

A Sermon for the Ages **Friar Antonio Montesinos and the Quincentenary of Indigenous America's Reformation**

by Francisco Rodés G.

Five hundred years ago, on the fourth Sunday of Advent, 1511—six years before Martin Luther nailed up the 95 Theses which began the Protestant Reformation—a monk in the Order of the Preachers (Dominicans) dealt a blow to the conscience of the New World with the first public protest in defense of the human dignity of those subjugated by the Spanish Empire. To the surprised gaze of the conquistadors at mass, Antonio Montesinos echoed the message of the prophet John the Baptist: “A voice crying in the wilderness,” bringing it up to date and applying it to the circumstances of Indigenous America, devastated by the insatiable voraciousness of Europe’s imperial reach.

This event deserves to be recalled as a pivotal moment in the church’s history. Its impact did not divide Christianity as did the Reformation, but it did distinguish between two ways of understanding the mission of the church. On the one hand, is its mission fulfilled in the work of charity, healing wounds and comforting the suffering and largely neutral and silent about the affairs of history? Or might the mission also entail a confrontation with the forces of injustice, exhibiting a certain partisanship on behalf of impoverished and enslaved people?

As Gustavo Gutiérrez claims, on that Sunday of Advent—half a millennium ago—Latin America gave birth to Liberation Theology.

This was not the beginning of a structured and organized movement with a flag and a specific belief system, but it was the opening through which have moved innumerable Christians, priests and laypersons, counting among their number many martyrs, who found their consciences illuminated by seeing the face of Jesus in the downtrodden and mistreated. Even today, this view of Jesus marks the difference between the Christianity of the temple and the worship service and the Christianity of the prophetic voice, committed to the poor and the oppressed. Remembering this brings to the forefront the debate over the continued relevance of a spirituality that fosters countercultural initiatives in defense of life, peace, and justice.

Luther’s reformation centered on the question of justification before God; the Latin American reformation turns on the question of being just with one’s neighbor. The emphasis in Luther’s reform is on theology; the emphasis in the Latin American reform is on ethics. These two do not stand precisely as contrasts, rather as complementary points of focus, since a profound experience of God leads to committed action on behalf of others. Since human experience rarely achieves a full measure of perfection, however, it is important to highlight the Latin American emphasis on ethics since, as has been rightly claimed, in the writing of theology, ethics is frequently left until last and then left out.

The context of Luther’s reformation is the dawn of the modern era. The printing press and the pulpit are the symbols of the new era, in which human reason dominates, seeking to explain all the mysteries, sweeping away superstitions and traditions. The context of the Dominican reform was the globalization of European empires which, spurred on by mercantilism’s insatiable thirst

for gold and silver, went to whatever lengths to destroy civilizations and to sweep away entire cultures. Any similarity with today's world is not pure coincidence.

Spain under the Reformation

It is also important to underscore what Justo L. González, a Cuban historian living in the United States, points out in his writings. There is, he says, a faulty historical judgment that claims a solitary North Atlantic European center for the Protestant Reformation, with Spain having the primary role in the Counterreformation and the Inquisition. About this, González writes: "During the period of the Reformation, Spain was a center of reforming intellectual activity. . . . Well before Luther's protest, the desire for reform had taken over in most of Spain, thanks to the work of Queen Isabel and her collaborators."[\[1\]](#)

The central figure in the religious reform in Spain was Queen Isabel of Castile, commonly known as "The Catholic Queen." She found her main support in Franciscan friar Francisco Jeménez de Cisneros, her confessor and ally, a man of great Biblical erudition and well-proven piety, who led the preparation and editing of the monumental Complutensian Polyglot Bible. Working with Cisneros, the Queen led a reform movement of monastic life, founded the celebrated University of Alcalá de Henares, and promoted studies in the University of Salamanca. In addition, the enormous influence of the writings of Erasmus of Rotterdam on many circles in Spain should not be forgotten. A true reform in religious life was well under way at the end of the fifteenth and the beginning of the sixteenth Centuries.

Clearly the military victories over Islamic forces which had dominated the Iberian Peninsula for seven centuries, along with news of Luther's Reformation, fed a spirit of intolerance which dominated the Spanish Kingdom. With Spain as his stronghold, the Pope seized the initiative in handling religious matters, opening the way for a unification of the Crown and the Church. Thus, the Inquisition took charge of wiping out any church reforming activity. Nevertheless, a kind of evangelical humanism was present in some of the Catholic missionaries who migrated to the Americas, an orientation that fostered attention to human dignity. Among those were the Dominican friars, to which we now turn our attention.

The Dominican Order

Founded in 1221 by Domingo de Guzmán, this order was from its beginning identified as a group of mendicant preachers, embracing a vow of poverty, relying entirely on offerings. Domingo had been greatly affected by the conflict with the Albigensian "heretics" from southern France. He believed it important for his Order to defend orthodox Christian faith and therefore urged his preachers to engage in rigorous study. Theological education became an overriding character of the Order, which would later produce towering intellects like Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas.

The Dominican Order produced many of the leaders of the Inquisition, including Torquemada. Being among the most theologically articulate, Dominicans were often appointed to refute nonconformist thinkers. But such theological rigor also created the soil for a renewing spirituality.

Missionary zeal characterized the Dominicans from the beginning. As itinerant preachers, Dominicans spread throughout the regions of Europe and the known world, teaching and serving as examples of evangelical humility. Dominicans, along with Franciscans, consistently participated in the earliest global exploration. From the College of Saint Stephen, in the

university city of Salamanca in 1510, three monks departed to begin the work in the “New World.”

The pulpit revolt

We know what happened on that bright morning in La Española (today, the Dominican Republic) from the mouth of an eyewitness, a young priest devoted to the people of the New World, though largely unaware of the conquest’s bloody hand. Within three years this priest would undergo a dramatic conversion, turning him into a courageous advocate for Taino people indigenous to that area. His name was Friar Bartolomé de las Casas. For this account we use information from his *Historia de las Indias*.

A year earlier, in 1510, three monks first arrived in La Española: Friar Pedro de Córdoba, Friar Antonio Montesinos, and Friar Bernardo de Santo Tomás. For their communal house, they used a humble dwelling with a straw roof, a dirt floor, and rustic furniture they made themselves. One day a stranger appeared at their door. He had committed a crime of passion and was returning after spending three years as a fugitive, hiding in the mountains. Showing signs of a profound repentance, and a sincere desire to give his life to the Order, he was accepted as a novice. Juan Garcés would become one of the first martyrs for the faith in the New World.

Garcés surprised the friars with accounts of Spanish soldiers’ cruel and bloodthirsty treatment of the Taino. He told how they kidnapped natives, forcing them to work as slaves for wealthy Spanish leaders and in the search for gold; how they plundered whole villages, raping women and using dogs to hunt those who fled to the mountains. These firsthand accounts shocked and shamed the friars, who were now convinced they could not remain neutral in the face of such barbarism. After months of prayer and meditation, they decided that on the fourth Sunday of Advent one of them would rebuke such practices from the pulpit. All of the friars agreed to the message, each signing the dramatic demand for repentance by the Spaniards. Friar Antonio Montesinos, their most eloquent speaker, was chosen to preach the sermon.

Like the good missionaries they were, the friars went through the streets of the town, house by house, inviting everyone to attend mass on that Sunday. They also invited each of the ruling Spanish authorities, including the governor. Since the friars enjoyed a well-earned recognition for their life of self-denial, the sanctuary was filled, all dressed in their finest clothing, eager to please the pious friars.

Then came the sermon and its excoriating indictment of Spanish rule. Here is how Friar las Casas later wrote of the occasion:

Having finished with the introduction and having said something which had to do with the subject of the time of Advent, [Montesinos went on to say] “I have risen here to let you know, I who am the voice of Christ in the desert of this island. . . .” This voice, he said, is that “all of you are in mortal sin and you live and die in it due to the cruelty and tyranny which you practice with this innocent people. Tell me by what right and with what justice do you hold these Indians in such horrible servitude? With what authority have you waged such detestable war, bringing havoc and death never before seen on these people who were living peacefully and calmly on their lands? How can you keep them so exhausted and oppressed, without giving them food or curing their illnesses, which were caused by the excessive work you have forced upon them and by which you cause their deaths, or more accurately put, by which you murder them. All of this so you can daily acquire more gold. Are these not human beings? Do

they not have rational spirits? Are you not obliged to love them as you love yourselves? Do you not understand this? Do you not feel this? How can you remain lethargically in such a deep slumber? Be assured that living like this you cannot save yourselves any more than can the Moors or the Turks, who do not have or want the faith of Jesus Christ”.[\[2\]](#)

Having finished his sermon, Montesinos left the pulpit, confronted by the angry gazes of those in attendance. No one in the congregation, except Pedro de Rentería, was prepared to confess their sins. Most were outraged and began conspiring against the daring preacher.

According to Las Casas: “They agreed that they at least would go to reprimand and frighten the preacher and the others, if indeed they did not punish him as a scandalous person who was spreading a new teaching never heard before and was condemning everyone and speaking against the King and his dominion in the Indies.”

That very afternoon they went to the house of the Dominicans to present their complaints to the superior, Pedro de Córdoba, who tried to calm them, listening patiently to their charges. He explained that all the Dominicans had approved of the sermon’s text. Nevertheless, the colonists insisted that the next Sunday they would give the friars the opportunity to take issue with Montesinos’ message.

Chances are the church was packed for next Sunday’s mass. Montesinos again went to the pulpit and, without tempering his passion, renewed his accusation against Spanish mistreatment of the “Indians” (so-called, since Columbus was convinced his exploration had taken him to Asia). Frustrated that their intimidation of the friars had failed, the colonial leaders appealed to the authority of the king. It was the king who gave property rights over discovered lands and authorized enslavement of the Taino. Therefore, reasoned the colonists, the friars’ opposition was defiance against the authority and the interests of the Crown.

Both sides prepared to take their case directly to the Spanish king. The colonists chose their most persuasive political leaders to represent them. But they also found among the Franciscan community a leader willing to collaborate, Friar Alonso de Espinal, a zealous and virtuous religious person, but with little education (other than reading the *Suma Angélica* as a part of confession.[\[3\]](#)) and even less exposure to the lives of natives.

This way, the colonists could make their accusation against the Dominicans more credible. This complicity of some missionaries with the conquistadors occurred throughout all of the history of the conquest and colonizing of the New World, which made prophetic preaching more difficult. It is not surprising that due to their lack of instruction (as Las Casas would call it), colonists assumed the right to exploit the indigenous population. The mythology of racial superiority began to grow, and many slanderous statements were circulated to justify merciless treatment of the indigenous. They were said to have licentious cultural practices, a lack of discipline for work, and limited intellectual capacity.

The next chapter of this history occurs in Spain, where for the first time the Dominicans argued their case in the royal Court. A record of their complaints is recorded in the 1512 Laws of Burgos, and it results in the first legal provisions providing modest protections for the indigenous populations in the Americas against the most extreme abuses.

The voice of opposition would later grow louder and more insistent, in the career of Friar Bartolomé de las Casas. Las Casas was converted to the indigenous cause in 1514, while he was in Cuba. After a time of conflicts and some failures, he entered the Dominican order and spent

10 years in a monastery, where he prepared himself intellectually and spiritually for the human rights struggle that would occupy him for the rest of his days, building on the legacy of Montesinos' protests. The Latin American historian Enrique Dussel summarizes that legacy:

The action of Montesinos is of transcendental importance in the Latin American situation. His was a truly prophetic action based on a belief which began a tradition in the history of America. The words which Antonio de Montesinos declared on that 21st of December, 1511, on the fourth Sunday of Advent, will never cease to echo through America, as long as there is a Christian consciousness worthy of the name.[\[4\]](#)

Rationalizing racial privilege

Returning to Montesinos' words, the questions with which he challenged the conquistadors are nothing less than questions regarding the human condition of the Taino population: "Are they not men? Do they not have rational spirits? Are you not obligated to love them?" From the earliest encounters, the colonial enterprise required elaborate racial and cultural theories to justify treating the indigenous as sub-human beasts. Sadly, it was religious people who sent back to Spain the most denigrating images of native peoples, such as the description given by Friar Tomás Ortiz, who became Bishop of Santa Marta:

There is no justice among them. . . . [T]hey are like asses, stupid, crazed, having no sense, considering it nothing to kill and be killed; they don't tell the truth unless it benefits them, they are inconsistent . . . have the vices of beasts . . . are not capable of understanding doctrine . . . are traitors, cruel, vengeful, and never pardon . . . lazy, thieves . . . of low and mean judgment . . . are as cowardly as rabbits, dirty as pigs, they eat lice, spiders, and raw worms . . . have no art or human skills . . . are like brute animals. In all, I say, that never did God create people with so much vice and animal behavior.[\[5\]](#)

Note how many epithets reference animals; but the term "beasts" is the one that seemed to become fixed, and it circulated more widely than any other. In the intellectual atmosphere of Europe, a more paternalistic terminology was used, treating the natives as "children" who needed the imposition of a strict discipline in order to change their customs. But the result was the same: the justification of violence and slavery.

Another method of denigration used by the conquistadors was to castigate indigenous people's religions as diabolical and idolatrous. It was not enough to control bodies; spirits and culture also must be shackled. These approaches not only destroyed indigenous social structures, manners, and customs, but also swept away ancestral religious practices.

The bravery of Montesinos in saying to the Spaniards that they were in "mortal sin" and that Moors and Turks were better, was to transform the accusers into the accused. In effect, the Spaniards were the ones without souls, who were condemned precisely because they did not treat the indigenous as human beings worthy of the love and respect.

The Dominicans' persistence in defending human dignity is an important historical lesson to be claimed in our modern circumstances. This precedent pushes us, even today, to ask about our treatment of those who are different, who belong to another culture. We need to ask ourselves: In what ways do we continue to practice xenophobia and other forms of racial and cultural discrimination in ways that rob the humanity of the "other"? Is it not said today that the poor are such because of some moral deficiency, some character flaw, some cultural inadequacy or religious superstition?

Why do we treat others as if they were invisible and have no real existence? Are not those ideologies to blame which blind us, preventing us from seeing other people as human beings, as subjects for relationship rather than objects for manipulation? What privileges are we protecting, rationalizing and justifying? Whose interests are we serving when a few are allowed unimaginable wealth while others go begging—whether by the “hand of God” or the logic of the market?

An alternative vision

A final lesson must be taken from this history. It is posed by the question of how and when can we catch that purifying vision, that revelation which links us together, which invites us to live as brothers and sisters, which unites us in solidarity with the “other”? How can we escape from the circle of purely individualistic interest – private, sectarian, class interests into which we were born and by which we have been schooled? How can we discover in the “other” someone worthy of our love, care, and protection? By what transformation are we empowered to turn enemies into friends, strangers into acquaintances, competitors into collaborators?

The Dominicans listened to a man who told them painful stories that opened their eyes to the suffering, their ears to the lament. Exposure to the bloody face of history is the first step of awakening the conscience. As people of faith, we can read such history alongside our own central story of the bloody timbers endured by the one who claims our allegiance.

Let me conclude by recounting the experience of a young inmate in colonial Cuba, José Martí. A political prisoner at the tender age of 17 years, he observed the inhuman treatment to which an old man named Nicolás del Castillo was subjected, how he was made to work in the quarries far beyond his physical capacity. When his body could take no more, he was beaten and thrown down on the rocks. Martí watched Nicolás’ inert body being carted away and wrote later: “His head was banging up and down in the cart. His body bounced up with every bump. They have crushed a human being. Miserable wretches! They have forgotten that God dwells in that man!”^[6]

Martí saw God in the victim. As a result, he dedicated his life to fighting for freedom and the happiness of his people. He reached the point where he said: “I want the first law of our Republic to be the respect of all Cubans for the full dignity of man.”^[7]

Each human being is a child of God and is made in God’s image. This gives each human being an innate right to dignity. It matters not how victimized or vilified a person might be by human society: that person’s worth rises above all circumstances. This is the prophetic testimony of Friar Antonio Montesinos. It is a testimony that should be universally known, honored and celebrated—especially in this time, when we commemorate the 500th anniversary of that fateful sermon. It reflects the voice of the One who names us, and claims us, and gives substance to our hope for the day when death shall be no more.

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- [1] Justo L. González: *Historia del cristianismo*, vol. 2, Editorial Unilit. Miami, 1994, p. 21.
- [2] Véase Bartolomé de las Casas: *Historia de las Indias*, Libro I, Fondo de Cultura Económica, México, D. F., 1986.
- [3] *Ibidem*.
- [4] Enrique Dussel: *El episcopado latinoamericano y la liberación de los pobres, 1504-1620*, Centro de Reflexión Teológica, A. C., México, 1970, p. 34.
- [5] Citado por Luis N. Rivera Pagan: *Evangelización y violencia: la conquista de América*, Editorial CEMI, San Juan, Puerto Rico, 1992, p. 227
- [6] José Martí: “El presidio político en Cuba”, en *Obras completas*, t. 1, Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, La Habana, 1971, p. 61.
- [7] José Martí: “Discurso en el Liceo Cubano, Tampa”, Tampa, Florida, 26 de noviembre de 1891, en *op. cit.*, t. 4, La Habana, Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1971, p. 270.