Chapter One
The Boy in Seville

March 31, 1493, Seville

He almost tripped into one of the many stagnant pools of sewage dotting the gutter running down the center of Calle Sierpes, racing down the narrow, sinuous street after morning mass in his parish church of San Salvador. Nimbly he darted over piles of dung and the other stinking detritus that fouled all medieval cities. Bartholomew was headed for the Cathedral, the center of the city, where the Admiral was expected for High Mass. He paused briefly at a fountain with cool water splashing down from the spouts. The fragrance of new orange blossoms in a patio drifted out into the street and he breathed in the sweet smells. He splashed his face and took a drink from the stream of water splashing into his cupped hands.

Springing up from the fountain, Bartholomew resumed his plunge down towards the center of the city, determined to get a good view of the Admiral and his entourage. His father Pedro and uncles had been talking about the Admiral's voyage for months. Now, finally, he had returned.

Christopher Columbus arrived in Seville on Palm Sunday, March 31, 1493. In his entourage marched seven Taino Indians captured in the Caribbean. Dressed in their native feathers and fishbone and gold ornaments, they drew curious stares from the gawking onlookers, as much impressed by the parrots as the strange "Indians." Young Bartolomé de las Casas, then eight years old, witnessed the procession into the city. It was the most exciting event of his life. It also prefigured a long life that was to follow at this crossroads in the history of mankind. Did the boy, still dressed in his acolyte robes, feel a compassion for these awkward savages who seemed so out of place in medieval Seville?

The procession could hardly have been missed. Even in medieval Spain, where the horse was the fastest form of transportation, the news of the Admiral's return from his voyage, less than two weeks earlier, spread rapidly, first through the lands of Andalucia and then to the many kingdoms of medieval Spain—Castile, Leon, Aragon, Valencia—united by the marriage of Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile in 1569. Modern Spain was emerging as these two forged the links of a powerful monarchy, but a Spaniard of the age of the Crusades hundreds of years earlier would have recognized his land and its people easily. Change came about slowly in the medieval world. But the first voyage of Columbus detonated an explosion of knowledge that would transform the world. And young Bartholomew was there.

The Admiral had sailed west. What had he found? The Portuguese were suspicious that, in the service of Castile, Columbus was infringing on their monopoly of Africa trade. But the Admiral apparently claimed innocence of offending Portuguese sensibilities or rights. He had gone WEST, not south to Africa. To Cipangu? To China? Did he reach the exotic kingdoms described in the travels of Marco Polo? The land of Prestor John where Christians still held out against the infidels? Did he reach the islands and lands of the East from whence the spices issued?

Bartholomew listened closely in the patio of his father's house, as the men sipped wine and speculated on what the Admiral would do next. Pedro de las Casas opined that a second voyage would soon be in the making.

"I'd like to be on that one for sure," Pedro, a small merchant with large ambitions, said to his brother Francisco de Peñalosa.[1]

Francisco nodded. Another brother, Juan, already was tied in with the Admiral, as Columbus was now being called. The Genoese explorer's star rose rapidly through the ranks of Spanish sailors and merchants ever since the King and Queen had summoned him to Barcelona and used that title in their letter to him in Seville.

"Did you see the gold on his Indians?" Pedro said.

"Hmmm," Peñalosa nodded. Impressed as he was by the gold, something else was equally important. "Did you notice the title by the Queen in her last letter? 'Admiral of the Ocean Sea and Viceroy and Governor of all the islands discovered in the Indies.' "

The excitement stirred by Columbus rippled out through the land. He soon continued from Seville on his triumphant trip to Barcelona, mobbed by curious sightseers and well wishers, not to speak of potential gentlemen adventurers seeking favor and a place on the next voyage. In a land where changes--compared to today--took place in glacial terms, the recent conquest of Granada and the Admiral's voyage thundered across the plains and mountains of the many kingdoms of Spain.

Only last year the Queen and King brought the last Moors in Spain to their knees in Granada and raised the cross in the Alhambra. To be a knight in the Queen's army, to hurl into battle with the standards of Santiago and the Christian saints unfurled in the wind, to slay the infidels in the name of the true Holy Faith, that's what Bartholomew and other youth of Castile dreamed of! The world into which Bartholomew was born was about to be transformed by the discoveries of Columbus, but the last decade of warfare against the Moors imbued Spain with a fervor for the Holy Roman Catholic faith that touched the boy as deeply as the news of the Discoverer's adventures. If one believes in predestination, then, taken together--the final triumph of the Reconquest over the Moorish kingdom of Granada and the First Voyage of Columbus--prefigured the boy's future controversial, explosive career as a Dominican friar in the conquest of the Americas. If one subscribes to the doctrine of free will, then the young man's choices turned him into God's leading angel to the Indians of the New World as the conquest ground them into submission and consigned the majority to oblivion.

As most eight year old boys, however, Bartholomew wasn't thinking about the great events of history. He reached the Giralda, Seville's magnificent Christian cathedral, in time only to catch the tail end of Columbus's procession. On-lookers and passers-by drifted slowly away in knots of two or three, commenting on the Discoverer's entourage.

"Did you see the natives?!"

"Did I SEE them? There wasn't much left NOT to see!" exclaimed another.

Sevillanos, like all medieval Spaniards, left few parts to their anatomy bare, partly in response to the climate but more in keeping with Church teaching. Flesh inflamed the passions, so cover all flesh. A flash of ankle was considered erotic, although when the gypsy girls danced in the taverns, there were slender arms and bare legs aplenty for the lasciviously inclined. And the Church assumed all men were so inclined.

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[1] Giménez Fernández, "Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, A Biographical Sketch," pp. 67ff.

Bartholomew finally caught up with the knot of Indians, gawkers, and Columbus's friends and family. The entourage made its way through the Arch of the Images into the parish of the Church of San Nicolás where the Admiral had prepared lodgings for his Indians.[2] Bartholomew strained to catch a glimpse through the crowd, pushing up on his toes, squeezing a view between the adults in front of him.

They were gone by the time he got to the front of the small crowd, now thinning out in the face of the closed doors in front of them. Disappointed, Bartholomew turned away and started for the parish of La Magdalena where he lived with his mother Isabel and three older sisters, Isabellita, Catalina, and Mariana.

He kicked a stone or two, walking and running as boys are wont to do, wondering about the "Indians" in Columbus's train. The only glimpse he caught was through the crowd. Bartholomew saw something bright--perhaps the bold blue feathers of native Caribbean birds--on the shoulders of one of the Indians, but the image that claimed young Bartholomew's mental picture was not of brightness, but of sadness. Unlike proud Spaniards, Bartholomew glimpsed a bowed back through the men and women pushing each other for a view of the Admiral and his Indians.

Sometimes we form an impression from but a fleeting glance, a passing sound, a momentary, ephemeral view that flashes before our eye. That image of the bowed back stuck in Bartholomew's mind as he wound his way through the narrow streets of his hometown, a place where proud and plumed knights on horseback were as common as hooded Franciscan friars swinging perfumed smoking incense in the cool, cavernous churches of the city. Mixed in with these images, the boy also remembered the sad trail of Jews--backs also bowed--leaving their homeland last year.

Precisely a year ago, March 31, 1492, Isabelle and Ferdinand had signed an edict expelling Jews from Spain. The decree was revealed in late April and thousands of Spanish Jews--members of the Sephardic branch whose home had been in Spain since the end of the ancient Roman empire almost a thousand years earlier--were given three months to pack up their belongings and banished into exile.[3] Already lumped into special neighborhoods, forced to wear six-pointed star emblems on their right arms, and hounded and persecuted by Christian pogroms since the late fourteenth century, they packed up their few belongings--for they could not take gold, silver, money, arms, or horses with them--and formed pitiful caravans heading for the ports of embarcation.

Bartholomew knew the Barrio Santa Cruz, Seville's Jewish quarter, well, for he often went there on his father's or uncle's business. It was crowded and the streets narrow, but he enjoyed the movement, the noise, the slightly exotic, foreign tinge to this community of outsiders within the walls of the great Christian nation that was Spain.

But then last year by order of the Catholic Monarchs, they were expelled. He went to the gates of the city where the melancholy column of Jews took leave of their homes, their security, their place in life, and marched to the ships waiting for them down on the River Guadalquivir to take them to North Africa, to Portugal, to Italy, to Turkey, away from Spain, into exile.

Later that summer, in June of 1492, Bartholomew accompanied his uncle Juan de Peñalosa to the small coastal town of Palos on some royal business. Bartolomé was

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[2] Phillips and Phillips, The Worlds of Christopher Columbus, p. 189.

[3] Peggy K. Liss, Isabel the Queen: Life and Times (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 262ff, an excellent chapter devoted to the "The Expulsion of the Jews 1492."

getting old enough to be of use to his father and brothers. He could read and write, was pretty good with numbers, sat a horse reasonably well, and was always curious, asking questions, learning.

Peñalosa was charged by Isabelle and Ferdinand to compel the small but bustling port of Palos to supply the Genoese navigator Christopher Columbus with two caravels for his forthcoming voyage. Palos's men made their living fishing and shipbuilding, and they had strayed south of Cape Bojador on the African coast in search of the tuna that fetched such good prices in the Andalucian markets. The Portuguese complained and Isabelle and Ferdinand slapped Palos with a fine for violation of a royal ordinance. Peñalosa helped Columbus make that fine good, resulting in the addition of the famous Niña and Pinta to Columbus's small expedition whose voyage changed the course of world history.

Bartolomé discovered he liked traveling. It wasn't far as the crow flies from Sevilla west to the little towns of Palos, Huelva, and Moguer all clustered in the same river estuary emptying into the great Atlantic Ocean. But it was an adventure for the city boy. The salt air of the coast itself was invigorating and novel. Great swells rolled in from the Atlantic, finally crashing along the empty beaches and marshes of the region in a rolling, thunderous surf. There is something about ships and oceans that transports the imagination. Small boys and grown men can see distant shores and exotic lands in their mind's eye with just a whiff of the sea and the sight of ships riding at anchor, perhaps rocking gently in the midday breezes, creaking and groaning as is the wont of wooden

ships.[4] What Bartolomé saw was a small thriving port alive with curiosity about the Genoese mariner's proposed voyage of exploration. However, it took some persuading, on the part of his uncle, Columbus, and a local shipowner and pilot, Martín Alonzon Pinzón, to put together the crew of ninety men. Going fishing was one thing. Heading south to the Canaries and then due west into the unknown was quite another. But it was a spirited and adventurous age.

There was no doubt that important things were happening in Spain during the glorious reign of Isabella the Catholic, but not all edified the boy Bartolomé. He witnessed more of the Jewish emigres in May and June streaming into Sevilla to board the ships to take them into exile. Tired, worn down, some sick and dying along the dusty, hot highways of Andalucia, they were a pitiful lot. Many Christians along the way, brokenhearted by the sight of the Jews, offered them succor and Baptism.

"Accept Christ friends, and you can stay. You can return."

Some Jews did, but most did not, wailing when they reached the ports and saw the ships.

Something familiar struck Bartolomé as he caught a glimpse of Columbus on his triumphant return through Seville a year later with his small troup of Indians in tow. They too were bent at the shoulder. Were they broken like the Jews?

Bartolomé knew that his own family was descended in part from conversos, Christians who had earlier converted from Jewry. It did not seem important in the eyes of a seven or eight-year old; grandparents and great grandparents, after all, were generally far removed from one's horizon. But, still, as he grew up, as he entered the Church, as he studied canon and natural law, he grew more conscious of how diverse were these people of his home in Andalucia: Christians, conversos, Moors, mudéjares (Moors living as vassals in Christian states), moriscos (Moors converted to Christianity; also known as conversos), marranos (conversos suspected of continuing to secretly worship as Muslims and Jews), and other terms that divided and subdivided the society he lived in.

But the temper of the times was not division and subdivision. Isabella and Ferdinand were committed to union and orthodoxy and conformity as they centralized power and control in the dual monarchy they had established with their marriage. The long campaign against the Moorish kingdom of Granada, culminating with its capture in 1492, was but one strain of the Spanish temperament at the end of the fifteenth century. It is worth exploring, even if only in a cursory manner, for Bartolomé de las Casas was formed in these times, and he carried with him much of the enthusiasm, the passion, the zeal, and the stamp of Spain into the New World.

The Spanish Temperament

What was the Spanish temperament in 1493? It is important to know, if we are to place the boy Las Casas into the man's world he would soon grow into. My Webster's defines "temperament" in many ways, but, for our purposes, we choose the first meaning, "one's customary frame of mind, or natural disposition."

Here we also need to depart a bit from the rationale, scientific world we inhabit, the one where we not only think we can predict what will happen and but also analyze

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[4] This section, largely imagined, but quite possible, put together from various sources, including Giménez Fernández, Liss, Phillips and Phillips.

dispassionately the world around us and behind us. In other words, we feel in control of much of the natural world we inhabit, and are--superficially at least--little influenced by the spiritual or non-material cosmos where faeries and spirits and myths and other supernatural forces can and do determine our fortunes. Perhaps we are in control; perhaps that is but an illusion created by our scientific world. I am not here to argue the merits of a natural, scientific, rationale view of the cosmos as opposed to one where forces beyond our apparent control--God and gods, spirits and souls, witches and the occult--in fact dictate our fortunes and our destinies. The first view is considered by many to be "modern," while the latter is labeled "traditional" or "premodern."

In the late fifteenth century, Las Casas was living in perhaps one of the most interesting of all times--the juncture of the premodern with modern times. Called the Renaissance in Europe, the age combined much of the premodern concern with one's spiritual life with the modern temper just evolving, characterized by the human ability to understand and manipulate our world. For our purposes, as we focus on Spain, let us emphasize the changes that were underway which combined elements of the premodern with the modern, the spiritual with the natural, the occult with the scientific, the past with the future.

The long crusade--called the Reconquest--by Christians to purge their homeland of Moors rises above all other affairs that Spaniards focused on towards the end of the fifteenth century. In 711 A.D. a wave of Muslims--Syrians, Berbers, and Arabs--swept across North Africa and then crossed the eight-and-a-half-mile strait dividing Africa from Europe. Led by Jebel-al-Tarik, these 12,000 worshippers of the prophet Mohammed were the precursors of a wave of Moors who soon conquered almost all of Iberia. Gibraltar (the mount of Tarik) still bears the imprint of this long-ago invasion.

For a few hundred years, an uneasy but prosperous peace ensued between Christians and Moors. Indeed, there occurred a bright center of civilization around the caliphate and city of Córdoba in southern Spain that became the richest and most powerful state in all of Europe.[5] Around the year 1000 A.D. the Reconquest of the peninsula began, led by small Christian kingdoms in the north that had survived the Moorish invasion.

The Reconquest stamped Spain indelibly with a martial culture. This is not the time or place to chronicle the impressive other advances in culture made by Christians and Moors--in the study of botany and medicine, in techniques of irrigation, in the building of libraries, in preserving and translating the great works of the classics, in architecture, and in many other fashions, including, up to the fourteenth century at least, a remarkable religious toleration between Moors, Christians, and Jews.

By the time the boy Bartolomé reached adolescence, the Reconquest was in the final act of returning all Spain to Christendom. After nearly five hundred years of intermittent warfare, the only surviving Moorish kingdom was Granada on the southeastern corner of the Iberian peninsula. Granada fell in January, 1492.

But, before the Moors invaded Spain in the 711 A.D., before the long Reconquest, Spain had been Christianized while still a Roman province. For the sources of Las Casas's Christian life, we reach back into antiquity.

Christian roots in Spain ran very deep, all the way back to apostolic times when Peter, Paul, and the other disciples took to the road to preach the Good News, or gospel,

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[5] Following, Bradley Smith, Spain, A History in Art, pp. 58ff

of Jesus Christ. Legend has it that St. James the Less, considered by many Christians and Spaniards to have been the brother of Christ, evangelized in Spain, then an integral part of the Roman Empire. There is no proof that he did. But, as we recall the story of St. James, or Santiago as he is known in Castilian Spanish, let's remember that true or not, the power of the belief, whether fact, myth or legend, was not necessarily imperiled by empirical determination in the premodern age.

The young Las Casas, like all Spaniards, was imbued with the ideals of Santiago. St. James, the brother of Jesus, died about 62 A.D. in Jerusalem, either stoned to death or flung from a tower, depending on one's source, a martyr to Christendom. The other St. James, one of the twelve original apostles and the son of Zebedee, was, on the other hand, beheaded in 44 A.D. It was tough sledding for these early Christians! Their loyalty to their calling and courage would later inspire Las Casas and other missionaries in the Indies.

Legend attributes a trip to Iberia, or Spain, before St. James the Less was martyred in Jerusalem. According to some legends, it was the other James, the son of Zebedee, who preached the Gospel in Spain for six years and then returned to Jerusalem where he was beheaded by King Herod.[6] His followers embalmed him and transported him across the full length of the Mediterranean, through the Pillars of Hercules (Straits of Gibraltar) and then up the Atlantic coast of Iberia where they disembarked at the old Roman port of Iria Flavia on the Galician coast. They carted James's body to Santiago where he was buried. Christians ceased making pilgrimages to his tomb when Roman persecution heated up, and thence the burial site was lost and forgotten for centuries.

There is no evidence in the New Testament of James's evangelizing mission to Spain. There is no evidence of his body being returned, buried, and turned into the site of early Christian worship.

There ARE, on the other hand, some tantalizing clues that the apostle Paul MAY have actually made a missionary journey to Iberia between 62-64 A.D. after a period of imprisonment in Rome. Paul later assumes a position of high importance in Las Casas' defense of the American Indians, for Paul's evangelization of the gentiles and Greeks throughout Asia Minor and Greece becomes a model of peace and persuasion which Las Casas attempts to replicate in the Indies.

St. James next appears in Spain in the early ninth century when a hermit observed a bright star each night shining over a lonely oak tree on a hill, accompanied by celestial music.[7] Local clergy investigated and they found a tomb with three bodies, one of them decapitated. An inscription announced this as the burial place of St. James. The King was called. A church was built. Santiago de Campostello became one of the leading shrines in medieval Christendom (only Rome and Jerusalem being more popular), the destination of thousands of pilgrims over the years.

How Santiago's bones were miraculously transported from where he died in Jerusalem to Spain is a mystery. But they were. And soon Santiago appeared in battle alongside Christian knights waging war against the infidel Moors. Wielding a mighty

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[6] Some from John A. Crow, Spain: The Root and the Flower: An Interpretation of Spain and the Spanish People (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1985 [1963]), p. 83. Interpreters of the myth/legend of St. James get a bit cloudy on WHICH James (the son of Zebedee or the brother of Jesus) came to Spain, but it is enough to know that both James were Saints and among the Apostles of the original Church.

[7] I don't know what celestial music is either.

sword, Santiago evolved into the patron saint of Spain, a country whose people were increasingly militant in their demeanor and orthodox in their faith by the time Bartolomé de las Casas was born. For a warrior to be inducted into the knightly Order of Santiago was to reach the apex of Spanish society at the end of the sixteenth century. There was only one other avenue to such stature and eminence in Las Casas' militant homeland. And that was the Church.

What was the Church like in 1493? That is not a simple question. It has provoked immensely diverse, complex, and sometimes contradictory answers that ecclesiastics and laymen have provided in hundreds and thousands of tracts, polemics, bulls, exegeses, and books in the past five hundred years. Bartolomé would himself become part of the answer as he grew to manhood, became a priest, and roared into the center of the debate on Christianity and the American Indians.

Profound changes were in store for Christianity during Las Casas's life. It is worth noting that Las Casas was almost an exact contemporary of the author of the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther, born in 1483 in Germany. Although there is no evidence they ever met, their paths--as reformers and activists--paralleled each other in important ways as they went about God's business in the sixteenth century. But that is anticipating the story a bit.

In 1493 Bartolomé was an altar boy in his local parish church of San Salvador and a student in the cathedral school of San Miguel, reading holy Scripture in Latin with his uncle Luis Peñalosa. Bartolomé was learning to read and write Spanish with his mother and sisters, but now he began to study Latin more formally with his uncle in the school adjoining the mighty Seville cathedral. Bartolomé became as conversant and familiar with Latin as with his native Castilian. It would hold him in good stead. Not only did he write some of his more famous tracts and polemics in a strong, well constructed Latin, but he could converse easily in the language of the Church.

When Charles I, the grandson of Isabella and Ferdinand, sent his Flemish ministers to Spain decades later to assist him in governing the stiff-necked Castilians, the few Spaniards, like Las Casas, who could converse in Latin made easy friends with the Flemings who refused to talk in Castilian.

Bartolome's father, Pedro, sailed with Columbus to the Indies in 1493 and did not return until 1499. That was five long years without his dad. After school, the boy was often down by the docks of the river, perhaps crossing the Guadalquivir to the neighborhood of Triana, a community of seamen. There he could mix with the shipbuilders, the caulkers, smell the scents of freshly-sawed timbers, hear the pounding of nails, fill his senses with the pungent fumes of tars and pitch cooking in large vats, and watch as ships, large and small, made their way in and out of the river docks and quays.

He was young enough to miss his father, waking up at night sometimes. "Father? Father?" the boy could see his father running down the gangplank and taking him into his arms, enfolded once more in trust, comforted by his father's embrace.

Yet a boy's love for his father grows dimmer with time, especially an absent one. The emptiness in his heart is never totally filled, but it is gradually replaced. Bartolomé's dreams became a compound of a yearning to see or join his dad in the islands but also to excel in his studies, encouraged by his uncle, Luis, in reading and Latin. There is gold in the Indies, but there is life in Scripture. Bartolome was drawn to both, a true child of the Renaissance where worldly and spiritual values contested for his soul.

At what point in a person's life does one make a life's commitment? Sometimes it never comes, and one is but at the mercy of fate and fortune. Sometimes it flashes like lightning on a summer's night, incandescent and instantly life-changing. For most of us, it is a seed that is planted in our heart or minds, and it slowly grows until one recognizes the calling on our lives. Bartolomé was drawn more and more to the church as he waited for his father to return and took care of the quotidian requests of mother and sisters. Could there be anything more important than one's eternal soul? The knowledge and wisdom, the mystery and mercies of Christianity slowly poured into the vessel that was Bartolomé de las Casas these years. By the time he was ten or eleven, or about 1495 or 1496, he may have already determined to enter into God's service.

His plate of questions seemed to grow as he read scripture and witnessed the world around him. Christian warriors strode over Moorish infidels. How did the way of the sword reconcile with Christ's teaching of peace and forgiveness? Jewish friends disappeared into exile, never to return, banished from their homeland. Where did they belong? Was their persecution of Christ fifteen centuries earlier still to be held against them? Where did the "Indians" who followed Columbus in his train go? Where did they come from?

The certitude he found in the words of Scripture gave him some comfort and security, even as the questions raised by the rapidly changing events of the natural world around him went sometimes unanswered, or, at the best, answered only unconvincingly. In the Spanish church of his time, where the spiritual and temporal dimensions of the faith were intimately entwined, he found a home.

Why the Church? Perhaps the old snap back to a "why" question is valid. Why not? It was his uncle Luis, the encouragement of learning and learning well; it was the comfort of tradition and ceremony unchanging and seemingly unchanged since Christ; perhaps the sweet scents of incense, the roll of Latin off his tongue, the hypnotic chants from St. Gregory, and, at the center of it all, the Mass. He was drawn inexorably into the world of the eternal faith.

At the center of church service was the Mass, or the sacrament of the Eucharist. A few years later, a newly ordained priest--Las Casas himself--sang the first Mass of a new priest in the Indies in 1510. It was a holy moment for priest and celebrants, one that is fairly simple to describe but understood only with an amalgam of faith and conviction.

There is a mystery to the Mass that transcends human understanding. The elements of bread and wine are supernaturally transformed ("transubstantiation" is the technical term invented in the twelfth century to describe the process) into the body and blood of Christ. They are the vehicles, or sacraments, by which the grace of God is then imparted to the believers who partake of these sacraments. There are actually seven sacraments recognized by the Church: baptism, confirmation, the eucharist (or Mass), penance, extreme unction, ordination, and matrimony. All of these sacraments either were instituted directly or indirectly by Christ or the apostles. They not only represented grace, but actively *conferred* grace on the believer. Without God's grace, one was separated from God. The sacraments were *central* to the relationship between Jesus Christ and his mystical body on earth, the Church.

Break the bond, deprive believers of the sacraments, and one was separated from God. There were other ways that believers placed themselves beyond God's grace, and in

the conquest of the New World, Spaniards following Columbus practiced most of them, inventing a few new twists along the way.

In the world that Las Casas would soon play a leading role, the Church both defended and attacked the Conquistadors. That struggle echoes today in our own debates over right and wrong, moral and immoral, truth and deception, justice and injustice, poor and rich.

A church which enshrined piety and peace while at the same time hosting the Inquisition prompts one to examine it more closely. Like so much of the Renaissance, the church represented an amalgam of extremes, a place where Las Casas found not only a home, but a mission in life.

The phrase "Church militant" of Bartolomé's time was no literary device to add some adjectival color to a noun. The church was at the forefront of the Reconquest, warrior-priests not uncommon in the long history of expelling Moors. The desire to purge Spain of unbelievers led in part to the expulsion of the Jews in 1492 and later in 1502 to the final edict demanding that all Moors in Spain either convert to Christianity or be banished like the Jews. There were other, powerful economic and political streams contributing to this growing age of intolerance and orthodoxy in the Spain of Las Casas's time, but none so compelling as matters of faith. In other words, the advantages of frontier warfare and conquest were measured not only in religious terms, but also in terms of captured booty, slaves, property, privileges, and honor.[8] Bartolome was drawn to the Indies--his first voyage in the fleet of 1502--by this mixture of the sacred and the profane, the spiritual and the natural that marked his age. In this he was not unusual. The Admiral of the Ocean Sea himself, Christopher Columbus, combined in his character extremes of materialism and spirituality that frequently confounded and irritated his contemporaries and produced intense controversy among his modern interpreters.

Bartolomé eventually became involved in his adult life in one of the most intense controversies in Christian history, the definition of man and the framing of human rights in the context of the discovery and conquest of the New World. His role in this great epic was squarely from within the church. So, in one fashion, the church formed Las Casas, for he derived much of his inspiration from its precepts and character. In his writings and actions, he later <u>imparted</u> much to the church's nature, leaving as deep a mark on the church as the church did on his early formation.

In the center of the church of Las Casas's adolescence and early manhood stood an extraordinary man, Francisco Jiménez de Cisneros. He led the Spanish church into a period of intense reform and renewal that gave the church a new vitality at the dawn of the Spanish conquest of the Indies. He also presided over the Inquisition, one of the most dramatic, brutal, and intolerant manifestations of the church that continues to fascinate us today.

Cisneros (1436-1517) was born of minor nobility and was educated at the famed medieval University of Salamanca in law and theology.[9] His father, like at least one of

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[8] See Stanley G. Payne, <u>A History of Spain and Portugal</u> (2 vols.; Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1973), I, pp. 205ff, for example, for a discussion of some of these other political and economic motives.

[9] This section on Cisneros and the Inquisition drawn from Walker and Norris, <u>A History of the Christian Church</u>, pp. 400ff, Payne, <u>A History of Spain and Portugal</u>, I., pp. 214ff, Liss, <u>Isabel the Queen</u>, pp. 312ff, Crow, <u>Spain</u>, pp. 148, and some other readings.

Las Casas grandparents, was a *converso*, a curious note in the personal histories of so many Spaniards who avidly supported the expulsion of the Jews and the actions of the Inquisition. Cisneros turned into an extremely able administrator and preacher under Pedro González de Mendoza, bishop of Siguenza. Then in 1484 Cisneros renounced his places of honor and privilege and became a Franciscan of the strictest observance, entering an austere, remote monastery. He took on, in fact, the way of life of an extreme ascetic, adopting a hermit's life, wearing a hairshirt, scourging himself regularly, and devoting himself to a life of prayer, meditation, fasting, and devotion to the life of the spirit. Although not quite as extreme in his devotion to asceticism, Las Casas would undergo a similar experience in 1522 when he became a Dominican monk and retired to the remote north shore of the island of Santo Domingo.[10]

In Cisneros's behavior we witness an example of the reform movement that was slowly transforming the Spanish Catholic church from one of greed, corruption, sexual license, and worldliness to an institution more faithful to the founding precepts of Christianity. Yet, however much Cisneros tried to avoid the world, the world took notice of him.

Queen Isabella appointed him as her private confessor in 1492 soon after the fall of Granada. Cisneros resisted, but the call to duty was strong. He agreed, but only if he could continue to live in his cell, coming out only when called by the Queen. His high intelligence, astute judgements, and absolute incorruptibility and asceticism persuaded Isabella to appoint him Archbishop of Toledo and primate of Spain in 1495, much against the friar's protests.

In their eagerness to reform the church and unite the country, Isabelle and Ferdinand established the Spanish branch of the Inquisition in 1478 with the permission of the Pope, Sixtus IV. The first trial, auto de fe (act of faith), was held in Bartolome's hometown of Seville in early 1481. Six men and women were convicted of secretly practicing the Jewish faith, or judaizing, and they were burned at the stake. The Spanish Inquisition was underway. Later in his life Bartolomé would get embroiled in Inquisitorial politics, and he himself almost became the target of the Inquisitors. But more of that later. Why the Inquisition did not lay hands on Las Casas will tell us as much about the institution as about the man.

Indeed. Why the Inquisition? The question has been rolled around for as long as it existed. The last victim was executed in 1826, but twentieth century killing machines, such as Germany under Adolph Hitler, have invariably invited comparisons, no matter how far fetched. Torture was regularly employed to extract confessions. Denunciations and evidence were presented in secret. Cardinal Cisneros himself became Inquisitor-General for a while, even while leading the church through a period of reform and renaissance in humanistic learning. Autos de fe occurred regularly in Seville as Bartolomé grew up. He learned first hand how religious fanaticism and intolerance were made manifest. Perhaps the experience of witnessing heretics and conversos caught up in the web of secret denunciations, quick trials, and of flesh burning at the stake at the quemadero persuaded him in part to take up the defense of the Indians.

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[10] Liss quotes Peter Martir on Cisneros's decision: "Fearing the inconstancy of the world and the snares of the Devil, he abandoned everything in order not to become caught up in pernicious gratifications and delights." P. 312.

The Inquisition has become synonymous with injustice and intolerance gone beserk, but, in the context of late Medieval Spain, it fit quite naturally, if certainly not comfortably, especially for those it tried and sentenced! It was born of an amalgam of religious, political, and economic determinants, and thrived under the sponsorship of Isabelle and Ferdinand who viewed it as a tool of enhancing royal authority in the land. When they established the Inquisition, they made it dependent upon *royal,* not papal authority. They used it not only to root out heretics--the principal targets of the Inquisition--but also to their economic and political benefit. The condemned property of convicted heretics swelled royal coffers, while politically the Inquisitors exalted royal authority over nobles and townships attempting to preserve their ancient liberties. The Inquisition thus becomes, in this light, a tool of the royal unification of Spain.

If we view the Inquisition uncritically, it comes off not only as extremely intolerant and orthodox, but also as nearly monolithic and awesome in its power. Everyone cowered when the Inquisitors announced a new auto de fe in Sevilla, or Toledo, or Cadiz. Not so. Many marranos and conversos, the principal targets, fought back. They were often backed by the nobility. In Córdoba, the Inquisitor General was thrown out on one occasion, while in Saragossa, an Inquisitor was murdered before the altar.

Isabella brooked no such impudence and challenge to royal authority, and, of course, to her determination to ensure the fidelity of all new Christians in Spain, whether they be Jews or Moors, who, recall, were forced to convert after 1502, and became moriscos.

"The story was told," observed Peggy Liss, "that in 1498 Isabel, on hearing that a *converso* was resisting expulsion from the prestigious *Colegio de San Bartolomé* in [the University of] Salamanca, which had instituted a statute of purity of blood, responded, 'if he will not leave by the door, throw him out the window!'"[11]

Cisneros tried some slightly less subtle ways of inducing orthodoxy. He offered Moors of Granada, between 1492 and 1502, expensive gifts if they came forward to be baptized. Many did, and as the word got around, even the common people came forward in large numbers.

"On one occasion," wrote John Crow, "so many hundreds assembled that it was necessary to baptize them with water flung from an immense mop twirled above the heads of the multitude."[12] Later on similar scenes would take place in the Indies, thousands upon thousands of Indians being baptized with only the flimsiest sense of what Christianity meant.

One, however, does not often associate a light sense of humor with the Inquisition. When the conversion process in Granada stalled, Cisneros increasingly pressured the Moors and they revolted in 1499-1500. The revolt was suppressed and the expulsion edict of 1502 followed. Coincidentally, Bartolomé sailed for the Indies for the first time that year, opening a vista that transformed the young man. After 1502, there were only "Christians" in Spain, but the Inquisition continued to prosper throughout the sixteenth century, as much a tool of royal authority as an enforcer of religious conformity.

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[11] Liss, Isabel, p. 321, quoting Albert A. Sicroff, Los estatutos de limpieza de sangre. Controversias entre los siglos xv y xvi (rev. ed., Madrid, 1985), p. 122.

[12] Crow, Spain, p. 148.

Cisneros also presided over a time of reform and renewal of the church. In 1499, the Pope approved the Crown's petition to reform all the mendicant orders, a process Cisneros had already initiated within the mendicant Franciscans. The papal license gave the Crown extensive power to purge the church of the venery, corruption, and worldliness that had come to characterize the clergy. For example, concubinage had long been accepted practice among Spanish priests.

Priests' mistresses, barraganas, were common. And priests, exposed to so many women in the course of their churchly duties, acquired unsavory reputations of scounderels and libertines. Pomp, ceremony, power were all associated with ecclesiastical authority. Cisneros waged an intensive campaign especially against concubinage. Reputedly hundreds of huffy friars emigrated from Andalucia to Morrocco rather than give up their concubines. Virtue and chastity were, however, only inculcated slowly. Archbishop Deza of Sevilla in 1512 asked the clergy to at least refrain from attending the weddings of their grown children and from deeding property to concubines as an outward demonstration of reform.[13]

In the field of learning, Cisneros founded the University of Alcalá de Henares in 1508, and patronized schools of higher education at Valladolid and Avila as well. Alcalá de Henares rapidly became the center of humanistic studies in Spain. Perhaps the greatest achievement--from the Christian and scholarly point of view--was Cisneros's sponsorship of the first Polyglot Bible, a critical edition of both the Old and New Testaments of the Bible.

The Old Testament was presented in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin while the New Testament appeared in Greek and Latin. A group of scholars at Alcalá worked for fifteen years on this massive, six-volumed edition which first appeared in 1517. Although a Greek edition of the Bible first appeared in Basel in 1516, produced by the Dutch humanist Erasmus, the "Polyglot Bible of Alcalá" was the first critical edition in many languages and marked a high point of humanistic learning in Spain. Eventually, the theology of St. Thomas Aquinas was given new impulse by these intellectual endeavors sponsored by Cisneros. Las Casas, as he matured and took on the cause of the American Indians, drew deeply from the study and publication of these sources of ecclesiastical and canon authority (the Bible and Christendom's interpreters) given momentum by Cisneros.

We have moved slightly beyond 1493 in describing the "Spanish Temperament" which swadled the young Bartolomé growing up in Seville in the late fifteenth century. To say it was a heady time may be understatement. We are used to rapid changes in our way of life in the twenty-first century. Technological and scientific frontiers move so quickly that we hardly have time to sit still and contemplate our very lives and their meanings.

In the Spain of the turn of the fifteenth century, Bartolome witnessed an equal array of life-changing circumstances, although they did not come with the lightning speed we are accustomed to today. The church, keeper of eternal wisdom and verities, was changing. The new Inquisition rooted out heretics and kept the populace entertained with trials and executions that titillated the masses. Meanwhile, reformers like Cardinal Cisneros and Queen Isabelle struck at the clergy's habits of corruption and venery, provoking a rededication to study, chastity, poverty (in the case of the Orders), and spiritual growth. Las Casas found not only a physical home in the church, and later in the

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[13] Crow, Spain, p. 206.

Dominican order, but an intellectual and spiritual atmosphere congenial to his nature. As we will see below, he thrived within the discipline of the church, although perhaps "love" was not the paramount principle he manifested in his long life. He would most certainly not have made a libertine, wordly priest of the type which so populated Spain at the time. On the other hand, he did embrace the virtues exemplified by his Dominican and Franciscan masters. Although he only met Cardinal Cisneros late in the great Archbishop's life, and got on the cross side of the dying Cisneros in 1516, Las Casas fit in well in to the reforming Catholic church. He later even found some intellectual support in the writings of another great reformist churchman of the times, Martin Luther.

So, we return to the boy growing up in Seville in the 1490s. Although he didn't know it yet, he belonged to "Generation C," the conquistadors of the world Columbus had just recently discovered. Bartolome was still a young sevillano, little traveled, but already witness to the final reconquest of the Moors, the expulsion of the Jews, the return of the Admiral of the Ocean Sea himself, the drama of the autos de fe as inquisitors and conversos squared off in spiritual warfare. Dramatic trials, penitential victims paraded through the streets in coned hats and hoods, burnings, the arrival and departure of ships from the docks of Seville and Triana, learning Latin with his uncle, waiting for news of his father off with Columbus on his second voyage, playing with his friends, listening as his older sisters and mother spoke of the things of their world, of babies and breads, needles and threads.

Las Casas left us precious little in his monumental outpouring of writing over the course of his life on his childhood. Perhaps he thought it unimportant in the grand scheme of things. We can imagine a serious, somber boy of thirteen or so in 1498, waiting for the arrival of the ships coming up the Guadalquivir River, newly returned from the Indies.

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