

## Assignment:

Based on the readings below, write a 5 paragraph essay (in English) describing how Bartolomé de las Casas displayed the Catholic virtues of Justice, Courage (Fortitude), and Love (Charity).

From the Catechism of the Catholic Church:

- *Justice* is the moral virtue that consists in the constant and firm will to give their due to God and neighbor. Justice toward God is called the "virtue of religion." Justice toward men disposes one to respect the rights of each and to establish in human relationships the harmony that promotes equity with regard to persons and to the common good. The just man, often mentioned in the Sacred Scriptures, is distinguished by habitual right thinking and the uprightness of his conduct toward his neighbor. "You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbor."<sup>68</sup> "Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven."
- *Fortitude* is the moral virtue that ensures firmness in difficulties and constancy in the pursuit of the good. It strengthens the resolve to resist temptations and to overcome obstacles in the moral life. The virtue of fortitude enables one to conquer fear, even fear of death, and to face trials and persecutions. It disposes one even to renounce and sacrifice his life in defense of a just cause. "The Lord is my strength and my song."<sup>70</sup> "In the world you have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world."
- *Charity* is the theological virtue by which we love God above all things for his own sake, and our neighbor as ourselves for the love of God.

## Fray Bartolomé de las Casas

Bartolomé de las Casas was a Spanish historian, missionary, Dominican theologian, and the Bishop of Chiapas. He was born in Sevilla, Spain, in 1484 to a family of French descent. His family was very wealthy and he was educated at the best schools, including the University of Salamanca, the oldest university in Spain. He studied theology and Canon Law (Church Law). In 1493, after "discovering" the Americas, Christopher Columbus visited Sevilla on his way to Madrid. During this visit he met the de las Casas family, and they became friends. In fact, Bartolomé's father, Pedro, became such good friends with Columbus that he and his brothers were invited to join Columbus on his second voyage to the New World. Bartolomé's family was awarded land on the island of Hispaniola, or what is now divided into the Dominican Republic and Haiti. In 1502, Bartolomé de las Casas traveled to Hispaniola to manage his family's land. Like many other colonists, de las Casas operated his land (used as a plantation) under the *encomienda* system. The *encomienda* system came about through a series of grants from the King and Queen of Spain, and allowed landowners to enslave the native population as long as they also converted the natives to christianity. As a *hacendado*, or slave owner, de las Casas owned many Taino natives and used them to work his fields while making sure that they were converted to Catholicism. He saw nothing wrong with owning slaves, since all of the other landowners also had slaves.

In 1507, de las Casas returned to Europe. He went to Rome, and was ordained as a Catholic priest. After his ordination, he returned to Hispaniola. De las Casas served as chaplain to Spanish soldiers from 1513-1514 when Spain conquered Cuba. Around this time many Dominican friars came to the New World to convert natives to Catholicism. When the Dominicans saw how the native people were treated, they were horrified. After hearing one friar speak against the evils of slavery, de las Casas had a change of heart. He

decided he could no longer own slaves, and gave up his land. Then, he returned to Spain to plead with King Ferdinand on behalf of the native peoples.

In 1516, de las Casas was named priest-procurator of the Indies, on the recommendation of King Ferdinand and the Bishop of Toledo. This meant that he was in charge of acting on the Church's behalf in the New World. He returned to South America with a committee to investigate the treatment of the Native Americans, and to see if there was a better alternative for the two groups, European and indigenous, to live together peacefully. De las Casas experimented with many different ideas, including working with the Indians in Venezuela. In Venezuela, he tried to create a settlement where Native Americans and Spanish settlers lived together. However, the natives were used to being treated poorly by the Spaniards, and violently rejected all interaction. In 1522, when de las Casas realized his experiments weren't working, he gave up and joined the Dominican Order in Santo Domingo (Dominican Republic).

As a Dominican, de las Casas wrote hundreds of letters to as many powerful people as he could. His main idea was that the Indians were people, just like Europeans. As human beings created by God, they should have been treated with dignity, not enslaved. He wrote that the natives had a right to own the land they had always inhabited, and that the Spaniards did not. He also said that Papal grants (written permission from the Pope) had only been given to convert the Indians, not to take their lands and resources.

De las Casas had some success through his letter writing campaign. He was able to peacefully introduce Dominicans to the Indians in Guatemala, so that they could bring Christianity to the region. He was named the Bishop of Chiapas and enforced the "New Laws" of Charles V, the new Holy Roman Emperor. These laws made slavery illegal by stating that any children born from slaves were free people, and could not be enslaved by anyone. However, most of the colonists and many of the priests in South America objected to these laws and refused to follow them. In 1547, when de las Casas saw that the laws were going unfollowed, he resigned his position and returned to Spain. While in Spain, he continued to work on behalf of the Indians. He once debated for five straight days against Sepulveda, an author who supported a war with the Indians, winning the debate and convincing the Council of Valladolid not to approve his book for publication.

Nicknamed the "Defender of the Indians," de las Casas crossed the Atlantic Ocean ten times. He published many books and wrote hundreds of letters on the proper treatment of the natives, causing him to lose titles, lands, and friends. In his *History of the Indies*, de las Casas wrote about his experiences in the New World and his prediction that injustices committed against the natives would result in punishment from God. His work influenced freedom fighters such as Simon Bolivar, who led Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia, Peru, and Columbia to independence from Spain.

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