How did Europeans view the people they encountered in the Americas? To what extent, if at all, were Spanish explorers and settlers able to understand empathize with the culture of the Native Americans?

Probably the best way to gain insight into such questions is to read excerpts from the writings of Columbus and other explorers and conquistadores of the 15th and 16th centuries. Excerpts from three such primary sources are presented in Documents A, B, and C on the following handouts.

The fourth reading, (D), comes from a secondary source (a history written long after the events it describes). It is a modern historian's view of how Columbus reflected the European culture of his times. As you will see, this historian views past events with a strong bias against the European "conquest" and "genocide."

Is the historian's interpretation supported by evidence in the primary source documents? Draw your own conclusion after completing your reading of all four sources.
Upon his return to Spain in 1493, Columbus presented to Queen Isabella his captain's log—the daily account of what he had observed on his voyage. The following excerpts from that document describe his impressions of the Native Americans and also reveal his attitude toward them.

**October 12, 1492:**
I want the natives to develop a friendly attitude toward us because I know that they are a people who can be made free and converted to our Holy Faith more by love than by force. I therefore gave red caps to some and glass beads to others. They hung the bead around their necks, along with some other things of slight value that I gave them. And they took great pleasure in this and became so friendly that it was a marvel. They traded and gave everything they had with good will, but it seems to me that they have very little and are poor in everything. I warned my men to take nothing from the people without giving something in exchange.

**October 13, 1492:**
I cannot get over the fact of how docile these people are. They have so little to give but will give it all for whatever we give them, if only broken pieces of glass and crockery. One seaman gave three Portuguese ceitis (not even worth a penny!) for about 25 pounds of spun cotton. I probably should have forbidden this exchange, but I wanted to take the cotton to Your Highnesses, and it seems to be in abundance. I think the cotton is grown on San Salvador, but I cannot say for sure because I have not been here that long. Also, the gold they were hanging from their noses comes from here, but in order not lose time I want to go to see if I can find the island of Japan.

**December 24, 1492**
Your Highnesses may believe that in all the world there cannot be better or more gentle people. Your Highnesses must be greatly pleased because you will soon make them Christians and will teach them the good customs of your realms, for there cannot be a better people or country. The people are so numerous and the country so great that I do not yet know how to describe it.
Bartolome' de Las Casas (1474-1566) was a Spanish priest and missionary who traveled to the island of Hispaniola in 1502 to convert the Native Americans there to Christianity. Las Casas found that the native people on the island were badly mistreated by Spanish officials and landowners. He did what he could to alleviate the Indians' sufferings and to stop the worst of the abuses. After living more than 40 years in the Americas, Las Casas returned to Spain, where he continued his campaign to prevent further mistreatment and enslavement of the Native Americans. In 1552, he wrote "In Defense of the Indian," from which the following excerpts are taken.

Concerning the methods of Spanish soldiers after an attack:
Once the Indians were in the woods, the next step was to form squadrons and pursue them, and whenever the Spaniards found them, they pitilessly slaughtered everyone like sheep in a corral. It was a general rule among Spaniards to be cruel; not just cruel, but extraordinarily cruel so that harsh and bitter treatment would prevent Indians from daring to think of themselves as human beings or having a minute to think at all. So they would cut an Indians' hands and leave them dangling by a shred of skin and they would send him on saying "Go now, spread the news to your chiefs." They would test their swords and their manly strength on captured Indians and place bets on the slicing off of heads or the cutting of bodies in half with one blow. They burned or hanged captured chiefs.

Concerning the treatment of Native American workers:
When they were allowed to go home, they often found it deserted and no other recourse than to go out into the woods to find food and to 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, giving them some cassava for the twenty-to eighty-league journey. They would go then, failing into the first stream and dying there in desperation; others would hold on longer, but very few ever made it home. I sometimes came upon dead bodies on my way, and upon others who were gasping and moaning in their death agony, repeating "Hungry, hungry."

Francisco Coronado (1510-1554) was a Spanish soldier and commander who, in 1540, led an expedition north from Mexico into what is today Arizona, New Mexico, and Colorado. Seeking the legendary seven cities of gold, he was disappointed to find only adobe pueblos. The following is from Coronado's account of his travels in Quivira (northern New Mexico).

The province of Quivira is 950 leagues from Mexico. Where I reached it, it is in the fortieth degree of latitude. I have treated the natives of this province, and all the others whom I found wherever I went, as well as was possible, agreeably to what Your Majesty had commanded, and they have received no harm in any way from me or from those who went in my company. I remained 25 days in this province of Quivira, so as to see and explore the country and also to find out whether there was anything beyond which could be of service to Your Majesty, because the guides who had brought me had given me an account of other provinces beyond this. And what I am sure of is that there is not any gold nor any other metal in all that country, and the other things of which they had told me are nothing but little villages, and in many of these they do not plant anything and do not have any houses except of skins and sticks, and they wander around with cows; so that the account they gave me was false, because they wanted to persuade me to go there with the whole force, believing that as the way was through such uninhabited deserts, and from the lack of water, they would get us where we and our horses would die of hunger. And the guides confessed this, and said they had done it by the advice and orders of the natives of these provinces.
In a controversial book, the historian David Stannard argues that Columbus and those explorers and settlers who came after him were responsible for the most destructive campaign of genocide in world history. (Genocide means the deliberate destruction of a group of people.) His history traces the violent treatment and even extermination of Indian peoples from 1492 into the 1890s. The following is Stannard’s interpretation of Columbus.

Apart from his navigational skills, what most set Columbus apart from other Europeans of his day were not the things that he believed, but the intensity with which he believed in them and the determination with which he acted upon those beliefs...Columbus was, in most respects, merely an especially active and dramatic embodiment of the European-and especially the Mediterranean-mind and soul of his time; a religious fanatic obsessed with the conversion, conquest, or liquidation of all non-Christians; a latter-day Crusader in search of personal wealth and fame, who expected the enormous and mysterious world he had found to be filled with monstrous races inhabiting wild forests, and with golden people living in Eden. He was also a man with sufficient intolerance and contempt for all who did not look or behave or believe as he did, that he thought nothing of enslaving or killing such people simply because they were not like him. He was, to repeat, a secular personification of what more than a thousand years of Christian culture had wrought. As such, the fact that he launched a campaign of horrific violence against the natives of Hispaniola is not something that should surprise anyone. Indeed, it would be surprising if he had not inaugurated such carnage.
Analyzing the Documents

David Stannard called Columbus "a religious fanatic obsessed with conversion, conquest, or liquidation of all non-Christians."

1. To what extent is Stannard's view either supported or contradicted by Columbus' own words in reading A?

2. Which of the primary source documents do you think gives the strongest support for Stannard's thesis? Why?

3. Which of the primary source documents do you think offers the weakest support or no support for Stannard's thesis? Why?