

500th Anniversary of the Sermon of Friar Montesinos

From the Dominican Monastery of Our Lady of the Rosary in Summit, NJ

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Antonio de Montesinos was a Spanish Dominican friar on the island of Hispaniola (now the Dominican Republic and Haiti) who, with the backing of his prior, Fray Pedro de Córdoba and his Dominican community at Santo Domingo, preached against the enslavement and harsh treatment of the Indigenous peoples of the Island. Montesinos's preaching led to the conversion of Bartolomé de las Casas and his subsequent entrance into the Dominican Order.

Friar Montesinos became a Dominican friar at the convent of St. Stephen in Salamanca, where he may have studied. He was part of the first band of Dominicans

to come to Hispaniola island, in September 1510, under the leadership of Pedro de Cordova.

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

This is what he preached that Fourth Sunday of Advent, 500 years ago today:

"I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness. In order to make your sins known to you I have mounted this pulpit, I who am the voice of Christ crying in the wilderness of this island; and therefore it behooves you to listen to me, not with indifference but with all your heart and senses; for this voice will be the strangest, the harshest and hardest, the most terrifying that you ever heard or expected to hear....

This voice declares that you are in mortal sin, and live and die therein by reason of the cruelty and tyranny that you practice on these innocent people. Tell me, by what right or justice do you hold these Indians in such cruel and horrible slavery? By what right do you wage such detestable wars on these people who lived mildly and peacefully in their own lands, where you have consumed infinite numbers of them with unheard of murders and desolations? 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? How can you lie in such profound and lethargic slumber? Be sure that in your present state you can no more be saved than the Moors or Turks who do not have and do not want the faith of Jesus Christ."