

## **Two Spanish Priests: Two 16<sup>th</sup> century Perspectives on Native Americans (Bartolome de Las Casas/Juan de Sepulveda)**

**Read, highlight, identify the speaker, analyze the documents**

**Identify the speaker – Who was he? What was his role in the Roman Catholic Church?**

**Analyze – Summarize the document. State the perspective, point of view, purpose, or historical context of the document with respect to the natives in the Spanish colonies. What was the writer's opinion on relations with the natives in Spanish North America? What did he believe was the role of the RCC with respect to the natives?**

### **Document 1**

"The Spanish have a perfect right to rule these barbarians of the New World who are as inferior to the Spanish as children to adults, or women to men; for there exists between the two as great a difference as between savage and cruel races and the most merciful, between the most intemperate [lacking in self-control] and the moderate and temperate, and, I might even say, between apes and men. They do not possess any learning at all, and are not even literate or in possession of any monument to their history except for some obscure and vague reminiscences of several things put down in various paintings; nor do they have written laws, but barbarian institutions and customs. They waged continual and ferocious war upon one another with such fierceness that they did not consider victory at all worthwhile unless they satisfied their monstrous hunger with the flesh of their perfect enemies. Furthermore these Indians were otherwise so cowardly and timid that they could barely endure the presence of our soldiers, and many times thousands upon thousands of them scattered in flight like women. Therefore, if you wish to [subdue] them . . . to a servitude a little less harsh, it will not be difficult for them to change their masters, and instead of the ones they had, who were barbarous and impious [wicked] and inhuman, to accept the Christians, cultivators of human virtues and the true faith."

### **Document 2**

"The pattern established at the outset has remained to this day, and the Spaniards still do nothing save tear the natives to shreds, murder them and inflict upon them untold misery, suffering and distress, tormenting, harrying and persecuting them mercilessly....It clearly appears that there are no races in the world, however rude, uncultivated, barbarous, gross, or almost brutal they may be, who cannot be persuaded and brought to a good order and way of life, and made domestic, mild and tractable, provided . . . the method that is proper and natural to men is used; that is, love and gentleness and kindness."

### **Document 3**

"And never have the Indians in all the Indies committed any act against the Spanish Christians, until those Christians have first and many times committed countless cruel aggressions against them or against neighboring nations....With my own eyes I saw Spaniards cut off the nose and ears of Indians, male and female, without provocation, merely because it pleased them to do it....Likewise, I saw how they summoned the chief rulers to come, assuring them safety, and when they peacefully came, they were taken captive and burned....They laid bets as to who, with one stroke of the sword, could split a man in two or could cut off his head or spill out his entrails with a single stroke of the pike....They took infants from their mothers' breasts, snatching them by the legs and pitching them headfirst against the crags or snatched them by the arms and threw them into the rivers, roaring with laughter and saying as the babies fell into the water, "Boil there, you offspring of the devil!"....They attacked the towns and spared neither the children nor the aged nor pregnant women nor women in childbed, not only stabbing them and dismembering them but cutting them to pieces as if dealing with sheep in the slaughter house."

## **Additional Information**

*What were the actual arguments presented by Juan de Sepúlveda and Bartolome Las Casas?*

In essence, the debate revolved around the long-debated question of the judiciousness of declaring war against the Indians before instructing them in the Christian faith so as to facilitate their conversion. As noted above, the two sides based their arguments on the Bible, the Church Fathers, and Spanish medieval as well as Renaissance thought and law.

For his part, Sepúlveda put forward four propositions in favor of the just war against the Native Americans: first, the Indians were barbarians; second, they committed crimes against natural law; third, the Indians oppressed and killed the innocent among themselves; and fourth, they were infidels who needed to be instructed in the Christian faith.

Las Casas, in contrast, set out to expand and clarify each one of these points. In the process, he came to advocate the essential unity of humankind; that is, the Indians, though at a different and backward stage of human development than the Europeans, were no less rational and adept to peacefully receive the Christian faith than the peoples of the Old World. Also, Las Casas came to conclude that Spain's sole role in the New World was spiritual rather than economic or political. In sum, since the Indians were rational and civilized human beings, Spaniards had no right to subject them to slavery or to war.