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 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’ building, mind 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.

Source: Letter from King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain to Commander Nicolás de Ovando, Third Governor of Hispaniola, 1503



Source: Bartolomé de las Casas, “Brief relation of the destruction of the Indies,” Regionum Indicarum per Hispanos. (Heidelbergar: typis Guilielmi VValteri acad, 1664). New-York Historical Society Library.

The encomienda system, rooted in the medieval Castilian custom of"commendation," was begun in the West Indies by Columbus, carried to the mainland by Cortes in his conquest of Mexico, and grafted onto the already-extant structures of native government that the conquistadores quickly found useful. In essence, the system allotted conquered lands and the peoples on it to those who had participated in the conquest. Since these lands theoretically came under the king's royal patronage, the monarch could do with them as he desired. Encomienda, then, was a crude form of serfdom, adapted to fit the exigencies of Spain's New World empire. Its main purpose was threefold: 1) to reward the builders of the empire and their heirs for one or more generations; 2) to encourage settlement and ensure a colony's permanence by requiring the proprietor, or encomendero, to live near his area of encomienda; and 3) to provide for the defense of the area and its inhabitants. In addition, New World encomiendas also entailed obligations to instruct the Indians in the Roman Catholic faith and the rudiments of Spanish civilization.

The term "encomienda," particularly in New Spain (Mexico), was most commonly used to designate portions of Indians living on the allotted lands. The granting of encomiendas carried with them the right of repartimiento, that is, the right to employ Indians living on the grants. Although the religious motive of Christianizing the Indians was stressed, the economic motive of securing a cheap labor supply to maintain the colonists and increase their wealth was foremost in the minds of the encomenderos. Indian labor was deemed necessary, especially for work in mines and on farms, because the class of colonists could or would not work with their hands. As an answer to the crown's demand for tribute, the system allowed the encomenderos the products of Indian labor, collectable either in personal service or material tribute….

Indians in encomienda were, despite laws protecting their rights, from the beginning subject to abuses. This abuse was particularly true in the formative years when encomenderos sought to gain perpetual rights of lordship over their vassals. The encomienda essentially fostered the structure of a fighting class, a praying class, and a mass of laborers to do' most of the menial tasks. Although Spanish colonists were divided between the "haves" and the "have-nots," the latter being at a disadvantage in the scramble for wealth and status, their problems were trivial compared to those of Indians allotted to ruthless proprietors.

Source: Anderson, H. Allen. "The Encomienda in New Mexico, 1598–1680." New Mexico Historical Review 60, 4 (1985). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmhr/vol60/iss4/2>

Their reason for killing and destroying such an infinite number of souls is that Christians have an ultimate aim, which is to acquire gold, and to swell themselves with riches in a very brief time and thus rise to a high estate disproportionate to their merits. It should be kept in mind that their insatiable greed and ambition, the greatest ever seen in the world, is the cause of their villainies. And also, those lands are so rich and felicitous, the native peoples so meek and patient, so easy to subject, that our Spaniards have no more consideration for them than beasts. And I say this from my own knowledge of the acts I witnessed. But I should not say “than beasts” for, thanks be to God, they have treated beasts with some respect; I should say instead like excrement on the public squares. And thus they have deprived the Indians of their lives and souls, for the millions I mentioned have died without the Faith and without the benefit of sacraments. This is a well-known and proven fact which even the tyrant Governors, themselves killers, know and admit. And never have the Indians in all the Indies committed any act against the Spanish Christians, until those Christians have first and many times committed countless cruel aggressions against them or against neighboring nations. For in the beginning the Indians regarded the Spaniards as angels from Heaven. Only after the Spaniards had used violence against them, killing, robbing, torturing, did the Indians ever rise up against them.

Bartolome de las Casas, *A Short Account of the Desctruction of the Indies*, 1542