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# TELLING TRUTH TO KINGS

BY REINHOLD SCHNEIDER

Foreword by  
OS GUINNESS

Preface by  
JONATHAN QUICK

THE TRINITY FORUM READING  
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# PREFACE

ON THE MORNING OF JANUARY 28, 1986, the space shuttle *Challenger* exploded seconds after liftoff from Kennedy Space Center. The death of teacher Christa McAuliffe and fellow crew members shocked America and the world. Seventeen years later, the space shuttle *Columbia* sustained damage during liftoff that caused it to overheat and disintegrate during re-entry. In both cases, information from NASA engineers that could have prevented the disaster failed to reach or was ignored by decision-makers. In all, fourteen astronauts perished.

The sudden collapse of several large financial institutions in 2008 precipitated a global financial crisis and widespread recession, with devastating effects for millions of people worldwide. The 2011 U.S. Financial Crisis Inquiry Commission was unequivocal: the crisis was “avoidable ... the result of human action and inaction...” During the lead up to the crisis, experienced, knowledgeable individuals inside and outside the financial system saw the coming catastrophe. Too few spoke up and even fewer acted until it was too late.

As president of the international non-profit Management Sciences for Health, I learned firsthand the high cost of unspoken and unheard truths. In 2006, we began an ambitious project to improve health services in communities throughout the Philippines. Early on, we faced serious challenges in project leadership and donor relations. At a critical juncture, I balked at traveling to the Philippines, where I would have heard directly from each

of the stakeholders. I relied instead on an internal project analysis that proved only partly true. In the end, our inability to find and face the truth resulted in the project ending prematurely. What was to have been a seven-year, \$70 million project became a three-year, \$30 million project. Much good actually was achieved for the people of the Philippines in those three years; yet so much more good could have been achieved in seven.

### *The Challenge of Truth-Telling*

These are just a few examples in which a failure to recognize and act on the truth led to serious consequences for individuals, organizations, or even entire societies. As Os Guinness notes in his penetrating Foreword, Reinhold Schneider's *Las Casas Before Charles V* was published in the 1930s at a time when Britain and other world powers were failing to recognize and act decisively against Adolf Hitler's maniacal intent. Horrified by this, perhaps the greatest failure in truth-telling of the twentieth century, Schneider related the story of one of the greatest truth-telling successes of the colonial period of the conquistadors. The excerpt included in this *Reading* vividly illustrates the power and the challenge of truth-telling. The truth-teller was a simple Dominican priest, Bartolomé de Las Casas. The truth-hearer was King Charles V of Spain. The truth was the vicious brutality of the Spanish toward the indigenous "new world" peoples.

### *Four Character Tests in Truth-Telling*

Why is telling and acting on the truth so difficult? Schneider's text deftly illustrates the four critical steps in truth-telling, each of which presents a genuine test of character: the wisdom and willingness to see the truth; the courage to speak the truth; the humility and honesty of mind to hear the truth; and finally, the will to act on the truth. As he argues his case before King Charles V at the Council of the Indies (a forum of Spanish leaders seeking the King's ruling regarding the proper treatment of indigenous

peoples), Las Casas demonstrates both wisdom and courage. As King Charles deliberates, he reveals his humility and his desire to act with honor.

Seeing the truth of a situation can be surprisingly difficult. Economist William Whyte coined the term “groupthink” in 1952 to describe the dynamics of a highly cohesive group, often insulated from outside opinions, that strives for unanimity over critical analysis. Such dynamics contributed to each of the costly truth-telling failures described above.

The second step in truth-telling is mustering the courage to “speak truth to power.” In Las Casas’ day, those who spoke out against people in authority often faced serious reprisal, including imprisonment, torture, or death. Even today truth-telling has its perils: damage to reputation, social pressure, financial risks, lawsuits, and sometimes physical threats.

Las Casas saw the truth of the horrific Spanish wars of conquest so vividly that he could hardly contain himself at the Council of the Indies as he debated the scholar Sepulveda, who argued against greater rights for the natives. Las Casas was forced to admit, however, that in his younger years he “was not guided by right” when he advocated using Negro slaves to work in place of Indians. Guilt over failing that character test only strengthened Las Casas’ courage to speak the truth to the King. While his fellow Dominicans were cowed by the force of Sepulveda’s attack, Las Casas reacted with “humble calm.”

Even when the truth has been told, too often a leader or decision-maker is prevented by ego, self-interest, or an inner circle of naysayers from responding decisively and with integrity. Before the 2008 global financial crisis, most who grasped the reality of the situation remained silent or acted too late to make a difference. Much of the damage from wrongdoing or incompetence results from cover-up or failure to act by those in positions to do so.

In “Telling Truth to Kings,” King Charles V presents a vivid example of a leader who welcomes honest, vigorous debate. He listens carefully to Las Casas and Sepulveda’s arguments and testimonies. The King’s desire to hear the facts is captured in the one word he utters during the Council debate, “Speak!” Three features of the King’s decision process are notable.

First, he deliberates and decides in private—away from the pressure and high emotion of the Council. Second, as he weighs the arguments the King considers the character of their proponents. Of Las Casas he notes, “I see that whenever you fought it was not for your own sake, but for the sake of others. You have led the life of an honest man.” Finally, the King humbly examines his own intentions and seeks divine wisdom, concluding, “Human counsel no longer avails; we must return now to God.”

### *Living in the Truth*

We do not live in sixteenth-century Spain; the challenges faced by King Charles V and truths spoken by Las Casas are dramatically different than those of today. Yet the requirements for truth-telling apply equally today to families, communities, organizations, and nations: wisdom to see the truth, courage to speak the truth, humility to hear the truth, and will to act on the truth. We each have something to learn from Las Casas and Charles V.

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# FOREWORD

ONE OF THE MOST HAUNTING figures in history is that of the unheeded messenger. Two such messengers in ancient times—Jeremiah and John the Baptist—have left their hallmark on the genre of public warnings. Every time we speak of a “jeremiad” we tip our caps to the weeping prophet, as we do whenever we talk of “a voice crying in the wilderness.” But our modern use of these expressions underscores that these messengers went unheeded. The jeremiad has become a term denoting denunciation and lament, and a “voice crying in the wilderness” is often spoken of as best left there—uncouth and not to be heeded.

In our own time, the figure of the unheeded messenger was well represented by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn speaking at the Harvard commencement in 1978. But perhaps the twentieth century’s greatest example was Winston Churchill during his “wilderness years” in the 1930s. Farsighted and indefatigable, he was appalled by what he called the “mush, slush, and gush” of a pacifist-dreaming Britain, a corrupt and divided France, and a remote and indifferent America. All of them were being led or lulled into oblivion before the menace of a rapidly rearming Germany.

In 1936, when the Stanley Baldwin government called for a review of the situation, Churchill commented acidly, “Anyone can see what the position is. The Government simply cannot make up their minds, or they cannot get the Prime Minister to make up his mind. So they go on in a strange paradox, decided only to be undecided, resolved to be irresolute, adamant

for drift, solid for fluidity, all powerful to be impotent.” The sleepwalking democracies with their “leaderless confusion” were unwittingly relinquishing more years “for the locusts to eat.” Or as Churchill muttered at London’s Savoy Hotel as the sounds of merriment celebrating the Munich Agreement reached him, “These poor people! They little know what they will have to face.”

Two hundred years earlier, the unheeded messenger was Edmund Burke. Revered today for his profound political philosophy and high oratory, many of his views were unpopular during his lifetime. Indeed, he was roused to greatness by the momentous battles of his day—on behalf of conciliation with the American colonies, against the domestic power of George III, against the Jacobinism of the French Revolution, and in his prosecution of Warren Hastings.

The impeachment of Warren Hastings for corruption and injustice in British India occupied Burke for sixteen long years. His closing speech alone in the case lasted nine full days. But the outcome was failure. Hastings was acquitted, and Burke, commenting on those years, said, “I labored with the most assiduity and met with the least success.” His fellow Whig leader Charles James Fox perfectly described the foresight of unheeded messengers: “Well! Burke is right—but Burke is often right, only he is right too soon.”

### *A Dog that Barked*

This *Trinity Forum Reading* uncovers the magnificent voice of an unheeded messenger from outside the English-speaking world who deserves far wider recognition. *Las Casas Before Charles V* is the greatest novel by Reinhold Schneider, one of the leading exponents of the German literary resistance to Nazism. In a 1945 survey of German culture during the Third Reich, the BBC World Service recognized Reinhold Schneider’s prophetic stature when it described him as “the voice of one crying in the wilderness.”

Reinhold Schneider was born in Baden-Baden in southwest Germany in 1903. His father was a Protestant hotel owner but he was raised a



Catholic by his devout mother. He studied agriculture but abandoned this field to work for an art dealer in Dresden. From there he was able to travel widely—to Portugal, Spain, France, Italy, England, and Scandinavia. He visited England in 1934 and 1935, where he had an experience that changed his life and reinforced his decision to resist Hitler by staying inside Germany rather than going into exile. “As I was trying to comprehend English history,” he wrote later in his autobiography, “Christ stood all around me as Power.” The experience, he said, inspired him to investigate the meaning of history and address his contemporary situation from the perspective of faith.

At the time, Schneider was already a writer rediscovering the genre of the carefully researched historical novel. But his newly awakened faith gave him the depth of perspective and sense of calling that fueled his active resistance to the Nazis. His earlier novel, *The Hohenzollern*, was finished in 1933 as the S.S. platoons marched down the street in front of his house in Potsdam. The Nazis were quick to recognize him as a threat. His writings were censored at first, then banned altogether in 1941. After the ban he wrote mostly poetry, essays, and biblical exposition. These later works were printed clandestinely and some reached a circulation of half a million. In 1944, he was charged with high treason by Reichsminister Martin Bormann, but the chaos of the last days of fighting stayed his execution. Other brave truth-tellers, such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, were not as fortunate.

“Telling Truth to Kings” is excerpted from *Las Casas Before Charles V*, first written in 1937 (and later somewhat misleadingly titled in English as *Imperial Mission*). On the surface, the novel is about the atrocities of the Spanish conquistadores in the New World, but discerning readers knew well that Schneider was condemning the persecution of the Jews and the crimes committed in the Nazi concentration camps in the 1930s. The book was published in 1938, only a few months before *Kristallnacht*, when the Nazi storm troopers looted and burned Jewish shops and property. Through the story of Spain, Schneider was directly challenging the Nazi understanding of Germany’s character and destiny.

When Schneider learned about Dachau and other concentration camps in 1934, he wrote a short story, “The Comforter,” which foreshadowed the heroic resistance to come. He wrote of the story’s protagonist, Friedrich von Spee: “The authorities and judges might take it amiss or not—he did not want to be found among the number of those who are rejected by the prophet because they are dumb dogs that cannot bark.”

This last powerful sentence of Schneider’s refers to Isaiah 56:10 and describes his own life of resistance. Clearly he was no mute dog. Furi-ously, repeatedly, and at the risk of his own life, he barked in protest to his nation’s leaders. The warnings went unheeded, but no one could blame the watchdog.

### *Truth-telling and Leadership*

History’s unheeded messengers have varied widely in temperament. Winston Churchill—aristocratic, cigar-chomping, and ebullient—was a far cry from John the Baptist, traditionally seen as wild-eyed and dining on locusts and honey. Some lived to see their vindication, some did not. Despite such differences, common virtues emerge—discernment of the times, courage to repudiate powerful interests and fashion, perseverance in the face of daunting odds, seasoned wisdom born of a sense of history and their nation’s place in it, and—supremely with the great Hebrew prophets—an unflinching statement of truth and a ring of conviction in their message that was born of its transcendent source.

Despite history’s vindication of these messengers, our own generation seems heedless of such warnings. There is little discrimination between true alarms and false alarmism. For many people, the good times are still rolling in their own worlds, if not in the world at large. And for others, the combined effect of the entertainment media and trivialized political discourse has created a spirit of denial that shuts its eyes to the realities that grow more and more apparent to people outside the West.

In Europe, the problem stems from the triumph of bureaucrats,

economists, lawyers, and managers at the expense of leaders who appreciate the need for a deeper sense of history and humanity. In the United States, the problem is that a generation of culture warring has created a dearth of national leadership that addresses the interests of all Americans, and does so with a keen understanding of the character and requirements of the great American experiment. For many thought-leaders in both spheres of the West, a striking tone deafness about faith means that leaders do not pick up on themes once considered critical to the continuing flourishing of our civilization.

*The American Hour?*

The story of *Las Casas* speaks powerfully to people in many countries, but it is specially arresting for Americans. I first encountered *Las Casas Before Charles V* more than 30 years ago in Oxford through Carsten Peter Thiede, a friend and scholar who was later the president of the Reinhold Schneider Association in Germany. What moved me profoundly then, and still does now, is Schneider's notion of "Spain's hour"—and therefore by extension "Germany's hour" and "America's hour" too. For I have long believed that what Spain confronted in the sixteenth century and England in the nineteenth, America confronts now—challenges that go to the very heart of the American republic, which George Washington called "the Great Experiment." In other words, America's current crisis of cultural authority means that the present period is the "American hour," a critical time of reckoning that is fateful for America's future. Indeed, it is later in the hour than most people think.

My conviction of the momentousness of America's present crisis is not unique. But along with many others, I have the equally strong conviction that America's greatest crisis lies in the absence of national leaders that address the "state of the Union" as they should. The troubling suspicion is that in many circles, many Americans, including many American leaders, simply do not understand either the character of the American experiment as constructed by the founders or the character of its crisis

today. Through the person and voice of Reinhold Schneider's Bartolomé de Las Casas, we might reflect on the state of Western civilization today, and in particular on the condition of its lead society at this extraordinary moment.

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# TELLING TRUTH TO KINGS

THERE WAS THE USUAL CONFUSION on the pier. Under the burning sun, young seamen rolled water barrels into the boats, while half-naked natives staggered along under their cruel burdens, driven forward by the whips of the overseers. Huge iron-bound chests were loaded on board under the watchful eyes of wild-looking and audacious soldiers. Travelers took leave of their relatives and friends. Here and there sickly and ragged Spaniards squatted on the stones, gazing longingly at the tossing barges rowed by natives or at the passengers climbing aboard the sailing ships.

Suddenly a crowd surrounding a tall Dominican moved towards the ships. Walking beside the monk, and carrying his baggage, was a man of lighter color than that usual among the Aztecs and of a build different from theirs, an Indian who might have been born in the Antilles. The two were the center of a colorful group of natives—men and shy, slim boys who looked up at the monk and pressed against his habit; and women, carrying children in their arms, who begged again and again for the priest's benediction. The monk stopped and the crowd immediately gave way, as if it were a sensitive and exotic plant closing up at the slightest danger of a touch. The priest saw that many around him had adorned themselves

with feathers of rarest birds, such as are found only in remotest regions. A woman unfurled a feather coat of wondrous colors which shimmered and shone in the sun. She dared not speak, but merely tendered it and looked beseechingly at the priest with her dark eyes, which, like those of all her people, seemed to glisten with unshed tears. "Take it all, Comacho," said the monk in the native tongue of his servant, "and give me my bundle." While the jubilant natives piled their gifts in Comacho's arms, the monk bent over the children and laid his hand on their shining black hair.

One of the sailors whose duty it was to keep unauthorized persons away from the barges grumbled that Las Casas apparently wanted to take all his proteges with him even aboard ship. A richly clad Spanish planter who, to while away the time, had himself carried past the scene in a hammock by two natives, expressed in his clipped Spanish the wish that the Father, together with his ship, might plunge to the bottom of the sea. "It's worth a shipwreck to get this agitator out of the world at last!" His loudly spoken words were intended for Las Casas' ears. To taunt the Dominican even more, the speaker struck a heavy blow at the slave who ran beside the hammock with a parasol of palm-fronds to protect his master from the sun. "Even more useless, by heaven, than these useless beings who can't even protect a Christian from the sun are those who would free these idlers," the Spaniard called back over his shoulder as his head bobbed away among those of the crowd. An angry flush suffused the Father's face, but at that moment the Indians gathered more closely around him, crying loudly. He blessed the women and embraced two men who seemed to be of noble descent, although clad in rags like the others.

"I will surely return," he said in a firm voice, "and I promise you that help will come. There is a just God in heaven. In Him you must believe. And on earth there is a just, God-fearing Emperor. To him I will go to ask protection for you against your tyrants." With this, he boarded the boat, speaking sharply to a sailor who tried to prevent Comacho from following him with his colorful burdens. While the faithful servant went below to busy himself in the hold of the ship, Las Casas remained on deck.

The milling and straining of the fear-crazed slaves became more frenzied as the moment of the vessels' departure drew near. At last the ships of

the fleet began to slip out of the harbor. When the ship carrying Las Casas weighed anchor, the monk leaped onto a bale of goods. He raised his strong arm and made the sign of the cross over the forlorn flock, as if to place them under powerful protection. Those he had blessed sank to their knees and humbly crossed themselves. The Father was deeply touched when he saw that not only the baptized, in their threadbare woolen coats, reverently crossed themselves, but that the half-naked others did so too, even though he had been unable to baptize them for lack of time for proper instruction. He knew that, in the next instant, Spanish soldiers would swoop down on his friends and scatter them, or do even worse. In order not to provoke his countrymen to commit this final offense he turned quickly and went below.

*Heading out to the open sea, the fleet is scattered by a terrible storm. Las Casas helps those on board, including an aging knight who is returning wealthy, but guilt-ridden, after a degenerate career in the New World. The knight recounts the sordid details of his corrupt career—how he and his compatriots oppressed the Indians in pursuit of gold. The knight's account spurs Las Casas on the rest of the voyage as he works on the case he is to present before Charles V, the King of Spain. Las Casas will insist that Spain's true mission should be to save the souls of the native people. His opponent, legal scholar Dr. Ginés de Sepulveda, will argue that the subjugation of the natives should precede their conversion.*



### *The Council of the Indies*

... The Emperor's chair, only slightly raised, was placed opposite the long broad table at which the members of the Council of the Indies, the ecclesiastic and secular scholars, and the two opponents were now taking their places. The side of the table facing the simple throne remained empty. There were those among the assembly who could still remember the first entry of the young Monarch into Valladolid [the capital city of imperial

Spain], and how magnificently the city was decorated when this Hapsburg heir to the United Kingdoms accepted his due honors in solemn ceremony. Now, by contrast, the servants had not disturbed the austere aspect of the rooms in which he was expected.

Cardinal Loaisa of Seville, president of the Council of the Indies, sat directly opposite the throne. The two opponents occupied the ends of the table: Sepulveda, his face inscrutable, bending over his papers; Las Casas, elbows on table, resting his forehead on his clasped hands, unmindful of the documents before him.

As the door opened, the assembly rose. Two imperial councilors, who had been waiting for their Master midway between door and throne, bowed deeply; priests and scholars followed suit. Charles, a biretta on his head, entered, leaning on a cane. As the Sovereign approached the dais, one of the two pages walking behind him stepped quickly forward. Supporting himself on the boy's shoulder, the Emperor mounted the step and lowered himself slowly into the chair. With a curt nod he bid the assembly be seated.

Only then did he raise his eyes to survey the gathering with detached coolness. He noticed Las Casas, and greeted him with a soft, pensive smile. The monk responded by rising respectfully. Under Charles' unadorned black cloak glistened the golden chain of the Fleece. He drew the cloak closely about him and looked around questioningly. One of the pages hurried to the fireplace and awoke the half-dormant embers into flame. The Emperor was handed some papers, and these he began to study, holding his glasses at a distance from his eyes. A long time passed in silence, interrupted only by the Monarch occasionally reading a word in a low voice. Finally he looked up with tired, slightly reddened eyes, put his glasses away, returned the papers, and by a nod indicated that the Cardinal of Seville should begin.

"The presence of His Imperial Majesty," declared the Cardinal after rising slowly," testifies better than any words to the high significance of this meeting. During the last few days it has almost seemed as if we were engaged in a literary controversy. Yet we all know that it is not to display his erudition that Dr. Sepulveda has written a book justifying the war against



the Indians. This erudition,” added the Cardinal with a slight bow towards the Emperor, “has long since brought him both the confidence of His Imperial Majesty and well-deserved fame. Dr. Sepulveda has written the book to reaffirm the rights of Spain to the New World and to demonstrate the justness of the Spanish government’s actions. The Doctor’s opponents must never forget that he has fought for what, during long years of study, he has come to recognize as the ideal most to be cherished.

“In this struggle,” continued the Cardinal, “he has the advice and support of loyal men. He fights for his thesis for the sake of universal order and to serve his country.

“If, on the other hand, Father Las Casas has so far prevented the publication of this book, even despite its endorsement by high authorities and famous scholars, he has not done so, it is evident, out of envy of the Doctor’s name and reputation. Among all the reproaches which his well-known energy has earned Father Las Casas, lust for glory is never mentioned.”

It was doubtful whether the mild irony of these words was intended to defend or accuse the Father, and expressions of subdued mockery lingered on the listeners’ faces as the speaker continued.

“I consider it my duty,” he said, “to help clarify the issue between the opponents, though to leave the decision to a greater insight. The two opponents,” he went on, “personify two warring concepts, both of which are deeply rooted in the history of Spain and have long been basic influences in that history. Many of us have a Father Las Casas as well as a Dr. Sepulveda in our hearts. There can, of course, be only one truth and it will have to be found. As has been said, Las Casas prevents publication of the book not from professional envy, but from conviction that the Doctor’s conclusions are false and anti-Christian; and he demands, accordingly, that, although free-born Indians should be converted, they should in no case be forced into the Faith. Convinced of this as he is, he must condemn the greater part of what has been done in the New World in the name of the Kings of Spain.

“If it is true that the cross is to conquer the earth by its own strength, without protection of the sword or of the state which wields the sword, Columbus should have left his weapons aboard ship before going ashore at Guanahani. We should have sent martyrs, not warriors, across the sea.

In actual fact, more Spaniards have become martyrs in the New Indies than any chronicler has been able to report. Even Father Las Casas, who, as we know, has long been working diligently on a history of the New Indies, cannot account for them all. If it is wrong to use the sword, then unpardonable injustice is being done every day in the name of the Spanish crown. For even today Spaniards brandish their swords in the wild mountains of Peru and Chile, where the population refuses to be pacified. If we are not to think of the Father's demand as rash, or even insane, we must visualize clearly and in all their horror the crimes that he believes have been committed.

“A bolder request, of course, has never been made, as even the Father's friends have to admit. If this demand is to be met, the social order and way of life in the New World will have to be altered profoundly, though possibly only by degrees. The Indians will have to be given back the rights and privileges that were theirs before the discovery.

“What will then be left to the Spaniards is not our concern today. As for me, my only duty is to point out that the fight that Father Las Casas, after intense self-examination, has decided to wage can have the most far-reaching consequences. At this stage, the debate demands a decision whether, along with the way of life in the Indies, all relations between the motherland and the colonies should or should not be basically changed. For a change of spirit is the greatest change of all, and Father Las Casas' demand aims at such a spiritual change—one which would introduce an entirely new concept into the history of mankind. His purpose is to bring about the complete freedom of Man-before-God within the world-embracing Spanish Empire, whose structure he wants to see built in its entirety on the foundation of Divine Law. However, it would be presumptuous to discuss before His Majesty the consequences which such a change would cause in the wealth of Spain, in the Imperial treasury and our Emperor's international policies. It would be presumptuous particularly now when His Imperial Majesty, after his heroic war against the infidels of Algiers, is about to unify the Faith and restore the old order so deeply shaken.

“Therefore, the ultimate question,” continued the Cardinal in a lower voice, “is perhaps directed to the conscience of His Majesty; and it is

whether Las Casas' request or Sepulveda's doctrine comes nearer to God's command. The Emperor's conscience has to be the judge of how much secular power can be renounced or secular obligation waived by a divinely ordained Monarch who is desirous of fulfilling his duty to his Creator. That cannot be decided by any one of the priests and scholars here assembled, since they do not have the power to make their decisions effective."

... "I do not know how further to aid my cause if the force of its inherent truth is unable to do so," Father Las Casas began, having risen after a respectful interval. "For what I have here told you is the truth. Furthermore, we have not convened to discuss worldly affairs or the destinies of states. Wiser men than I are needed for such complex matters. What we must agree on is much more simple: how to follow the command of Our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for all men, and how to work for the extension of His kingdom without overestimating our own strength or underestimating the power of the Lord.

"The Lord has sent forth His apostles to baptize the peoples of the earth. The apostles' work will go on until He calls them to heaven. All of Spain has been entrusted with this high mission. The noble Queen Isabella was an instrument of the Lord when she heeded Columbus' plea and allowed him to prepare his ships—he, a simple and honest man, even though in many ways an ignorant one, and one to whom ill-intentioned opponents later did much bitter injustice. Our people must never falter in this holy mission. It was God's will that we discover the New World and bring the cross to those whom He had long prepared to receive it. God will one day ask us whether we have carried out His will, and we shall be judged according to how well we have fulfilled this will.

"If I understand Dr. Sepulveda correctly, he believes, even as I do, that that is our mission. I, who wear the simple cloth of a priest, and often experience longing for the quiet of a monastery, now dare to step before the Council only because it is not empires we must win, but souls.

"We also agree, I believe, that God created Man free, and that there is, before Him, no difference between men. But the Doctor holds that we should conquer peoples in order to convert them, and only then, in a manner I cannot quite visualize, bring them Christian freedom after subjugation.

But he who is baptized is taken into the fold and is freed of the burden of his sins. He cannot then be reproved for the error in which he lived before. Then he is a Christian under Christian law. He has been born again and he must adhere to the new life or fall under eternal punishment. Baptism creates a new man—that is the heart of the matter. If we chastise a baptized man for what he did before baptism, it is as if we forced an innocent man to atone for a crime which he did not commit. Our Lord transformed the world when He came and He transforms everyone to whom He comes. If we baptize men, we have no right to punish their former idolatry. If we do not baptize men, we have no right to be in the Indies. Therefore, I deem the wars against the Indians counter to Divine command, and the slavery unchristian!”

Las Casas had spoken under great tension and with constraint. At times it had been apparent that he held back angry words.

“I want to thank the Father for his moderation,” Sepulveda answered, “and particularly for emphasizing what we have in common. Both of us have at times been in danger of forgetting this, as I admit and honestly regret.

“Las Casas speaks about himself,” the Doctor continued, “and about his anxiety concerning the fulfillment of God’s will. For the sake of the cause I shall also have to speak a few words about myself. Only with great reluctance did I accede to the Cardinal of Seville’s demand that I present, corroborate, and justify the reasons for the Spanish war in the New Indies. I have done so in the conviction of rendering a service to the Faith. For how can the Faith be advanced if not through an ordered state?

“At the same time, I have done so because of my great concern for the honor of the Emperor—who has favored me so often and has elevated me to be his historian. I have also been driven by anxiety for the honor of my people. The honor of Spain—I must say this, even though I would far rather clasp hands with Las Casas before the Emperor’s throne—the honor of Spain has been offended. It has been offended by the contention that Spaniards under the noble and ancient flag of Castile, from the governor down to the humblest sailor—with the possible exception of the Dominican Friars—have committed nothing but the most despicable crimes.

“As for myself, I prefer the quiet of scholarly retreat to the clamor of public debate. If by conscientious work I should succeed in formulating principles which could serve a noble and wise Monarch in ruling his peoples, I would be perfectly satisfied, even more so if I myself could stay in the background. I am sure that all who know me will believe this assertion. For the sake of recognition by my Monarch I am ready to forgo the applause of a gullible world. The Emperor’s recognition has eased my life as a scholar, which by its very nature is a misunderstood and thankless one, valued and appreciated by few.

“Since I have acted for these reasons,” he went on, “it has hurt me deeply when Father Las Casas, whose onerous life I have respected from afar, attacked my book with such bitterness and prevented it from becoming the good influence it could surely have been. It has hurt me that the Father, in his zeal confusing causes and personalities, has publicly degraded me, who am but a well-meaning fighter for the honor of Spain, and has even accused me of intellectual dishonesty. What has already happened cannot now be mended. Even the trace of a stain on a scholar’s name is difficult to bear, but I shall forgive and forget, since I, at least, do not misconstrue the selfless devotion of the attacker, even though the attacker has not shown me the same fairness.

“Of course,” added the Doctor, glancing briefly over the assemblage, “my basic conviction has not been shaken during the long disputation. The Father believes that it is paramount to recognize rights which are Man’s by birth—rights which he acquires by being a human being. I believe, on the other hand, that rights do not exist by themselves, but must be derived from the organized state.

“The supreme law is to create order. Only after order is established can the demand for Christian life be considered, a demand which, to be sure, I recognize in its whole meaning, in its faith and in its hope. If, on the other hand, one considers the command of Christ as something absolute, and neglects its necessary relationship to secular order, it will, I believe, lead to a tragic confusion in human existence. And, as the present quarrel almost serves to prove, can even lead to the endangering of a great and powerful nation. But the worst consequence of this unrelated devotion, which

cannot possibly be the will of the Lord, will be precisely to preclude the fulfillment of Christ's commandments.

"For it will show that endangering a Christian state means the very endangering of Christendom, while strengthening the Christian state necessarily means the strengthening of Christendom itself. What serves to render this state strong is good, what weakens it, though not necessarily bad, is at least false and foolish. If a Christian state stands on firm foundations, so does Christendom in that state. The New Indies, from Mexico to Peru, from the Lucayos to the Isthmus, will be won to the laws of Christ only when they are subjugated to the scepter of the Kings of Spain. Measures which are designed to bring about this end serve the Faith. For this reason, I want once again to affirm my belief that the Spanish wars to subjugate and convert the Indians are fought in a just, even a holy, cause."

Las Casas had listened with growing excitement. Now he sprang up. "In the name of God, I declare that the Spanish wars of conquest are unlawful, tyrannical, and hellish—far worse and far more cruel than all the crimes committed by Turks and Moors..."

"Nothing," Sepulveda burst forth sharply, "is more abominable than disorder—nobody more harmful than the agitator."

Deep abhorrence showed on the small face of the Doctor, but the eyes of the assembly turned towards the Emperor in fear that the untempered vehemence of the adversaries might arouse his anger. The Monarch still sat in the same, slightly relaxed, but not careless posture, the fingers of his right hand plucking convulsively at his left glove. Without a word he looked at Sepulveda, who responded with a bow and continued.

"It would be unseemly for me to defend Spain from such a reproach in the presence of our Imperial Sire, although there could be no better defense than to point out the well-known high-mindedness of our Monarch. But it would be against our dignity to prove that we are no Moors or Turks. It must bitterly sadden any well-meaning person that a wearer of the cloth, a man in the seventh decade of his eventful, restless life, allows himself, in his confused ardor, to be carried away and to insult honest men. Those men, trusting in the righteousness of their cause, could bear this wrong, were it not that he has also indicted his nation in the eyes of the whole

world. For what could be more pleasing to the foes of Spain than to hear from Spanish lips that we have now been committing the most abominable crimes for years. And what if the world, which always looks for pretexts to take away from the privileged and the more fortunate, should deduce from these accusations that we had forfeited our rights, and thereby, our historical claims and our power?

“Father Las Casas’ accusations do unthinkable damage to the name of Spain and, consequently, to the Spanish state. It is my duty to say this. It may even be asked whether a man who accuses his countrymen so persistently—by assertions proved unequivocally wrong by political philosophers—should not have to be considered a traitor. I will not mention the boundless exaggerations of which the Father is guilty in so many of his writings, and I will not go beyond the word ‘exaggerations.’ Also, I will not discuss the matter of the historical role of the accuser, which I have reflected on so many times. But it is certain, nevertheless, that the actions of Father Las Casas will seem the basest treason years hence. How much longer will it be before our foes take up and enlarge upon his accusations, unless an end is put to them, as I desire as a Christian and a Spaniard? We need fear neither the armies nor the ships of our enemies, but we do need to fear the destruction of our good name, which must bring in its train the destruction of our might.”

Father Las Casas wanted to rise, but did not, as in this instant his adversary obviously dominated the situation. Sepulveda had the passionate attention of the assemblage, of whom only a few glanced pityingly at the accused. The implacable eyes of the doctor seemed to hold the monk in his seat.

*Dr. Sepulveda switches to an ad hominem argument. He calls Las Casas a hypocrite, recalling how Las Casas oppressed Indians and Negroes as a young man.*



### *Heavy on My Soul*

... “Such is the life of the man who feels himself called upon to pass judgment on his nation—on so many valiant men whose deeds outshine the utmost dared by Greek and Roman heroes. I do not charge him with evil intent. That he has offended some, that he disseminates obvious untruth, I ascribe to his fervent zeal. But the most ill-intentioned man is not as dangerous as the ardent follower of a false idea. We must judge our fellow men not by their intentions but by their effect on secular order and welfare. The judgment of their intentions and of their inmost hearts is not ours, but God’s.

“I stand for the firmness of the secular structure, any weakening of which would swiftly make it impossible for our people to fulfill their tasks here and across the sea, or, indeed, to seek the salvation of their souls. As long as this structure is firm, we may aspire to the Kingdom of God. If the foundation is firm, present and future generations may continue building the house of God layer upon layer, in the hope that one day it will be completed. The firmer the foundation, the more promising our endeavor to draw nearer to God and to fulfill His law, or to perfect ourselves more and more in the spirit of this law. The state serves the Lord only if it stands firm. If the foundation quavers, we must strengthen it before we can serve.

“I fight Father Las Casas because he shakes the foundations on which our existence is based; because he brings destruction into our lives, and because he dares to act in this way even in an hour when the order of the world is given into the hands of our people, and when we must demonstrate to posterity that we are able to establish order, and to take upon ourselves the responsibility for the destiny of the world. Because we stand before this test, I bear witness against Father Las Casas. I do so, not for my sake, but as



a servant of my Monarch, whom God has made organizer and administrator of the world. And I do so from deepest revulsion against the chimeras which befog the necessity for action and veil the clarity of secular law. We have already attained the most dangerous and glorious approach from which we can see and reach the loftiest pinnacle in the history of Spain, but if we now let ourselves be deluded by dreamers, by knights in white cloaks, we will fall headlong into the abyss. Our task is rooted in our might, and we would sacrifice both, as well as our lives, if we were to follow the 'Father of the Indians.'"

Sepulveda had delivered his speech, and particularly the last sentences, in cutting coldness, as if the accused were a well-known person who was not even present. The effect on the listeners had varied during the delivery. Open agreement had showed in the face of the Bishop of Burgos, an old adversary of Las Casas. He had endorsed some parts of the speech with a vigorous nod, others with a smile. Further, most of the scholars and councilors, particularly the Franciscans, seemed to have agreed with the Doctor; except for one of them, who had bowed his head as if in deep shame, and then covered his eyes as if to withdraw from what was going on. The chiseled features of the Cardinal had expressed displeasure. The Bishop of Segovia, who was sitting next to Las Casas, had had to force himself several times not to interrupt the speaker.

As for the Dominicans, they could not shake off a feeling of depression. Some of them threw anxious glances at the Emperor, who had shown no reaction since the early part of the speech when he had drawn his cloak even more closely around him, while others looked at their confrere with mingled reproach and pity. But as soon as Las Casas had seen through the plan of his adversary he had seemed to breathe more easily. Humility, resignation, and relief had appeared on his face. Only when Sepulveda mentioned the trading in Negroes did the monk wince as if under a heavy blow. But he regained his composure during the final sentences and was now able to answer with humble calm.

"Dr. Sepulveda has studied my life with great care. What he has told is true, and I am grateful for that, because no weakness of those whom the Lord has made His servants should remain unrevealed. Are we not in truth

just what God wants us to be? The Doctor was also correct in accusing me of inconsistency, of confusion and foolish deeds, or, in any case, of deeds which must appear foolish to the world. Yes, my life is burdened with guilt for which I can never do adequate penance. I have long since reached the age when others peacefully contemplate the results of their lives. I am now an old man, but in all the long years of my life I have not succeeded in living down my early mistakes. They remain, and wherever I go to fight for the Kingdom of God I meet the young Bartolomé de Las Casas who fought against this Kingdom and who is still strong enough to win against the aged man.

“Nothing lies heavier on my soul than the memory that I, as the Doctor said, advocated the shipping of Negroes to the New Indies to work in the place of Indians. On that one occasion I was not guided by right, from which we should not stray, but acted from pity. I believed that Negroes were hardier than the Indians whom I saw dying in every street, and I wanted to replace a greater suffering by a lesser one. But I was wrong, and thus became burdened with guilt.

“I herewith solemnly abjure my errors and declare that it is counter to every concept of justice and against the Faith—that it is utterly damnable—to capture Negroes like animals, to herd them into ships on the coast of New Guinea, to sell them in the Indies, and to treat them as they are still being treated day in and day out. I am guilty because I, a fool, gave in to my heart instead of advising according to what is right.

“It is also true that lust for gold dominated me in my youth. I am a Spaniard, and I succumbed to the temptations to which my people are subject. I have been fighting these temptations to the limit of my strength to show my people how they can be overcome.

*Las Casas sorrowfully acknowledges his part in injustice, and he recalls how God guided him to renounce his temptations and embrace the cross. His speech rises in intensity.*

... “Oh, that it were possible at all times to tell the truth to kings! If only the voices of men whose hearts burn with anxiety for the fate of their

people had a different sound from all other voices! Or that those who know of hidden suffering should not have to keep silent! But there are so unbelievably few who live solely for the purpose of bearing witness, of reporting what is true and to what degree the lives of men depart from Eternal Truth.”



### *Spain's Hour*

... The monk no longer paid attention to those sitting at the table. He stepped closer to the throne: “I am long weary of using arguments to support my fight,” he continued passionately. “You can feed scholarship to a fool and he will grow no wiser. I have no more to say, and will never have more to say than this: *God does not allow evil that good may come of it.* We cannot attain good by evil means. And our means are evil.

“Oh, if I could but hold the mirror of truth before your eyes, my Lord and Emperor, it would reflect those evil means a thousandfold, and all who looked into it would have to blush with shame.”

The Emperor had leaned forward and listened to these last words with growing interest and without a sign of disagreement. Now he made a gesture and said almost inaudibly, “Speak!”

This softly spoken word—perhaps only heard by the monk, although all understood the wish of the Emperor—struck Las Casas like a blow. He shrank back, and a terrible emotion gripped his body. Then he clutched at the edge of the table with his left hand, leaned on it, and drew a sharp breath. “I have asked permission to speak of what I have seen,” he began, “and I shall try, although I do not know whether I will succeed.”

*Las Casas describes the enslavement of the Indians, the starvation of their children, and many other injustices that he witnessed.*

... “All these things have I seen, and I could do nothing but make the sign of the cross over these mountains of corpses.”

Las Casas staggered. He leaned harder on the table and the words now came only brokenly from his lips: “And that is not the worst. For I have heard blasphemies from those to whom I preached the gospel of love. I have helplessly watched the dying refuse the sacrament in order to escape the paradise of the Spaniards. Before my very eyes the souls of the doomed plunged down into eternal damnation.

“And what cries of anguish have I not heard! The cries of those who died under the lash, and of those who were burned alive, and of those stretched on the rack—and these cries were still not the worst. Worse were the lamentations and the sobbing and the tears—and much worse were the questioning eyes of those who could not comprehend and looked up to heaven and searched and knew not Him who dwells there. Oh, what have I not seen! You asked me for the truth. That is the truth, and yet still not the whole truth. I have seen things even worse; things no brain dares to conceive, no lips to speak—sights that would fill even Satan with abhorrence. Oh, what I have not seen!”

He sank down in front of the table, pressing his hands to his eyes and shaken by convulsive sobs. Two brothers of his Order raised him gently by the arms and led him to his place at the table. Nobody dared speak. A sound of weeping filled the room. The Emperor, deeply moved, looked at the shattered man. Then he leaned back, shadowing his face with his hands.

When Charles looked up again, his face was deathly pale, as if wasted away. He looked towards the Cardinal, who arose and said: “Nobody doubts the deep Christian compassion which moves Father Las Casas. If we were free to follow solely the dictates of our hearts, even as Father Las Casas would we console the miserable, prosecute the guilty, and put compassion above every other obligation. And we will surely not reproach his ardent priestly heart for calling those guilty who may be guiltless. We believe that he truly suffers, but we ask ourselves whether this constant suffering does not cause him to see every wretched person as an innocent

victim of persecution, which is not necessarily so. Who would deny, after the touching scene we have just witnessed, that Las Casas has a heart for the Indians? Whether he also has a heart for the Spaniards we often doubt. Could it be, then, that he, as some of his opponents maintain, misunderstands his own nation, and that it is for this reason that he bears testimony against Spain? And could it further be, as his opponents also say, that he advocates the liberation of the Indians because he cannot see that their suffering is nothing but the consequence of their own crimes and obduracy?"

*The Cardinal summons a Captain to testify regarding the Indians' dangerous militancy. In response, Las Casas calls forward the knight from his voyage. The knight paints a different picture of the native peoples, repents of his corruption, and renounces his fortune. Las Casas resumes his case.*

... "The Cardinal mentioned the opinion of some that my heart goes out only to the Indians, not to the Spaniards. Perhaps, they think, with reason, for the former call me their father, and the latter their enemy. But I affirm before Our Lord that nothing grieves me more than the lot of my own people. I know that those others who suffer innocently on earth are assured of the compassion of the Lord; and even for those Indians who did not become true Christians, or who turned away again from the cross, because it was the sign of the Spaniards, even for them there is perhaps still hope that He, in His infinite kindness, will take them into his fold. But what about us? What of Spaniards?"

"Upon us fall all the blasphemies uttered against our Lord in the agony of death. Upon us falls the grief of souls who are trapped in a sinful life and will surely fall into damnation." The monk turned directly toward the Emperor. "That the souls of your people perish, illustrious Emperor, is what forbids me to keep silent. Consider everything I have said as unsaid or unimportant, reject my reasons and proofs and witnesses—except this: that we always face eternity and that in this instant the Lord is looking upon us. I, though unworthy, am a priest. You, my Emperor, are not a priest, and perhaps you do not know this deepest grief for souls about to be lost. But you, like your ancestors, are charged with the stewardship of souls, and

your powerful arm must protect them, for they are God's property. Your people shall live not only on earth, but in eternity, and for this eternal life you bear the responsibility within the power and limitations of your office."

Las Casas approached the throne: "Your people are sick, help them to recover. Clear away the wrong which suffocates them. Whatever the cost, do not hesitate, for this is what God desires of you. Perhaps this is the hour when God demands a great sacrifice from you. Offer it, Sire; do not ask how the world will respond, or whether your foes will turn it to their own advantage; put your trust in the Lord. We do not know His ways. We know only His law, and His law we must obey. What seems foolishness to men may be the deepest wisdom. You fear the consequences, Sire, if you should eradicate wrong and reestablish right? Do not fear, trust instead, and depend on prayer. We will not cease to pray. And if your people become well again, is this not reward enough for you?"

"Free the Indians, reinstate their rulers, whose rights are as authentic as yours. Make your people see that the Indians are also created in the image of God and deserve respect. This must be your mission. It shall never be forgotten and shall bring everlasting glory to you and to Spain. Now is the time for you to carry it out, and thereby show that you are the servant of God alone, not of men or of your country, and that you are King because your spirit is nobler than that of other men. Ask no one but yourself. Ask your suffering and your sorrow and your grief. Ask your love and your conscience. The voices of men cannot answer you, but if you listen, Sire, you may hear the voice of the Author of history Who at this moment wishes to use you and your crown and your country as His instruments and Who desires to expand His Kingdom through you."

Moved by the words of the monk, Charles leaned forward as if inclined to yield. Just then Sepulveda rose behind the monk: "Sire, if ever the voice of necessity, which must be heeded by princes and peoples alike, has the right to warn you, it is now. He who disregards this voice is never forgiven. Heed not the dreamer, he would destroy your empire."

"How will you serve the Lord with your power shattered?" cried the Bishop of Burgos, who had listened to Las Casas' last words with barely controlled bitterness. "Of what use is a broken reed in God's hand? Do not

forget that the New World, like the Old, must subject itself to you, and that you can reestablish order only if you remain firm. That is your mission.”

Las Casas seemed not to hear the voices. He looked unflinchingly at the Emperor, the greatest expectation on his face. “It is Spain’s hour,” he said softly, and after a long pause he repeated these words in an undertone of suppressed tears, the precursors of a tremendous disappointment.

But the Emperor remained silent and suddenly the old passion arose in Las Casas, the passion with which he had answered Sepulveda in the moments of highest excitement. But like his final plea, his passion was directed to the Monarch alone.

“What then in the New Indies,” he demanded, “belongs rightly to the Spanish crown? Nothing but a mandate. The Pope entrusted the lands beyond the sea to the kings of Castile that they might open the hearts of men to Christ and that they might infuse the old order of the Indies with the new spirit of Christian faith, but not to overthrow and exterminate this order. The peoples of the Indies owe allegiance to their kings and caciques; no mussel of the sea, no grain of gold, no fruit of the tree or of the field is ours, not one *real* belongs to us.

“Our Lord Jesus Christ wanted to enter the lands beyond the sea. He sanctified our ships with the mission of carrying Him across. We should have been the Lord’s sailors and apostles. But of this chosen fleet we have made traders and privateers; and of the apostles we have made felons and robbers. Oh, how proud we could have been of this service if only we had understood it! We should not have taken, but given. That was God’s mandate. And what was our response? We asked, ‘How much do the ships cost?’ ‘How much must we spend for the erection of churches and chapels?’ ‘It takes money for this holy mission, and this money will have to come from the Indies.’ This, alas, is how our wise doctors justify our pillage. But what better could you have done, Sire, than to spend Spain’s treasure? And if Spain had grown poor in the fulfillment of its mandate, what prouder poverty...?

“But the guilt has already become part of our lives,” he continued in a melancholy tone. “All warnings have been in vain. Spain has missed her hour. Those for whom God’s mandate still lives go about as fools, laden

with all the sorrows of the world. Oh, that God would take me from this world, so that I would not have to testify for him! Oh, that he would not have smitten me with deepest insight, and that I would not have to say what I must say now!”

Turning to face the whole assembly, he drew himself up to his full height and said in a penetrating voice: “It is certain that judgment will fall upon this land. For he who fails to fulfill the highest duty bears the heaviest guilt. Therefore God’s anger will fall upon this land. He will shatter its power and lower its scepter, and take away its islands and possessions. And if those who rise from the ruins accuse the Lord, and ask why he has brought this misery upon the land, I shall rise from the tomb to testify to God’s justice. I will answer the accusers. God called upon your fathers to perform a great mission and they closed their hearts and would not heed Him. Like unto the Saint, they should have carried the Lord across the sea on their shoulders, but they carried Satan instead. God does right if he destroys the might of this land. Terrible punishment follows terrible crime!”

Las Casas, immersed in the spirit of his words, had not yet finished speaking when the Emperor leaped to his feet, clenched his fists in utter rage, and moved to leave the chamber.

Priests and scholars rose hastily to do him obeisance. The Cardinal was dismayed, the Bishop of Segovia deeply distressed, the Bishop of Burgos triumphant. Indignation, mingled with a certain satisfaction, appeared on the faces of most of the others as they moved towards the door which had remained open behind the Monarch. Only when Sepulveda, with an expression of angry condemnation, had passed Las Casas, did the Father seem to wake from his trance. He sighed and passed his hand across his forehead and looked about him. But at that moment even the Dominicans, who had remained standing near the door, looked back despairingly at him and departed.

The monk, gaining support from the table, dragged himself back to his seat. He seemed suddenly to have aged decades. Again, as before the disputation began, he leaned his forehead on his clasped hands and thus remained, first in silence, then murmuring prayers more and more fervently,



as if he wanted to resume, with the concentration of his innermost power, the battle which seemed so obviously lost.



### *The King's Decision*

In the days following, Comacho never stirred from his master's side.

... "Do not be so downcast about your tribesmen, Father," said the Indian, looking up sadly. "Go away from this country where you are not understood, and return to the islands."

*Las Casas reflects on the encounter with the Emperor.*

... "All might still have gone well," Las Casas said, "had not my old temper and anger ruined everything. The Emperor was with me; that I felt very strongly. But I, arrogant fool that I am, believed he should declare himself for me before the whole assemblage, although I well know that he almost never speaks before an audience, and even less seldom makes decisions in public, or announces them in person. Had I lost sight of my cause?"

*Soon after Las Casas is summoned by the Emperor. He is shown to the Emperor's study.*

... Las Casas was aghast to see how the slender form of the Emperor almost lost itself in the wide embrace of his cloak, and how deeply cut were the lines of his face as pale as death.

"I have given careful thought to everything you have said," the Emperor began in a voice which, like an instrument long mute, gained back its timbre only slowly. "You are not one of those wearers of the cloth who strive for power or who try to play the prophet in order to rule kings. As I look into your life, I see that whenever you fought it was not for your own sake, but

for the sake of others. You have led the life of an honest man. It is not the error we must fear, it is the lie. I believe that it is not by chance that a voice like yours is heard. I feel convinced, indeed, that because it is heard at this particular time it must have some special significance.

... “As the Cardinal intimated, he fears that my present plans may lead us into danger, just now when we are doing our utmost to carry out reforms in the New Indies. I cannot agree with him, for is it not true that each burden that we cast off leaves us with more strength to bear the balance? I no longer can or will bear this terrible burden. It must no longer be allowed to press down upon the crown of my fathers. Must I, the protector of Christendom, drag behind me the horrors of which you spoke? It is with clean hands that I want to set about my greatest task. I do not desire the fate of Cortez, who longs to make restitution now, when it is already too late. Human counsel no longer avails; we must return now to God.”

The Emperor pointed to a bell, which Las Casas rang. A clerk brought in a document. With hands trembling with emotion, the Emperor offered the document to the monk, who was wholly unprepared for this development: “These are the New Laws. Read them and think them over carefully; they are of the greatest importance: *I intend to set the Indians free.*”

Tears sprang to Las Casas’ eyes. He leaped to his feet, grasped the proffered document and tried to read it, but could not, so great was his emotion. Suddenly he threw himself at the Emperor’s feet and kissed his hand.

... And when the Emperor urged him to rise, Las Casas cried: “Now all will be well. The fire is lit; it can never again be extinguished, even if all the tempests of the world should rage about it. The Indians have been granted the dignity of Man.”



### *The Difficult Task Remains*

... Las Casas hesitated. His eyes still expressed his deep distress. Then the Emperor gently leaned towards him. “The most difficult hours of your life await you, for it is you who must sail to the Indies to uphold the new laws—you can do so better as a bishop than as a monk. You will inspire fury wherever you appear. The predatory landowners and mine owners, and the pearl fishers who live from the misery and death of the Indians, will feel that it is you who are mainly responsible for these laws. Perhaps they will not even permit you to set foot in Santo Domingo; perhaps they will try to murder you in the streets. But it is my hope that they will shrink from murdering or torturing a bishop. Not my power, only the high spiritual office can protect you.

“I too must soon face my most difficult days. I do not, indeed, have to fear death and torture, but all else my opponents would not hesitate to inflict upon me. Above all, I fear for the fate of my newest hopes, and still more I fear,”—he lowered his head in meditation and then raised it as if to listen to distant voices—“the ebbing of my strength, the immense desire for peace. When you begged me to let you continue wearing the habit of your Order, I understood you very well, even though I would not be able to match your fervor if I were forced to plead to continue in my royal garments. It would be different if you were able to grant me permission to wear your humble habit.” His next words were said as if with great effort. “There is strength in the thought ... that others will continue to fight by our sides ... as long as we ourselves persist.”

Las Casas, deeply affected, bowed to kiss the hand of the Emperor, who smilingly murmured, “Bishop of Chiapa, poor Bishop of Chiapa!”

... The Emperor's eyes wandered from the monk to his son [the future Philip II], who stood respectfully before the Dominican. Then Charles picked up Thomas à Kempis' book and smilingly handed it to the Prince. "On the last day of the disputation, Father Las Casas enlightened me about the relative unimportance of my secular office. But the true teacher of both of us speaks in this book. Let us listen to his words once more. Read us the beginning of the forty-seventh chapter in the third book."

Prince Philip read: "Son, let not your spirit be broken by the toil you have undertaken for my sake; and be not cast down by any tribulation; but whatever happens, let my promise be your strength and consolation. I am able, beyond all measure, to reward you. You have not long to labor in this life, and you will not for ever be burdened by your sorrows. Hold out a little longer, and soon you will see the end of all such evils. The hour is coming when all toil and trouble will be no more. These things pass with time, and therefore, they are little and do not last."

"Those, indeed, are words which fit Father Las Casas and myself better than you," Charles said. "But the master reaches into every human heart. Before we start any task we should imagine its completion and our death as if these events had already occurred. That hurts us at first, but later becomes our consolation." With that he rose, squaring his thin shoulders. "I will not see you again before my departure," he said to the monk, who was bidding him adieu. Then, standing beside the fireplace, now cold, he nodded once more to the Prince and the monk as they left the room side by side.

... In the meantime the priests whom Las Casas had recruited gathered in the city. They witnessed the ceremonies at which a nephew of Cardinal Loaisa made the "Father of the Indians" a bishop at the church of the Dominicans at San Pablo. In deep emotion Las Casas received his bishop's crook. When the prelates and priests saw him in his new vestments, each must have felt how great was the burden that pressed on his shoulders.

He himself seemed to suffer more the nearer the day of departure drew. With gratitude in his heart he greeted in San Lucar the many priests who were going with him on the voyage. Many of them glowed with youthful, holy joy, and eagerly anticipated boarding the *Salvador*, the ship which was destined to carry them across the ocean.

The many insults heaped on Las Casas in Seville—even after his ordination in San Pablo—the mockery and derision he sensed everywhere in the port, in the glances of the lay passengers and porters, weighed on his heart more than it ever had before. The fleet was still waiting for the arrival of the widow of the Viceroy, Doña Maria de Toledo, who was sailing to Hispaniola to secure the contested possessions and privileges of her sons, the grandchildren of the great Columbus. Days passed, during which the impatience of the voyagers grew. The admiral of the fleet, the Duke of Medina, lived in fear that the weather would change.

One evening Las Casas, accompanied by [a] young priest and Comacho, wandered down along the river bank in the fading light, past the crowded ships. Las Casas, who had long been engaged in a quiet inner struggle, could no longer keep back his fears. He had, he admitted, argued with sensible men, to whom the fate of the Indians and of Spain was as dear as it was to him. They could not believe in the feasibility of the new laws, and, he said, he still could remember Dr. Sepulveda, whom he had met, after the Emperor's departure, on a street in Valladolid. The Doctor had passed him with a disdainful smile, like a man who, through a bitter experience, had been strengthened in the belief in his cause.

During this conversation they had reached a neck of land which cut deeply into the shallow mouth of the stream. There stones which the waves had washed ashore were piled on top of one another, and had been crowned by a huge wooden cross, whose broad arms seemed destined to bless or admonish the departing and returning ships. Las Casas sat down on the stone pile. He turned his eyes towards the dark stream which rolled powerfully down to the sea, and whose distant further shore lost itself in morasses and swamps and the wild tangles of plants.

“On my last journey from Valladolid to Seville,” he said slowly, “I dreamed one night that I had to travel this road again and again under the burden of my age and of all the things I have seen. Perhaps I shall return to San Gregorio one day, and perhaps the Lord will pile many, many more years on my shoulders, but He will not lighten my burden.”

The light of the sinking sun glided over him. He rose and looked up at the cross, whose horizontal bar still caught the sun's rays, although the rest was already in shadow.

"That we pervade the world with the cross," he finally said softly, "is not so important as that we, while doing so, be pervaded by it."

He turned, and they walked silently back along the bank of the river, which, now entirely darkened, pushed its way, turbulent and swirling, towards the impatiently awaiting sea. The wind carried the roaring of the surf to their ears.

Next day the fleet departed. The ships weighed anchor and entrusted themselves to the current, which impetuously drew them on. The *Salvador* grounded at the entrance to the harbor, and had to be freed with great effort. Then the sailing ship moved hesitantly to the open sea. To the astonishment and even to the terror of onlookers, she listed so heavily that many believed they saw her keel. Finally winds filled the sails of the lonely ship bearing the Bishop of Chiapa. The vessel, at one moment riding high, the next dipping low, hurried after the departing fleet.





# THE TRINITY FORUM

## Group Discussion Guide

### Discussion Questions

- 1** In the opening scene of “Telling Truth to Kings,” Las Casas claims that power and justice emanate from “a just God in Heaven.” Why does he choose to make this point to the oppressed natives? How might regarding both power and justice as originating in the divine affect the exercise of political power and the pursuit of justice?
- 2** The Foreword describes Reinhold Schneider’s brave truth-telling against Nazi Germany’s totalitarian government. What are some similarities between Schneider’s truth-telling and Las Casas’ challenge to the King? What are some differences? What other historical examples of truth-telling do you find compelling, and why?
- 3** The Cardinal introduces the views of Dr. Sepulveda and Las Casas on pp. 16-17. What do you make of his statement, “Many of us have a Father Las Casas as well as a Dr. Sepulveda in our hearts”?
- 4** On p. 26, Las Casas exclaims, “Oh, that it were possible at all times to tell the truth to kings!” What barriers to truth-telling does he identify? Which of these barriers have you encountered? Were you able to overcome the obstacle(s) to truth-telling? What helped you succeed, or not?

5 The Preface outlines four steps of truth-telling. Which of the steps do you find most challenging? Can you think of a situation where you needed to *tell* the truth? Can you think of a situation where you needed to *hear* the truth?

6 How does Las Casas defer to the King, while also challenging him? Does telling the truth to someone in authority differ from telling the truth to a friend or family member? If so, how?

7 Dr. Sepulveda declares, “The state serves the Lord only if it stands firm.” Similarly, the Bishop of Burgos asks the King, “How will you serve the Lord with your power shattered? ... Of what use is a broken reed in God’s hand?” What do you think motivates the Bishop as he makes this appeal? How can someone in authority determine the correct use of power and guard against the corruption that so often accompanies it? Can you think of a situation where you experienced this tension?

8 Las Casas counters the argument put forward by Sepulveda and the Bishop when he declares: “That we pervade the world with the cross ... is not so important as that we, while doing so, be pervaded by it.” How might this statement inform the role of faith in society? What are the implications of this statement for private and public virtue?

9 On p. 33 Las Casas comments, “I well know that he [the King] almost never speaks before an audience, and even less seldom makes decisions in public, or announces them in person.” What do you think of this “private” approach to decision-making? Where and how do you make decisions about complex personal, professional, or other important matters? What approach to decision-making have you seen from people you admire?



**10** Las Casas' character clearly influences the King's decision to issue the New Laws for the Indians. What can we learn from Las Casas about the relationship between character and influence? Can someone with poor character still have influence? How might it differ from the influence Las Casas demonstrates?

**11** How does the advice King Charles gives his son demonstrate his understanding of a king's office and responsibility? What lessons can we draw for effective leadership in our different spheres of influence today?

Notes

## Related *Trinity Forum Readings*

David Aikman, "One Word of Truth: A Portrait of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn," *The Trinity Forum Reading*, 1997

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Who Stands Fast?" *The Trinity Forum Reading*, 2009

Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from Birmingham Jail," *The Trinity Forum Reading*, 2012

John Pollock, "William Wilberforce: A Man Who Changed His Times," *The Trinity Forum Reading*, 1996

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, "The Oak and the Calf," *The Trinity Forum Reading*, 1992

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, "A World Split Apart," *The Trinity Forum Reading*, 2002



## Further Resources

J.H. Elliott, *Imperial Spain: 1469-1716*, 2nd ed. (Penguin, 2002)

Irving L. Janis, *Groupthink: Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascoes* (Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, 1982)

Francis Augustus MacNutt, *Bartholomew de Las Casas: His Life, Apostolate, and Writings* (Arthur H. Clark, 1909; free e-book available from [www.gutenberg.org](http://www.gutenberg.org))

Reinhold Schneider, *Imperial Mission [Las Casas vor Karl V]*, translated by Walter Oden (Gresham Press, 1948)

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