named Pedro Lumbreras. The hut was located in the back of his barn. Their diet usually consisted of cazabi (bread made of roots and of very little substance), cooked cabbage (very often without oil, only with ‘aji’ which is the pepper of the Indians), and some eggs. Now and then a little fish would appear. Their beds were cots made out of branches placed over forked legs, and covered with straw mattresses. Their habits were made of rough material and their tunics were made of badly woven wool. In addition to those things, there were a few utensils to celebrate Mass, and “a few booklets that maybe could be fitted into two trunks”, as Bartolomé de las Casas would later say. Certainly, to organize the return to Spain under these conditions would have not demanded a great effort.

Who were those friars? The Master of the Order, Fr. Tomas de Vio Cayetano, had asked the Provincial of Spain to obtain the required permission from the Crown of Castile, to send 15 missionaries to the “new world”. In September of 1510, as we have said, the first four friars arrived: Fr. Pedro de Cordoba, vicar, Fr. Antonio de Montesinos, already a renowned preacher in Castile, Fr. Bernardo de Santo Domingo, the most learned of all, and Fr. Domingo de Villamayor, a cooperator brother who, shortly after, had to return to Spain. Successively, other friars arrived until the required number was completed.

It is interesting to know, even more than their names, how they understood the mission of the Order and what criteria they used to put it into practice in a situation, which was new, complicated and conflicting. We call attention to two aspects: the environment in which they were formed, and the religious disposition with which they undertook their project of evangelization.

We can easily perceive the type of formation received by those friars if we remember that they were heirs of the spiritual, moral strength of Fr. Juan Hurtado de Mendoza. During the XIV and XV centuries, in part as a consequence of the black plague, religious life had been reduced to a state of laxity and collapse: the so-called “enclosure” practically lost its *raison d’être*. In an effort to re-establish religious life in all its freshness and original meaning, the Dominican Province of Spain had created the Congregation of the Observance, made up of those convents where regular observance and the aims of the Order were lived in all their integrity and purity.

The promoter and soul of the aforementioned reform was, in fact, Fr. Juan Hurtado de Mendoza, a shining and fervent religious, who incarnated the spirit of St. Dominic. For many years he dedicated himself to teaching, as Master of Theology. The last years of his life were given fully to preaching. In his life were met those two essential elements in the mission of the Order which are study and preaching. Among the regular observances, he insisted on poverty, which he considered one of the most authentic signs of religious consecration, and obedience, as the guarantee and expression of fidelity to the communal spirit of the Order.

Fr. Juan established a school and left a splendid legacy in the brothers whom he trained. As his disciples, they maintained with great veneration that which they had learned from their master: strict poverty, perseverance in prayer, constancy in study and zeal in preaching. Among such successors were found the friars who preached the Advent sermon through the mouth of Montesinos.

Such was the formation which generated the religious character which was pulsating in their project of evangelization. The words of Fr. Domingo de San Pedro, Master of Novices in the Convent of St Esteban in Salamanca, when sending off the 40 missionaries who accompanied Fr. Bartolome de Las Casas, as he took possession of the bishopric in Chiapas in 1544, reflect very well the evangelical courage with which the Order made itself present in American lands. He would say to them:

“I am sure, my sons, that I will never see you again, in the first place because my long years bring me very near death, and secondly, because even if I should live many years, I do not think that you are such cowards as to have gone to do battle, where one conquers with perseverance, and then return to the house of your mother.

My heart is wounded with pain on seeing you go, as I have raised all of you from a very early age. I had begun to reap the fruits of my labors on witnessing your profession, your virtue, prudence and learning,.. But on seeing you go, so determined to fulfill the ministry which you professed in the Order of our holy Father, St. Dominic, who is the personification of the Gospel, the good and health of our souls. My soul is full of joy and delight (...) As stalwarts you have begun, as strong ones persevere, as the matter for which you are going is from God and He will always assist you with his grace. Many are the dangers, but greater will be his blessings so that you come out well from them all. Remember our glorious Father, St. Dominic (...)

I do not know if there are heretics or enemies of the Faith of Jesus Christ, our Lord, in the land to which you are going. But, through reliable information, I am certain that in that land there are many who abound in offenses. You are going to contradict them and to oppose their doings (...) and to free the natives, whom they unjustly keep as slaves (...)

You are not coming out of a place where one does not need to fight: you have been training well, as I have seen you doing works of penance and mortification to the point that I have had to ask you for moderation so that you would not exhaust yourselves. Do not forget, I beg you, (...) mainly, holy poverty. Know that you are going into a captivating land where gold and silver trick the senses and make the soul drunk, taking a man out of himself to make him forget the obligations of his state in life. When you received this holy habit, you left behind all that was yours. Do not now desire what is not your own. And he who so liberally gave all he had to God, let him not receive from men what will make him lose his own goods, where thieves cannot enter nor rust erode or destroy.

Let us always hear in this holy house good news about yourselves. And I beg you in the name of all the friars here that you communicate often the adversities you are facing so that through the prayers of your brothers they may be remedied. Let us know as well all your successes so that we can rejoice with you.”

Of this caliber were the friars, who, allowing themselves to be touched by the suffering of the Indians, had the uprightness to give it voice and not to let themselves be intimidated by the interests of the encomenderos who intended to blackmail them through the mouth of the governor.

FOR REFLECTION AND DIALOGUE

1. What are the dangers against which the Master of Novices warns those who are being sent? What motivates his confidence in them? What else captures our attention in his words of farewell?
2. Which are the essential elements of the mission of the Order which we find in the formation and life of the friars of the first Dominican community in America?
3. In the pastoral Constitution, *Gaudium et Spes*, of the Second Vatican Council, the Church says that “The joys and the hopes, the sorrows and anxieties of the people of our time, especially of the poor and those who suffer, are at the same time the joys and hopes, sorrows and anxieties of the disciples of Christ. There is nothing truly human that does not find echo in their hearts”. What aspects of our Dominican tradition enable us to realize that ecclesial sense?
4. The propagation of the Gospel is tested by the conflict with those who abuse others with their injustices, and those who try to free them from the same abuse. Do we cultivate that sensibility in our formation circles, both initial and permanent?

4. THE WRITTEN WORD: THEIR LETTERS

“The first thing is that we do not see how this of way of dealing with the Indians, by the Christian encomendados, can be licit; what is more, we believe it to be against all law, divine, natural and human. It is enough to say that these Indians have been, and are being, destroyed in soul and body and in their posterity.”

Letter to the Hieronymite Comisairs

The “letters” are written reports by the Dominican community, on the situation of the Indians within the system of the encomiendas. In the letters, the Dominicans denounced the bad treatment that the Indians were receiving and the contempt they had toward them. They analyzed the causes, identified those responsible, and proposed specific solutions.

Those documents reflect the experience of the impossibility of announcing the Gospel in a situation of oppression practiced by those who professed to be Christians. It was because of that situation that the friars planned proposals intended to create conditions where respect for the dignity of the Indians would be a prerequisite to the announcing of the Gospel.

According to general opinion, all the letters were written in the same year, as far as we know, 1517. After the death of King Ferdinand V, there was a period of uncertainty and relative dispersion of authority: regents of the Kingdom, with Cardinal Cisneros at the head; the Hieronymite monks commissioned by Cisneros for the matters dealing with the Indies; Xevres, the Chancellor of Carlos I; and the King himself, who though a minor, exercised some duties, together with his mother, Juana.

The letters are the product of a practical spirit, as they were always addressed to those, who, because they held some kind of authority, had certain power to intervene in the matter of the Indies and to remedy the injustice which the Indians suffered, with the speediness which was needed.

In the letters, the friars expressed their opinions respectfully, but without any kind of fear and irrespective of the rank of the person they were addressing, even if it was the King himself. Thus, for example, in the letter addressed to Carlos I, to inform him of the events that were happening in the Indies, Fr. Pedro de Cordoba pointed out to him that in their way of thinking, “In that, is the eternal life of your blessed soul.”

There are five letters which have come down to us. Three of them were endorsed by all the friars of the community, two of which were endorsed by the Franciscans; while the other two were signed only by Fr. Pedro de Cordoba.

Given the fact that it is not possible to reproduce here the letters in their entirety, we present here their most important contents, trying to organize them by themes.

The friars proceeded to denounce the abuses suffered by the Indians, such as the contempt and scorn shown for their lives, as well as by the theft of their properties and the exploitation of their work, which must have created situations so humiliating for the Indians as to lead them to choose suicide, abortion and infanticide.

CONTEMPT AND THEFT

“Dogs are considered with more respect and thought to be of more value than the Indians.” “The reasons for killing such a great number of people were these: one, that all those who came through here believed that because these people are without faith, they could kill them indifferently, capture them, take their lands, possessions and dominions, their nobility and all their things. All that never touched their conscience in the least. Another reason was that the Indians were tranquil, peaceful and without arms. Added to these reasons was the fact that those who came through here, or the majority of them, were the scum of Spain, greedy, and robbers”.

Letter to Chancellor Xevres

EXPLOITATION IN WORK

“Making them do hard labor all day, suffering from the burning heat of the sun, which in these lands is very strong, from the rain, winds, tempests; barefooted and naked with only animal skin, perspiring under the weight of the work, having no place to sleep at night other than the bare floor, without food or drink to sustain life; even those without work were killed by starvation and thirst, and in their sickness they were considered much, much less than the beasts they have, as those they have are given medical treatment, but not the Indians”.

Letter to the King

CONSEQUENCES: SUICIDES, ABORTIONS, INFANTICIDES

“Because of these atrocities and hard labors, the Indians themselves would choose and have chosen to kill themselves, preferring death rather than having to face such unaccustomed work.” The women, exhausted from the work, have avoided conceiving and giving birth (pregnancy and childbirth would not excuse them from the work and would have added to their suffering); while many other women who were pregnant have taken something to induce labor and have aborted the babies; and others, after having given birth, have caused the death of their own children with their own hands in order not to subject them to such harsh servitude.”

Letter to the King

Through their letters the friars tried, on the other hand, to confront the various authorities with their own responsibility.

“As your reverences are very religious persons, learned, fearful of your consciences... I ask your reverences and beg you to remember how great and dangerous is this business which has now been placed in your hands. It must be one thing or the other. Do something so that the perpetual anguish, of that which after it has been done cannot be put right, does not remain on your consciences.”

Letter to the Hieronymite Comisairs

“Your Highness must know what is happening, for the eternal life of your blessed soul can depend on it. The life of grace and the salvation of Your Highness are not secure, if knowing about so much wrong being done, you do not remedy the situation so that this people can live in freedom.”

Carta al Rey

“In your hands is the yes or no towards the well-being of these kingdoms.”

Letter to Chancellor Xevres

Finally, they pointed to measures expected to offer a remedy for that situation:

a. The total and immediate suppression of the encomiendas, in such a way that the Indians “will not serve even the King”.

(Letter to the Regents)

b. The restitution of their properties by the encomenderos, as “everything a Christian here has, or has acquired, has come from the entrails, sweat and blood of the Indians.”

(Letter to the Regents)

c. Help for the Indians to regain their health so that “they can procreate” (Letter to the Hieronymite Comisairs) and “and not become extinct.” (Letter to the Regents)

d. Also “being in extreme need they must be provided for with the goods of the King, if it is necessary.”

(Letter to the Regents)

THE SUPPRESSION OF THE ENCOMIENDAS

“We think that they (the Indians) must be released from the power of the Christians and set free (...) Allow them to go to their settlements and do not entrust them to the Christians, because even though they will not gain anything for their souls by this, they would be better off and it would be a lesser evil, to have, at least, human life and natural procreation, than to lose everything. Then there would be opportunity for the friars to walk among them, teaching and preaching, which is not possible now”.

(Letter to the Hieronymite Comisairs)

In short, what was intended at the moment was to stop that system, return what had been stolen and secure the material well-being of the Indians with all the economic means available. Afterwards, “Time will tell if something else can be done”. (Letter to the Regents)

It seems that when he saw the accusations of the abuses committed and the impossibility of controlling the behavior of the conquistadores, encomenderos and slave merchants, Carlos I began to think about the possibility of abandoning the lands incorporated into the Crown, which, in the end, did not take place. What would have happened in that case is “ flour of another sack.”

FOR REFLECTION AND DIALOGUE

1. Much of our social, political and economic analysis is lost in abstractions, attributing responsibilities to the system, the structure... Certainly, they are important, as the “structures of sin” “grow stronger, spread, and become the source of other sins, and so influence people’s behavior”, but it is no less true that such structures, “are rooted in personal sin, and thus always linked to the concrete acts of individuals who introduce these structures, consolidate them and make them difficult to remove.” (John Paul II - *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, 36) Do we have the courage to identify and point out the personal responsibilities which bear upon the violations of human rights?

2. The friars declared, in support of the Indians, that if it was necessary, even the goods of the King should be used in their service. Let us point out, as we said before, that the friars had learned from the Fathers of the Church and from St Thomas that, as he wrote in the *Summa Theologica*, “According to the natural order instituted by divine providence, all things have been created for man. It follows that each man has the right to what is necessary for him. For this reason, the superfluous goods that some people possess, are owed by natural right to the sustenance of the poor.” Do we have a correct understanding of the tradition of the Church and its social teaching, and do we identify ourselves with it?

3. It is always true that serious uncertainties and risks of error weigh heavily over proposals for concrete solutions. But, “accusation without announcement, the identification of problems without offering alternatives,” is the very thing that Pope John XXIII called “prophets of misfortune”. Do we have the courage to propose solutions and to act on these with proper discernment? Do we dare answer in the affirmative?

4. Christian salvation is universal and total, and is directed, as Pope Paul VI pointed out, “to all men and to each man” (*Populorum progressio*, 14) which includes the conditions of health, education, food, shelter, clothing, etc. Does our apostolic work incur diminishment of any kind? Do we reject, with equal vehemence, spiritualism, as we do materialism?

5. THE PROJECT OF PEACEFUL EVANGELIZATION

“They (the Indians) were such calm and peaceful people, so obedient and so good that if the preachers would enter alone, without the force and violence of those low-minded Christians, I think that one could found a church with them almost as excellent as the primitive Church.”

Letter of Fr. Pedro de Cordoba to the King

Convinced, on the one hand, of the impossibility of announcing the Gospel in a system of oppression and contempt and, on the other hand, trusting in the power of the Word and in the good treatment of the Indians, Fr. Pedro de Cordoba worked diligently to obtain a land free of the presence of soldiers and of the encomenderos, or as he would say, “a land where the Christians do not scandalize or stir up the Indians.”

In a letter addressed to Fr. Bartolome de Las Casas at one of the times when he was in Spain, Fr. Pedro de Cordoba pressed him to do all he could in order to obtain such a royal concession. King Ferdinand granted the petition by giving them the region of Piritu, on the coast of the Pearls (Venezuela). In 1514, Fr. Pedro was able to get his project of a peaceful evangelization underway by sending Fr. Antonio de Montesinos, Fr. Francisco de Cordoba and Fr. Julian Garces, the encomendero who had become a cooperator brother. Montesinos fell ill during their trip and had to remain in Puerto Rico.

IN SEARCH OF THE CONCESSION

“...I worked hard to obtain a hundred leagues of *terra firma* with the people of Cumaná. With the prohibition of the King and grave punishment if any Spaniard dared enter there, they must leave that land alone, where only the Dominican and Franciscan friars would preach.”

Letter of Fr. Pedro de Cordoba

A PROMISING EXPERIENCE

“From what I know, in the place where the monastery is, the friars had the Indians as catechumens and many children were baptized. The adults are baptized only when they are in danger of death. This witness (Fr. Pedro de Cordoba) knows that in Cumana there were some adults who had been baptized and received the sacrament of marriage.”

Report to the Hieronymite Comisairs

The experience was promising and the friars were very optimistic and hopeful, dedicating body and soul to their new apostolic work. Sadly, despite the ban set by the King, a group of Spaniards looking for divers to collect pearls at the bottom of the sea, entered within the limits of the mission around 1516; they kidnapped the Chief, Alonso, whom the friars knew and had baptized in the city of Santo Domingo. Sixteen other Indians were also kidnapped. The Indians took revenge by killing the friars since they thought that they had connived with the kidnappers.

Fr. Pedro de Cordoba was so convinced of the possibility and potentials of a peaceful evangelization that he did not feel defeated and decided to repeat the experience, sending new friars to the north of Venezuela. This time the Franciscans accompanied them. But another failure took place in 1520, when the missionaries were killed in reaction to the capture of natives from the mission, who were to be sold as slaves in Santo Domingo. The death of the friars had a double lesson: while the colonizers maintained that, in view of their malice, the Indians should only be treated by force, the Dominicans understood the reaction of the Indians as the result of a provocation and, in fact, they did not weaken in their missionary dedication.

Fr. Pedro de Cordoba died a few months after this second failure, at the age of 39. There is no doubt that one of the causes for his untimely death was the deep impact which the fate of his brothers provoked in him, as well as the “knocking out the bottom” of the hope he had placed in the viability of a peaceful evangelization.

It was Friar Bartolome de Las Casas who did succeed in getting under way the peaceful evangelization project. He did so in Vera Paz (Guatemala), also called Tezulutlan which, curiously, means “land of war”.

We offer here a summary of the entry into Tezulutlan, which was later related by Fr. Antonio Remesal.

“In Santiago de Guatemala and in El Salvador the conquistadores would laugh at the book De Unico Vocationis Modo by Fr. Bartolome de Las Casas and say that if “with words and persuasions” he was bringing the Indians under the control of the Church and he was putting into practice what he wrote in rhetoric, they would drop their weapons and be considered unjust soldiers and captains. They would ask them (the friars) why they didn’t go to the brave Indians in Tezulutlan with only “words and holy exhortations”.

Friar Bartolome de Las Casas offered to control the Indians without arms or soldiers but, only with the Word of God. He put forth one condition: that the Indians were not to entrust themselves to anyone and that they would be free vassals of His Majesty.

The friars wrote verses in Quiche telling the story of the creation of the world, the fall of man, the exile from paradise, the deluge, the death of the Son of God and his resurrection. Using the sounds of the instruments of the Indians, they put music to the verses and taught them to four Indians from Guatemala who did commerce with the Indians from Quiche.

When the merchants arrived at the town’s plaza where the Chief lived, they opened shop and people came to see and buy the new merchandise. The traders began to sing the poems. The people were all surprised as they had never heard anyone tell those stories. The Chief was silent, waiting to hear them again. The songs went on for eight days. The Chief asked them to explain to him what they were singing. They told him that they did not know more, but that the friars would be able to explain it to him. “And who are the friars?” he asked. The merchants described them as dressed in black and white, with their hair in a tonsure; that they did not eat meat, nor did they want gold, nor cloths, nor feathers, nor cocoa; that they were not married nor did they have sin because they did not deal with women; that they sang the praises of God day and night. And that, if they send for them, they would gladly come and explain to him what they had sung in the verses.

The Chief sent one of his brothers along with the merchants to Santiago, and asked him to observe the friars carefully and to look well to see if they had gold. When the Chief's brother reached the friars house, he observed, in silence, everything they were doing. He returned to his land with Fr. Luis Cancer.

The Chief had great parties for him with garlands and triumphal arches. As a sign of respect he would not dare to look him in the face. As Fr. Cancer was barefooted, they would sweep the ground he walked on. The Chief tore down his idols and burned them. They stopped sacrificing peacocks. And every evening they would sing the songs the friars had written.

The rains had stopped and Fr. Bartolome de Las Casas went also, to Tezulutlan, the "land of war".

In support of the historicity of the account we must indicate that the songs referred to in the summary have been found in a manuscript of the XVI century in k'ekchi. Five centuries later, the memory of those first Dominican friars continues to live among the natives of Vera Paz. When in 1955 the Dominicans took charge again of the parish of Rabinal (Baja Vera Paz), the persons responsible for the Guilds of the parish went to greet them and in the course of their conversation asked the friars if they were "the friars of the Virgin", of Fr. Las Casas. The friars responded yes, that they were Dominican friars, the men of the Rosary, of the same Order of Fr. Las Casas, Fr. Angulo and their companions. The next day the members of the Guild returned with a beautiful silver ostensoria!! Full of symbolism, at the base was a small statue of St. Thomas Aquinas, the singer of the Eucharist, with his arms raised holding the luna. They explained: "When you were expelled (at the time of the independence) you left this ostensoria, which we have kept. Now that you have come back we are returning it to you."

Apart from all that has been said, it is interesting to realize that in contrast with what happened in other places, in the areas of America which were evangelized by the Dominicans (Oaxaca and Chiapas in Mexico; Vera Paz and Quiche in Guatemala; Pasco in Colombia; Alto in Peru; Ecuador and Bolivia) the majority of the population is not only still native, but have also retained their culture, their language, their customs and their organizational traditions. This demonstrates that the evangelization that the Dominicans set up was not to be mistaken with the acculturation of the natives, that is, to implant the culture of Castile upon the Indians, but that it consisted in the true inculturation of the Gospel.

FOR REFLECTION AND DIALOGUE

1. The missionary impulse was central to St. Dominic's religious experience and belongs to the heart of the Order. How is your community, group or movement doing with regard to this?
2. Pope Paul VI encouraged the evangelization of cultures, but without forgetting that the Gospel is independent in regard to them: "Though independent of cultures, the Gospel and evangelization are not necessarily incompatible with them; rather they are capable of permeating them all without becoming subject to any one of them". "Evangelization loses much of its force and effectiveness if it does not take into consideration the actual people to whom it is addressed, if it does not use their language, their signs and symbols, if it does not answer the questions they ask, and if it does not have an impact on their concrete life". (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 20, 63) How must we evaluate our evangelization from that point of view?
3. In that same apostolic exhortation Pope Paul VI said that "Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers it is because they are witnesses." (41) How are we doing with our coherence of word and life?
4. Are our projects of evangelization imbued with a peaceful, tolerant disposition and open to dialogue? Do we cultivate a listening attitude?

6. LAS CASAS: FROM CLERIC ENCOMENDERO TO DOMINICAN FRIAR

“In the Indies, I have left Jesus Christ, our God, beaten and afflicted, mocked and crucified, not only once but millions of times, by the Spaniards who devastate and destroy those peoples and take away their capacity for conversion and penance. They take their life and cause their premature death. Thus, they die without faith and the Sacraments.”

Fr. Bartolome de Las Casas - Historia de las Indias

The cleric, Bartolome de Las Casas had an encomienda for the Indians in Hispaniola. When he accompanied Diego de Velasquez as chaplain, in the conquest of Cuba, he received another encomienda. At a decisive moment Pedro de Renteria, socius of Las Casas, became convinced that the system of the encomiendas was unjust and decided to abandon it, setting the Indians free so that he might become a Carthusian. This decision of Pedro de Renteria had a strong influence on Las Casas. In addition, two things still weighed heavily upon him: the sermon of Montesinos and the fact that he had been denied absolution when he went to confession at the convent of the Dominicans in Santo Domingo.

Bartolome de Las Casas was finally convinced of the injustice of the encomiendas. The “drop that made the glass overflow” was a text from the Bible. In April of 1514, some Spaniards asked him to celebrate the Eucharist and to preach to them. As he prepared the readings for the day, one of them struck his conscience with tremendous harshness. The text that spoke to him was from the Book of Ecclesiasticus: “Offering a sacrifice from the property of the poor is as bad as slaughtering a son before his father’s very eyes. A meager diet is the very life of the poor; he who withholds it is a man of blood. A man murders his neighbor if he robs him of his livelihood, sheds blood if he withholds an employee’s wages.” (34:20-22) That day the priest did not dare to celebrate Mass. He had discovered that the bread that he was about to offer to God had been stolen from the Indians. Subsequently, the sermons by Fr. Bernardo de Santo Domingo would make his “whole body tremble”.

From then on, Las Casas dedicated all his strength and abilities, which were many, to find a remedy for the wrongs being done and causing so much suffering to the Indians. He traveled to Castile and had an interview with King Ferdinand V. Full of good will he made agreements and promises, signing with the King a capitulation in which a land free of soldiers and encomenderos was given to him, where he would implant a colony of “good” Spaniards who would live in contact with the Indians without having them as encomendados. The Indians, inspired by the good example of the Spaniards, would then embrace the faith and the customs of Castile.

THE LAUGHING STOCK

“The Spaniards, who knew him well from La Vega, would make fun of Las Casas and the new gentlemen with their crosses. Las Casas felt very much ashamed, and the truths that were being said about him pained him.”

“God, Our Lord, has awakened the spirit of a cleric, called Bartolome de Las Casas, who with much zeal, before the death of King Ferdinand, went to Spain to inform him of all these things and ask him for the remedy for them. After the King’s death he negotiated about the same situation with the Rev. Cardinal, Governor of Your Highness, and returned here with the remedy given to him, which has satisfied neither him, nor us. Now, he returns there again with the thought of seeing Your Highness and giving you an account of everything here. I send him as a person of virtue and truth.”

Letter of Fr. Pedro de Cordoba to the King

The new encomienda began to function with 50 farmers from Castile, chosen by Las Casas himself. They came dressed in white with a golden cross on their chests so that the natives could distinguish them from the bad Spaniards. The project failed completely and its promoter became the laughing stock of the whole world. However, this failure led him to a second conversion, because it made him understand that the oppression under which the Indians were living could not be resolved with remedies nor with volunteer reformists: it was necessary to change the entire system from its very foundations. It was then that he came in closer contact with the Dominicans, who advised him to continue the fight by other means. Fr. Pedro de Cordoba introduced him to the authorities of Castile, and for some time, Las Casas served as a bond between the friars and the decision-making centers of the Kingdom.

In 1522, a year after the death of Fr. Pedro de Cordoba, Las Casas requested the Dominican habit and was accepted in the convent of the Dominicans. Even though he was a cleric and a lawyer, the Order required that he be completely dedicated to study and prayer, and in order to do that he would need to renounce all travel and to keep silence, which meant no writing or preaching. One can understand that for that extrovert and passionate soul, this period of study and prayer was very arduous, as he himself would later recount.

It was, however, a most fruitful time of Dominican formation during which Las Casas came to understand the project of Fr. Pedro de Cordoba and of his community, making it entirely his. At the end of that period, he published *De unico vocationis modo omnium gentium ad veran religionem*, which is precisely the exposition of the rationale behind the method of evangelization recommended by the Dominican community.

An extract from the dedication to Prince Philip of his book, Apologia de los Indios contra Sepulveda (1555), gives us the extent of the measure of the human and Christian caliber of that friar:

“Conscious that I am a Christian, a friar, a bishop, a Spaniard, and a subject of the Kings of Spain, I have not been able to do any less than to give free reign to my pen in defense of the truth, in reverence for the house of God and a greater respect for the Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ, so as to erase the opprobrium that weighs upon the name of Christian, remove the impediments and obstacles which are in opposition to the propagation of the evangelical faith and, to spread the truth that, in baptism, I pledged to profess, that I learned in my Order and finally, though as a most unworthy bishop, I have affirmed.

Armed with all these titles, I am willing to put up a wall against the impious, in defense of that most innocent people whom we must soon introduce into the house of God, which rapacious wolves persecute unceasingly.

I feel obliged also, as I publicly and solemnly promised until death, to close the way to the road through which so many thousands of mortals are being dragged to eternal perdition and, to defend my sheep against the wolves, ecclesiastic and lay, who barge into my fold.

I want to erase the horrible and infamous crimes, that my people, that is the Spaniards, have committed in these last few years, against human rights and justice, so that in doing so, the ignominy contracted by those very acts might vanish before all the nations of the earth.”

The influence exerted by Fr. Bartolome de Las Casas in all the circles which had connections with the Indies, was enormous.

1. He kept the problem of the conquest alive in court, as well as in the Council of the Indies, the center where the decisions were made.
2. Through his writings and polemics, Las Casas brought about that the aspects of the conquest and colonization, in relation to ethics and the law, were taken into consideration.

BARTOLOME DE LAS CASAS

“Few lives such as yours, man gives,
few shades are on the tree as yours,
in it all the living sentiments of the continent go,
all the broken conditions,
the wound of the mutilated,
the exterminated villages,
everything under your shade is reborn,
from the extremes
of agony you create hope.”

Pablo Neruda, Canto General

3. His famous controversy with Sepulveda in Valladolid, had a special effect because, thanks to it the religious, moral, legal and sovereignty problems raised in the Indies, made their entrance into the universities. It was sponsored and directed by the Masters of Theology and Law from Salamanca, among which were found Dominicans, Fr. Melchior Cano and Fr. Domingo de Soto.
4. Las Casas exercised a decisive influence in the elaboration of the New Laws of the Indies (1542). And, from then on, as Mr. Bataillon points out, “There is no viceroy, listener or bishop who does not hold the opinion of Las Casas”.

In effect, the publication of the New Laws was supported by the Crown in the naming of a group of heroic bishops. Enrique Dussel writes in his History of the Church in Latin America, Colonization and Liberation (1491-1983):

“They are: Bartolome de Las Casas, bishop of Chiapas (1544-47), Antonio de Valdivieso, of Nicaragua (1544-1550), Cristobal de Pedraza of Honduras (1545-1583), Pablo de Torres of Panama (1547-54), Juan del Valle, of Popayan (1548-63), Fernando de Uranga of Cuba (1552-56), Tomas de Casillas of Chiapas (1552-97), Bernardo de Alburquerque of Oaxaca (1559-79), Pedro de Angulo of Vera Paz (1560-62), Pedro de Agreda of Coro (1560-80), Juan de Simancas of Cartagena (1560-70), Domingo de Santo Tomas of La Plata (1563-70), Pedro de la Pena of Quito (1666-83), and Agustin de la Coruna of Popayan (1565-90). These bishops risked everything: they were committed even to failure; were expelled from their dioceses, imprisoned, expatriated and suffered death for the Indians... The idealists - if we may use the expression - of the liberation of the Indians were the theologians of the Convent of San Esteban in Salamanca. That is why only three of the bishops mentioned above were not Dominicans.”

FOR REFLECTION AND DIALOGUE

1. Some verses from the Book of Ecclesiastes penetrated the heart of Bartolome de Las Casas like a double-edged sword. What is the quality of our contemplation?
2. Are we good at self-criticism? Do we take seriously the continuous need of conversion to be the Dominican God has called us to be? Do we revise and evaluate regularly the dynamics and practices of our groups?
3. At the roots of the apostolic mission of the Order is found a spirituality of compassion, the same compassion that moved Jesus of Nazareth, Dominic de Guzman, Bartolome de Las Casas... Do we have a heart full of mercy for all human misery?
4. In the poem of his book, Canto General, dedicated to Fr Bartolome de Las Casas, Pablo Nerunda writes with good reason: “Battle after battle your hope became precision tools: the solitary struggle became branch, the useless crying gathered in a team.” Do we rise above mere “assist-ism”, that our commitment to the poor might have a transforming social impact? Do we surpass capitalism and join our forces to those of other men and women of good will?

7. STUDY IN THE MISSION OF THE FIRST COMMUNITY

“We cried as we saw the native’s goodwill to learn, knowing how many good friars in Castile are idle and how we could very easily keep them busy here. Their life is being lost there. They are well-prepared instruments for salvation, but they do not have full understanding of the true meaning of salvation.”

Fr. Tomas de la Torre - Diary

During all of the XVI century **the Order promoted in America, a most impressive number of institutions of learning**, which, without doubt, demonstrates the importance that the friars gave to the element of study within the life and mission of the Order.

Besides being places of culture, prayer and preaching, **the convents were also centers for study**. In each house there was a lector, who was in charge of setting up the program of studies for the community. Daily, they had a “colacion” which was a meeting to analyze and study their situation in order to discern what would be the best method to use in their preaching. It was precisely in this way that the sermon of Montesinos was generated and elaborated.

The Studium Generale was the center where young Dominicans were formed. It was also open to the laity. As Fr. Vicente Beltran de Heredia relates: “The teaching and scholarship of the brothers was up to par with the academic level needed to obtain credits. However, it was not mainly to get a degree that the brothers studied, but rather for the purpose of obtaining the proper and necessary academic training. The degrees were conferred by the university once it was proven that the brothers had done the required studies in their centers or in the officially recognized centers of General Studies.”

THE SCHOOL OF FR. PEDRO DE CORDOBA

Fr. Pedro de Cordoba, during his trip to Spain to defend the doctrine in the sermon of Montesinos, asked Ferdinand V to establish a school in the city of Seville, in collaboration with the bishop of that city, Diego de Deza, who was also a Dominican, where young people brought from Hispaniola would be educated together with children from Spain. King Ferdinand not only approved of the idea, but ordered Diego Columbus, then governor of the island, to permit the Dominicans to bring 15 young boys to Spain to study in Seville.

Fr Antonio del Remesal.

The first university of the American continent, known today as the Universidad Autonoma de Santo Domingo, in the Dominican Republic, is the successor of the Universidad de Santo Tomas Aquino, which was the name given to the Studium Generale at the Convent of Saint Dominic in Hispaniola, when, in 1538, it became a university institution by the Bull *In Apostolatus Culmine* of Pope Paul III.

Study was understood and practiced by the friars for its role in preaching. The objective of intellectual activity did not consist in producing erudite brothers, for whom gaining knowledge became the reason for study, rather the friars understood clearly that they did not want to spend their “life preparing instruments of salvation without understanding it,” as Fr. Tomas de la Torre said, who had been prior and Professor of Logic in the Convent of Salamanca and later was companion to Bartholome de Las Casas in Chiapas. The *raison d’être* of study consisted in the deepening of the evangelical message and in the analysis of the reality lived by the people in order to announce the Word of God to them as Good News for all.

We can summon up **the method of study** of those Dominicans by pointing out that the purpose of their method was “to unite the ‘right’ with the ‘deed’.” For them it was of vital importance to take, systematically, into account the context of preaching, the experience and “the closeness of the situations, because he who does not deal with what we are dealing, cannot understand completely this method as we know it.” Fr. Tomas de la Torre.

It was that method of study, open to immediate situations and at the same time observing suffering human faces, which **allowed them to question the principles accepted by some traditions** and by reason of which the conquest and colonization were justified, such as the right of the Pope to donate the “new world” to the Crown of Castile, the authority of the Christian prince over lands of the pagans, or of the legitimacy of the “pacification”, that is, of reducing people to submission, by whatever means necessary, including violence, as methods of Christianization.

Besides, the Dominican missionaries in America kept in **regular contact with their brothers in Salamanca, Valladolid y Alcalá who were teachers at the university** and who studied with attention and seriousness the problems encountered by their brothers in the new world in their apostolic praxis. In fact, they contributed greatly with their proposals for solutions to the problems.

Before the arrival of the Spaniards to those lands, “the Indians were in peaceful possession of their goods, public and private; so if the contrary is not proven, they must be considered as owners or lords (...) The right to possession (of property) is founded on the image of God (...) Man is the image of God by his very nature, that is, his rational potencies. It is clear that is it not licit to rob them of their goods, nor the Moslems, nor the Jews, nor any of the infidels. Undoubtedly, it would be theft, to live off what one has stolen, no less than if that had been done to a Christian.”

Fr. Francisco de Vitoria, *De Indis*

Outstanding in that sense was **the contribution of Fr. Francisco de Vitoria**, who was in charge of the Theology Department at the University of Salamanca. It was customary that the extraordinary lessons, called “relecciones”, consisted in commentaries on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard. Fr. Francisco de Vitoria had the courage to change the method in order to give preference to the experiences and problems which the Dominican missionaries in America shared with him. In that way, he began to address the situation of the Indians and the power of the Pope and of the Emperor. This entitles him to a greater recognition as precursor of human rights and founder of what was then called “the right of the people,” the “international right” of modern times.

So it was, while occupying the Chair of Theology, that Fr. Francisco de Vitoria pronounced, in 1539, **the two “relecciones” called De Indis**, about the Indians, in which, relying on the thought of St Thomas, he vehemently maintained, among other things, the following:

“The Emperor is not the Lord of the Globe (...) By natural right men are free (...) So then, there is no one who has the right to be Lord of all the Globe (...) And even supposing that he was the Lord of all the Globe, the Emperor cannot occupy the lands of the Indians nor can he depose their lords by naming others in their place.

The Pope is not the temporal Lord of all the Globe (...) The Pope has no temporal power over the Indians, nor over any of the infidels (...) Here this corollary can be proved: even though the Indians do not want to recognize any authority of the Pope, war cannot be declared on them for that reason, nor can we occupy their lands (...) The Indians are not obliged to believe in the religion of the Christians nor in the authority of the Pope, and not in the power of the Emperor either.”

FOR REFLECTION AND DIALOGUE

1. Do we attribute to the cultivation of study, formal or informal, the vital importance that is acknowledged in our Dominican tradition?
2. Do we know how to bring about the methodical and thematic changes that might be necessary to make the historic experiences and vital situations of our contemporaries perceptible?
3. In a relatively recent interview, Fr. Gustavo Gutierrez lamented the fact that “so many faculties think of theology as a religious metaphysics, not as a historic announcement of liberation.” Are we sure that our study and our teaching do not incur this deceitful secular trap? Do we dedicate ourselves “to prepare instruments of salvation without understanding what salvation is about?”
4. Do we study and teach with the clarity and honesty that allows us to unveil and criticize the dominant ideologies?

8. THE LEGACY OF THE FIRST DOMINICAN COMMUNITY IN AMERICA

“Every brother, community and province must assume the defense of the poor and suffering, realizing that his Dominican vocation is at stake. (...) It is not simply a question of a moral view, but our very faith in the God of Jesus Christ. This is why we are called to preach justice.”

Acts of the General Chapter of Mexico

Throughout the first seven chapters we have tried to examine certain elements of the life of the first Dominicans in America. Having represented a true incarnation of the evangelical ideal and of the charism of the Order, they give us reason for legitimate pride, but also the occasion to question ourselves. Because of this we cannot do less than painfully acknowledge that we have not always, by any means, reached the heights of our Christian and Dominican vocation. It is true that, at present, we do not perpetuate these historic failures, but neither can we consider ourselves exempt from the need to revise, in depth, our forms of life, patterns of thought, and apostolic practices.

“Lamentably, after the first generations, the majority of our communities conformed themselves to the colonial system: they themselves became the owners of large extensions of land, had slaves in their service, and they allied themselves to the interests of the dominant class.”

Acts of the General Chapter in Mexico

Now we will allow the friars gathered at the **General Chapter of Mexico (1992)**, to re-echo their document, *On the Fifth Centenary*, which, in our judgment, retains its validity even today.

THEN

“ ‘Aren’t they human too?’ was the cry left to us some five hundred years ago by Antonio de Montesinos, looking at the way the Indians were treated. This cry still echoes today. 1492 is in fact the symbol of a historical process which continues to this day. This process, in the beginning went far beyond the intentions of individuals. This historical process also goes beyond Spain: England was in North America as soon as 1497; France was there in 1534; and Portugal was in Brazil from 1500 on. Germany was in Venezuela in 1528... 1492 was nothing less than a re-organization of the world as a new reality.”

TODAY

“...the indigenous, through the last few decades, have been , and continue to be the object of a destruction more or less systematic (...) The black people are many times the object of violent discrimination, as are also the masses of people in rural and urban areas (...) Racism denies human equality to the other. Immigrants are the object of scorn and violence (...) Millions of refugees are herded into camps, living almost always in inhuman condition (...) Everywhere the primacy of the economy is imposed. Money is the god which makes inequality grow and engenders violence and repression.”

The celebration of the memory of our brothers urges us to appeal to the conscience of all human beings, and especially of Christians. This obliges us to renew, without compromise, our vocation as Dominican brothers and sisters, and also to put our theology at the service of the dignity of all people, especially those to whom it has been denied.

ALL HUMAN BEINGS

“The foundations of the world’s economic and political system were set up in the XV and XVI centuries. This system is based on inequality and exploitation. At the beginning of the colonization, this had dramatic effects, producing death for the indigenous and the Africans. Today when the economic structures of our world reduce so many people to misery and lead them to violence, how can we not challenge such a system?”

CHRISTIANS

“...There are yet too many committed Christians who embrace the predominant concepts of the wealthy Nations, with very little sensitivity in their practices toward the cry of the poor, the lame and the exploited, and less attentiveness to the consequences this presents in regard to the future of humanity. This is contrary to the preferential option for the poor proclaimed by the Church of Jesus Christ himself... Mt: 25: 31-46”).

DOMINICANS

“Montesinos raised a major evangelical question: ‘Aren’t they human, too?’ He was able to ask this question because our brothers had heard the cry of the oppressed. Can our communities allow themselves to be disturbed by the multiple cries of today to the point where they too proclaim this question wherever it needs to be asked? Are our communities ready to take the risk together of speaking a prophetic word which can open the eyes of the blind? Are they ready to take a public stand in a prophetic manner that can bring people to a choice for solidarity with the oppressed?”

OUR THEOLOGY

“In Spain, there arose an extraordinary movement of intellectual, philosophical, juridical and theological thought (Fr. Vitoria) leading to profound public debate regarding these questions. In this way they contributed to establishing the fundamentals of human rights of peoples and of communities, in addition to the morality of international relationships (...) How can we, today, put our theological work, with all its exigencies of seriousness and competence, at the service of the human dignity of the poor and marginalized, thus honoring the memory of the work of our predecessors? “

FOR REFLECTION AND DIALOGUE

The above quoted extracts from the Acts of the General Chapter of México could be used as guiding questions for Reflection and dialogue.

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