**CHY4U Unit 1, Activity 2**

**Context for Spanish Conquest of the Aztecs**

**Spanish Treatment of the Natives**

From the moment Columbus made contact with the people of the Caribbean in 1492 the Spanish saw them as objects of conquest. This Eurocentric viewpoint was made quite blunt in the ship’s recorder’s account of Columbus’s first landfall; Columbus claimed the land for the king and queen of Spain, Ferdinand and Isabela, by brandishing a royal standard decorated with their initials, a green cross for Christianity, and the Spanish crown as he first set foot on the new land. Columbus took the natives to be a people free of a religion of their own. An attitude of possessiveness and a perception of the natives as culturally naked from the very beginning were signs of things to come.

**Labour and Gold**

In the years following, the native population declined drastically due to the harsh labour they were forced to perform in the gold mines. As Governor of Hispaniola, Columbus wanted the colony to become rich through trade; he had Spanish officials working under him recruit natives for gold mining. Those who opposed enslavement, such as the Guacanagari, were murdered. Columbus was sure to make an example of them in order to maintain an orderly and reliable supply of gold. He was so bad at administering the colony that eventually his own sponsoring government had Columbus recalled to Spain in 1500. Time went on and similar practices continued.

**Encomienda**

Spanish friar (missionary) Bartolome de Las Casas witnessed many episodes of horrifying treatment, as he indicated in his aptly titled 1542 book, Very Brief Account of the Destruction of the Indies, about the abuses forced upon the native peoples of Hispaniola:  *“Among these gentle sheep … the Spaniards entered … like wolves, tigers, and lions which had been starving for many days, and since forty years they have done nothing else; nor do they otherwise at the present day, than outrage, slay, afflict, torment, and destroy them… To such extremes has this gone that, whereas there were more than 3 million souls, whom we saw in Hispaniola, there are today, not 200 of the native population left….”* Las Casas would have known this first hand as a holder of an encomienda himself.

**Religion in Mexico**

The Spanish arrived in Mexico in 1519 looking for gold. The Aztec Empire dominated parts of Mexico, though it was a relatively recent phenomenon. The history of Mexico goes back through many empires and peoples, including the Toltecs, Mixtecs, Maya, and finally the Aztecs who rose to prominence in the 1420s. Their large capital city, Tenochtitlan, was a complex and organized place.

Franciscan missionaries first came to Mexico in 1523 at the request of Cortes, who himself had asked Charles V of Spain for manpower to help speed up the conversion process.  Spanish government and church officials then directed that some 12 000 churches and missions be built by native labour, many atop local religious buildings.