**Who was Fray Montesinos?**

Antonio de Montesinos or Antonio Montesino (c. 1475 - June 27, 1540) was a Spanish Dominican friar who was a missionary on the island of Hispaniola (now the Dominican Republic and Haiti). With the backing of Friar Pedro de Córdoba and his Dominican community at Santo Domingo, Montesinos was the first European to publicly denounce the enslavement and harsh treatment of the indigenous peoples of the island. His censure initiated an enduring struggle to reform the Spanish conduct towards all indigenous people in the New World. Montesinos' outspoken criticism influenced Bartolomé de las Casas to head the humane treatment of Indians movement.

Very little is known about Montesinos' early life. He became a Dominican friar at the convent of St. Stephen in Salamanca, and while Montesinos was here, he may have received an education. He was also a part of the first group of Dominican missionaries to go to Hispaniola in September 1510, under the leadership of Pedro de Córdoba.

On December 21, 1511, the fourth Sunday of Advent, Montesinos preached an impassioned sermon. He criticized the practices of the Spanish colonial encomienda system, and decrying the abuse of the Taíno Indian people on Hispaniola.

Listing the injustices that the indigenous people were suffering at the hands of the Spanish colonists, Montesinos proclaimed that the Spanish on the island ***are all in mortal sin and live and die in it, because of the cruelty and tyranny they practice among these innocent peoples."*** During his sermon, Montesinos also proclaimed that he nor any of the other missionaries would allow these slaveholders to partake in confession. According to Bartolomé de las Casas, who was a witness, Montesinos asked those in attendance:

***Tell me by what right of justice do you hold these Indians in such a cruel and horrible servitude? On what authority have you waged such detestable wars against these people who dwelt quietly and peacefully on their own lands? Wars in which you have destroyed such an infinite number of them by homicides and slaughters never heard of before. Why do you keep them so oppressed and exhausted, without giving them enough to eat or curing them of the sicknesses they incur from the excessive labor you give them, and they die, or rather you kill them, in order to extract and acquire gold every day.***

The sermon outraged the settlers and prominent citizens of Hispaniola, including the governor, Diego Columbus, son of Christopher Columbus, as well as other high-ranking representatives of the king. Montesinos's sermon had a formative impact upon Las Casas, who heard it firsthand. Las Casas became well known for his advocacy of the rights of indigenous peoples of the Americas.

The primary goal of the Preaching Friars (Dominicans) in the New World was to aid and represent the aboriginal American Indians under Spanish and Portuguese rules, for which they fought for over three centuries.

As a result of the friars' protests at Santo Domingo, King Ferdinand II initially ordered that Montesinos and other Dominicans who supported him be shipped back to Spain. Ferdinand, at first, referred to the preaching of Montesinos as "a novel and groundless attitude" and a "dangerous opinion [that] would do much harm to all the affairs of that land." After returning to Spain, Montesinos and his supporters were able to persuade the king of their righteous agenda and principles.

As a result, the king convened a commission that promulgated the Laws of Burgos, the first code of ordinances to protect the indigenous people. The laws regulated the treatment and conversion of the indigenous people, and also limited the demands of the Spanish colonizers upon them.

In July 1526, under the leadership of Lucas Vásquez de Ayllón, Montesinos, two other Dominicans, and 600 colonists established San Miguel de Gualdape, the first European settlement in what would later become the United States. Founded near Sapelo Sound on the Coast of Georgia, the colony lasted about four months before it succumbed to disease, starvation, and a hostile Indian population. Immediately after the death of Ayllón in October 1526, the settlement was abandoned. Montesinos and the other remaining 150 survivors returned to San Domingo. Before they returned home, it is presumed that Montesinos and the other Dominicans became the first priests to celebrate Mass in the present-day United States.

When Montesinos returned to Hispaniola, he continued to play a prominent role in the region. In 1528, he accompanied Fray Tomás de Berlanga to Spain to see Charles V on matters of "great importance." While in Spain, Montesinos was appointed protector of the Indians in the Province of Venezuela. Charles V then granted the province to Ambrosio Alfinger and Bartolome Sayller, representatives of the Welser banking family, German creditors of the emperor. Montesinos accompanied the German expedition to Venezuela in 1529. On June 27, 1540 Antonio de Montesinos was murdered by an officer of the expedition due to his strong opposition to the exploitation of the Indians.

**Sermon of Fray Montesinos**

Sermon of Fray Montesinos, Dominican on December 1511. Five hundred years ago this Advent, a Dominican friar named Antonio de Montesino delivered a sermon haranguing an assembly of Spaniards in Santo Domingo” a tiny, ragged, and lonely outpost on a sylvan Caribbean isle.

“I am the voice of Christ crying in the desert of this island,” he preached. “All of you are in mortal sin and in it you are living and are dying . . . . With what right and with what justice do you hold these Indians in such cruel and horrible servitude?”

The chronicler of the horror, Montesino’s later Dominican brother Bartolomé de Las Casas, tells a story of the Taíno chief Hatuey, who was caught and convicted for armed resistance. When asked on his funeral pyre if he wished baptism so that he could live forever in heaven, he asked for clarification:

***“Do Christians go to heaven?”***

***“Yes,” replied the priest.***

***“Then I’d rather go to hell.”***

As luck (or Providence) would have it, the season was Advent. The text assigned for the fourth Sunday was John the Baptist’s quintessential call to repentance: “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness.” To “make straight the pathway of our Lord,” the Dominicans chose Antonio Montesino, not for his authority” he was not their leader” but because he was “an eloquent preacher, harsh in the reproaching of vice.” Further, lest the public presume that his message represented a minority opinion, the whole fellowship signed their spokesman’s text ahead of time.

Then, at last, Montesino revealed the mysterious “certain thing”:

***“All of you are in mortal sin and in it you are living and are dying because of the cruelty and tyranny with which you treat these innocent people,”*** he declared, and then said:

***Tell me: With what right and with what justice do you hold these Indians in such cruel and horrible servitude? With what authority have you waged such detestable wars against a people who were so gentle and peaceful in your lands, where you have consumed uncountable numbers of them with death and unheard-of tortures? How do you possess them so oppressed and fatigued, without giving them anything to eat, nor curing them of their illnesses, which, due to the excessive work that you give them, they incur and then die”or to put it better, you kill them by taking and acquiring gold every day?***

He continued:

***And what care do you take over who teaches them the faith, that they know their God and creator? Are baptized? Hear mass? Keep festival days and Sundays? These [Indians], are they not men? Do they not have rational souls? Are you not obligated to love them as you love yourselves? Do you not understand this? Do you not feel this? How is it that you are in such a deep, lethargic sleep? You can be sure that in your state you are no more able to be saved than the Moors or Turks, who lack and don’t even want the faith of Jesus Christ.***