but their conscientious efforts to gather "capable" Indians into free villages were all failures; the Indians ran away as before. In their reports (II 22:5), the Hieronymites confirmed that the colony could not survive without forced labor. Their principal positive recommendations concerned the emigration of Spanish farmers, to be encouraged by grants of seed and tools; and—with some misgivings—the import into the Indies of Negro slaves to relieve part of the burden of labor borne by the Indians.


The movement for reform of native administration in Hispaniola began publicly with two sermons by a leading Dominican in Santo Domingo, proclaiming that Spaniards holding repartimientos of Indians were in mortal sin, and denying them absolution while in that state. This was not the personal outburst of an emotional fanatic, but a considered move supported by the Dominican community as a whole: a pressure group that subsequently, under the leadership of Las Casas, was to wield a formidable influence both in Spain and in the Indies. So began a bitter controversy over the status of Indians that was to rage for half a century and more. Las Casas joined the Dominican Order in 1520. He is our principal informant, although not himself present at the sermons, he was personally acquainted with most of those who were.


The Dominican friars at that time had already noticed that the island Indians were dying, because of the miserable life and harsh captivity they endured. Spaniards who possessed Indians regarded them simply as animals. When Indians died, they lamented the loss of labor in farms and mines, but their regret never found expression in greater kindness towards the survivors. They continued as before to drive them and wear them out with killing labor. There were, it is true, degrees of cruelty. The most brutal Spaniards, men without pity or compassion, thought only of enriching themselves through the blood of these unfortunates; others were less cruel, and others again may even have regretted the misery and want in which the Indians lived; but all, without exception, subordinated the health, the lives, and the salvation of these wretches to their own private and material interests. I can remember, of my acquaintance, only one man who employed Indians and showed any compassion for them. His name was Pedro de la Renteria, and I hope later, if God wills, to tell his story.

For a long time the friars witnessed, on the one hand, Spanish brutality, Spanish indifference to the material and spiritual well-being of the Indians, and on the other, the innocence, the docility, and the extraordinary patience of the Indians themselves. As spiritual and God-fearing men they began to contrast reality with justice and to discuss among themselves these hideous and unheard-of wrongs. “Are these not men?” they asked, “Are we not bound, in our dealings with them, by the rules of charity and justice? Do they not own their lands? Have they not their natural lords and lordships? Have they done us any injury? Are we not required to preach the law of Christ and to strive to convert them to it? How has it come about that this great multitude of people who, as we are told, lived in this island, have in fifteen or sixteen years so miserably perished?”

It so happened that one of the Spaniards, who had taken part in the ravages and massacres committed against these people, stabbed his wife and killed her because he suspected her of adultery. She was a native, one of the chief ladies of the province of the Vega, and mistress of many vassals. He wandered in the woods for three or
four years, before the Dominicans came to the island, for fear of prosecution. When he heard of the friars’ arrival, and of their reputation for sanctity, he went one night to the straw hut that had been given them for their dwelling, and told them the story of his life. He begged them repeatedly to admit him to the Order as a lay brother, intending so to serve, with God’s help, for the rest of his life.

He showed such evidence of conversion and repentance, such detestation of his past way of life, that they granted his petition. He lived in sanctity and, we are sure, died a martyr; for God shows his greatest mercy to the greatest sinners, and through them works His miracles. We will tell the story of his martyrdom, if God wills that we should live so long, later, at the end of this present third book.

They called him Brother Juan Garces, for Juan Garces had been his name in the world. I knew him well. He gave them detailed eye-witness accounts of the abominable cruelties that he and the others had committed against these innocent people, both in war and in peace, if peace it could be called. The friars were appalled by this narrative of deeds so contrary to humanity and Christian conduct, and became more determined than ever to oppose this new and horrible form of tyrannical injustice. They burned with holy zeal, mourned the affront to God through the breaking of His commandments, and lamented the infamies that made His faith stink in the nostrils of those people. They considered with delight the multitude of souls that had perished, and were perishing still, unnoticed, but now would be saved. They called on God with many prayers, fasts, and vigils, to guide them and keep them from error in so important a matter; for they knew that their testimony, however it were presented, would be a rude and revolutionary awakening for people so deeply sunk in the sleep of sin. Finally, after long and serious discussion, they decided to preach publicly in the pulpits, to proclaim the state in which those of our sinners were, who held and ill-used these people, and warn them of where they would go, should they die in that state, to receive the reward of their inhumanity and greed.

By the order of their Vicar, Father Fray Pedro de Cordoba, that wise servant of God, the most learned among them discussed the first sermon that was to be preached on the subject, and they all signed their names to it, to make clear that it represented the deliberate opinion of them all, and not merely that of the preacher. The Father Vicar, invoking due obedience, entrusted the task of preaching [the first sermon] to the most noted preacher among them, after the Father Vicar himself. He was Father Fray Anton Montesino, the second of the three friars who brought the Order to the island, as I related above in Book 2., Chap. [54]. This Father Fray Anton Montesino was a gifted preacher, severe in condemning vices, very emphatic, almost passionate in his sermons and his speech, so that his sermons had great effect, or so it was believed. To this man, as to a brave leader, they committed the first sermon on this subject, so new to the Spaniards of this island. Its novelty consisted in declaring that killing these people was a greater sin than squashing bed-bugs.

Since it was the season of Advent, they agreed that the sermon should be preached on the fourth Sunday, on which they sing the Gospel where St. John the Evangelist says “... the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, Who art thou? ... he said, I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness. ...” To ensure that the whole of Santo Domingo should hear the sermon, and no one, at least of the principal people, should be absent, they sent word to the second Admiral, who was then governing the island, and to the royal officials and the judges, each at his own house, informing them that on Sunday there would be a special sermon in the principal church, on a topic that concerned them all; and begging them all to attend and hear it.

They all willingly agreed, partly in acknowledgment of the courtesy done them, and out of respect for the friars and their virtue and strict religious life; partly because they were all curious to hear this matter that concerned them all; though certainly they would not have wished to hear it if they had known beforehand what it was, nor would they have allowed it to be preached.

Sunday came, and at the hour for preaching Father Fray Anton Montesino mounted the pulpit with his sermon, written out and signed by the others, and announced his text, “I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness.” He said something by way of introduction about the significance of the Advent season. Next he began to describe the barrenness of the desert of the con-
sciences of the Spaniards of this island; the blindness in which they lived; the danger they incurred of condemnation, for the deadly sins in which they were constantly immersed and in which they would die. Then he returned to his text, and said, "It is to warn you of these sins that I stand here, I who am the voice of Christ crying in the wilderness of this island; and it is vital that you hear me, not with divided attention, but with all your heart and with all your mind. The message you are about to hear will be the most disturbing you have ever heard, the hardest and harshest and most dreadful you ever thought to hear." He expanded this theme for some time with terrible stinging words that made them tremble and fancy that they were already before the judgment seat. He declared to them in majestic tones the nature and the content of his message: "The message," he cried, "that you are all in mortal sin, that you live in it and will die in it, because of the cruelty and oppression with which you treat these innocent people. Tell me, by what right do you hold these Indians in such cruel and horrible servitude? By what authority did you make unprovoked war on these people, living in peace and quiet on their land, and with unheard-of savagery kill and consume so great a number of them? Why do you keep them worn-out and down-trodden, without feeding them or tending their illnesses, so that they die—or rather you kill them—by reason of the heavy labor you lay upon them, to get gold every day? What care do you take to have them taught to know their God and Maker, to be baptized, to hear Mass and keep their Sundays and their holy days?

"Are they not men? Have they no soul, no reason? Are you not required to love them as you love yourselves? Do you not understand this? Do you not feel it? How can you be sunk so deep in unfeeling sleep? Be sure that you have no more hope of salvation, in the state you are in, than Turks or Moors who lack and reject the faith of Jesus Christ." So, in his peroration, he explained the message that he had earlier emphasized. He left them aghast, some as if they could not believe their ears, some more obdurant than ever, some a little stricken in conscience, but—as I heard afterwards—none converted.

His sermon over, he left the pulpit with his head held high, for he was not a man to show fear; nor was he afraid, nor did he greatly care if he shocked his hearers by doing and saying what God commanded. He returned with his companion to their straw hut, where they had nothing to eat but some cabbage soup without oil; but this was often their lot. When he had gone, the church was full of mutterings, so that they could hardly finish the Mass. One may suppose that there were not many readings from Menosprecio del Mundo at table that day.

After dinner, which probably no one much enjoyed, the whole city assembled at the house of the Admiral, the second to hold that office and title, Don Diego Colon, son of the first Admiral, the discoverer of these Indies. There were present, in particular, the royal officials: treasurer, accountant, factor, and overseer. They decided to go and reprimand the preacher and give him a fright, if not actually punish him, as a breaker of the peace and an advocate of revolution. In telling them that they were not entitled to hold the Indians the King had given them, he had slandered them all, he had spoken disrespectfully of the King, and had impugned the royal prerogative in the Indies. These were serious offences, impossible to overlook.

They knocked at the convent gate, and when the porter opened, they told him to fetch the Vicar and the friar who had preached the scandalous sermon. The Vicar, the venerable Father Fray Pedro de Cordoba, came to the gate alone. They told him, with more arrogance than humility, that he should call the preacher. He replied, most prudently, that there was no need for that; if his lordship and their honors would state their wishes he, as the friar's superior, would make himself responsible. They insisted that he should send for the friar; he, speaking modestly and courteously, as he always did, but with firm authority, excused himself. He was a man so venerable, so pious, and so endowed by Providence with natural virtue, that his presence commanded respect. Eventually the Admiral and his companions, seeing that the Father Vicar was not to be intimidated by their authority, changed their tone, and asked him with due humility to send for [the preacher], because they wished to talk with him in his superior's presence, and inquire what grounds there might be for preaching a doctrine so new and so prejudicial to the King's authority and to the interests of the settlers in the island.
The holy man, seeing that they were taking a different approach and speaking less heatedly than when they arrived, called the Father Fray Anton Montesino, who came, with what inward fears may be imagined. They all sat down, and the Admiral, on behalf of all, stated his complaint. He said that the Father had made bold to preach doctrines prejudicial to the King's authority and damaging to the public interest. He [the Father] had said Spanish settlers had no right to hold Indians, although the King, who was Lord of all the Indies, had conferred that right upon them, in recognition of their labors in conquering these islands and subjugating the heathen who lived there. The sermon had been so disrespectful to the King and so prejudicial to the settlers' rights that they were resolved to insist that the friar should take back all that he had said. If he would not, they would know what further steps to take.

The Father Vicar replied that the friar's sermon represented the opinion and the wishes of himself and all the others. They had agreed to it after long and mature deliberation. They had decided that it should be preached as evangelical truth, necessary for all the Spaniards of the island, and for the Indians, whom they saw dying day by day without paying more attention than they would to animals. They were compelled to this by Divine command and by the profession they had made at baptism, first as Christians and then as friars and preachers of the truth. They intended no disservice to the King, who had sent them here to preach as they thought necessary for the salvation of souls. They were wholly loyal to His service, and were sure that when His Highness was fully informed of what was happening here and of what they had preached about it, He would deem Himself well served and would thank them.

This speech, with the arguments the holy man adduced in justification of the sermon, gave them very little pleasure. He had hoped to mollify them and soften the blow they had received in being told they could not hold Indians because they ill-treated them; but this was no way to satisfy their greed. If their Indians were taken from them, all their hopes and ambitions would be frustrated; so all of them, especially the leaders, became more extreme in their demands. They all insisted that the Father should retract on the following Sunday what he had said in his sermon, and went so far in their blindness as to say that if this were not done the friars should pack their bags to return to Spain; to which the Father Vicar replied, "That, gentlemen, would give us little trouble." This was true, for their possessions consisted of no more than the habits of coarse frieze that they wore, and some blankets of the same material to cover them at night. Their beds were simple frames of branches, raised on forked stakes and covered with bundles of straw. Otherwise all they had were the utensils of the Mass, and a few books, all of which could have fitted into two chests.

When they saw that the servants of God were unmoved by these threats, they again tried a soft approach. They besought the friars to reconsider and, after due thought, to preach another sermon modifying what had been said in the first, in order to calm the populace, who had been roused and were still in a state of dangerous excitement. They laid great stress on the importance of calming the people by a more moderate sermon, and eventually the fathers, to get rid of them and put an end to frivolous importunities, agreed that at the appropriate hour on the following Sunday Father Fray Anton Montesino would preach a second sermon on the same topic as the first. He would say what he thought fit, but would try, so far as he could, to meet their wishes. This being agreed, they went away pleased and hoping for the best. . . . They at once announced—or some of them announced—that they had reached agreement with the Vicar and that on the following Sunday the friar would retract all that he had said. There was no need to invite people to attend this second sermon, for the whole city was there, everyone urging his neighbor to come along and hear a friar take back all that he had said the week before.

The hour of the sermon arrived and the friar mounted the pulpit and gave out the text that was to be the basis of his retraction. It was a sentence from the Book of Job, in Chap. 36: "[Suffer me a little, and I will shew thee; for I have yet something to say on God's behalf.] I will fetch my knowledge from afar, and will ascribe righteousness to my Maker, for truly my words are not false. . . ." "I refer again [he said] to the basis of the knowledge and the truth that I preached to you last Sunday, and I will prove to you that my words, that so offended you, are true." Once they heard the text, the more intelligent among the
congregation saw at once where it would lead him, and they could hardly bear to let him continue. He began the body of his sermon by recapitulating all he had said on the previous occasion. He adduced still more arguments and authorities against the injustice and tyranny in which [the Spaniards] held those oppressed and worn-out people. He repeated his conviction that they could not, in their present state, hope for salvation. In the hope that they might in time mend their ways, he told them that they [the friars] would not shrive any man among them, any more than they would an unrepentant robber. His hearers could publish this abroad, and write about it to whom they chose in Castille; for he was sure that they [the friars] were serving God and doing no small service to the King.

The sermon ended, he returned to his house, leaving the people in the church dismayed, muttering, and more than ever enraged against the friars. Having foolishly and unreasonably expected a retraction, they felt cheated; as if the friar's retraction could have changed the law of God, against which they were rebelling by their treatment of those wretched people.

It is a dangerous and pitiful thing for men to be sunk in sin, especially if by robbing and injuring their neighbors they have risen to a higher estate than they knew before. To such a man it seems, and indeed is, a harsher fate to fall from that estate than to throw himself off a cliff; only by a miracle can he cling to life. For such a man, it is intolerable to be reproved from the pulpit; for so long as the preachers remain silent and he hears no reprimand, he can imagine that God is indifferent and Divine law suspended. In our Indies, more than in any other part of the world where people are oppressed, we have constant experience of how our Spaniards run into this danger of insensibility and obstinate malice.

To return to our narrative: they all came out of church seething with rage and went off to their dinners; to them, a bitter feast. They paid no more attention to the friars, for talking to them was clearly a waste of time. They decided instead to write to the King by the next ships, informing Him that these friars had come to the island and were threatening the foundations of their society by preaching revolutionary doctrines in defiance of His Highness' commands; that they had consigned everyone to Hell for holding Indians and employing them in the mines and other necessary work; and that their preaching amounted to nothing less than robbing His Highness of sovereignty and revenue.

These letters, when they reached the Court, caused great consternation. The King sent for the Provincial of Castille, who was the prelate responsible (since there was then no separate province of the Indies) and complained to him that the friars he had sent over had disturbed the whole territory and done Him, the King, great disservice, by preaching against His royal prerogative. He told the provincial to put this right at once; otherwise He, the King, would take matters into His own hands.


The royal reply to the Admiral-Viceroy's report on the Montesinos sermons was presumably drafted by Fonseca, or on his instructions. It is coldly legalistic and wholly unsympathetic to the Dominican position: an expression of affronted authority and fiscal alarm.


... I also saw the sermon that you say was preached by a Dominican friar named Fray Antonio Montesino, and although he has always been given to indiscreet preaching, I was greatly amazed he could say what he did, because all the lawyers say there is no basis either in theology or in canon or civil law for it; and I am sure they are right, because when I and My Wife the Queen, Who is in heaven, issued a cédula commanding that the Indians be compelled to serve the Christians as they do now, We ordered all the members of Our council and many other civil and canon lawyers and theologians assembled to discuss the matter, and considering the donation that Our Most Holy Father Alexander VI made to Us of all the islands and mainland discovered and to be discovered in those regions, an authorized copy of which will be sent with the present letter, as well as the other written opinions, both in law and philosophy, that existed on the subject, they
decided in the presence and with the advice of the present Archbishop of Seville that the Indians should be assigned to work for the Spaniards, and that this was in accord both with human and divine law. And since it is clear by logic that even laymen can comprehend how necessary it is for this business of the servitude of the Indians to the Spaniards to be handled as it is, I am even more amazed at those friars who refuse to absolve the settlers, who go to confession, until they free their Indians, when these Indians were given to them by My orders, so that even if there was a burden of conscience to be borne in this matter, which there is not, it would be on My part or on that of the people who advised Us that these things should be arranged as they are, rather than on the part of the settlers who have Indians. Thus you were certainly right to take the action you did with regard to the preacher and the others who in their obstinacy refused to grant absolution [to the encomenderos] because of the magnitude of their error, because the populace had been calmed down and the Indians prevented from believing that the things they were saying were right, and because this business is so prejudicial to the welfare of those regions. And seeing that the preacher was not alone in the said error, but was joined in it by others among the Dominican friars living on that island, all the members of the council were of the opinion that they should send an order to you to put all of them in a ship and send them back here to their superior to explain what induced them to do a thing so unheard of and lacking in any foundation, so that he could punish them as they deserved. I ordered the matter discussed with their Provincial in order to establish the case more conclusively; and he and others speaking for him here asked Me to have them brought here, since he knew very well that the said friars not only deserved that punishment but a much greater one. He assured me that their error had been due to excessive charity, to ignorance of the causes that had moved Me and the Queen to order the Indians given in repartimiento, to the erroneous belief that We had not received the donation of that island and the others of the region from Our Holy Father, and to their failure to understand the Holy Scriptures as they ought. As soon as he admonishes them for their fault, they would correct it entirely and repair the damage they had caused. Thus he wrote them that they should preach and speak no more about these matters, and since I had great devotion to the order and did not wish it to receive any dishonor in My time, I was willing for them to remain on the island, on condition that they speak no more about these or similar matters, whether in the pulpit or out of it, either directly or indirectly. Therefore I command you, the Admiral, to take [the treasurer Miguel de] Pasamonte with you and give the said letters to the Vicar General and the other fathers, and to speak with them in the way that seems best to you. And if they are willing to come to an agreement with you that neither they nor the other friars of their order will speak about these or other similar matters in the pulpit or out of it, in public or in secret, except to say that if they held those opinions it was because they were not informed of the right We had to those islands and also because they were not aware of the justifications that existed, not only for making the Indians serve the Spaniards as they do, but for placing them in even stricter servitude, then you are to allow them to remain on the island and to aid and favor them so they can reap all the fruit they can in matters of the faith in those regions. But if by any chance they do not agree to this, and it seems to you that if they are left on the island they will continue in their mistaken course, then you are to send them back here to their superior in any ship in the best and most honorable way you can, so that he can punish them; and this should be done as expeditiously as possible, because every hour they remain on the island while they hold these pernicious opinions, they will do great damage to things there. And because of the need to send this dispatch quickly, it is not possible to respond to everything you wrote, but another letter will be written responding to all the other things at length. Done at Burgos, the 20th of March, 1512.

22.3. 1516. Instructions of Cardinal Jiménez de Cisneros for the Hieronymite governors of Hispaniola.

On the death of King Ferdinand in January, 1516, the government of Spain passed for a brief two years into the capable hands of the aged Cardinal Jiménez de Cisneros, regent for the mad Queen Juana and her young son