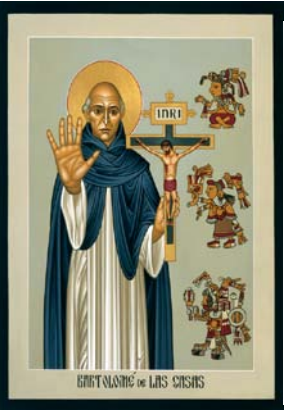


Seeing with the Eyes of Las Casas: An Epistemology of Solidarity with Haiti

Katie Grimes, Boston College

Thesis: Bartolomé de las Casas offers a special critique of the United States' Catholic bishops' conference's inability to recognize the imperialistically exploitative nature of its country's relationship to Haiti. For this reason, their well-intentioned efforts to ameliorate the suffering of the Haitian people have been inadequate. Las Casas is able to see what the bishops cannot because he employs a superior moral method, which can be described as poverty in solidarity with the Indians¹. This way of life enabled him to overcome the epistemological limitations inherent to his membership in a social class that was privileged and empowered by his country's imperial achievements. Without the epistemological corrective of the experience of solidarity, the bishops are defenseless against the distortions of their social location. Quite simply, Las Casas offers the United States bishops and all people of privilege, the "only way" to truth and discipleship.

Despite the bishops' belief that the United States' intentions towards Haiti have been benevolent², when history is told from the below of the lived experience of the Haitian poor, it is clear that the United States not only is not and has never been motivated primarily or even in any *real* way by altruistic concern for Haitian well being, but also that the United States has devoted much of its history to actively sabotaging this tiny island nation.



The Epistemology of Solidarity³

1485-1504- Las Casas' father joins Columbus in Hispaniola. With the money earned there, Las Casas is able to begin studying for the priesthood³.

1504- Las Casas journeys to Hispaniola to begin his stint as an *encomendero*.

1510- After his ordination, he continues his life as *encomendero*, thinking that since he was "good and kind" to the Indians he owned, he was guiltless of any wrongdoing.

1513- Las Casas accepts a land grant in Cuba, which was made possible by the drastic "reduction" of the size of the island's original population.

1514- On Pentecost Sunday, he realizes that "everything the Spaniards had done in the Indies from the beginning...was completely wrong and mortal sin besides" and renounces his slaves and property.

1514-1520- Las Casas tries in vain to convince Spain to abolish the *encomienda* system and install a more just economic system in its place. Due to this failure, Las Casas realizes that the brutalities of this system are caused by greed rather than ignorance.

1522- Defeated and ashamed, Las Casas seeks admission into the Dominican Order and adopts a more strict ascetical discipline. He subsequently demands that Spain leave the New World entirely, and pay reparation to the indigenous peoples.

1546- Las Casas named bishop of Chiapa, Mexico and decrees that a penitent could not receive absolution for the sins he committed against the Indian people unless he first agreed both to abandon these sins and to give back the profits he had incurred by means of these sins.

Present-Day Applications of the Epistemology of Solidarity: Looking at History "From Below"⁴

1791-The U.S. aids France in its attempt to crush Haiti's revolution.

1803- France recognizes Haiti's independence only on the condition that Haiti repay the former French slave owners for their losses.¹ In 1900, "80 percent of Haiti's total national revenue...was going to repay foreign debts."

1824- South Carolina Senator Robert Hayne says, "Our policy with regard to Haiti is plain: We never can acknowledge her independence." Some U.S. statesmen refer to the victorious Haitians as "rebel slaves."

1849-1915- The U.S. Navy send warships into Haitian waters twenty-five times.

Between 1870 and 1913, the United States increases its share of the Haitian market from 30 to about 60 per cent.

1915-1934-The Marines invade and conquer Haiti, disband its parliament, re-write its Constitution, kill 15,000 Haitians, and reinstitute slavery. U.S. corporations are granted 266,000 acres, depriving over 50,000 Haitian peasants of their land. Haiti is left heavily dependent on the U.S.

1957-The brutal dictatorship of "Papa Doc" begins. With his reign, Haiti becomes "a darling of the American business community."

1990- Jean Bertrand Aristide, a priest committed to lifting the poor from "misery to poverty with dignity", is elected president. The U.S. considers him an enemy and allows CIA-trained Haitian military personnel to depose him.

1994- Aristide is returned to power by President Clinton, with only a few months left on his term.

2000-Aristide is elected to a second term.

2001- President Bush blocks four loans of \$146 million for projects aimed at bringing clean water, health, education, and roads to the rural poor of Haiti.

April 7, 2003- A restitution commission finds that France owes Haiti \$21 billion, the value in current dollars extorted from Haiti by France following its successful slave rebellion. In response, the French government tries to persuade Aristide to resign.

February 2004-in a coordinated effort among the U.S., France, the Haitian elite, and disaffected former members of Baby Doc's military police force, Aristide is deposed for a second time.

Call to Conversion

If the bishops' conference recognized that the United States is in no small part responsible for Haiti's misery, it would devote itself to denouncing America's militarily underwritten economic exploitation of Haiti, which would in turn require it to denounce the American way of life that is sustained by such exploitation. Rather than encouraging the United States to be more generous and giving, the bishops would exhort the United States to be less selfish and exploitative.



References

- ¹ Sullivan, Francis Patrick S.J. *Indian Freedom: The Cause of Bartolomé de las Casas; Bartolomé de las Casas: The Only Way*, ed. Helen Rand Parish, trans. Francis Patrick Sullivan, 1992.
- ²"Letter to Secretary Warren Christopher," Justice, Peace and Human Development, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Washington DC.; "Statement on Haiti" Justice, Peace and Human Development, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, March 2, 2004.
- ³Rand, pgs 12-13; 18-20; 35; Ruston, Roger. *Human Rights and the Image of God*, 2004. Pg 137.
- ⁴ Farmer, Paul. *Aids and Accusation: Haiti and the Geography of Blame*. Pg. 167; 174-176; Farmer. *The Uses of Haiti*. pg 182-183; Randall Robinson, *An Unbroken Agony: Haiti, From Revolution to the Kidnapping of a President*.
- ⁵"Capture of Ft. Riviere, Haiti." by Donna J. Neary. Depicts three Medal of Honor Winners defeating the Cacos en route to conquering Haiti.

