

The Origin of the Crusades

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The Crusades are a very sensitive topic in the modern era. The Christians and the Muslims are the key players, the 2 major religions even up to this day; they fought in Jerusalem, which has been the source of conflicts for thousands of years; it was initiated by the Pope, who is often depicted by the modern secular media as fanatic old man who uses the name of God to spread some strange ideologies; finally, it was a war, or even worse a religious war, which is two groups of fanatics fighting against each other doing good to nobody.

Nowadays many of the faithful do not understand the history of the Crusades and think we are the ones to blame; Protestants use this as an example to “prove” that obedience to the Pope is wrong; the secular media uses this to attack the Church. But do we really know about the history of the Crusades? We will not discuss the whole Crusade phenomenon here in this short article as it is not an appropriate place to do so, but at least we can look into why there had to be a Crusade in the first place.

When we normally refer Rome as the Apostolic See, we rarely notice that there were other episcopal sees. Before the 7th century, there are 5 sees which are especially important that they are collectively called the Pentarchy, namely Rome (St. Peter and St. Paul), Constantinople (St. Andrew), Alexandria (St. Mark), Antioch (St. Peter) and Jerusalem (St. Peter and St. James). These five sees represent the most important of the Christian communities across Europe, Asia and Africa. As we can notice, there are numerous Church Fathers and saints coming from these sees, including St. Cyril, St. John Chrysostom, St. Athanasius, and many others.

Two centuries later, 3 out of these 5 sees were destroyed by the Islamic invasion; Antioch, Alexandria and Jerusalem were no longer Christian cities and now under Islamic rule. North Africa was lost, the outer islands of Italy were already taken and the Italian mainland was under siege. The connection between Byzantium and Rome was cut due to the Islamic dominion in between. Southern Spain and France were invaded; even up to the time of St. Teresa of Avila the Moors were still present in Spain. The Byzantine Empire attempted to recapture some lost ground, but they could not hold the ground for long.

Christians who survived and lived in the conquered land were subject to a special tax and regarded as an inferior social class. Their churches were often destroyed. The Byzantine Empire and the Christians sent requests for help to Rome, but since at the same time Rome was also under invasion and subject to other difficulties, very little could be done.

In the year of 1067, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, together with a large number of other churches, was destroyed and Christian pilgrims were killed. In response to the plea sent by the Byzantine Emperor, Pope Urban II convened the Council of Clermont and called for an army to assist the defeated Byzantines and to protect the pilgrims in the Holy Land. Urban II granted indulgences to those who joined the Crusade under the condition of pure intention of being truly penitent for his sins and willing to suffer the hardship to reclaim the Holy Sepulchre, assist the Eastern Christians, and defend Christendom against Islamic advancement.

In fact, the Church often had to discourage those who were unfit for war to join the subsequent Crusades, especially after the first Crusade which had a casualty rate of 75 percents. However many people, either for spiritual intention to gain indulgences, or for other secular intentions, decided that they would rather die in the Holy Land. Crusade sermons were always warning of the dangers and suffering in the Crusades. The participants also needed to have the consent of their spouses because of their long absence. However as in many occasions, the response of the people did not match the mandate of the Pope. Many participants of the Crusade joined because they were attempting to earn fame, glory or just escape from familial responsibilities. In addition, the granting of indulgences was very much desired by the laypeople, as the penances were much heavier and the sacrament of confession was

administered under stricter conditions than today. Since the laypeople were very concerned their salvation, many of them participated the Crusade even if their physical, spiritual, or social conditions were not suitable. Needless to say this was actually against the will of the Pope but there was not much he could do about it.

The Crusade was a very complicated phenomenon, besides the official stance of the Church or the Pope, the views of laypersons, knights, or army of different countries were very different. The extent of the Crusades caused great impact to the economy and society at that time, which even caused other unexpected problems. Furthermore, many sporadic troops called themselves Crusades when they were completely unrelated with the protection of the Holy Land and the pilgrims. We cannot deny that during wartime, including the Crusades, there are many times where the devil can turn the good people nasty. However when we look into the history of Crusades, we should avoid oversimplifying the whole Crusade into a “black-and-white” classification but to consider the morality of a “just war”. There is no doubt that the Crusade eventually was not able to save the Holy Land from Islam and caused some unfortunate results; however the situations at the 11th century could not be worse for the whole Christendom and one can argue the Crusade could be categorized as a just war. After all, we should at least know that the Crusade was a response to the crisis in the Holy Land and the Christendom and if there was no Crusade, the Christianity could have been destroyed.

Reference:

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