

A Defense of Human Sacrifice

For his debate with Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda on the lawfulness of the Spanish conquest of the New World (see pp. 19-20), Las Casas wrote a long *Defense in Latin*. In it he refused the argument that war against the Indians was justified because of their sins—war was a greater evil than the sins it was supposed to stamp out, said Las Casas. He defended the Indians against the charge that they were “slaves by nature” who should be ruled by others, and he even had the audacity to find reasons for their practice of human sacrifice.

Like other sixteenth-century scholastics, Las Casas debated, armed with a wealth of citations from authorities—Church Fathers, later theologians, Roman and canon law. In fact, the *Defense*, which until recently was available only in manuscript, gives a valuable picture of Las Casas in action at court as “Protector of the Indians,” as well as a comprehensive view of his thought.

The following selection, Chapter 34 of the *Defense* (1550), develops an unusual excuse for the Indians through Aristotle’s theory of “probable” error.

From Bartolomé de Las Casas, *Defense Against the Persecutors and Slanders of the Peoples of the New World* Discovers across the Ocean, ed. Ernest J. Burrus, S.J., trans. Stafford Poole, C.M. (Madrid: Series José Porrua Turanzas; Editorial José Porrua Vencero, 1971). Reprinted by permission of Father Stafford Poole.

We have come to the same conclusion [that we cannot punish the crimes of unbelievers] regarding the crime of human sacrifice, which is said to be one of their practices. It would not be right to make war on them for this reason both because . . . it is difficult for them to absorb in a short time the truth proclaimed to them through messengers and also because the Indians are under no obligation to believe the Spaniards, even if they force the truth on them a thousand times. Why will they believe such a proud, greedy, cruel, and rapacious nation? Why will they give up the religion of their ancestors, unanimously approved for so many centuries and supported by the authority of their teachers, on the basis of a warning from a people whose words work no miracles to confirm the faith or lessen vice?

Even though the Indians cannot be excused in the sight of God for worshipping idols, yet they can be excused completely in the sight of men for two reasons. First, they are following a “probable” error for, as the Philosopher [Aristotle] notes, *Topics*, Book I, something is said to be “probable” which is approved by all men, either by the majority of wise men or by those whose wisdom has the greatest following. Further, he says, *Rhetoric*, Book I, Chapter 20, “That must necessarily be judged to be good or better which is so judged by all, or the majority of men of good judgment or by those who are thought to have better judgment, even if only one person is forming the judgment.” Judgments of this type, approved by the opinions of such men, are called morally certain, according to the same Philosopher whom all philosophers and theologians follow, *Ethics*, Book I, Chapter 2. Convictions about the gods, the duty of offering sacrifice to them, and the manner and thing to be sacrificed are fully agreed on by all the known Indian nations, and these gods are worshiped by those reputed to be sacred and holy men (that is, their priests), and their idolatry is established by the decrees of their laws,

the sanctions of their rulers, and the penalties leveled against transgressors. Finally, since idols are not worshipped secretly, but publicly and religiously in their temples—and this from the earliest centuries—it is quite clear that the error of these people definitely is probable. Nor should we be surprised if they do not immediately arouse themselves at our first preaching.

Also, they are definitely in probable error about their practice of human sacrifice, since the ancient history of both pagans and Catholics testifies that almost all peoples used to do the same thing. For this is what Eusebius says, *De Praeparatione Evangelica*, Book IV, Chapter 7:

It was common for all men, on the day customarily set for human sacrifice, to sprinkle the altar with human blood. This was the practice in ancient times when calamity or danger threatened. The ruler of the city or nation would offer to the avenging demon his favorite child as a ransom for the redemption of the whole people, and the one chosen would be slain in a mystic rite.

He goes on:

Human sacrifice is demanded by the demons, who from time to time afflict many cities and nations with plagues and sudden calamities and ceaselessly harass the people in frightful ways until appeased by the blood of the victims offered them.

Again, Clement says, *Recognitiones ad Jacobum, Fratrem Domini*, Book IX, that some of the peoples of western India, who possibly were much like those we are dealing with, used to sacrifice foreigners to their gods and then devour them. Eusebius writes the same thing in the work which we have already quoted. In addition, Lactantius says, *De Divinis Institutionibus*, Book I, Chapter 21:

Among the Tauri, an inhuman and savage nation, there was a law that a stranger should be sacrificed to Diana and such a sacrifice was offered for a long time. The Gauls placated Esus and Teutates with human blood. Even the Latins were not free of such barbarism. Indeed, even now the Jupiter of Latium is worshiped with human blood. . . .

However, we should not be astonished at the barbarians whose religion matches their morals. Are not our own people, who boast of their meekness and gentleness, often more inhuman than those who practice such sacrilegious rites?

Further on he notes, "It is now evident that this practice of human sacrifice is very ancient, for in honor of Saturn people used to be thrown into the Tiber, from the Mulvian Bridge."

And in regard to innocent children, he says:

I find no words to tell of the children who were sacrificed to the same Saturn out of hatred for Jupiter. Men were so barbarous and so inhuman that they labeled as sacrifice that foul and detestable crime against the human race which is paricide when, without any sign of family love, they blotted out tender and innocent lives at an age which is especially dear to parents. . . .

And later:

The Carthaginians had the custom of offering human sacrifice to Saturn, and when they were conquered by Agathocles, king of Sicily, they made peace with their god who was angry with them, and so, in order that they might better discharge their guilt-offerings, they sacrificed 200 children from noble families.

Plutarch writes, *Problemata*, that the Romans failed to punish some barbarians who were sacrificing men to

the gods because they knew that it was done out of custom and law. Plutarch also says that the Romans themselves did the same thing at times. Here are his own words:

When the Romans discovered that certain barbarians had sacrificed a man to their immortal gods, the magistrates thought that they should be summoned and punished. Later they released them when they learned that the barbarians did this because of a certain law and custom, and so they forbade them to do it again. This was because a few years before they themselves had buried [alive] two men and two women in the *Forum Boarium* at Rome. It does not seem right that they should do this and yet find fault with the savages who did the same. Were they persuaded that to offer a man to the immortal gods was evil but to offer him to the demons was a necessity? Did they think that those who did this sort of thing from custom and law committed sin, while they believed that by following the command of the Sibylline books, they were not guilty of the same crime?

The Greek historian Herodotus tells us, Book IV, that the Scythians had the custom of sacrificing to their gods one out of every hundred prisoners of war. He also maintains that the Scytho-Tauri of Germany sacrifice everyone who is shipwrecked on their shores, as well as strangers, to Iphigenia, the daughter of Agamemnon. The same thing is recorded by Solinus, *Polyhistoria*, Chapter 20, and Pomponius Mela, Book II, Chapter 1. Diodorus of Sicily writes, Book VI, that the Gauls sacrificed to their gods captives or those condemned for their crimes. Strabo reminds us, *De Situ Orbis*, Book III, that our own Spanish people, who reproach the poor Indians for human sacrifice, used to sacrifice captives and their horses. He says that they forced some to live next to the Duero River in a spartan manner. He continues:

Those who are given to sacrifice also practice divination with entrails, especially those of captives. They cut off the right hands of their victims and offer them to the gods. They eat a goat which they sacrifice to Mars, as they do with prisoners and horses.

Moreover, similar practices of other peoples are narrated in other of Strabo's works. Polydore Vergil, *De Rerum Inventoribus*, Book V, Chapter 8, has also recorded many similar details worth remembering.

Since, then, human sacrifice to the gods has been customary among so many different peoples, surely the Indians, in performing human sacrifice for many centuries, are in probable error.

We know that famous philosophers have lived in many parts of the world. According to Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, Book VI, Chapter 10, even though they knew the stories about the gods to be mere fables and judged them to be undeserving of divine honors (this group includes Cicero and Seneca), they did not wish to turn the people from an ancient custom accepted for so many centuries. Why, then, should it be thought that at the words of Christian soldiers [who surpass the barbarous peoples in their wicked deeds], the Indians ought to turn from a religion which has been accepted for many centuries, sanctioned by the laws of many rulers, and strengthened by the example of so many prudent men? As Chrysostom says, *Homilia VIIa in Epistolam 1a ad Corinthios*, in matters that are sacred and of great importance and very difficult to give up, they would be fickle and worthy of reproach and punishment if they put aside the many and great testimonies of such great authority and believe these soldiers in this matter, without being convinced by more probable reasons—and this cannot be done in a short time—that the Christian religion is more worthy of belief.

They ought to be ashamed who think to spread the gospel by means of the mailed fist. Men want to be taught, not forced. There is no way for our religion to be taught in a short time to those who are as ignorant of our language as we are of their language and religion, up to the point that those who prudently hold fast [to these beliefs] are convinced by reason. For, as we have said, there is no greater or more arduous step than for a man to abandon the religion which he has once embraced.

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The Restoration of the Indies

When Las Casas was in his early eighties, he blocked an attempt of Spaniards in Peru to have their encomiendas made perpetual. He did this by his outspoken Letter to Carranza (Fray Bartolomé Miranda de Carranza, Philip II's confessor), which caused Philip II to indefinitely delay a decision about the encomiendas even though the colonists were offering him between 7 and 9 million ducats for the favor (see pp. 20-21).

In the Letter, labeled a "little book" by one copyist, Las Casas arrived at his most extreme conclusions. To make up for past injustices, the Spaniards must free all Indians, subject the caciques only to a token tribute, and—except for a minimum number of paid garrisons to maintain the emperor's overlordship—withdraw from the Indies! The following selection, from the Letter to Carranza (August 1555), contains these extreme recommendations. (Obras Escogidas, V, 444-449.)

[A Token Tribute]

In the fifth supposition, Your Fathership says that the king of Castile must be recognized as supreme lord of all the new-found Indies, in order to establish and preserve the Christian religion, and for this they must give him his stipend, just as they gave it to Montezuma or to another lord. As for the first part of this supposition, I