IN DEFENSE OF THE INDIANS

The Defense of the Most Reverend Lord, Don Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas, of the Order of Preachers, Late Bishop of Chiapa, Against the Persecutors and Slanderers of the Peoples of the New World Discovered Across the Seas

Bartolomé de Las Casas

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NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY PRESS · DeKalb
enemy and gain possessions, although, if they wage war in this spirit, they sin gravely. However, those who inflict injuries and steal property contrary to the laws of war and justice, as many have done, are held to restitution and commit a very serious crime, and the ruler who tolerates such actions, or does not forbid them when he can, is guilty of the same crime and is held to give an account to God.

Preface to the Defense of the Most Reverend Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas, of the Order of Saint Dominic, Late Bishop of Chiapa, to Philip, Great Prince of Spain

Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas, of the Order of Saint Dominic, Late Bishop of Chiapa, to Philip, Great Prince of Spain

Illustrious Prince:

T is right that matters which concern the safety and peace of the great empire placed in your keeping by the divine goodness be reported to you, for you rule Spain and that marvelous New World in the name of the great Charles, your father, and you strive for immortal glory, not just with the imperial power but especially with the generous spirit and with the wisdom implanted in you by Christ. Therefore I have thought it advisable to bring to the attention of Your Highness that there has come into my hands a certain brief synopsis in Spanish of a work that Ginés de Sepúlveda is reported to have written in Latin. In it he gives four reasons, each of which, in his opinion, proves beyond refutation that war against the Indians is justified, provided that it be waged properly and the laws of war be observed, just as, up to the present, the kings of Spain have commanded that it be waged and carried out.

I hear that it is this man’s intention to demonstrate the title by which the Kings of Spain possess the empire of the Indies and to bolster his position with arguments and laws, so that from now on no one will be able to slander you even tacitly on this point. I have read and reread this work carefully. And it is said that Sepúlveda drives home various other
points at greater length in his Latin work (which I have not yet had the chance to see). What impression it has made on others I do not know. I certainly have detected in it poisoned honey disguised with honey. Under pretext of pleasing his prince, a man who is a theologian offers honey-coated poison. In place of bread, he offers a stone. Great Prince, unless this deadly poison is stopped by your wisdom, so that it will not become widespread, it will infect the minds of readers, deceive the unwary, and arm and incite tyrants to injustice. Believe me, that little book will bring ruin to the minds of many.

In the first place, while claiming that he wants to vindicate your jurisdiction over the Indies, he tears to pieces and reduces your rights by presenting arguments that are partly foolish, partly false, partly of the kind that have the least force. Furthermore, if this man’s judgment in this matter should be printed, [and] sanctioned with the royal license and privilege, there can be no doubt that within a short time the empire of the Indies will be entirely overthrown and destroyed.

Indeed, if so many laws already issued, so many decrees, so many harsh threats, and so many statutes conscientiously enacted by the Emperor Charles and his predecessors have been ineffective in preventing so many thousands of innocent men from perishing by sword, hunger, and all the misfortunes of total war, and extensive areas of their highly civilized kingdoms and most fertile provinces from being savagely devastated; if the fear of God and the dread of hell have not even moderated (I shall not say curbed) the utterly ruthless and cruel spirits of the Spaniards; if the outrages of preachers and holy men that they were barred from the sacraments of the Church and were not forgiven in sacramental confession were of no avail, what will happen when evil men (for whom, according to the old proverb, nothing is wanting except the opportunity) read that a scholar, a doctor of theology, and the royal historian has published books approving those criminal wars and hellish campaigns and, by supporting arguments, confirms and defends the unheard-of crime whereby Christian men, forgetting Christian virtue, hold in slavery those people, the most unfortunate of all, who appear to have escaped the ferocity of that most cruel race by chance rather than by the mercy of the Spaniards? Furthermore, [what will happen when they read] that he teaches that soldiers may lawfully keep everything they take in these wars, even though they undertook the campaign with the evil intention of looting, that is, of pillaging by fire, sword, murder, plunder and violence, upsetting, overturning, and throwing into confusion all laws, divine and human, and that they are not bound to restore such goods because the Spaniards who do these things and shed the blood of the innocent consecrate their hands to God (as I hear Sepúlveda has written) and merit Christ’s grace because they prevent the worship of idols?

Whom will they spare? What blood will they not shed? What cruelty will they not commit, these brutal men who are hardened to seeing fields bathed in human blood, who make no distinction of sex or age, who do not spare infants at their mothers’ breasts, pregnant women, the great, the lowly, or even men of feeble and gray old age for whom the weight of years usually awakens reverence or mercy? What will they not do if they hear that there is a man teaching that they are consecrating their hands to God when they crush the Indians with massacres, pillaging, and tyranny—that they are doing the same as those who killed the Children of Israel who were adoring the calf? They will give more trust to him, as to someone who tells them what they want to hear, than they would to the son of God himself if he were face to face before us and teaching something different.

If, then, the Indians are being brought to the point of extermination, if as many peoples are being destroyed as widespread kingdoms are being overthrown, what sane man would doubt that most flourishing empire of the New World, once its native inhabitants have been destroyed, will become a wilderness, and nothing but dominion over tigers, lions, and wild beasts for the Kings of Spain? When the all-wise God commanded certain nations to be overthrown, he did not want them completely destroyed at once, lest the empty lands without human beings become the lair of wild animals which might harm the few Jews who were the new inhabitants. ¹

Therefore when Sepúlveda, by word or in his published works, teaches that campaigns against the Indians are lawful, what does he do except encourage oppressors and provide an opportunity for as many crimes and lamentable evils as these [men] commit, more than anyone would find it possible to believe? In the meantime, with most certain harm to his own soul, he is the reason why countless human beings, suffering brutal massacres, perish forever, that is, men who, through the

¹ So we read in the seventh chapter of Deuteronomy.
inhuman brutality of the Spaniards, breathe their last before they hear
the word of God, [or] are fed by Christ’s gentle doctrine, [or] are
strengthened by the Christian sacraments. What more horrible or unjust
occurrence can be imagined than this?

Therefore, if Sepúlveda’s opinion (that campaigns against the Indi-
ans are lawful) is approved, the most holy faith of Christ, to the re-
proach of the name Christian, will be hateful and detestable to all the
peoples of that world to whom the word will come of the inhuman
crimes that the Spaniards inflict on that unhappy race, so that neither
in our lifetime nor in the future will they want to accept our faith under
any condition, for they see that its first heralds are not pastors but
plunderers, not fathers but tyrants, and that those who profess it are
ungodly, cruel, and without pity in their merciless savagery.

Furthermore, since Sepúlveda’s book is polished, painstaking, per-
suasive, and carefully built up throughout with many tricky kinds of
argument, it will permanently deceive these thieves, these enemies of
the human race, so that they will never come to their senses nor, admit-
ting their crimes, flee to the mercy of God, who, in his unutterable love,
is perhaps calling them to penance, nor will they implore his help. Under
the pretext of religion, [Sepúlveda] excuses the criminal wickedness of
these men, which carries with it all the evils to be found anywhere in
the lives of mortal men. He praises with lofty language these plunderers
who loot with utmost savagery, and he commends their warlike virtue.

Finally, it is intolerable that a man to whom has been entrusted the
duty of writing the imperial history should publish a destructive error
that is in total disagreement with the words of the gospel and the
meekness and kindness of which all Christ’s teaching is redolent and
which the Church, imitating its master, exercises toward those who do
not know Christ. For men of the future will, with good reason, decide
that a man who has gone wrong so disgracefully in a matter so clear has
taken no account of the truth when writing history, a fact that, no
matter how learnedly and gracefully that history will have been written,
will tarnish the most celebrated victories of the Emperor.

Therefore I considered the many misfortunes, the great harvest of
evils so deserving of rebuke, and the severest punishment which will
arise from his teaching: offense against God, ill repute and hatred for
our most holy religion, irreparable damage, the loss of so many believ-
ing souls, and the loss of the right of the kings of Spain to the empire
of the New World. I considered also that these opinions of his will
spread through all the nations of the world the savage and firmly rooted
practice of seizing what belongs to others and increasing one’s property
by shedding human blood (an evil reproach under which the Spanish
people have labored for so long), which, Sepúlveda claims, are for the
power and glory of Spain.

I could not contain myself. Mindful that I am a Christian, a religious,
a bishop, a Spaniard, and a subject of the King of Spain, I cannot but
unsheathe the sword of my pen for the defense of the truth, the honor
of God’s house, and the spreading of the revered gospel of Our Lord
Jesus Christ so that, according to the measure of the grace given to me,
I might wipe the stain from the Christian name, take away the obstacles
and stumbling blocks hindering the spread of belief in the gospel, and
proclaim the truth which I have vowed in baptism, have learned in the
religious life, and finally, however unworthy, have professed when
consecrated bishop. For by all these titles I am bound to set myself up
as a wall against the wicked for the defense of a completely innocent
people, soon to be grafted onto the true house of Israel, whom the
ravening wolves unceasingly pursue. I am also obliged to block the road
along which so many thousands of men are lured to their eternal de-
struction and to defend with my life my sheep, whom I promised by a
solemn oath to protect against every wolf, ecclesiastical or lay, who
breaks into my sheepfold.

Finally, I want to set forth the true right of my prince, that is, the
title by which he may possess the New World, and to hide [sic] the
frightful and disgraceful crimes that my own people, the Spaniards,
have inflicted in violation of justice and right during these last few years
on the Indians, who have been ruined by terrible butchery, and to wash
away the shame brought upon that name among all the nations.

Four things, therefore, that I must give a full account of are to be
treated here.

First, I shall refute Sepúlveda’s opinion claiming that war against the
Indians is justified because they are barbarous, uncivilized, unteachable,
and lacking civil government.

Second, I shall show that, to the most definite ruin of his own soul,
Sepúlveda is wrong when he teaches that war against the Indians is
justified as punishment for their crimes against the natural law, espe-
cially the crimes of idolatry and human sacrifice.
Third, we shall attack his third argument, on the basis of which Sepúlveda teaches that war can be waged unconditionally and indiscriminately against those peoples in order to free the innocent.

Fourth, I shall discuss how foreign to the teaching of the gospel and Christian mercy is his fourth proposition, maintaining that war against the Indians is justified as a means of extending the boundaries of the Christian religion and of opening the way for those who proclaim and preach the gospel.

When I have finished, the truth of this case and the magnitude of the crime committed by those who have maltreated the Indians by robberies, massacres, and other incredible misfortunes of war, and continue to do so, will be clear; and at the same time how groundless are the arguments of a man who is wrong both in law and in fact, by what design he was led to write that dangerous book, in what way he has distorted the teachings of philosophers and theologians, falsified the words of Sacred Scripture, of divine and human laws, and how no less destructively he has quoted statements of Pope Alexander VI to favor the success of his wicked cause. Finally, the true title by which the Kings of Spain hold their rule over the New World will be shown.

For this reason, Most Excellent Prince, I beg Your Highness to order this work, which I have written at the cost of much sweat and [many] sleepless nights, to be weighed and examined by learned men. If anything is found to be stated improperly or badly, I shall be most pleased to have my sleepless nights perfected by their charity. If, however, anything is found to be expressed well, I look for no other human reward except that Your Highness command Sepúlveda to give me a copy of the Latin work he wrote on this subject so that, when I have refuted his falsehoods more completely, the truth may shine forth and rule the consciences of all men.

Farewell!
HEY who teach, either in word or in writing, that the natives of the New World, whom we commonly call Indians, ought to be conquered and subjugated by war before the gospel is proclaimed and preached to them so that, after they have finally been subjugated, they may be instructed and hear the word of God, make two disgraceful mistakes. First, in connection with divine and human law they abuse God's words and do violence to the Scriptures, to papal decrees, and to the teaching handed down from the holy fathers. And they go wrong again by quoting histories that are nothing but sheer fables and shameless nonsense. By means of these, men who are totally hostile to the poor Indians and who are their utterly deceitful
enemies betray them. Second, they mistake the meaning of the decree or bull of the Supreme Pontiff Alexander VI, whose words they corrupt and twist in support of their opinions, as will be clear from all that follows.

Their error and ignorance are also convincingly substantiated by the fact that they draw conclusions on matters which concern a countless number of men and vast areas of extensive provinces. Since they do not fully understand all these things, it is the height of effrontery and rashness for them to attribute publicly to the Indians the gravest failings both of nature and conduct, condemning en masse so many thousands of people, while, as a matter of fact, the greater number of them are free from these faults. All this drags innumerable souls to ruin and blocks the service of spreading the Christian religion by closing the eyes of those who, crazed by blind ambition, bend all their energies of mind and body to the one purpose of gaining wealth, power, honors, and dignities. For the sake of these things they kill and destroy with inhuman cruelty people who are completely innocent, meek, harmless, temperate, and quite ready and willing to receive and embrace the word of God.

Who is there possessed of only a sound mind, not to say a little knowledge of theology, who has dared to pronounce a judgment and opinion so un-Christian that it spawns so many cruel wars, so many massacres, so many bereavements, and so many deplorable evils? Do we not have Christ’s words: “See that you never despise any of these little ones,” “Alas for the man who provides obstacles,” “He who is not with me is against me; and he who does not gather with me scatters,” and “Each day has trouble enough of its own”? Who is so godless that he would want to incite men who are savage, ambitious, proud, greedy, uncontrolled, and everlasting lazily pillage their brothers and destroy their souls as well as their possessions, even though war is never lawful except when it is waged because of unavoidable necessity?

And so what man of sound mind will approve a war against men who are harmless, ignorant, gentle, temperate, unarmed, and destitute of every human defense? For the results of such a war are very surely the loss of the souls of that people who perish without knowing God and without the support of the sacraments, and, for the survivors, hatred and loathing of the Christian religion. Hence the purpose God intends, and for the attainment of which he suffered so much, may be frustrated by the evil and cruelty that our men wreak on them with inhuman barbarity. What will these people think of Christ, the true God of the Christians, when they see Christians venting their rage against them with so many massacres, so much bloodshed without any just cause, at any rate without any just cause that they know of (nor can one even be imagined), and without any fault committed on their [the Indians] part against the Christians?

What good can come from these military campaigns that would, in the eyes of God, who evaluates all things with unutterable love, compensate for so many evils, so many injuries, and so many unaccustomed misfortunes? Furthermore, how will that nation love us, how will they become our friends (which is necessary if they are to accept our religion), when children see themselves deprived of parents, wives of husbands, and fathers of children and friends? When they see those they love wounded, imprisoned, plundered, and reduced from an immense number to a few? When they see their rulers stripped of their authority, crushed, and afflicted with a wretched slavery? All these things flow necessarily from war. Who is there who would want the gospel preached to himself in such a fashion? Does not this negative precept apply to all men in general: “See that you do not do to another what you would not have done to you by another”?

And the same for the affirmative command: “So always treat others as you would like them to treat you.” This is something that every man knows, grasps, and understands by the natural light that has been imparted to our minds.

It is obvious from all this that they who teach that these gentlest of sheep must be tamed by ravening wolves in a savage war before they are to be fed with the word of God are wrong about matters that are totally clear and are opposed to the natural law. Moreover, they commit an ungodly error when they say that these wars are just if they are waged as they should be. They mean, I suppose, if they are waged with restraint, by killing only those who have to be killed in order to subjugate the rest. It is as if they held all the peoples of the New World shut up in cages or slave pens and would want to cut off as many human heads as are usually sold each day in the markets for the feeding and

2. [Tobit 2:16].
3. [Matthew 7:12].
nourishment of the populace. (I suggest this as a comparison.) But if they would consider that war and the massacre of this timid race has lasted, not for one day or a hundred days, but for ten or twenty years, to the incredible harm of the natives; that, as they wander about, hidden and scattered through woods and forests, unarmed, naked, deprived of every human help, they are slaughtered by the Spaniards; that, stripped of their wealth and wretched, they are driven from their homes, stunned and frightened by the unbelievable terror with which their oppressors have filled them through the monstrous crimes they have committed. If those who say such things would only consider that the hearts of this unfortunate people are so shattered with fear that they want to hurl themselves headlong into the deepest caverns of the earth to escape the clutches of these plunderers, I have no doubt that they would say things that are more temperate and more wise.

To come to the point, then, this Defense will contain two main topics. First, I shall show that the Reverend Doctor Sepúlveda, together with his followers, is wrong in law in everything he alleges against the Indians. While doing this, I shall provide an answer to all his arguments and to the authorities he violently distorts. Second, I shall show how wrong they are in fact, with great harm to their own souls. For the Creator of every being has not so despised these peoples of the New World that he willed them to lack reason and made them like brute animals, so that they should be called barbarians, savages, wild men, and brutes, as they [Sepúlveda et al.] think or imagine. On the contrary, they [the Indians] are of such gentleness and decency that they are, more than the other nations of the entire world, supremely fitted and prepared to abandon the worship of idols and to accept, province by province and people by people, the word of God and the preaching of the truth.

As to the first point, which we have discussed elsewhere at greater length and in general against all those infected with errors of this kind about the question of unbelievers; for now, as a sort of assault on the first argument for Sepúlveda’s position, we should recognize that there are four kinds of barbarians, according to the Philosopher in Books 1 and 3 of the Politics and in Book 7 of the Ethics, and according to Saint Thomas and other doctors in various places.

First, barbarian in the loose and broad sense of the word means any cruel, inhuman, wild, and merciless man acting against human reason out of anger or native disposition, so that, putting aside decency, meekness, and humane moderation, he becomes hard, severe, quarrelsome, unbearable, cruel, and plunges blindly into crimes that only the wildest beasts of the forest would commit. Speaking of this kind of barbarian, the Philosopher says in the Politics that just as the man who obeys right reason and excellent laws is superior to all the animals, so too, if he leaves the path of right reason and law, he is the wickedest, worst, and most inhuman of all animals.4

Boethius also speaks of these when he refers to the courtiers of the tyrant Theodoric as barbarians because of their savage and insatiable greed. “How often,” he asks, “have I protected, by putting my authority in danger, such poor wretches as the unpunished greed of the barbarians abused with uncounted false accusations?”5

The Second Book of Maccabees also mentions this kind of barbarian. For when Nicanor, a ruthless and savage despot, wanted to join battle with Judas Maccabaeus in Samaria on the Sabbath, some of the Jews who were with him said to him: “You must not massacre them in such a savage, barbarous way,” that is, savagely and inhumanly.6 Both the Greeks and the Latins, and any others who live even in the most highly developed states, can be called barbarians if, by the savagery of their behavior, they are anything like the Scythians, whose country was regarded as singularly barbaric, as Isidore notes, because of the savage and inhuman practices of this race.7

Indeed, our Spaniards are not unacquainted with a number of these practices. On the contrary, in the absolutely inhuman things they have done to those nations they have surpassed all other barbarians.

To this class of barbarian belong all those who, aroused by anger, hatred, or some other strong feeling, violently defend something, completely forgetful of reason and virtue. Gregory speaks of this in his Letters,8 and Gratian, when speaking of the uprising that occurred at

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4. Book 1, chap. 2.
6. 15 [1–2].
7. Ethnologiae, 14. 4.
8. 2, 69.
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Milan over the election of one of the bishops, says: “Many of the Milanese, driven by barbaric fury, come together.” In his *Ethics*, the Philosopher calls this type of barbarian brutish when he writes: “It is found chiefly among barbarians, but some brutish qualities are also produced by disease or deformity; and we also call by this evil name those men who go beyond all ordinary standards by reason of vice.”


Chapter Two

The second kind of barbarian includes those who do not have a written language that corresponds to the spoken one, as the Latin language does with ours, and therefore they do not know how to express in it what they mean. For this reason they are considered to be uncultured and ignorant of letters and learning. Hence, so that his own people, the English, might not be regarded as barbarians, the Venerable Bede wrote in English on all the branches of the liberal arts, as we read in his life and as Saint Thomas notes. Likewise, Saint Gregory speaks in his *Moralia* as John Gerson quotes him:

See how the tongue of Britain, which knew only how to grind out barbaric sounds, has long since begun to resound with Hebrew words in praise of God. See how the ocean, which before was swelling, is now calmed beneath the feet of the saints and is subject to them. Its barbarous motions, which the princes of the earth had not been able to control with the sword, the mouths of priests now bind with simple words through the fear of God.

In this sense he is called a barbarian who, because of the difference of his language, does not understand another speaking to him. Thus Paul, speaking of himself, says: “If I am ignorant of what the sound means, I am a barbarian to the man who is speaking and he is a barbarian to me.” Saint John Chrysostom often calls the holy kings, the Magi, barbarians in this sense: “Indeed, because a star called the wise men from the east and barbarous men underwent the fatigue of so long a pilgrimage.”

Barbarians of this kind are not called barbarians in the absolute but in a restricted sense; that is, they are not barbarians literally but by circumstance, as Chrysostom indicates in the same passage when he says: “The star which had gone before them only to desert them, leads to his worship not just any barbarians, but those among them who were indeed outstanding in the dignity of wisdom.”

From these words of Chrysostom it is obvious that a people can be called barbarians and still be wise, courageous, prudent, and lead a settled life. So, in ancient times, the Greeks called the Romans barbarians, and, in turn, the Romans called the Greeks and other nations of the world barbarians. It is quite clear that in the first book of the *Politics* the Philosopher is not talking about this category when he writes that barbarians are by nature slaves and do not have the ability to govern themselves or others. However, he speaks of this kind of barbarian in

1. In Libros Politicorum Aristotelis Expositio [Liber 1*]; lectio 1* [par. 22].
2. *Moralia*, Liber 27*; cap. 11* [no. 21, ad v. 30].
4. *Homilia* 7* in Matheum*, cap. 2* [This is a paraphrase.]
5. *Homilia* 7* in Matheum*, in the complete work, cap. 2*.