

## A Classic Text

### History of the Indies

The preaching of Fray Antonio de Montesinos is the first important event in the controversy surrounding the justice or injustice of the conquest of the Americas. His first sermon of this kind was preached in the city of Santo Domingo during the Advent of 1511, when the island was called "Hispaniola". Fray Bartolomé de las Casas relates it in his *History of the Indies*. In this fragment, the first defence of the rights of the indigenous peoples appears in response to the treatment they received from the titleholders (*encomenderos*) and conquerors.

"Being Sunday, and the time to preach having arrived, Fray Antón Montesinos ascended the pulpit and took as the topic of his sermon, which had already been written together with and signed by the others, *Ego vox clamantis in deserto*. Having finished his introduction and having said something about the time of Advent, he began to proclaim the sterility of the consciences of the Spaniards of this island and the blindness in which they lived as well as the danger they were in of being condemned for all eternity, not being aware of the very serious sins in which, with so much insensitivity, they were continuously living and in which they died. Then he returned to the topic, thus saying:

*"To let ye know I have ascended here to tell you: I am the voice of Christ in the desert of this island, and hence, it is for your benefit that with attention, and with all your heart and with all your senses, ye hear it; this voice will be the most new that ye have ever heard, the most bitter and harsh and dangerous that ye could ever have heard."*

*"Ye are all in mortal sin and in it ye all live and die, because of the cruelty and tyranny that ye use with these innocent people. Tell me with what right and with what justice do ye have these Indians in so cruel and horrible a servitude? With what authority have ye waged so terrible a war on these people who were docile and at peace in their lands, and why have ye killed so many with a havoc never heard of before? How ye have so oppressed and*

*tired them, without giving them to eat nor curing them in their illnesses, afflicted by such cruel labours that lead them unto death! Or, to put it better, ye killed them only to mine gold every day! And what concern do ye show in teaching them about their God and Creator, that they should be baptised, hear Mass, keep the days of obligation and Sundays? Are they not men? Have they not rational souls? Are ye not under obligation to love them like your very selves? Do ye not understand this? Do ye not feel it? How can ye be so blind? Know for certain that in the state in which ye find yourselves, ye cannot be saved."*

In this way he explained himself, so that he left them overwhelmed, many of them out of their senses, others more hardened and some more remorseful, but none, from what I later understood, converted. Having finished his sermon, he descended from the pulpit with his head only slightly bowed, because he was not a man who wanted to show fear – not that he was a fearful man, always doing and saying what was necessary according to God's will – and with his companion he went to his straw house, where, luckily, they had nothing to eat except cabbage soup without oil. When he left the church, it was filled with murmuring, which, as I believe, barely allowed the Mass to finish.

When he and his companion had finished eating, even though it must not have been very pleasant food, the entire city gathered at the house of Admiral D. Diego Colón, son of the first person who discovered these Indies, along with the king's officials... , and they decided to go and reprimand the preacher and the other friars, if they did not punish him for being a scandalous man, sower of new doctrine, unheard of before, condemning all, and for speaking against the king and his dominions in these Indies, affirming that they could not have the Indians whom the king had given them, and these were very serious things."

[Fray Bartolomé de las Casas: *History of the Indies*].