



July 17

Commemoration:

Bartholomé de Las Casas, missionary to the Indies, 1566

Las Casas was born in Seville in 1484. He studied both theology and law at the University of Salamanca.

As a reward for his participation in various expeditions, Las Casas left for Hispaniola in 1502. He was given an encomienda, a royal land

grant populated with native peoples of the Indies. He soon began to evangelize them; he was ordained priest in 1510 at Santo Domingo.

On December of 1511, the Dominican Antonio de Montesinos preached a fiery sermon implicating the colonists in the genocide of the native Indians. Las Casas gave up his rights to the encomienda and in his own preaching urged other Spanish colonists should do likewise. Continuing his demand for change, he returned to Spain in 1515 to plead for justice from the Spanish government. The powerful archbishop of Toledo, who named him “Protector of the Indies,” took up his cause.

His passionate defense of the Indians before the Spanish Parliament persuaded the emperor, Charles V, to accept Las Casas’s project of founding “towns of free Indians”: communities of both Spaniards and Indians who would jointly create a new civilization in America. The location selected for the new colony was in the northern part of present-day Venezuela. Although the initial attempts were a bitter failure, Las Casas’s work seemed to be crowned with success when Charles V signed the so-called New Laws (1542), that required the Spanish colonists to set free the Indians after the span of a single generation. Las Casas renounced his bishopric of Chiapas, Mexico, returned to Spain in 1547, and became a prolific writer. His *A Brief Account of the Destruction of the Indies* (1552), exposes the oppression inflicted upon the peoples of the Indies. Although filled with inaccuracies, it is his most famous work.

Las Casas lived his convictions with such zeal that he often seemed intolerant of others, but is remembered as a tireless advocate for justice for those oppressed by colonialism. Las Casas died in Madrid on July 18, 1566.