The intensity of a life

On 9 January, 1531 a lawyer disembarked in Mexico. He was transformed to such an extent by New Spain that he decided to relinquish his profession as a magistrate and become a priest of souls and bodies. He was determined to shape the Utopian Christian ideals of Humanism in the virgin lands of America

He was born in Madrigal de las Altas Torres (Avila), the town of Isabella the Catholic, on February 3, 1470 (or 1477, according to other authors). He had studied case law in Salamanca and had worked so conscientiously that the Bishop of Badajoz recommended him with Queen Isabella, wife of Charles V, as Judge of the Audiencia of New Spain. Although this recommendation was not successful, the next one, made in 1529 by Juan Tavera, Archbishop of Santiago, and by the members of the Council of the Indies, was. According to a document dated 2 January, 1530, the Empress appointed him member of the second Audiencia of New Spain, due to the alarm raised over the brutal acts perpetrated by the first Audiencia.

His first action was to open an impeachment trial against the President of the Audiencia and former judges who were found guilty of ill-treatment of the Indians and of murdering the Purepecha chief. He even started proceedings against Hernán Cortés, who was saved by his brilliant advocacy. Soon after he began his material work. Using his own savings, he founded the hospital-towns of Santa Fe, the first of which was one or two miles from

Mexico City, in Coyoacán, christening it Santa Fe de Los Altos, in 1532; and another one the following year in Santa Fe de La Laguna, on Lake Pátzcuaro. They were very special charitable organizations. They were not hospitals, or settlements, but a type of community housing in which education, medicine, faith and the law together with a moderate collectivism were fitted together. In this Utopian republic, the product of the ideas he acquired from his readings of the works of Thomas More, Ignacio de Loyola, Plato and Luciano, Vasco de Quiroga maximized specific craft activities and grouped them by villages. Coppersmiths, carpenters, potters, rural workers. Each one engaged in his craft in his specialized locality and all of them owned their means of production (tools and land)
As a consequence of these experiences, Vasco de Quiroga decided to leave the law and become a priest.

He was ordained by a famous Erasmian, Fray Juan de Zumárraga. His first initiative was to complain to Emperor Charles V for departing from his original willingness to prohibit the slavery of the Indians. Quiroga wrote his celebrated “Información en derecho” (Information on Law) to the monarch in 1535 in which he condemns the encomenderos for treating the natives ‘not as men but as beasts’ while at the same time passionately defending the Indians, and offered ‘with God’s help, to form and start a genre of willing Christians, as a basic Church, for God is almighty in doing and fulfilling all that that happens and is, according to His will.’ On the arrival of the new Viceroy, Antonio de Mendoza, Vasco de Quiroga suggested adopting Prince Antonio de Huitziméngari, son of the last Cazonci, Tangaxuán II whom he sent to the first American University of Tiripetío.

His generosity went beyond the ocean and in August 1538, Charles V appointed him Bishop of Michoacán. The land in which he was acting as an inspector. From that moment on, his activities multiplied. That year he founded the third hospital-town in Santa Fe del Río and in 1540 began the repopulation of Pátzcuaro with several hundred Indians and some Spanish families. After transforming Pátzcuaro into the capital of Michoacán, (relegating Tzintzuntzan, the former capital, to a neighborhood) he began the construction of the cathedral on the site where the great temple dedicated to the goddess Cuerauáperi had been, founded Santa Marta Hospital and a large group of small hospitals (huátaperas) throughout the region. Not everything was easy. Many of his contemporaries, both friars and lay persons, tried to stop his initiatives and some Indian sorcerers, like Cuninjángari, tried to murder him as a safeguard against his influence. He died in Uruapan, during a pastoral visit, on March 14, 1565. He was over ninety years old, an age almost impossible to reach in those days. His remains lie in the Basilica of Our Lady of Good Health, then the Cathedral of Pátzcuaro. Among his most important works are the ‘Carta al Consejo’ (Letter to the Council) (1531), ‘Información en Derecho’ (Information on Law) (1535), ‘Doctrina para los Indios’ (doctrine for Indians), ‘Sermones, Reglas y Ordenanzas para el Gobierno de los Hospitales de Santa Fe, Méjico y Michoacán’ (Sermons, Rules and Regulations for the Management of the Santa Fe, Mexico and Michoacán Hospitals).

To details suffice to explain his social projects. The first attests to his unusual perception. Vasco de Quiroga’s will, written on 24 January, 1565, particularly insists on the idea of integrating whites and Indians through religion and culture, urging the latter not to allow the Colegio de San Nicolás be taken away from them. By making culture and religion available to all, Don Vasco was ahead of his time, touching on a problem that is still essential for understanding Mexico; the racial and cultural integration of the various ethnic groups. The second attests to his organizational skills. In 1872, the affidavit of the Liquidation deed for three hospital-towns was drawn up as the funds provided by its founder, Vasco de Quiroga, 334 years earlier had been spent. They were the last to survive. As we have said before, the Indians in the region still refer to him as Tata Vasco.