The struggle for justice for the Indians was begun by a small group of Dominican friars, who were horrified by the sights that they daily saw on the island of Hispaniola. They delegated one of their number, Father Antonio Montesino, to preach a sermon that would drive home to the Spanish settlers the wickedness of their deeds. Father Antonio's tremendous denunciation produced much dismay and anger among his listeners, but apparently not a single conversion. In the sequel, the infuriated townspeople called upon the Dominicans to retract their sentiments in next Sunday's sermon; otherwise the friars should pack up and get ready to sail for home. (This would not have been at all difficult, observes Las Casas, with quiet humor, for all they had on earth would have gone into two small trunks.) In reply, Father Montesino mounted the pulpit the following Sunday and let loose a second and even more terrible blast against Spanish mistreatment of the Indians. Las Casas describes the opening round in the great controversy over Spain's Indian policy.2

Sunday having arrived, and the time for preaching, Father Antonio Montesino rose in the pulpit, and took for the text of his sermon, which was written down and signed by the other friars, "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness." Having made his introduction and said something about the Advent season, he began to speak of the sterile desert of the consciences of the Spaniards on this isle, and of the blindness in which they lived, going about in great danger of damnation and utterly heedless of the grave sins in which they lived and died.

Then he returned to his theme, saying: "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

2 Las Casas, Historia de las Indias, II, pp. 441–442. (Excerpt translated by the editor.)
hardest, the most terrifying that you ever heard or expected to hear."

He went on in this vein for a good while, using cutting words that made his hearers' flesh creep and made them feel that they were already experiencing the divine judgment. . . . He went on to state the contents of his message.

"This voice," said he, "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."

Thus he delivered the message he had promised, leaving his hearers astounded. Many were stunned, others appeared more callous than before, and a few were somewhat moved; but not one, from what I could later learn, was converted.

When he had concluded his sermon he descended from the pulpit, his head held high, for he was not a man to show fear, of which indeed he was totally free; nor did he care about the displeasure of his listeners, and instead did and said what seemed best according to God. With his companion he went to their straw-thatched house, where, very likely, their entire dinner was cabbage soup, unflavored with olive oil. . . . After he had left, the church was so full of murmurs that . . . they could hardly complete the celebration of the mass.

3. THE LAUGHTER OF DOCTOR PALACIOS RUBIOS

The dispute over Indian policy that had begun on the island of Hispaniola and was carried to Spain by the contending parties stimulated discussion of a fundamental question: By what right did Spain claim to rule over America and wage war on its native