

# Document 4 -Encomienda System: Comparing Perspectives

Letter from King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella to the governor of Hispaniola (Haiti/Dominican Republic) in 1503, explaining the Encomienda system, in which Native Americans worked on Spanish-owned lands.



*“Our desire is that the Christians not lack people to work their holdings and to take out what gold there is. It also is our desire that the Indians be converted. All this can*

*be better done by having the Indians live in community with the Christians, because they then will help each other cultivate and settle the island, take out the gold, and bring profit to Spain. Therefore, we command you, our governor, to compel the Indians to associate with the Christians. The Indians should work on the Christians’ buildings, mine the gold, till the fields, and produce food for the Christians. This the Indians shall perform as free people, which they are, and not as slaves. Also, see to it that the Indians are well treated, with those who become Christians better treated than the others. Do not consent or allow any person to do them any harm or oppress them.”*

Selection from Brief Account of the Destruction of the Indies by Bartolomé de Las Casas, a Spanish priest who protested the treatment of Native Americans under the Encomienda system.

*“The Indians were totally deprived of their freedom and were put in the harshest, fiercest, most horrible servitude and captivity which no one who has not seen it can understand. Even beasts enjoy more freedom when they are allowed to graze in the fields. When the Indians were allowed to go home, they often found it deserted and had no other recourse than to go out into the woods to find food and die. When they fell ill, which was very frequently because they are a delicate people unaccustomed to such work, the Spaniards did not believe them and pitilessly called them lazy dogs, and kicked and beat them; and when illness was apparent they sent them home as useless. I sometimes came upon dead bodies on my way, and upon others who were gasping and moaning in their death agony, repeating “Hungry, hungry.” And this was the freedom, the good treatment, and the Christianity that Indians received.”*

