



The Cry of Montesinos

As recounted by Bartolomé de las Casas

(Events described: 1510 or 1511)

Antonio de Montesinos (his name is rendered a little differently in the text below) was a Catholic missionary who came to the island of Hispaniola shortly after it was colonized by the Spanish. He and his fellow missionaries were appalled to hear of atrocities that the Spanish had perpetrated against indigenous Taínos while conquering the island. The missionaries were outraged as well by their own observations of how colonists exploited surviving Taínos, from whom colonists had the right, according to the Spanish government, to extract forced labor, along with a legal responsibility to see that the Taínos under their authority were Christianized. The missionaries decided that Montesinos should give a sermon denouncing the colonists. This account of his sermon, now known as the “Cry of Montesinos,” was written years later by eyewitness Bartolomé de las Casas, a colonist who himself became a Catholic priest and an advocate for indigenous people under Spanish rule.

That Sunday, at the hour appointed for preaching, the aforesaid friar, Father Anton Montesino, ascended the pulpit and took as the theme and basis of his sermon, which he carried with him written out and signed by the other friars: *Ego vox clamantis in deserto.*^a

Following his introduction and some remarks touching the season of Advent, he began to speak more vehemently of the desert-like sterility of conscience of the Spanish of this island and the blindness in which they lived; the great peril of damnation in which they walked, heedless of the extremely grave sins in which, with such indifference, they were continuously steeped and in which they were dying.

Returning then to his scriptural theme, he spoke thus: “It is to make these sins known to you that I have ascended this pulpit, I who am Christ’s voice in the wilderness of this island; and it behooves you, therefore, to hear this voice, not with commonplace attention, but with all your heart and with all your senses—this voice which will be unlike any you ever heard, a voice more harsh and severe, more frightful and devastating, than you ever thought to hear.” [...]

“This voice,” he said, “declares that all of you are in mortal sin, living and dying in it, because of the cruelty and tyranny you practice toward these innocent people. By what right, and by what justice, do you keep these Indians in such cruel and horrible bondage? By what authority have you waged such detestable wars against these people living meekly and peacefully in their lands, where now you have destroyed countless numbers of them, with deaths and ruinations as have never before been heard of? How can you keep them so oppressed and wearied, neither feeding them nor treating their illnesses, which they incur because of the excessive labors you give them, and of which they die for you—or better said, by which you kill them—so that you can extract and acquire gold day after day? What care do you take that they be taught to know their God and Creator, that they be baptized, that they hear mass, that they observe the feast days and Sundays? Are these not men? Do they not have rational souls? Are you not obligated to love them as yourselves? Do you not understand this, are you not grieved by this? How can you be in so

^a A quotation from the New Testament, in Latin: “I am a voice crying out in the wilderness” (John 1:23).

profound a torpor, asleep? Know this with certainty: that in your present state you can no more be saved than the Moors or Turks who neither have nor desire the faith of Jesus Christ.”

[...H]e left them dumbfounded, many seemingly in shock, others more defiant, some somewhat stung in conscience; but none, as I later perceived, converted.

Source: Bartolomé de las Casas, *Historia de las Indias*, ed. Marquess of Fuensanta del Valle and José Sancho Rayon (Madrid: Miguel Ginesta, 1875-76), 3:365-366 (book 3, chap. 4), <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/pst.000024807616>. Public domain, Google-digitized.

Excerpts translated into English and annotated by John-Charles Duffy. Paragraph breaks added for readability. Usage of quotation marks modernized. The English word *mass*, referring to the Catholic rite, is presented here in lowercase, replicating the source's use of lowercase for Spanish *misa*.



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