

Comment

Bartolomé de las Casas OP 1484—1984

When there are so many urgent things we could comment on—famine in Ethiopia, the shooting-down of Mrs Gandhi, the growing temptation of moral and earnest Britons to violate Mrs Thatcher's laws—what on earth are we doing writing about somebody who was born 500 years ago, the Spanish Dominican bishop Bartolomé de las Casas? Why, for that matter, are we letting ourselves get caught up at all in the current craze for lavish marking of centenaries, jubilees, eightieth birthdays? After all, what good does it do?

The social scientists tell us that the keeping of anniversaries meets a deep human need. They are "socially reinforcing". They help to give us a sense of belonging. They help us to define our relationship with the rest of the universe, it seems. But this does not explain the present boom in them. The bigger the gap gets between the world and the Church, and the Church's own calendar of sacred commemorations, the longer grows the list of secular commemorations which—so the media people say—are worth keeping. The boom is in fact at least partly a product of the media industry itself, of President-making Madison Avenue and its sometimes quite sedate imitators. In a media-shaped culture ideas and information (even quite stodgy ideas and information) are almost inevitably going to be packaged in the form of stories. It is the best way of circulating them. And any anniversary has the makings in it of a story. Further, human beings are the flesh and blood of stories, so personalities have a role today in public communication of a kind they have never had before.

What, though has all this got to do with Las Casas, "the Apostle of the Indies"? In fact, a lot. The 500th anniversary of this man's birth has a power of meaning (at least for the Spanish-speaking half of the Church) that most of these events do not have, for the myth of Las Casas is still alive and growing. His actual historical career was extraordinary, by any counts. He spent his long life in championing the rights of the Indians in the New World. In his writings we see the Church possibly for the first time reflecting on what its mission is in human terms—and, in doing this, helping to create the modern world. Next month we shall publish a paper on the man himself, his work and his theology, one of a series of talks sponsored by the Dominicans and Oxford University to honour the quincentenary. Here, however, we are concentrating on the myth.

Not long after his death in 1566 most of his writings were for all

practical purposes banned by the State, and they were not released for publishing until the 19th century. His criticisms of what his fellow-countrymen had done in the New World had struck too deep: one of Spain's finest historians, Menéndez Pidal, was belittling him even in Franco's time. He was certainly not forgotten, but suppression of his writings has made it much easier to play politics with the memory of him. Over the centuries, at different times, Las Casas has been fêted as apostle, fighter for independence, liberal, nationalist, socialist, Marxist and saint. He carries a dozen passports. In Latin America every cause connected with human rights and social justice seems to have appropriated him.

Yet was it really so unfortunate that he caught people's imaginations so easily? Certain figures do this: an obvious example is St Francis, who, in the past 100 years especially, has come to be seen by all sorts of people, by no means all of them Catholics, as personifying values in danger of being lost—simplicity, humility, reverence for God's good earth. The extraordinary interest in moderns like Pope John XXIII and Mother Teresa of Calcutta also springs to mind.

There are obvious dangers, but strictly these are not personality cults, since, generally speaking, it is what these people are seen as standing for that is the focus of attention rather than the people themselves. Reflection on the lives of some holy heroes can, it seems, lead to a focussing of ideas and values that at the popular level otherwise would not come into focus, and this would seem to be even truer today, when—thanks to the media—people instinctively think in terms of narrative, drama, personality.

Acknowledging this is not capitulation to a sentimental idealism, but, on the contrary, a reassertion of the "bodiliness" of our faith. Remember that the traditional honouring of saints is rooted in belief in the Incarnation, in the conviction that it is not through words but through a human being, Jesus Christ, that human beings of all kinds, everywhere, find unity and reconciliation.

If somebody like Las Casas had had the kind of place in English Catholicism which Las Casas himself has in Latin American Catholicism, almost certainly Michael Knowles's reflections "from the pew" on whether or not there is such a thing as a Catholic social ethic—published by us last month—would have been rather different.

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