Former conquistador Bartolomé de Las Casas became an early defender of the rights of the native peoples conquered by the Spanish.

Bartolomé de las Casas experienced a remarkable change of heart during his lifetime. At first, he participated in Spain’s conquest and settlement of the Americas. Later in life, he criticized and condemned it. For more than fifty years, he fought for the rights of the defeated and enslaved peoples of Latin America. How did this conquistador become known as "the Protector of the Indians?"

Bartolomé de las Casas (bahr–taw–law–MEY day las KAH-sahs) ran through the streets of Seville, Spain, on March 31, 1493. He was just nine years old and on his way to see Christopher Columbus, who had just returned from his first voyage to the Americas. Bartolomé wanted to see him and the “Indians,” as they were called, as they paraded to the church.

Bartolomé’s father and uncles were looking forward to seeing Columbus, as well. Like many other people in Europe during the late 1400s, they saw the Americas as a place of opportunity. They signed up to join Columbus on his second voyage. Two years after that, Bartolomé followed in his father’s footsteps and voyaged to the Americas himself. He sailed to the island of Hispaniola, the present-day nations of Haiti and the Dominican Republic.
Las Casas began his experiences in Spanish America on the island of Hispaniola in the Caribbean. There, he managed his family’s businesses, which used enslaved Indians as labor.

**Las Casas as Conquistador and Priest**

One historian wrote that when Las Casas first arrived in the Americas, he was "not much better than the rest of the gentlemen-adventurers who rushed to the New World, bent on speedily acquiring fortunes." He supported the Spanish conquest of the Americas and was a loyal servant of Spain’s king and queen, Ferdinand and Isabella. Once in Hispaniola, Las Casas helped to manage his father’s farms and businesses. Enslaved Indians worked in the family’s fields and mines.

Spanish conquistadors wanted to gain wealth and glory in the Americas. They had another goal, as well—to convert Indians to Christianity. Las Casas shared this goal. So, the young conquistador went back to Europe to become a priest. He returned to Hispaniola sometime in 1509 or 1510. There he began to teach and baptize the Indians. At the same time, he continued to manage Indian slaves.

On a Path to Change

History often seems to be made up of moments when someone has a change of heart. The path that he or she has been traveling takes a dramatic turn. It often appears to others that this change is sudden. In reality, a series of events usually causes a person to make the decision to change. One such event happened to Las Casas in 1511.

Roman Catholics in Hispaniola witnessed horrible acts of cruelty and injustice against the native peoples of the West Indies at the hands of the Spanish conquistadors. One of the priests there, Father Antonio de Montesinos, spoke out against the harsh treatment of the Indians in a sermon delivered to a Spanish congregation in Hispaniola in 1511. De Montesinos said:

*You are in mortal sin . . . for the cruelty and tyranny you use in dealing with these innocent people . . . by what right or justice do you keep these Indians in such a cruel and horrible servitude? . . . Why do you keep them so oppressed? . . . Are not these people also human beings?*

One historian called this sermon "the first cry for justice in America" on behalf of the Indians. Las Casas recorded the sermon in one of his books, *History of the Indies*. No one is sure if he was present at the sermon or heard about it later. But one thing seems certain; even though he must have seen some of the same injustices described by de Montesinos, Las Casas continued to support the Spanish conquest and the goals of conquering new lands, earning wealth, and converting Indians to Christianity.
In 1518, Las Casas went before the Holy Roman emperor and ruler of Spain, Charles V, to plead for the rights of the native peoples. Influenced by Las Casas, Charles eventually ended slavery in Spanish America.

However, in 1513, something happened that changed Las Casas's life. He took part in the conquest of Cuba. As a reward, he received more Indian slaves and an encomienda, or land grant. But he also witnessed a massacre. The Spanish killed thousands of innocent Indians, including women and children, who had welcomed the Spanish into their town. In his book The Devastation of the Indies: A Brief Account, he wrote, "I saw here cruelty on a scale no living being has ever seen or expects to see."

A Turning Point
The Cuban massacre in 1513 and other scenes of violence against Indians Las Casas witnessed finally pushed him to a turning point. He could no longer believe that the Spanish conquest was right. Before, he had thought that only some individuals acted cruelly and inhumanely. Now he saw that the whole Spanish system of conquest brought only death and suffering to the people of the West Indies.

On August 15, 1514, when he was about thirty years old, Las Casas gave a startling sermon. He asked his congregation to free their enslaved Indians. He also said that they had to return or pay for everything they had taken away from the Indians. He refused to forgive the colonists’ sins in confession if they used Indians as forced labor. Then he announced that he would give up his ownership of Indians and the business he had inherited from his father.

Protector of the Indians
For the rest of his life, Las Casas fought for the rights of the Indians in the Americas. He traveled back and forth to Europe working on their behalf. He talked with popes and kings, debated enemies, and wrote letters and books on the subject.

Las Casas influenced both a pope and a king. In 1537, Pope Paul III wrote that Indians were free human beings, not slaves, and that anyone who enslaved them could be thrown out of the Catholic Church. In 1542, Holy Roman emperor Charles V, who ruled Spain, issued the New Laws, banning slavery in Spanish America.

In 1550 and 1551, Las Casas also took part in a famous debate against Juan Ginés Sepúlveda in Spain. Sepúlveda tried to prove that Indians were “natural slaves.” Many Spanish, especially those hungry for wealth and glory, shared this belief. Las Casas passionately argued against Sepúlveda with the same message he would deliver over and over throughout his life. Las Casas argued that:

• Indians, like all human beings, have rights to life and liberty. • The Spanish stole Indian land through bloody and unjust wars. • There is no such thing as a good encomienda. • Indians have the right to
make war against the Spanish.

This 19th century painting symbolizes the role of Las Casas as “Protector of the Indians”.

Las Casas died in 1566. The voices and the deeds of the conquistadors slowly eroded the memory of his words. But in other European countries, people began to read The Devastation of the Indies: A Brief Account. As time passed, more of Las Casas’s works were published. In the centuries to follow, fighters for justice took up his name as a symbol for their own struggles for human rights.

**The Legacy of Las Casas**

Today, historians remember Las Casas as the first person to actively oppose the oppression of Indians and to call for an end to Indian slavery. Later, in the 19th century, Las Casas inspired both Father Hidalgo, the father of Mexican independence, and Simón Bolívar, the liberator of South America.

In the 1960s, Mexican American César Chávez learned about injustice at an early age. His family worked as migrants, moving from place to place to pick crops. With barely an eighth-grade education, Chávez organized workers, formed a union, and won better pay and better working and living conditions. Speaking for the powerless, he rallied people to his side with his cry, "Sí, Se Puede!" ("Yes, We Can!") Just as the name "Chávez" will always be connected to the struggles of the farm workers, the name "Las Casas" will forever be connected to any fight for human rights and dignity for the native people of the Americas.