

COMMEMORATION
OF THE
V CENTENARY
OF THE PRESENCE
OF THE ORDER OF PREACHERS
IN AMERICA
1510 - 2010



Jubileo Dominicano



INTERPROVINCIAL CONFERENCE
OF DOMINICANS
OF LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN



Drawings by Fr. Félix Hernández O.P.

Taken from "Aquella comunidad de predicación". (That community of preachin).

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**FROM THE MESSAGE OF THE MASTER OF THE ORDER
FOR CHRISTMAS, AND THE NEW YEAR 2010**

THE MISSION OF PREACHING

Rome, November 29th, 2009 – 1st Sunday of Advent

Greeting and Introduction

Dear brothers and sisters,

While we prepare ourselves to celebrate the festive season I write you the last Christmas message of my term as Master. I wanted it to have the style of a letter full of good wishes and purpose, as we walk together – year by year – towards the **Jubilee for the 8th Centenary of the Confirmation of the Order** (1216 – 2016). On this occasion – 2010 – the joy is multiplied as providence allows us to remember a very significant event in our history: **five centuries since the foundation of the first Dominican community in the " Americas " !** To dedicate this year especially to reflect on "**The Mission of Preaching** " , will expand our minds and hearts, thus offering an ideal framework for the celebration of our forthcoming Elective General Chapter.

Our Dominican life is especially geared towards searching for, and knowing, God; preserving and deepening the faith, and – through our preaching – making ourselves in some way " responsible " for the faith of others, throughout the whole world.

Saint Dominic has been conscious that it is not enough just to preserve the heritage received: a religious and moral treasure which is always fruitful. It is true that such a task, in itself arduous and difficult, is not sufficient. It is necessary to renew the content of the Faith, not in itself (objectively) as it has to remain unaltered and incorrupt, but subjectively, in ourselves, in our communities and institutions, in our culture, in our life. A more mature and missionary faith is becoming more and more urgent and necessary !

**II " Remain faithful to the doctrine you have learnt....you know from whom you have received it " (2 Timothy 3:14)
We have been called to preserve and deepen the Faith.**

The responsibility for the faith does not limit itself to the search for knowledge about God. Faith demands that she be received as a gift, treasured, preserved and deepened, cultivated and lived !

According to the story of Matthew (2: 1 – 12) the Wise Men lost sight of the star but did not stop searching for the King of the Jews who had been born. They do not forget what they have seen, the star, that which has inspired them the set out. They have been given a shining sign and have continued believing in its importance, in the fidelity which has been shown to them, and so they continue to search with perseverance.

At the turn of the 16th Century, in the " new World ", the meeting of cultures began to present serious difficulties of integration. In the face of those difficulties the first solutions to be applied were anachronistic criteria, used in other places and cultures. The negative consequences, as was to be expected and always occurs, were suffered by the weakest of the people.

In the face of the challenge of the new times and places of evangelization, the Order responded – as it has tried to do throughout its history – in the General Chapter of 1508, by sending missionaries. Consequently, in the context of a deep reform, the zeal of the brothers gave a real drive to the mission.

Among those who took up the call was Fray Pedro de Córdoba. He was born in this city, of a noble family, in 1482. In 1497 he began his legal studies in Salamanca where his Dominican vocation was born, entering the Order in 1502 and making profession the following year. On completing his six years of study he was assigned to the community of Ávila along with fr Antonio de Montesinos, fr Bernardo de Santo Domingo and fr Domingo de Villamayor – a co-operator brother - with whom he would make up the first group of dominicans in America. The group set out and arrived at the island of "La Hispaniola " in the month of September, 1510 (it is truly providential that our General Chapter meets in the coming month of September, giving us the opportunity to recall the event and renew ourselves in that same missionary spirit !)

These friars began their apostolic work immediately, with very little to help them. They very shortly became conscious of the great

human potential in the new cultures, clever enough to receive the gospel, and also of the profound and difficult problems with which the mission presented them: the difficulties, on the part of the Europeans, of integration with those cultures; the claim of having just titles for domination; the justification of slavery, and the compulsive methods which were applied to the evangelization on the part of the other missionaries etc}

These friars preachers accepted, as a community and with all its consequences, the challenge of facing up to this situation. The history of the order remembers the preaching of the Advent sermon, on December 21st, 1511 , as a true sacramental. The task of preaching the sermon was given to fr Antonio de Montesinos and was synthesized in his celebrated cry " **By chance, are these not men?**" , in reference to the native people who were subjugated and mistreated.

The raising of the question marked the beginning of a long process of thought and action, which was painful but at the same time bore fruit, and from which would emerge the future *Law of Nations* and a new way of facing up to the challenge of the evangelization of peoples. Fr Pedro de Córdoba would be in a certain sense the soul of this movement both in Spain and in America, promoting the intellectual work on the issue in Salamanca, applying new methods of evangelization in America, creating a whole school of followers among those who stood out being fr Bartolomé de Las Casas who, like a new Saint Paul, would undergo a transformation from being an oppressor of the Indians to one of their most ardent defenders.

In recent years, fr Vincent de Couesnongle, fr Damián Byrne y fr Timothy Radcliffe, Masters of the Order, have consistently pointed in their diverse letters and messages to the Dominican Family the fruitfulness of the dialogue between the Dominican friars of "La Española " committed from the beginning to preaching in an eminently pastoral environment, and the friar theologians of Salamanca who took on board their brothers´ concerns, as a real spur to their own study and reflection. These, in their turn, offered solid and profound doctrinal material for the prophetic preaching of those who – on the frontiers – **admonished** the arrogant people and the oppressors; **consoled** the desperate and the oppressed; and **encouraged** those who were wavering.

Those friars preachers of the universities or in the little mud chapels continue to teach us the secret of the prophetic vocation: the

responsibility of the faith and the conservation of the patrimony received on being able to read the events in the light of the Word of God; the deepening of the faith on reading the Word with a finger on the pulse of reality. Principally, this allows us, even today, to see further and to look more deeply beyond the mere events. In that way we avoid the fragmentation of relativism; the paralysis which can be brought about by an unending analysis of cases, something which is particular to laboratories. The preachers of the universities and of the little chapels tried to read the Word of God in contact with what was going on, with the events of the time, through which God also wishes to say 'something' to us (the incidents can convert themselves into indications, clues " signs of the times " !). In this way we avoid the rigid and barren fundamentalist polarization, specific to a Manichean theology.

On May 23rd, 2007, on returning from his journey to Brasil after the inauguration of the *V Episcopal Conference of Latin America and the Caribbean*, Benedict XVI said " *certainly the memory of a glorious past cannot ignore the shadows which accompanied the work of evangelization in the latinamerican continent: it is not possible to forget the sufferings and injustices which the colonizers inflicted upon the indigenous populations, often trampled upon in relation to their fundamental human rights. But the obligatory mention of these unjustifiable crimes – already condemned by others and then by missionaries like Bartolomé de Las Casas and by theologians like Francisco de Vitoria, of the Universidad of Salamanca – should not stop us from gratefully recognizing the admirable work which divine grace has carried out among those populations during the course of these centuries. So, in that continent the Gospel has come to be the fundamental element in a dynamic synthesis which, with its diverse nuances according to the nations, expresses anyway the identity of the latinamerican peoples. Today, in the age of globalization, this catholic identity continues to present itself as the most adequate response, on condition that it is animated by a serious spiritual formation and by the principles of the social doctrine of the Church* " .

The experience of the Wise Men, like that of so many saints of the Order offers us a lesson: not to reject what we have known as being true, to be true to the faith.

We are witnesses to a certain religious indifference, to the phenomenon of de-christianization, to certain expressions of neo-paganism which move us to look at the Epiphany as the feast of the faith. The journey of the Wise Men of the east moves us to gratefully welcome

the huge spiritual heritage of which we are heirs, the treasure which those who have preceded us on the journey of faith, have passed on to us. It is true, we are responsible for the conservation and the transmission of this same heritage !

But, the following is also true: it is not enough simply to preserve the Faith. By chance, didn't the high priests and the scribes of the people, summoned by Herod, do just that ? They seem to know the scriptures and respond without mistakes to the question – information of the Wise Men. However, they were not capable of discovering the responsibility which that knowledge of the faith demanded and urged from them. They do not allow themselves to be questioned by that knowledge, they do not move themselves, they do not go in search of the One who has been announced in the prophecy; they are happy to conserve their faith without living it.

For those of us who contemplate the mystery of the Epiphany, for those of us who follow the footsteps of Saint Dominic and embrace the history of the Order as our own, it is not enough to conserve the faith, it is necessary to study it, to deepen it, according to the demands of our own life and the lives of those who are around us, the lives of those to whom we have been sent.

The truth which our faith reveals to us provokes a further search; it opens a spiritual dialogue and stirs up the zeal inside us. Being believers moves us to conform our life with our faith, to a constant study of the truth, to enculturate it, to evangelize the culture.

To deepen the faith means to deepen the principles of the faith, just as *1 Peter 3: 6* urges us *“Always be prepared to defend yourselves before anyone who asks you for the cause of the hope which you have”*. This cultivation of the faith, a true “responsibility for the faith” is inseparable from a living relationship with the Church and for that reason carries with it a profound requirement for catholicity, unity, and apostolicity which make its sanctity more visible. (cf. LCO 21).

Fraternally in Christ, Mary and Saint Dominic
Fr Carlos A. Azpiroz Costa OP, Master of the Order

IN EVANGELICAL SOLIDARITY
WITH THE OPPRESSED



THE FIFTH CENTENARY ANNIVERSARY OF THE ARRIVAL
OF THE ORDER IN AMERICA

Introduction



“ What Antonio Montesinos, Pedro de Códoba, Bartolomé de las Casas teach us are lessons in how to be human, in spirituality, and in an eagerness to dignify the human being, (...) They are men within whom the concern for the weak, for the defenceless, for the indigenous beats strongly; subjects worthy of every respect as persons and as bearers of the image of God, destined for a transcendent vocation. From this context the first International Law, with Francisco de Vitoria, was to be born.”

Pope John Paul II. Homily, Santo Domingo, January 23rd, 1979

Who were those friars ? In what circumstances did they preach the Gospel ? How far did their preaching reach? What challenges did they face? What were they announcing? What method did they proclaim for evangelization?

It is worthwhile that we try to answer these questions – for ourselves as men and women of the Dominican Family, and also for the whole Church – because the clear proclamation of the gospel will always meet with opposition.

In the following worksheets which we present, we ourselves have tried to say as little as possible. The idea is that those first Dominicans in America should be the ones who speak directly to us, through the written texts which they have left behind. The meticulous and reflective reading of their testimony will challenge our comfort zone and persuade us to rediscover the novelty of the Gospel.

It is true that the forces which presently deny and oppress human dignity are different to those of five centuries ago, just as the agents which use these forces have changed. However, enormous sectors of the world's population, throughout all the continents, continue to be oppressed, disrespected, marginalized, and eliminated. We need to dust off the profound manner of understanding the Gospel which our Dominican tradition has bequeathed us so that our preaching grows in credibility.

The firm option for the oppressed which provoked our brothers to action, the principles which supported them, and the evangelical praxis which they initiated, have the capacity to help us greatly to move in that direction provided, of course, that we have the courage to examine our methodology and our ways of doing things.

In the eight worksheets which make up this booklet you will find:

1. Historical and ideological circumstances in the "New World"
2. The condemnation: the sermon of Montesinos
3. The friars of the first community
4. The written word: their letters
5. The project of peaceful evangelization
6. Las Casas: from cleric and encomendero¹ to dominican friar
7. Study in the mission of the first community
8. The legacy of the first community of Dominicans in America

At the end we have included a basic bibliography, through which we intend to invite you to deepen your knowledge of the first Dominicans in America, so that their memory is not just limited to calling us together, but also that it provokes a renewed fidelity to Jesus Christ, to our father Domingo and to our elder brothers in the Order.

fr. Juan Manuel Pérez García O.P.
fr. Francisco Javier Martínez Real O.P.

1. The encomienda is a labor system known since the middle ages in which the crown granted a person a particular number of natives for whom they were to take responsibility. This person, the encomendero, was responsible for teaching the indians the Spanish language and instructing them in the Catholic faith. In return the natives would pay the encomendero in the form of labor, gold or other products.. The encomenderos were usually conquerors and soldiers, but some were high-ranking native people and women.

1. Historical and ideological circumstances in the "New World"



"Those who came from Castilla were not fearful of God, but they were very desirous and mad for money . The christians like to dress down to their shoes in silk, and not only themselves, but their mules also. The same silk – we think – which, if it were well squeezed, would pour out the blood of the indigenous people. This, and not that which they pretend to be, was the root cause for inventing the system of apportioning territory to the conquerors of the 'New World' ."

Letter of the Dominicans to the Chancellor Xevres

On August 3rd, 1492, Columbus undertook a journey towards the West looking for a new route to the East. On the way, he came across an unexpected world. They, the explorers, spoke of "discovery" of a "new world", but **in reality there was nothing new about that world**: it was already discovered and inhabited.

Everything turned out to be strange for the recent arrivals: the geography, the climate, the inhabitants, the sources of wealth, the customs, the religion, the social organization... They were convinced that they had reached India and, as it happened, they named those lands the West Indies. Their inhabitants, consequently, would be called "Indians".

Immediately, **the tragedy began**: the "unknown" became "not acknowledged"; the strange became the enemy which had to be fought so as to be able to impose the model of life and faith which the conquerors considered to be universal.

In virtue of the **donation of the "new world"** received from Pope Alexander VI, the Crown of Castilla signed the so called "surrenders", which would make

possible new expeditions of conquest, geared towards an effective incorporation of the territories to the command of the kings. The ‘surrender’ was a special contract which allowed the expeditionary, though working on his own, to travel in the name of the Crown, to receive certain titles from it and to retain a certain portion of the wealth obtained. All of that, properly understood, would be in exchange for swelling the royal coffers.

All of what happened from then was influenced in a huge way by the practice of the Royal Patronage, as a consequence of which the Crown of Castilla enjoyed such rights as fixing the boundaries of the new dioceses; proposing the authorities for the same, including the bishops; as well as collecting and administering the ecclesiastical alms. Furthermore, it can be said now in general, that the Church came to lose all capacity to act autonomously: alas, to be able to have meaning in the “new world” her decisions had to be accompanied by the approval – called the “**royal pass**”, of the Crown.

In 1503, the Catholic King and Queen, Ferdinand and Isabel, named the Bishop Juan Rodriguez de Fonseca, who became the principal defender of the “encomiendas”, as counsellor for Indian affairs. In 1516 the Board of the Indies was set up, later called the **Council of the Indies**, a body responsible for all matters concerning the “new world”, including the propagation of the Faith. The Crown had the obligation of sending the missionaries which were needed, and of financing their journey; though the religious, in virtue of their vow of poverty, should live from the alms received once they reached their destination.

Queen Isabel died in 1504, having left instructions in her will to the effect that the Indians must be given good, and just, treatment. However, the motive of the

PAPAL DONATION

“Making use of the apostolic mandate and with the authority of Almighty God, which we retain on this earth and which was given to blessed Peter; and as Vicar of Christ, and in the light of the present situations; we donate, confer and assign perpetually to you and your heirs and successors in the kingdoms of Castilla and León, each and every one of the islands and lands mentioned above, and those unknown, those which up to this moment have been found by your emissaries, and those to be found in the future, and which right now are not under the control of any other Christian man ”

Bull of Alexander VI, 1493

LAST WILL OF ISABEL, THE CATHOLIC

“When the islands and lands of the Ocean Sea, were given to us by the Holy See, our main intention was to make an effort to induce and bring their peoples from there, and to convert them to our holy Catholic Faith (...) and to teach them good customs, do it with due diligence. Accordingly, I appeal to the King, my Lord, and commission and send my daughter and the prince, her husband, so that they do that and carry out the work, and that it be their principal aim, and that they carry it out sedulously, and that they do not either allow nor create the possibility that the Indians, neighbours and denizens of the said islands and lands, suffer any wrongdoing to their person or to their goods, furthermore order that they be well and justly treated (...) as this was demanded of us and ordered by the apostolic letters of concession ”

majority of the Castilians who had come to the Indies to settle there was none other than the **eagerness for gold**, that is to say, to get rich quickly.

As a matter of fact, in order to secure cheap labour, the system of the ‘**encomiendas**’ was introduced. Known since the Middle Ages, it was based on the bondage of workers to a landlord. A number of Indians was assigned to each Castilian, depending on his ability or influence. The land belonged to the Crown and the work and mining of the estates and mines was the responsibility of the ‘**encomenderos**’, through the work of the indians. In order to convince the Queen of the convenience of this system, the pretext of the Christianization of the Indians was used, arguing that thanks to the contact with the Christians

THE CONDEMNATION OF THE ‘ENCOMIENDAS’

“The christians have shared them (Indians) among themselves, saying that the purpose is to teach them the elements of the Faith, but they have not taught them because none of them know them. The Christians, to whom the Indians have been entrusted and among whom they have been shared out, have been and are ignorant; furthermore they have been lived there, giving bad examples of lust, violence, blasphemy, of various cruelties; and, if they have compromised the health of their own souls with their bad public lives, how can they take pains even to look for healthy souls in others ?

Letter of the Dominicans to King Carlos I

and through their good example, the Indians would more easily accept the faith and the customs of Castilla. Encomiendas were even assigned to important people who lived in Castilla, among whom was the King himself.

The fact is that the encomiendas turned into a system of slavery and exploitation of the Indians. With good reason the Dominicans preferred to talk of the "repartimientos " (portions of territory given to the conquerors), denouncing their injustices and fighting to eliminate them. As they wrote in one of their letters to the monks of St. Jerome, when they were commissioned to deal with matters of the Indies, "*the first thing is that we do not see how this manner of holding the Indians can be lawful*".

Among **the consequences** of that colonial system it is worth highlighting the destruction of the indigenous populations, as well as the ruining of their cultures and ways of social and political organization.

Likewise, the amalgamation of, on the one hand the evangelization drive, and on the other the process of colonization with the resulting subjugation of the Indians; the Church and the State, the cross and the sword... an explosive mix. The observation of Saint Jerome, after the transformation of Christianity into the official religion of the roman empire, was becoming reality: "*since the Church came to be under the control of Christian emperors, her power and wealth have grown, yes, but her moral strength has diminished .*"

FOR REFLECTION AND DIALOGUE

1. Can it be affirmed that the fact that the Church would delegate to a political power the most fundamental work entrusted to her, which is that of evangelization, represented a resignation by the Church of its role ? By chance, in such circumstances, is acceptance of the Christian Faith equivalent to becoming a servant of the Crown of Castilla ?
2. Globalization entails, among other things, new financial and economic problems, cultural and religious tensions, emigrations, new vulnerabilities of ethnic groups... To what extent can the processes of globalization be considered to be the emergence of a new world ? Are we free from relational systems which could be considered colonial ?
3. Does the church in her evangelizing mission take into account the inherent problems of globalization ? Or do we continue with mental frameworks and methods belonging to other times.
4. What external conditionings, particular political, should the church overcome in our world in order to announce the Gospel with freedom and fidelity ?
It was in September, 1510, when the first Dominicans arrived in Hispaniola, the name given by the spaniards to the island of the Caribbean Sea, currently home to the Dominican Republic and Haiti.



2. The condemnation: the sermon of Montesinos

“ Are these not human beings ? Have they not got rational souls? Are you not at all bound to love them as you love yourselves ? Do you not understand this ? Do you not feel it ?”

Sermon by Fr. Antonio de Montesinos

Their mission consisted in the pastoral care of the Spaniards and, fundamentally in the evangelization of the indigenous peoples. Consequently, as soon as they arrived they came into direct contact with native peoples, especially with the “naborias” , the name given to those who were servants in the homes of the Spaniards. **Very soon the Dominicans became aware of the bad treatment** and the abuse committed against the inhabitants of the island.

Juan Garcés, a Spaniard who was being sought by the law for having killed his indigenous wife, asked for asylum in the convent of the Dominicans and finally went on to ask for the Dominican habit of the lay brother. He, who knew very well of the said injustices through his personal experience, informed the friars about them with great detail and precision.

In the face of clear evidence of submission and the oppression of the Indians, the Dominican community dedicated **many hours of meetings to study the problem in depth**, until they decided to make a public condemnation of it. They could not keep silent as “ *they felt obliged to do it because of the profession they had made.*”

They prepared the denouncement in the form of a sermon, to which they gave long and hard deliberation, with the participation of the whole Community. Once they decided on the text and wrote it down, it was signed by each one of the members of the community. Fr. Pedro de Cordoba, who was the vicar, commissioned Fr Antonio Montesinos to preach it at the High Mass on the Fourth Sunday of Advent which was December 21, 1511, just a little more than a year from the day of their arrival at the island.

In spite of the fact, as we have said, that it was a written sermon, the original text was not preserved, but only an extract which, later on, Fr. Bartolome de Las Casas would incorporate in his work on the History of the Indies (Book III, chapter 4), where one can read:

“Sunday arrived and at the time for preaching, Fr Antonio de Montesinos got up in the pulpit and took as the theme for the sermon, which was written and signed by all the other brothers, *“Ego sum vox clamantis in deserto”*.

“I am the voice of Christ crying in the desert of this island, therefore, it is right that you listen attentively (...) All of you are in mortal sin and in it you live and will die for the cruelty with which you treat these innocent people.

Tell me, by what right or justice do you keep these Indians in such cruel and horrible servitude...? By what authority have you declared such detestable wars on this people who were living, calmly and peacefully on their lands, where you have allowed an infinite number of them to be consumed in their sickness, resulting in death and destruction never heard of before? Through the excessive work you demand of them, they fall ill and die, or rather, you kill them with your desire to extract and acquire gold every day. And what do you care of the person who instructs them in the Faith and that they know their God and Creator, are baptized, attend Mass, keep holy days and Sundays?

Are these not men? Have they not rational souls? Are you not bound to love them as you love yourselves? This, do you not understand? This, do you not feel? Are you in such a profound sleep that you are lethargic? Be certain that in such a state as you are, you can no more be saved than the Moors or Turks who lack and do not want the Faith of Jesus Christ.”

The key points of the denunciations made by Montesinos in the name of all his community must be understood in the light of judicial practice and can be structured in the following manner:

1. The oppression to which they were submitting the Indians was so grave that it could be compared with the pronouncement of a guilty verdict for some crime committed. Thus it supposes the right of an authority to judge and give sentence, as well as the right to execute it. That is why the brothers would ask: "With what right, with what authority and with what justice does all this happen?"
2. The principal root of the abuse committed against the Indians and, therefore, the fundamental reason for the denunciations, consisted in the lack of acknowledgement of the human dignity of the Indians. And so, the questions: "Are these not persons? Do they not have rational souls?" The other arguments, like the need to evangelize the Indians and baptize them, presuppose the previous ones.
3. The Spaniards, obsessed by the thirst and eagerness for gold, forgot that their Christian responsibility obliges them to love the Indians as they love themselves and to announce the Good News to them, so that they know, love and worship the God of Jesus Christ.
4. It was the community of friars, therefore, who in the name of human dignity and Christian duty, could and must give the following sentence against the colonizers:
 - All of you are in mortal sin; in it you live and in it you die.
 - In the state you are, you cannot be saved, as your behaviour is equal to a lack of faith in Jesus Christ, and you have no desire for it.
 - If you continue mistreating the Indians, know for sure that the sins you confess will not receive our absolution.



3. The friars of the first community

“ There is nothing which gives so much freedom of word, nothing which can give so much encouragement in dangers, nothing which can make men so strong like possessing nothing, not carrying anything with us. And so whoever wants to have great strength must embrace poverty, must despise this present life, and must think that death is nothing. That could do more good for the Church than all the opulent and powerful people; much more than those same people who prevail over everything.”

St. John Chrysostom. Homily II on Priscila and Aquila

We do not know if Bartolome de Las Casas knew of that homily of St. John Chrysostom, but it matters little, because the reflections just quoted form part of the common experience and evangelical wisdom. What is true is that, after having referred to the sermon of Montesinos, Bartolomé de Las Casas wrote in his *History of the Indies*: “ *With his companion he goes to his thatched house where, by chance, they did not have anything to eat, other than some cabbage soup without oil, which sometimes occurred* ” .

Indeed, “by chance”, as the sermon of the Dominicans, as one can well imagine, had caused a tremendous commotion and **immediately a protest was organized** to put pressure on the Dominicans by way of the highest authority of the island. When the governor, Diego Colón, visited the friar’s hut to threaten them that, if they did not retract their sermon, they could gather their things and

take a ship back to Spain, Pedro de Córdoba was able to answer him: “ *Truly, sir, in doing that, we would not have much work.* ”

And so it was the case, for **the possessions of the friars were limited to a handful of things**. For their house, they had a hut loaned to them by somebody named Pedro Lumbreras, and which was located in the back of his farm yard. Their normal diet consisted of cassava bread (bread made of roots and of very little substance), cooked cabbage (very often without oil, only with red dwarf pepper, the pepper of the Indians), some eggs and, from time to time a little fish if it turned up. Their beds were cots made out of branches of trees placed over forked legs, and covered with mattresses of dry straw. Their clothes were made of crude and rough material and their tunics were made of badly combed wool. In addition to those things, there were utensils for celebrating Mass, and “ *some booklets which maybe could be fitted into two boxes* ”, as Bartolomé de las Casas would later say. To organize the return to Spain under such conditions would have not demanded, indeed, a great effort.

Who were those friars? The Master of the Order, Fr. Tomás de Vio Cayetano, had asked the Provincial of Spain to obtain the required permission from the Crown of Castilla, to send fifteen missionaries to the “ new world ”. In September of 1510, as we have said, the first four arrived: fr. Pedro de Córdoba, as Vicar, fr. Antonio de Montesinos, already a renowned preacher in Castilla, fr. Bernardo de Santo Domingo, the most learned of them, and fr. Domingo de Vil-lamayor , a cooperator brother, who shortly afterwards had to return to Spain. Successively, other friars arrived until the required number was completed.

Over and above their names, it is interesting to know **how they understood the mission of the Order** and with what criteria they put it into practice in a novel, complicated and conflictive situation. We centre our attention on two aspects: the environment in which they were formed, and the religious mode with which they undertook their project of evangelization.

We can easily perceive the type of **formation received by those friars** if we realize that they were heirs of the spiritual mind of fr. Juan Hurtado de Mendoza. During the XIV and XV centuries, in part as a consequence of the black plague, religious life saw itself reduced to a state of laxity and collapse - the so-called “cloister” - in which it practically lost its reason for existence. In an effort to return the freshness and original meaning to Religious Life, the Dominican Province of Spain had created the Congregation of the Observance, made up of those convents where regular observance and the purpose of the Order were lived in all their integrity and purity.

The promoter and soul of the aforementioned reform was, in fact, fr. Juan Hurtado de Mendoza, a shining and fervent soul, who personified the spirit of Saint Dominic. For a long time he dedicated himself to teaching, as Master of Theology, giving the last years of his life fully to the apostolate with the people. In his life those two essential elements in the mission of the Order, which are study and preaching, came together. Among the regular observances, he insisted on poverty, which he considered to be one of the most authentic signs of religious consecration, and on obedience as the guarantee and expression of fidelity to the communal spirit of the Order.

Fr. Juan established a school and left a splendid legacy, as his disciples held on to what they had learnt from their master with great honour: rigour in poverty, assiduousness in prayer, constancy in study and zeal in preaching. Among those successors were to be found the friars who preached the Advent sermon through the mouth of Montesinos.

Such was the formation which was the creator of the **religious mind which was working in their project of evangelization**. The words with which fr. Domingo de San Pedro, Master of Novices in the Convent of San Esteban in Salamanca, would send off the forty missionaries who accompanied fr. Bartolomé de Las Casas, as he took possession of the bishopric of Chiapas in 1544, reflect very well the evangelical courage with which the Order made itself present in American lands. He said to them:

“I am sure, my sons, that I will never see you again, in the first place because my long years have me very near death and, secondly, because even if I should live many years, I do not think that you are such cowards that, having gone to do battle, where one conquers with perseverance, you would then return to your mother’s home.

My insides are being torn up with pain on seeing you go, as I have raised all of you from a very early age, and I have begun to reap the fruits of my labours from your profession and virtue, your prudence and learning. But on seeing you set off so determined to fulfil the ministry which you professed in the Order of our Father Saint Dominic, which is the extension of the Gospel, the good and health of our souls, mine fills with delight and happiness (...) As courageous people you have begun, as strong ones persevere, as the cause for which you are going is God’s cause and He will always help you with his grace. The dangers are many, but his help will be greater so that you come out of them well. Remember our glorious Father, Saint Dominic (...)

I do not know if there are heretics or enemies of the faith of Jesus Christ, our Lord, in the land to which you are going. But, through reliable information, I am certain that in that land there are many who have many offences. You are going to contradict them and to oppose their actions (...) and to free the native peoples, who they are unjustly keeping as slaves (...)

You are not coming out of a place where one does not need to fight: as I have seen training well in works of mortification and penance to the point of having to ask you for moderation so that you would not exhaust yourselves. Do not forget them, I beg you (...) mainly, holy poverty. Be aware that you are going into a land of temptation where gold and silver tamper with the senses and make the soul drunk, taking a man out of himself to make him forget the obligations of his state in life. When you received this holy habit, you left behind all that was yours. Do not now accept what is not your own. And he who so liberally gave all he had to God, let him not receive from men that which will make him lose what he has saved, stored in a place from which robbers cannot steal, in which rust cannot eat it or break it up.

Let us always hear in this holy house good news about you. And I beg you on behalf of all the friars here that you communicate with us often about the adversities you are facing so that we may help you with them through the prayers of your brothers, likewise all that happens to make us happy ” .

The friars were made of that mindset, they who, allowing themselves to be touched by the suffering of the Indians, had the integrity to give it voice and not to let themselves be intimidated by the interests of the ‘encomenderos’ who intended to blackmail them through the mouth of the governor.

FOR REFLECTION AND DIALOGUE

1. What are the dangers against which the Master of Novices warns those who are being sent? What is the source of his confidence in them? What else captures our attention in his words of farewell?
2. What are the essential elements of the charism of the Order which we find in the formation and life of the friars of the first Dominican community in America?
3. In the pastoral Constitution, *Gaudium et Spes*, of Vatican II, the Church says that “ *the joys and the hopes, the sorrows and anxieties of the people of our time, especially of the poor and those who suffer, are at the same time the joys and hopes, sorrows and anxieties of the disciples of Christ. There is nothing truly human which does not find an echo in his heart* ”. What aspects of our Dominican tradition enable us to achieve that ecclesial meaning?
4. The spreading of the Gospel involves, on the one hand, conflict with those who do wrong to people through their injustices, and on the other, the liberation of the victims of injustice. Do we cultivate that sensibility in our places of formation, both institutional and permanent?.

4. The written word: their letters



“The first thing is that we do not see how this way of the Christians commanding the Indians, can be licit; rather we believe it to be against all divine, natural and human law. It is enough to say that all these Indians have been, and are destroyed in soul and body and in their posterity.”

Letter to the Commissioners of St. Jerome

The “letters” are **reports written by the Dominican community**, about the situation of the Indians within the system of the ‘encomiendas’. In the letters, the Dominicans condemned the bad treatment which the Indians were receiving and the contempt in which they were held, they analyzed the causes, identified those responsible, and proposed specific solutions.

Those documents reflect the experience of **the impossibility of announcing the Gospel in a situation of oppression** practiced by those who called themselves Christians. It was because of that situation that the friars made proposals capable of creating the conditions where respect for the dignity of the Indians would be a prerequisite to the preaching of the Gospel.

According to general opinion, all the letters were written in the same year, as far as we know, 1517. After the death of King Fernando V, there was a period of uncertainty and relative dispersion of authority: regents of the Kingdom, with Cardinal Cisneros in charge; the monks of St. Jerome commissioned by Cisneros for the matters dealing with the Indies; Xevres, the Chancellor of Carlos I; and the King himself, who, though a minor, exercised some duties together with his mother, Juana.

The letters **are the product of a practical spirit**, as they were always addressed to those who, because they held some kind of authority, had a certain capacity

to intervene in the matter of the Indies and to remedy the injustice which the Indians suffered, with the haste which the situation demanded.

The friars expressed their opinions respectfully in the letters, but **without any kind of fear** and irrespective of the rank of the person to whom the letters were addressed, even if it was to the King himself. Thus, for example, in the letter written to Carlos I, to inform him of the events that were happening in the Indies, fr. Pedro de Córdoba pointed out to him that, from their point of view, “ *the life of your blessed soul is tied up in that situation* ” .

There are five letters which have come down to us. Three of them were endorsed by all the friars of the community, two of which were endorsed by the franciscans ; while the other two were signed only by fr. Pedro de Córdoba.

Given that it is not possible here to reproduce the letters in their entirety, we show **their most important contents**, trying to order them thematically.

Contempt and theft

“Dogs are considered with more respect and thought to be of more value than the Indians.”
“ The reasons which existed for killing such a great number of people were these: one, that all those who came through here believed that because these people are without faith, they could indifferently kill them, capture them, take their lands, possessions, dominions, and all their things, and none of that would upset their conscience. Another reason was that the Indians were a tranquil, peaceful people and without arms. They were joined by those who passed through here, or the majority of them, the scum of Spain, greedy people and robbers ” .

Letter to Chancellor Xevres

Exploitation at work

“ Making them do hard labour all day, suffering from the burning heat of the sun, which in these lands is very strong, from the rains, winds, and storms; being barefooted and naked in animal skins, perspiring under the burden of the work, having no place to sleep at night other than the bare floor, not eating or drinking to sustain life; even those without work were killed by starvation and thirst, and in their sickness they were considered much, much less than the beasts they have under their control, as even those are given medical treatment, but not the Indians” .

Letter to the King

Consequences: suicides, abortions, infanticides

“Because of those bad and hard jobs, the Indians themselves would choose and have chosen to kill themselves, preferring death rather than having to face such strange work.” “ The women, exhausted from the work, have avoided conceiving and giving birth because pregnancy and childbirth would pile work on top of work; while many other women who were pregnant have taken something to induce labour, and have aborted the babies; and others, after having given birth, have caused the death of their own children with their own hands in order not to subject them to, nor leave them under, such harsh servitude.”

Letter to the King

The friars proceeded, on the one hand, to **condemn the abuses suffered by the Indians**, both through the contempt for their lives and through the theft of their properties, and the exploitation of their work, which must have created situations so extremely humiliating for the Indians so as to lead them to choose suicide, abortion and infanticide.

Through their letters the friars tried, on the other hand, **to make the different authorities face up to their own responsibilities** .

“ As your reverences are very religious people, very learned, fearful of your consciences... I ask your reverences and beg you to remember how great and dangerous this business is, and now, placed in your hands, it must be one thing or the other. Take measures so that something once done, and which later cannot be undone, does not remain as an ongoing anguish and burden for your consciences.

*Letter to the Commissioners of
St. Jerome*

“Your Highness must know what is happening, as the eternal life of your blessed soul depend on it. The grace and the salvation of Your Highness are not secure if, with knowledge of so many ills, you do not put in remedies in place so that this people can live in freedom.”

Letter to the King

“ In your hands is the yes and the no of all the wellbeing of these kingdoms.”

Letter to Chancellor Xevres

Finally, they pointed out the **measures capable of offering a remedy** for that situation:

- a. The complete and immediate suppression of the 'encomiendas', in such a way that the Indians "**will not serve even the King**". (Letter to the Regents)
- b. The restitution of their properties by the 'encomenderos', as "everything which a Christian has, or has acquired here, has come from the insides, the sweat and the blood of the Indians." (Letter to the Regents)
- c. Help them in the recovery of their health so that "*they can procreate*" (Letter to the Commissioners of Saint Jerome) and "*so that they do not become extinct.*" (Letter to the Regents)
- d. In addition "*being in extreme need they must be attended to, if necessary with the belongings of the King.*" (Letter to the Regents)

The suppression of the
encomiendas

" We think that they (the Indians) must be released from the power of the Christians and set free (...) Allow them to go to their yacuyeces (villages) and do not entrust them to the Christians, because even though they will not gain anything for their souls, at least they gain in life and natural reproduction, which is not as bad as losing everything. Then there would be the opportunity for the friars to walk among them, and they would have a place to teach them and to preach, which is not possible now".

(Letter to the Commissioners of Saint Jerome)

Ultimately, what was intended for the moment was to stop that system, to return what had been stolen and secure the material well-being of the Indians with all the economic means available. Afterwards, "*time will tell if something else can be done*". (Letter to the Regents)

It seems that, in the face of the condemnation of the abuses committed and seeing the impossibility of controlling the behaviour of the conquerors, the encomenderos and the slave merchants, Carlos I began to think about the possibility of abandoning the lands incorporated into the Crown, which, in the end, did not happen. What would have happened in that case is another question.

FOR REFLECTION AND DIALOGUE

1. Much of our social, political and economic analysis loses itself in abstraction, attributing “responsibilities” to the system, the structure... Certainly, they are important, as the “*structures of sin*” “*grow stronger, spread, and are the source of other sins, conditioning the behaviour of human beings*”, but it is no less true that such structures, “*are rooted in personal sin, and thus are always linked to the concrete acts of the people who introduce these structures, and make their elimination difficult.*” (John Paul II - *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, 36) Do we have the courage to identify and point out the personal responsibilities which are at work in the violations of human rights?
2. The friars argued that, if it were necessary, even the goods of the King should be employed in service of the indians. Let us say, as before, that the friars had learnt from the Fathers of the Church and from Saint Thomas that, as he wrote in the *Suma de teología*, “*According to the natural order instituted by divine providence, the inferior things are ordered towards the satisfaction of the needs of human beings. Therefore, for the distribution and appropriation which comes from human rights, no one should block these goods being used for the needs of people. For that reason, the goods which are surplus to requirements, and which some people possess, are due by natural right to be designated for the sustenance of the poor*”. Have we a proper knowledge of the tradition of the Church and her social teaching, identifying ourselves with it ?
3. It is true that serious uncertainties and risks of error always weigh heavily on proposals for concrete solutions. But the condemnation without announcement, the identification of problems without the offer of alternatives, is particular to those who John XXIII called “*prophets of misfortune*”. Do we have the courage to propose solutions and do we arrive at them with the necessary discernment ? Do we dare to announce the Word with certainty?
4. Christian salvation is universal and comprehensive, and is directed, as Pope Paul VI pointed out, “*to all humanity and to all of the human being*” (*Populorum progressio*, 14) which includes the conditions of health, education, food, shelter, clothing, etc. Does our apostolic work become watered down in any way ? Do we reject spiritualism with the same vehemence as we do materialism ?



S. The Project of peaceful evangelization

“They (the Indians) being such gentle, obedient and good people, if preachers entered alone among them, without the force or violence of these ill-fated Christians, I think that a church nearly as excellent as the first one could be formed among them”.

Letter of fr. Pedro de Córdoba to the King

Convinced, on the one hand, of the impossibility of announcing the Gospel in a system of oppression and contempt and, on the other hand, trusting in the power of the Word and in the good treatment of the Indians, fr. Pedro de Córdoba toiled diligently to **obtain a land free of the presence of soldiers and of the encomenderos**, or as he would say, “ *a land neither scandalized nor agitated by the christians.*”

In a letter addressed to fr. Bartolomé de Las Casas on one of the occasions when he was in Spain, fr. Pedro de Córdoba urged him to do all he could in order to obtain such a royal concession. King Fernando granted them the region of Píritu, on the Costa de las Perlas (Venezuela), for that purpose.. In 1514, fr. Pedro **was able to get the project of a peaceful evangelization**

In search of the concession

“...I worked to bring a hundred leagues of that firm land with the people of Cumaná, with the prohibition on behalf of the King and with grave punishments for any Spaniard who dared to enter those lands, but they must leave that land free where only the Dominican and Franciscan friars would preach.”

Letter of fr. Pedro de Córdoba

underway, sending fr. Antonio de Montesinos, fr. Francisco de Córdoba and fr. Julián Garcés, the encomendero who had become a cooperator brother. Montesinos fell ill during the journey and had to remain in Puerto Rico.

The experience was promising and **the friars were very hopeful**, dedicated in body and soul to their new apostolic work. However, despite the ban on entry, a group of Spaniards looking for divers to collect pearls at the bottom of the sea entered within the limits of the mission around the middle of 1516; they kidnapped the Chief Alonso, whom the friars had known and had baptized in the city of Santo Domingo, and along with him another sixteen Indians were also kidnapped. The Indians took revenge by killing the friars, as they thought that they had been in connivance with the kidnapers.

Fr. Pedro de Córdoba was so convinced of the possibility and efficacy of a peaceful evangelization that he did not give up and decided to repeat the experience, sending new friars to the north of Venezuela, this time accompanied by Franciscans. But a new failure occurred in 1520, when the indigenous killed the missionaries as a reaction to the capture of the indigenous of the mission who were to be sold as slaves in Santo Domingo. **The death of the friars was interpreted in two ways:** while the colonizers maintained that, in view of the evil of the Indians, they should only be treated by force, the Dominicans understood the reaction of the Indians to be the result of a provocation and, in fact, they did not weaken in their missionary dedication.

Fr. Pedro de Córdoba died a few months after this second failure, at the age of 39. There is no doubt that one of the causes of his untimely death was the profound impact which the fate of his brothers provoked in him, as well as the bottomless hope which he had placed in the viability of a peaceful evangelization.

It was **fr. Bartolomé de Las Casas who did have success** in getting the project of peaceful evangelization underway. He did so in Vera Paz (Guatemala), also called Tezulutlán which, curiously, means “land of war”.

A promising experience

“From what I know, in the place where the monastery is, the friars had the Indians as catechumens and many children –boys and girls – were baptized;

the adults are baptized only when they are in danger of death. This witness (fr. Pedro de Córdoba) knows that in Cumaná there are some adults baptized and married.”

*Report to the Commissioners
of St. Jerome*

Here we offer a summary of the **entry into Tezulutlán**, which was later told by Fr. Antonio de Remesal.

“ In Santiago de Guatemala and in San Salvador the conquerors laughed at the book “ De unico vocationis modo ” by fr. Bartolomé de Las Casas and said that if “ with words and persuasion” he was converting the Indians to the pale of the Church and he was putting into practice what he wrote in rhetoric, they would drop their weapons and be considered unjust soldiers and captains. And they said to them (the friars) why were they not going where the brave Indians were in Tezulutlán with only “ words and holy exhortations ”.

Fr Bartolomé de Las Casas offered to go to subdue the Indians with neither arms nor soldiers, but only with the Word of God. He put one condition: that the Indians were not to entrust themselves to anyone and that they would be free vassals of His Majesty.

They wrote parodies or verses in ‘quiché ’ (one of the Mayan tongues) telling the story of the creation of the world, the fall of man, the exile from paradise, the deluge, the death of the Son of God and his resurrection.

They put music to them to the sound of the instruments of the Indians and taught four Indians of Guatemala, who traded with de Indians of Quiché, to sing them

When the merchants arrived at the town’s plaza where the Chief lived, they opened shop and people came to see and buy the new merchandise. The traders began to sing the poems. The people were left surprised as they had never heard anyone tell those stories. The Chief remained silent, waiting to hear them again. The songs went on for eight days. And the Chief asked them to explain to him what they were singing. They said that they did not know more, but that the fathers would be able to explain them to him. “ And who are the fathers ? ” he asked. The merchants described them as dressed in black and white, with their hair cut in the form of a garland; that they did not eat meat, nor did they want gold, nor blankets, nor feathers, nor cocoa; that they were not married nor did they have sin because they did not deal with women; that they sang the praises of God day and night. And that, if they send for them, they would gladly come and explain to him what they had sung in the verses. The Chief sent one of his brothers along with the merchants to Santiago, and asked him to observe the fathers well and to check properly to see if they had gold.

When the Chief's brother reached the father's house he observed, in silence, everything they were doing. He returned to his land with fr. Luis Cáncer.

The Chief had great parties for him, with decorations of branches and triumphal arches. As a sign of respect he would not dare to look him in the face. As fr. Cáncer was barefooted, they swept the ground. And the Chief tore down his idols and burnt them. And they stopped sacrificing parrots. And every evening they sang the couplets.

The rains had stopped and fr. Bartolomé de Las Casas also went to Tezulutlán, the "land of war".

In support of the historicity of the account we must point out that the songs referred to have been found in a manuscript of the XVI century in k'ekchi (language of Mayan origin). Five centuries later, **the memory of those first Dominican friars continues to live on among the indigenous people of Vera Paz.** When, in 1955, the Dominicans once again took charge of the parish of Rabinal (Baja Vera Paz), the people responsible for the confraternities of the parish went to greet them and in the course of their conversation asked the friars if they were "*the friars of the Virgin*", of Father Las Casas. They told them that yes, they were Dominican friars, those of the Rosary, of the same Order as Father Las Casas, Father Angulo and their companions. The next day the confraternities returned with a beautiful silver monstrance, full of symbolism, whose base is a small statue of St. Thomas Aquinas, the singer of the Eucharist, with his arms raised holding the monstrance. And they explained to them: "*When you left here or they expelled you (at the time of the independence) you left this monstrance, which we have kept safe. Now that you have returned we are giving it back to you.*"

It is interesting, above all else, to realize that unlike what happened in other places, **in the areas of America which were evangelized by the Dominicans** (Oaxaca and Chiapas in Mexico; Vera Paz and Quiché in Guatemala; Pasco in Colombia; Alto Perú; Ecuador and Bolivia) the populations not only continue to be mostly indigenous, but have also retained their cultures, their languages, their customs and their organizational traditions. This demonstrates that the evangelization which the Dominicans promoted was not confused with the acculturation of the indigenous communities - that is, to implant the culture of Castilla among the Indians - but that it consisted in a true inculturation of the Gospel.

FOR REFLECTION AND DIALOGUE

1. The missionary impulse was central to St. Dominic's religious experience and is at the core of the Order. How is our community, group or movement doing with regard to this?
2. Pope Paul VI encouraged the evangelization of cultures, but without forgetting that the Gospel is independent in regard to them all: "*Though independent of cultures, the Gospel and evangelization are not necessarily incompatible with them; rather they are capable of permeating them all without becoming subject to any one of them*". "*Evangelization loses much of its force and its effectiveness if it does not take into consideration the actual people to whom it is addressed, if it does not use their native tongue, their signs and symbols, if it does not answer the questions they ask, and if it does not touch their actual lives*". (Evangelii Nuntiandi, 20, 63) How must we evaluate our evangelization from that point of view?
3. In that same apostolic exhortation Paul VI said that "modern man listens more willingly to those who give witness than to those who teach....., or if he does listen to those who teach it is because they give witness." (41) How are we doing in terms of our consistency between our word and our life?
4. Are our projects of evangelization imbued with a peaceful tolerant mind, open to dialogue? Do we cultivate a listening attitude?



6. Las Casas: from cleric encomendero to dominican friar

"I have left Jesus Christ, our God, in the Indies, beaten and heartbroken, slapped in the face and crucified, not only once but millions of times, by the Spaniards who devastate and destroy those peoples and take away the place of their conversion and penance, they take their lives and prematurely, and they die without faith or Sacraments."

Fr. Bartolomé de Las Casas - Historia de las Indias

The cleric, Bartolomé de Las Casas had an encomienda of Indians in Hispaniola and, when he accompanied Diego Velázquez as chaplain in the conquest of Cuba, he received another encomienda. At a certain moment Pedro de Rentería, socius of Las Casas, became convinced that the system of the encomiendas was unjust, and decided to abandon it, setting the Indians free so that he might become a Carthusian. This gesture deeply influenced Las Casas. Moreover, both the sermon of Montesinos, and the fact that he had been denied absolution when he went to confession at the convent of the Dominicans in Santo Domingo, continued to weigh heavily on him.

Finally, he ended up convinced of the injustice of the encomiendas. The drop which made the glass overflow was a text from the Bible. In April of 1514, some Spaniards asked him to celebrate the Eucharist and to preach to them. As he was preparing the readings of the day, one of them struck his conscience

with tremendous harshness. The text which spoke to him was from the Book of Ecclesiasticus in which it says “ *Offering something to God which has been robbed from the poor is like sacrifice a son before his father. The life of the poor depends on the bread which they have; whoever takes it from them is an assassin. A man murders his neighbour if he robs him of his food; sheds blood if he withholds an employee’s wages.*” (34:20-22) That day Las Casas the priest did not dare to celebrate Mass. He had discovered that the bread which he was about to offer to God had been stolen from the Indians. Subsequently, as he himself tells us, the sermons of fr. Bernardo de Santo Domingo would make his “ *whole body tremble* ”.

From then on, he dedicated all his energies and abilities, which were more than a few, to find a remedy for the wrongs being suffered by the Indians. He traveled to Castilla and had an interview with King Fernando V. Full of good will he got involved in agreements and promises, signing a capitulation along with the King in which a land free of soldiers and encomenderos was given to him, where he would implant a colony of “good” Spaniards who would live in contact with the Indians without having them as encomendados. The Indians, encouraged by the good example of the first Spaniards involved, would then embrace the faith and the customs of Castilla.

The new encomienda began to function with fifty farmers from Castilla, chosen by Las Casas himself. They moved around dressed in white with a golden cross on their chests so that the indigenous peoples could distinguish them from the bad Spaniards. The project roundly failed and its promoter was seen to become **the laughing stock of the whole world**. However, this failure led him to a second conversion, because it made him understand that the oppression under which the Indians were living could not be resolved with remedies nor with reformist wishes, but that it was necessary to change the entire system from its very foundations. It was then that he came in close contact with the Dominicans, who advised him to continue the struggle by other means. Fr. Pedro de Córdoba introduced him to the authorities of Castilla and, for a while, Las Casas served as a link between the friars and the decision-making centres of the Kingdom.

In 1522, a year after the death of fr. Pedro de Córdoba, **Las Casas asked for the habit and was accepted in the convent of the Dominicans**. Even though he was a cleric and a licentiate, the Order required him to dedicate himself completely to study and prayer, meaning that he would need to give up all travel and keep silence, which included neither writing nor preaching. One can understand that for such an extrovert and fiery soul, that period of study and prayer would turn out to be very arduous, as he himself would later recount.

It was, however, a most fruitful time of Dominican formation during which Las Casas came to understand the project of fr. Pedro de Córdoba and of his community, making it entirely his. At the end of that period, he published *De unico vocationis modo omnium gentium ad veram religionem*, which is precisely the reasoned exposition of the rationale behind the method of evangelization proclaimed by the Dominican community.

An extract from the dedication to Prince Philip of his book, *Apología de los Indios contra Sepúlveda* (1555), gives us the measure of the **human and Christian caliber of that friar:**

“Conscious that I am a Christian, friar, bishop, and a Spaniard, subject of the Kings of Spain, I have not been able to do anything but to give free reign to my pen in defence of the truth and in propriety for the house of God and a towards a greater respect for the Gospel of Our Lord Jesus

Christ, so as to erase the opprobrium that weighs upon the Christian name, to remove the impediments and obstacles which are in opposition to the propagation of the evangelical faith and, to divulge the truth which I pledged to profess in my baptism, which I learned in my Order and which finally, though as a most unworthy bishop, I have affirmed.

With all those titles I am prepared to oppose the irreligious like a wall, in defence of that extremely innocent people who, very soon, should be introduced to the true house of God, which is continuously persecuted by the young wolves.

I feel obliged also to close the way by which so many thousands of mortals see themselves dragged to eternal ruin and to defend my sheep against the ecclesiastical and secular wolves who break into my sheep-fold, as I promised to do with a solemn and public vow, until death.

I want to erase the horrible and despicable crimes which my people, that is the Spaniards, have committed against law and justice

THE LAUGHING STOCK

“The Spaniards, who knew him well from La Vega, made fun of the priest and of the new gentlemen with their crosses like ‘sambenitos’ (garments used by repentant sinners). Las Casas felt a lot of shame, and the truths which were being said about him pained him.”

López de Gómara

in these few years, and also make the ignominy contracted through these crimes disappear, before all the nations of the world containing land and water.

The influence exercised by fr. Bartolomé de Las Casas in all the areas which were related to the subject of the Indias was enormous.

1. He kept the question of the conquest alive, both in the Court and in the Council of the Indias, the place where decisions were taken.
2. With his writings and his controversies he managed to have the aspects of the conquest and of the colonization relative to ethics and to law, taken into consideration.
3. His famous controversy with Sepúlveda in Valladolid had a very special impact, thanks to which the religious, moral, and juridical problems, as well as those related to sovereignty which were raised in the Indias, made their way into the universities. This step was supported and directed by the Masters of Theology and Law of Salamanca, among whom were the Dominicans fr Melchor Cano and fr Domingo de Soto.
4. He had a decisive influence in the elaboration of the New Laws of the Indias (1542). And, from this moment, as M.Bataillon points out, *“ now neither the viceroy, nor the judge nor the bishop are named unless they are the choice of Las Casas ”*.

BARTOLOMÉ DE LAS CASAS

“Man gives few lives such as yours, there are few shades in the tree like yours, all the live pains of the continent come together, all the broken conditions, the wound of the mutilated, the exterminated villages, everything under your shade is reborn, from the extremes of agony you establish hope.”

Pablo Neruda, Canto general

In effect, the publication of the New Laws was supported by the Crown with **the naming of a group of heroic bishops**. Enrique Dussel writes in his *History of the Church in Latin America, Colonization and Liberation* (1491-1983):

“ They are: Bartolomé de Las Casas, bishop

of Chiapas (1544-47), Antonio de Valdivieso, of Nicaragua (1544-1550), Cristóbal de Pedraza of Honduras (1545-1583), Pablo de Torres of Panamá (1547-54), Juan del Valle, of Popayán (1548-63), Fernando de Uranga of Cuba (1552-56), Tomás de Casillas of Chiapas (1552-97), Bernardo de Alburquerque of Oaxaca (1559-79), Pedro de Angulo of Vera Paz (1560-62), Pedro de Ágreda of Coro (1560-80), Juan de Simancas of Cartagena (1560-70), Domingo de Santo Tomas of La Plata (1563-70), Pedro de la Peña of Quito (1666-83), and Agustín de la Coruña of Popayán (1565-90).

All these bishops risked everything, they committed themselves even to the point of failure; the expulsion from their dioceses, imprisonment, expatriation and death for the Indians... The idealists - if we may use the expression - of the liberation of the Indian were the theologians of the Convent of San Esteban in Salamanca. That is why only three of the bishops mentioned above were not Dominicans."

FOR REFLECTION AND DIALOGUE

1. Some verses from the Book of Ecclesiasticus penetrated the heart of Bartolomé de Las Casas like a double-edged sword. What is the quality of our contemplation?
2. Do we have the capacity for self-criticism ? Do we take seriously the continuous need for conversion to be the Dominican man or woman whom God has called us to be? Do we regularly revise and evaluate our group dynamics and practices ?
3. A spirituality of compassion is at the root of the apostolic mission of the Order, the same spirituality which stirred the passion of Jesus of Nazareth, Dominic of Guzmán, Bartolomé de Las Casas.... Are we, to the depths of our being, merciful in the face of human misery ?
4. In the poem of his book, *Canto General*, dedicated to fr Bartolomé de Las Casas, Pablo Nerunda writes with good reason: “ *From battle to battle your hope became precision tools: the solitary struggle became a branch, the useless cry gathered into a team.*” Do we rise above merely providing goods, trying to ensure that our commitment with the poor would have a transforming social impact ? Do we overcome capitalism and join our forces to those of other men and women of good will?

7. Study in the mission of the first community



“We cried as we saw the indigenous peoples’ willingness to learn, remembering how many good friars are idle in Castilla, and how they could very easily keep themselves busy here, and how their lives are being lost there as they prepare tools for salvation, without an understanding of it.”

Fr. Tomás de la Torre - Diary

During the whole of the XVI century **the Order promoted in America, an awe-inspiring number of institutions of learning**, which unequivocally demonstrates the importance which those friars gave to this element within the life and mission of the Order.

Besides being places of worship, prayer and preaching, **the convents were also centres of study**. In each one of them there was a *reader*, who was responsible for setting up the program of studies for the community. They had a daily collation, meaning a meeting for analysis of the situation and for study, in which they tried to discern what would be necessary in their subsequent preaching. It was precisely in this way that the sermon of Montesinos was created and elaborated.

The *Studium Generale* was the centre where young Dominicans were formed, and was open also to the laity. As fr. Vicente Beltrán de Heredia recounts: “*The teaching and scholarship of the brothers was of sufficient academic level so as*

to obtain credits. It was not precisely to get a degree that the brothers studied, but rather for the purpose of obtaining the proper and necessary academic training. The degrees were conferred by the universities once it was proven that the required studies had been done in the Studium or in centres officially recognised as General Studies ” .

The first university of the American continent, known today as the *Universidad Autónoma de Santo Domingo*, (Dominican Republic), is the successor of the *Universidad de Santo Tomás de Aquino*, which was the name given to the Studium Generale at the Convent of Saint Dominic in Hispaniola, when, in 1538, it was converted into a university institution by the Bull *In Apostolatus Culmine* of Pope Paul III.

Study was understood and practiced by those friars with a view to its role in preaching. The objective of intellectual activity did not consist in producing erudite brothers whose knowledge remained within themselves; the friars had a clear understanding that they did not want to spend “ *life preparing instruments of salvation without an understanding of it* ” as fr. Tomás de la Torre said. Fr. Tomás had been prior and Professor of Logic in the Convent of Salamanca, and later was companion to fr. Bartholomé de Las Casas in Chiapas. The purpose of study consisted in the deepening of the evangelical message and in the analysis of the reality lived by the people in order to announce the Word of God to them as Good News for all of them.

We could sum up the **method of study** of those Dominicans by pointing out that in study they aimed “ to bring together law and action.” For them it was of vital importance to take into account, systematically, the context of preaching, the experience and “ *the close relationship of things, because he who does not deal with what we are dealing with, cannot understand this method as fully as those of us who know it.* ” (fr. Tomás de la Torre)

THE COLLEGE OF FR. PEDRO DE CÓRDOBA

“Fr. Pedro de Córdoba, during his trip to Spain to defend the doctrine in the sermon of Montesinos, applied to Fernando V to establish a college in the city of Sevilla, in collaboration with the bishop of that city, Diego de Deza, also a Dominican, where they would form young Indians who had been brought from Hispaniola, together with others from Spain. He sought help from King Fernando who not only approved the request, but ordered Diego Colón, then governor of the island, to permit the Dominicans to bring 15 young boys to Spain to study in Seville ” .

Fr Antonio del Remesal.

It was that method of study, open to the situations close at hand and, at the same time, attentive to the suffering human faces, which **allowed them to question the principles accepted by some traditions** and by reason of which the conquest and colonization were being justified; such as the right of the Pope to make the donation of the “new world” to the Crown of Castilla, the authority of the Christian prince to subdue the lands of the pagans, or the legitimacy of the “pacification”, that is, of reducing people to submission, by whatever means necessary, including violence, as methods of christianization.

Besides, the Dominican missionaries in America kept in **regular and intensive contact with their brothers in Salamanca, Valladolid and Alcalá, who were teachers at the university**. These brothers attentively and seriously studied the problems encountered by their brothers in the new world in their apostolic practice and, in fact, they contributed greatly with their proposals for solutions to the problems.

In that sense **the contribution made by fr. Francisco de Vitoria**, who held the chair of *Prima of Theology* at the University of Salamanca. was outstanding. It was customary that the extraordinary lessons, called “*relecciones*”, consisted in commentaries on the *Judgements* of Pedro Lombardo. Fr. Francisco de Vitoria had the courage to change the method in order to give space in his teaching to the experiences and problems which the Dominican missionaries in Americas had shared with him. In that way, he began to address the situation of the Indians as well as the power of the Pope and of the Emperor, which actually entitles him to enormous recognition as the forerunner of human rights and founder of what was then called “the right of the peoples,” which is the modern international law.

So it was, in 1539, while occupying the Chair of Theology, that fr. Francisco de Vitoria delivered **the two “relecciones” called *De Indis***, about the Indians,

Before the arrival of the Spaniards to those lands, “the Indians were in peaceful possession of their goods, publically and privately; therefore, if the contrary is not proven, they must be considered to be owners or lords (...) The right of possession(of property) is founded on the image of God(...) Man is the image of God by his very nature, that is, by his rational faculties. It is clear that is it not lawful to rob the Moslems, nor the Jews, nor any of the other faithless people of their goods. Undoubtedly, it would be no less a theft or robbery than if it had been done to a Christian.”

Fr. Francisco de Vitoria, De Indis

in which, relying on the thoughts of St Thomas, he vehemently maintained the following, among other things, :

“The Emperor is not the Lord of the world (...) By natural right, men are free (...) So then, there is no one who has the natural right to be Lord of all the earth (...) And even supposing that it were possible, the Emperor cannot occupy the lands of the Indians nor can he depose those in charge by naming others in their place ”.

“ The Pope is not the temporal Lord of the whole world (...) The Pope has no temporal power over the Indians, nor over any of the infidels (...) From this, the following corollary can be deduced: even though the Indians do not want to recognize any authority of the Pope, war cannot be declared on them for that reason, nor can their goods be taken (...) the Indians are not obliged to believe in the religion of the Christians, nor in the control of the Pope, and not in the power of the Emperor either.”

FOR REFLECTION AND DIALOGUE

1. Do we attribute to the cultivation of our own study, and that of others, the vital importance which it is given in our Dominican tradition?
2. Do we know how to bring about the methodical and thematic changes which are necessary to enlighten the historical experiences and vital situations of our contemporaries?
3. In a relatively recent interview, fr. Gustavo Gutiérrez lamented the fact that “*so many faculties think of theology as a religious metaphysics, not as an historic proclamation of liberation.*” Are we sure that our study and our teaching do not fall into this deceitful timelessness ? Do we dedicate ourselves “ *to preparing the instruments of salvation without understanding what salvation is about ?*”
4. Do we study and teach with the clarity and honesty which allow us to uncover and criticize the dominant ideologies?



8. The legacy of the first community of dominicans in America

“ Each brother, each community and province must assume the defence of the poor and the suffering, aware that their own Dominican vocation is at stake. (...) It is not simply a question of a moral view, but of our very faith in the God of Jesus Christ. This is why we are called to preach justice with veracity.”

Acts of the General Chapter of Mexico

Throughout the first seven chapters we have **tried to pick out those elements** of the life of the first Dominicans in America which, having represented a true incarnation of the evangelical ideal and of the charism of the Order, give us truly a reason for legitimate pride, but also the occasion to question ourselves. Because of this we can do no less than **painfully acknowledge** that we have not always, by any means, reached the heights of our Christian and Dominican vocation. It is true that, at present, we do not perpetuate these historic excesses, but neither can we consider ourselves exempt from the need to do

“Unfortunately, after the first generations, the majority of our communities conformed themselves to the colonial system: they themselves became the owners of large extensions of land, had slaves in their service, and they allied themselves with the interests of the dominant class.”

Acts of the General Chapter in Mexico

an in-depth revision of our forms of life, patterns of thought, and apostolic practices.

Now we will allow the friars gathered at the **General Chapter of Mexico (1992)** to speak to us, recalling their document, *On the Fifth Centenary*, which, in our judgment, retains its validity today.

The celebration of the memory of our brothers urges us to challenge the conscience of all human beings and, especially that of Christians. It commits us, moreover, to firmly renew our vocation as Dominican brothers and sisters, as well as to make our theology a service towards the dignity of all people, especially those to whom it has been seen to be particularly denied.

THEN

“These, are they not men?”
The cry which Antonio de Montesinos let out almost five hundred years ago on seeing the treatment inflicted on the indigenous peoples, still echoes today. 1492 is the symbol of an historical process which still continues. In its origin, this process went far beyond the intentions of individuals. It also goes a good way beyond Spain. England was present in North America from 1497; France was there in 1534; and Portugal arrived in Brazil in 1500; the Germans were in Venezuela in 1528...1492 was the beginning of organization of the world as a new unified space.”

TODAY

“...the indigenous through the last few decades have been – and continue to be – the object of a more or less systematic destruction (...) The negro people are often the objects of violent discrimination, as are also the rural and urban masses (...) racism denies the human equality of the other. Immigrants are the objects of contempt and violence (...) millions of refugees are herded into camps, in conditions almost always inhuman (...) Everywhere the primacy of the economy is imposed, with money being the god, making inequality grow and generating violence and repression”.

ALL HUMAN BEINGS

“The foundations of the world’s economic and political order were established in the XV and XVI centuries. This system is based on inequality and exploitation. During the early period, the colonization had dramatic effects, causing death for the indigenous and the Africans. Today when the economic structures of our world reduce so many people to misery and lead them to violence, how can we not challenge such a system?”

CHRISTIANS

“...there are as yet too many christians committed to the predominant concepts of the wealthy nations, and with very little sensitivity in their practices toward the cry of the poor, of the lame and the exploited, and paying little attention to the risks which this entails in regard to the future of humanity. This is contrary to the preferential option for the poor proclaimed by the Church, following the requirement of Jesus Christ himself... (Mt: 25: 31-46) ”.

DOMINICAN SISTERS AND BROTHERS

“Montesinos raised a decisive evangelical question: ‘These, are they not human?’ He was able to ask this question because our brothers had heard the cry of the oppressed. Do our communities allow themselves to be challenged by the multiple cries of our time so that that same question resonates strongly, wherever it be necessary? Are our communities prepared to run the risk of announcing a prophetic message which can open the eyes of the blind? Are they ready to face the hostile public resistance which comes from the evangelical option of solidarity with the oppressed?”

OUR THEOLOGY

“They stirred up a first class intellectual, philosophical, juridical and theological movement in Spain (Fr. Vitoria) and introduced a truly public debate around these questions..... In this way they contributed to establishing the fundamentals of the human rights of the person and of peoples, and of morality in international relationships (...) How can we put our theological work, with all its demands of seriousness and competence, at the service of the human dignity of the poor and the marginalized, and thus honouring the memory of the work of our predecessors? “

FOR REFLECTION AND DIALOGUE

As questions to guide the reflection and dialogue around this theme, the contents of the extracts quoted from the Acts of the General Chapter in Mexico, can be used.

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