

Human Rights and Religious Witness: the Dominican Contribution
Question for the Reunion Seminar
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Robert A. Bourgeois and Sean P. O'Connell, Faculty Facilitators

By what right do you wage such detestable wars on these people who lived mildly and peacefully in their own lands.....Why do you so greatly oppress and fatigue them, not giving them enough to eat or caring for them when they fall ill from excessive labors, so that they die or rather are slain by you, so that you may extract and acquire gold every day? And what care do you take that they receive religious instruction and come to know their God and creator, or that they be baptized, hear mass, or observe holidays and Sundays? Are they not men? Do they not have rational souls? Are you not bound to love them as you love yourselves?

These words come from the sermon by the Dominican Friar Antonio de Montesinos on December 21, 1511. The sermon precipitated a debate about the human rights of the indigenous peoples and peasants of Latin America that has lasted 500 years.

In a secular age, with increasing numbers of Americans deracinated from the humanistic and Christian traditions that sustained their ancestors, people are free to abandon the faith of their forebears and to criticize their inherited religious traditions. Many consider organized Christianity to be at best irrelevant and at worst harmful.

The case of Latin America permits an examination of the relevance of Christianity in a context outside our own society. The Catholic Church, as part of the establishment of Spanish America, was complicit in the subjugation of the poor by the oligarchy. But that same Church raised up prophets and martyrs for human rights from the earliest decades of the Conquest to the present day.

The question we would like to raise is whether the discourse of religious witness on behalf of human rights is important, irrelevant, or harmful in the Latin American context. The answer to that question has ramifications beyond Latin America.

Prominent cultural mythologies or worldviews which shape our perceptions in the United States include individualism, consumer capitalism, the American creed centered on freedom and opportunity, and the national interest. Is the narrative of religious witness for human rights, sometimes called Liberation Theology, a worldview that is important and worth preserving, alongside the narratives of consumer capitalism, individual freedom, and national security? This question is the topic of the reunion seminar.