

THE DESTRUCTION OF THE INDIES

Bartolomé de las Casas (1474–1566)

to Felipe (1527–1598), Prince of Asturias

c. 1550

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

It is seemingly this that the divine Scriptures mean in the Proverbs of Solomon, *qui sedet in solio indieii, dissipat omne malum intuitu suo*:¹ because it is thus assumed from the innate and peculiar virtue of the king; namely, that the knowledge alone of evil in his kingdom is absolutely sufficient that he should destroy it; and that not for one moment, as far as in him lies, can he tolerate it.

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

When some of their particular actions are made known to Your Highness, it will not be possible to forbear supplicating His Majesty² with importunate insistence that he should not concede nor permit that which the tyrants have invented, pursued, and put into execution, calling it conquests; which if permitted, will be repeated because these acts in themselves, done against those pacific, humble, and mild Indian people, who offend none, are iniquitous, tyrannous, condemned and cursed by every natural, divine, and human law.

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

Although the Archbishop of Toledo,³ Your Highness' Preceptor, when Bishop of Cartagena, asked me for them and presented them to Your Highness, nevertheless, because of the long journeys by sea and land Your Highness has made, and of the continual royal occupations, it may be that Your Highness either has not read them or has already forgotten them.

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

¹ Proverbs 20:8

² Charles V

³ Juan Martínez Silíceo (1486–1557), Bishop of Cartagena (1541–1546) and Archbishop of Toledo (1546–1557)

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

Having seen and understood the monstrous injustice done to these innocent people in destroying and outraging them, without cause or just motive, but out of avarice alone, and the ambition of those who design such villainous operations, may Your Highness be pleased to supplicate and efficaciously persuade His Majesty to forbid such harmful and detestable practices to those who seek license for them: may he silence this infernal demand for ever, with so much terror, that from this time forward there shall be no one so audacious as to dare but to name it. This—Most High Lord—is most fitting and necessary to do, that God may prosper, preserve, and render blessed, both temporally and spiritually, all the state of the royal crown of Castile. Amen.

Short Report of the Destruction of the Indies

The Indies were discovered in the year 1492. The year following, Spanish Christians went to inhabit them, so that it is since 49 years that numbers of Spaniards have gone there: and the first land that they invaded to inhabit was the large and most delightful isle of Hispaniola, which has a circumference of six hundred leagues.

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

Of the continent, the nearest part of which is more than two hundred and fifty leagues distant from this island, more than ten thousand leagues of maritime coast have been discovered, and more is discovered every day; all that has been discovered up to the year 49 is full of people, like a hive of bees, so that it seems as though God had placed all, or the greater part, of the entire human race in these countries.

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

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

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

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

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

Among these gentle sheep, gifted by their Maker with the above qualities, the Spaniards entered as soon as they knew them, like wolves, tigers, and lions which had been starving for many days, and since forty years they have done nothing else; nor do they otherwise at the present day than outrage, slay, afflict, torment, and

destroy them with strange and new, and divers kinds of cruelty, never before seen, nor heard of, nor read of, of which some few will be told below. To such extremes has this gone that, whereas there were more than three million souls whom we saw in Hispaniola, there are today not two hundred of the native population left.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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