

many of his fellow-Dominicans effectively did, that the Spanish Crown was the legitimate ruler of the Americas and he persisted until his death in the belief that the indigenous peoples had, in ignorance but in good faith, voluntarily surrendered their natural sovereignty to the King of Spain. In a tract entitled *Comprobatory Treatise on the Imperial Sovereignty and Universal Jurisdiction which the King of Castile Have over these Indies*, printed in the same year as the *Short Account*, and probably in an attempt to deflect official criticism from it, Las Casas set out to 'silence those who say that, because I detest and severely abominate all that has happened in the Indies - as I do, and intend to do as long as I live - I thereby somehow impugn and detract from the aforesaid title'. The argument which ran through this and so many of his other quasi-legal works was simple: the kings of Spain are the legitimate rulers of the Americas; but they are so because - and only because - in 1493 Pope Alexander VI 'donated' to the Catholic monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella sovereignty over all the new-found lands in the Atlantic which had not already been occupied by some other Christian prince.

There were many (many of them close associates of Las Casas) who denied that the papal claim to 'plenitude of power' over the entire world, and with it the right to give away the lands of pagan princes, was a valid one. Las Casas never questioned it. It was, as he said time and again, the only possible legitimization of the Spanish presence in the Americas. But although the papal grant might confer sovereignty over the New World upon the Catholic monarchs, it did not confer property rights over the persons or lands of its inhabitants. These, he insisted, remained theirs by natural right. Nor did it entirely deprive the native rulers of their political authority. As Las Casas stated explicitly in the very last work he wrote, *On Royal Power*, the 'kings' and 'princes' of the Americas enjoyed the same status as the nobility in Naples and Milan, both of which also formed part of the Spanish Empire at this time. Furthermore, Alexander VI had charged the Catholic monarchs to 'induce the peoples who live

in such islands and lands to receive the Catholic religion, save that you never inflict upon them hardships and dangers'. The Indians were not chattels or goods; they were subjects of the Castilian Crown - 'our subjects and our vassals', as Queen Isabella herself had phrased it. For the Spaniards to treat them like animals was thus against God's laws, the laws of nature, and a violation of the laws of Castile. It was also an abomination in God's eyes: a denial of the humanity which all men, whatever their beliefs or cultural preferences, shared. Las Casas was even prepared to argue, both in the *Short Account* (p. 70) and later and at greater length in *On Royal Power*, that the Indians now had sufficient cause, 'under natural, divine, and Roman law', for *them* to wage a 'just war' against the Spaniards.

Las Casas's entire life was dedicated to demonstrating the truth of these claims, first to his king, then to the royal administration - the Council of the Indies - and then to the world at large. As he stated in the preamble to his will, 'I have had no other interests but this: to liberate [the Indians] from the violent deaths which they have suffered and suffer ... through compassion at seeing so many multitudes of people who are rational, docile, humble, gentle and simple, who are so well equipped to receive our Holy Catholic Faith and every moral doctrine and who are endowed with such good customs, as God is my witness.' In pursuit of these ends Las Casas wrote a vast number of works. The bulk of these consisted of detailed and endlessly reiterated proposals for legal and institutional reform. They included, however, in addition to the *Short Account*, two further descriptive works: a massive *History of the Indies* and an equally immense work of comparative ethnology, significantly entitled *Apologetic History of the Indies*.

The *History of the Indies* contains most of the material to be found in the *Short Account*. It was, said Las Casas, 'a book of the greatest and ultimate necessity', and it had been written to demonstrate that there was no people on earth, no matter how seemingly 'barbarous' their condition, that could be denied