

Taking the Cross: The Motives of the Crusaders

An Essay
by Larry Gwaltney

Introduction

“Since, O sons of God, you have promised the Lord to maintain peace more earnestly than heretofore in your midst, and to faithfully sustain the rights of Holy Church, there still remains for you, who are newly aroused by this divine correction, a very necessary work, in which you can show the strength of your good will by a further duty, God’s concern and your own. For you must hasten to carry aid to your brethren dwelling in the east, who need your help, which they have often asked.”

Pope Urban II at Clermont, as recorded by Fulcher of Chartres¹

During the first week of March, 1095, Pope Urban II found himself in northern Italy, in the city of Piacenza, presiding over a church council, one that was to set the stage (and the agenda) for the approaching Council of Clermont, which was to convene that coming November.

Present at that meeting were emissaries sent by the Byzantine emperor Alexius, sent for the express purpose of asking aid from the western church against the Turks. A series of military reverses for the East had resulted in the Turks’ advance across Asia Minor, and now those same armies were poised to strike at the heart of the eastern church itself – Constantinople. It was this appeal to the West that initiated a sequence of events that eventually coalesced into the First Crusade. And what was to follow *that* could scarcely have been imagined by anyone.²

Loss of Christian territory was in fact nothing new. By the time of the 8th century, the Muslims had subjugated Northern Africa, Palestine, Syria and the greater part of Spain. But after that point, things had been relatively stable until the 10th century, when a series of aggressive moves by the Byzantine emperors succeeded in palpable gains for the Christians, especially in Syria. That was most certainly not the case now.³

It was not only the Byzantines that were concerned. Some years before, in 1074, Pope Gregory VII had actually proposed “to lead personally a force of as many as 50,000 volunteers to “liberate” their Christian brothers in the East; he stated that with this army he might even push

¹ *A History of the Crusades*, Setton, Kenneth M. ed., from the article “The Councils of Piacenza and Clermont,” by Frederic Dunclaf. (Madison, WI, University of Wisconsin Press, 1969) pg. 241.

² Riley-Smith, Jonathan, *The Crusades, a Short History*, (New Haven, CT, Yale University Press, 1987) pg. 1.

³ *Ibid.* pg. 1

on to the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.”⁴ But what Gregory had in mind has been called by some a “hierarchical crusade,”⁵ and

Gregory failed in his attempt to place the triumphantly advancing idea of crusade at the immediate service of the papacy, just as he failed in some of his other efforts to enlarge the powers of the papacy: he drove ahead to positions that his own followers soon deemed untenable and eventually abandoned.⁶

So it was left to his successor, Urban II, to motivate and mobilize where Gregory had failed. He (Urban) had in fact been maintaining contact with the Byzantine emperor from the start of his reign; and Urban’s behavior subsequent to Piacenza was more than likely not a spontaneous reaction to the events of that council – in all probability he had been considering a response for some time.⁷

Clermont, 27 November, 1095

Under the chairmanship of Urban II, the Council of Clermont, which had been relatively uneventful,⁸ was drawing to a close. Scheduled for the 27th was a sermon by the pope, and as a large crowd was anticipated, it was held out-of-doors in a field outside the town. Today we have but four accounts of that sermon; they were composed some years after the event and after the flush of victory, and it cannot be said with certainty that any of the writers were even present – yet there are enough similarities among these four accounts that it can be reasonably believed we have a fair idea of what Urban II actually said.⁹

In this sermon, and in subsequent versions of it to follow (as Urban continued to preach the Crusade across France), two distinct goals – two liberating goals, were proclaimed. The first goal was one of freeing the eastern Churches, and in particular the Church of Jerusalem, from the “savagery and tyranny of the Muslims.”¹⁰ Evidently Urban painted quite a grisly picture of life under the Turks, not all of it true.

The second goal was the liberation of a specific city – Jerusalem.¹¹ Crusade historian Hans Meyer notes:

Even the mere sound of the name Jerusalem must have had a glittering and magical splendour for the men of the eleventh century which we are no longer capable of feeling...Men thought, of course, of the town in Palestine where Jesus Christ had suffered, died, been buried, and then had risen again. But more than this,

⁴ Ibid, pg. 2

⁵ Erdmann, Carl, *The Origin of the Idea of Crusade*, trans. by Marshall W. Baldwin and Walter Goffart, (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1977) pg. 269.

⁶ Ibid, pg. 267. See also Mayer, Hans Eberhard, *The Crusades*, 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press, 1990) pg. 20.

⁷ Ibid, Riley-Smith, *The Crusades*, pg. 3.

⁸ Lost in the hubbub of the call to arms, the other issues dealt with at this council included lay investiture, simony, clerical marriage, and the advocacy of The Truce of God. See Runciman, Steven, *A History of the Crusades*, (Cambridge University Press, 1951, rev. ed. 1999) pg. 107.

⁹ *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Crusades*. Riley-Smith, Jonathan, ed. “The Crusading Movement and Historians,” Riley-Smith (Oxford University Press, 1995) pg. 1.

¹⁰ Riley-Smith, *A History*, pg. 6.

¹¹ Ibid, pg. 7.

they saw in their minds' eye the heavenly city of Jerusalem with its gates of sapphire, its walls and squares bright with precious stones – as it had been described in the Book of Revelation (21:10ff.)¹²

Mayer goes on to propose that the majority of crusaders in that era would have been unable to distinguish between the earthly and the heavenly Jerusalem, and as they believed they were being asked to liberate the “city of eternal bliss,” such an entreaty would have had an irresistible effect on many.¹³

The Oxford historian Riley-Smith opines that these four accounts “give the impression of a piece of deliberate theatre – a daring one, given the risk involved in organizing an out-of-doors event at the start of winter – in which the actions of the leading players and the acclamation of the crowd had been worked out in advance.”¹⁴ If this is the case, the choreography worked – only too well. In understatement typical of the British historian, Sir Steven Runciman remarks, “The enthusiasm was greater than Urban had expected.”¹⁵ In fact, events were to rapidly spiral out of control. Urban had originally made his appeal to the fighting men – the knights. While his supplication was hugely successful on that score, fantastic numbers of those who by no stretch of the imagination could be considered warriors also made the journey – or at least attempted to. As the situation threatened to deteriorate, Urban consulted again with his bishops, and further decrees were added, undoubtedly to discourage those who were ill-suited to the campaign: “Anyone that took the Cross should vow to go to Jerusalem. If he turned back too soon, or failed to set out, he would suffer excommunication. Clerics and monks were not to take the Cross without permission of their bishop or abbot. The elderly and infirm must be discouraged from attempting the expedition; and no one at all should go without consulting his spiritual adviser.”¹⁶ Despite all of this, the torrent of humanity continued to flow to Jerusalem, and continued to, for centuries. There had been nothing like it before, or since.

Given the dangers, terrors and hardships of war, we might well ask ourselves why men, women, and even children (!) were willing to abandon their homes and property and set out on such a difficult and forbidding adventure. Of course, every war has its share of men seeking exactly that – adventure. But that cannot begin to explain what Europe experienced in the Middle Ages during this period. So why *did* they set out, anyway? At one time it was popular in Crusade studies to assign a major, even defining role to strategies devised by desperate families in Europe bent only on economic survival. Sir Steven Runciman closed his authoritative work in his *History of the Crusades* by concluding:

The triumphs of the Crusade were triumphs of faith. But faith without reason is a dangerous thing...In the long sequence of interaction and fusion between Orient and Occident out of which our civilization has grown, the Crusades were a tragic and destructive episode...There was so much courage and so little honour, so much devotion and so little understanding. High ideals were besmirched by cruelty and greed, enterprise and endurance by a blind and narrow self-righteousness; and the Holy War itself was nothing more than a long act of intolerance in the name of God, which is a sin against the Holy Ghost.¹⁷

¹² Mayer, Hans Eberhard, *The Crusades*, (Oxford University Press, 1990) pg. 11

¹³ Ibid, pg. 11

¹⁴ Riley-Smith, *A Short History*. pg. 1.

¹⁵ Runciman, *A History*, pg. 108.

¹⁶ Ibid., pg. 109.

¹⁷ Quoted by Riley-Smith in his essay, The Crusading Movement and Historians, *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Crusades*, Riley-Smith, ed., pg. 6.

While we can certainly acknowledge the truth of many of Runciman's sentiments, it is also true that over the past decades Crusade studies have evolved to a point where at least some of these assertions are now seen in a different light. It is now for us to examine some of the more prominent crusader motives in turn.

A Social Outlet for Violence?

“The Christian has a fundamental problem to face: is he entitled to fight for his country? His religion is a religion of peace; and war means slaughter and destruction. The earlier Christian fathers had no doubts. To them a war was wholesale murder. But after the triumph of the Cross, after the Empire had become Christendom, ought not its citizens to be ready to take up arms for its welfare?”¹⁸

Although the tendency in the East was to say, “no,” the attitude in the Christian West was very different. Its great theologian, St. Augustine, had offered in his *City of God* that wars might be waged by God's command, and the repeated barbarian invasions of the West had transformed Europe into what can only be called a military society.¹⁹ Along with this, and the disintegration of the Carolingian Empire, was a precipitous decline in state authority, including a declension of public morals: “Everywhere in tenth century the warrior class, composed of men who were gradually coming to be called knights, was patently brutalized. Private property, especially Church property, was attacked just as greedily as it ever had been by Vikings or Magyars.”²⁰

In response, the Church countered this attack on its property with the so-called “Peace of God” movement. It was to start in various outlying regions, (because of the deterioration in the power of the king) in which the local nobility would swear to observe the immunity of clerics, unarmed persons, and ecclesiastical property. In the 11th century the Church followed up with decrees restricting feuding to only certain days of the week, and later on even feuding was to be replaced with arbitration.²¹ Not only this, but in 1027 Oliba, the bishop of Vich, held a synod at Toulouges that prohibited all warfare during the hours of the Sabbath. These bans were later extended to various church holy days: Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Ascension Day. “But the duchy of Burgandy went further, reserving for the Truce the whole week between Wednesday evening and Monday morning, and adding the period from Advent to the first Sunday after Epiphany, and Lent and Holy Week to the octave of Easter.”²² That many of the warrior class were becoming increasingly frustrated can scarcely be wondered at.

Although these effort led to some real social gains as far as the reduction of violence was concerned²³ it was nevertheless true that the knights did not always accept these peace provisions. They could only be brought into line by force, and this meant that the church hierarchy, which had retinues of knights of their own, would often wage war against the peace-breakers. Baldric of Dol, who was one of the authors of the varying accounts of Urban's sermon at Clermont, reported him to say:

¹⁸ Ibid, pg. 83.

¹⁹ Ibid, pg. 84.

²⁰ Mayer, *The Crusades*, pg. 15-16.

²¹ Ibid, pg. 16.

²² Runciman, *A History*, pg. 86.

²³ Riley-Smith, *A Short History*, pg. 15.

“You, girt about with the belt of knighthood, are arrogant with great pride; you rage against your brothers and cut each other to pieces...You the oppressors of children, plunderers of widows; you, guilty of homicide, of sacrilege, robbers of another’s rights; you who await the pay of thieves for the shedding of Christian blood – as vultures smell fetid corpses.”²⁴

Quite simply then, it was in the Church’s best interest, to say nothing of society’s, to redirect these energies in more productive directions. The Church’s entreaties to the West’s knights and soldiers, to abandon their relatively petty quarrels with one another, and pit their prowess against the threat of the Turks, proved to be very effective. According to the historian Carl Erdmann, it was Urban II’s unique genius in “synthesizing” the notions of “pilgrimage” and “holy war” into the concept of “crusade,” offering to these frustrated warriors quite literally the best of both worlds – the absolution of penance enjoyed by the pilgrim, and the satisfaction that one’s warrior arts were in the employ of that most righteous of causes, the Church.²⁵

Economic Factors?

The traditional understanding of the Crusader’s motivation has centered largely along economic lines. A typical approach is that of Mayer’s, who notes the recurring problem of famines as well as other agricultural crises, man made, beginning around the years 850 and coming to a climax around the year 1,000.²⁶ “The still prevalent Carolingian custom of dividing an inheritance between all the heirs tended to hinder efforts to increase production. After 1000 the position began to improve...This was achieved mainly by doing away with the custom of splitting up the land into ever smaller holdings.”²⁷

What Mayer is describing here are the beginnings of *primogeniture*, which first appeared in northern France, a system in which the eldest son received the estate in its entirety, leading his younger siblings to fend for themselves – either seeking ministry in the Church, or pursuing a military career. Given what we have seen in the previous section, the portents for societal disintegration into a spiral of violence seemed inevitable – and so the Crusades, acting as a “safety valve” of sorts, came along just in time. With their prospects at home considerably dimmed, or non-existent, the opportunity for knights to procure large tracts of their own holdings, in a warm climate, often proved to be a powerful inducement. At least this was the explanation that was most in vogue until recently. Contemporary historians, however, have stepped forward with new evidence and analysis, and this “economic survival” theory has now come into question.

Riley-Smith, in his *The Crusades, A Short History*, notes that any knight determined to take the cross was not only committing to a perilous undertaking – it was also an expensive one. More than a matter of simply bringing himself, his armor, and his horse, “They were expected to bring with them the equipment, horses, pack-animals and servants required to fulfil their function

²⁴ Setton, K., *A History of the Crusades*, pg. 242

²⁵ Erdman, C., *Origin*, pg. 334.

²⁶ Mayer, *The Crusades*, pg. 21.

²⁷ *Ibid*, pg. 21.

efficiently. Half a century later a German knight called upon to serve the emperor in Italy needed to put by for such a campaign *twice his annual income*.”²⁸ [Emphasis mine, L.G.]

Landless knights went crusading as well, but could only do so at the expense of richer patrons. For those knights who did hold some sort of an estate, surviving records indicate that many of them were forced to mortgage their lands, the value of which had fallen precipitously due to a succession of bad harvests, just to gin up the needed funds to make the journey. And this land did not only belong to the knight; it was family land, too. Relatives of the warrior/pilgrim often did their part by pitching in when they could. As Riley-Smith concludes:

There is very little evidence to support the proposition that the crusade was an opportunity for spare sons to make themselves scarce in order to relieve their families of burdens, or for landless knights to seek an easy way to make a future for themselves overseas. The evidence points overwhelmingly to families taking on burdens to help individual members fulfil their vows...This makes it difficult for me to believe that most crusaders, or at least most crusading knights, were motivated by crude materialism. The disposal of assets to invest in the fairly remote possibility of settlement after a 2,000-mile march to the East would have been a stupid gamble...It makes much more sense to suppose that they, and especially their families, were moved by idealism.²⁹

Obviously this conclusion is a radical departure from the historians’ deductions from past Crusade studies, to say nothing of its variance from the impressions of the general public. Riley-Smith credits this turnaround to, of all things, the Christian Liberation movements of South America in the 1960’s.

Historians were blinded to facts and evidence by their abhorrence of ideological violence and their inability to comprehend that it really could have had a convincing appeal. They, and everyone else, had forgotten how intellectually respectable the Christian theory of positive violence was...Crusade historians suddenly discovered that there were sincere and devout contemporaries of theirs holding ideological positions very similar to those maintained by the medieval apologists they were studying...The adventurous younger sons began at last to ride off the scene. Few historians appear to believe in them any longer.³⁰

Ties of Kinship and Blood Feuds?

One way in which knights interpreted the call to crusade was in the context of kinship ties, blood feuds, and vendettas. Understandably, churchmen were not enamored of this approach, but given the venue in which the crusading sermons were preached, it was almost inevitable. The society of Western Europe at that time may be thought of as a series of tight, intertwined circles of families, “each bound by the knowledge that its members were kin and therefore ‘friends’, obliged to guard each other’s interests, and of feudal groupings, of vassals round lords, which made the same demands on their members.”³¹

Once we recall Urban’s original preaching in the context of aiding “our brothers to the East,” this interpretation has a good deal of appeal. The familial and feudal relationships concurrent to this era bound men to the obligation of drawing their swords on behalf of their kinfolk, lord, and

²⁸ Riley-Smith, *Crusades, A Short History*, pg. 12

²⁹ *Ibid*, pg. 13-14.

³⁰ Riley-Smith, “The Crusading Movement and Historians,” *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Crusades*, pg. 6

³¹ Riley-Smith, *A Short History*, pg. 15.

fellow vassals. John of Joinville's account of the Seventh Crusade, *The Life of Saint Louis*, has an interesting depiction of the pressures and inducements faced by the knights when their lord and fellow vassals had publicly announced an intent to take the Cross.³² There is a vivid account of a dialogue between two knights who were members of Louis IX's council:

"Never believe me again," said one, "if the king doesn't take the cross here in this chapel." "If he does," replied the other, it will be one of the saddest days France has ever seen. For if we don't take the cross ourselves, we shall lose the king's favor; and if we do, we shall be out of favour with God, because we shall not be taking it for His sake, but for fear of displeasing the king."³³

John Joinville describes his own situation:

The King of France and the King of Navarre both pressed me very earnestly to take the cross. To this I replied that while I was in the service of God and of the king overseas, and since I had returned home, his Majesty's serjeants and the King of Navarre's had so ruined and impoverished my people that there would never be a time when they and I could possibly be worse off...I considered that all those who had advised the king to go on this expedition committed mortal sin. For at that time the state of the country was such that there was perfect peace throughout the kingdom, and between France and her neighbours, while ever since King Louis went away the state of the kingdom has done nothing but go from bad to worse.³⁴

In addition, ties from local and regional associations played a prominent role when it came to recruitment. This is probably why Geoffrey of Villehardouin, a chronicler of the Fourth Crusade, listed those who took the cross in northern France by dividing them into political and geographical areas.³⁵

As conducive to the recruitment of manpower as these kinship ties were, they also contributed to the sorry spectacle of vendettas and pogroms carried out against Jewish communities, which began to be carried out in France almost immediately after Clermont. While many contemporaries blamed these outbreaks on avarice (and it is certainly true that at least *some* crusaders were guilty of extorting monies and other spoils) most of the Hebrew versions ascribed greed to the local bishops. Rather, the crusaders seemed more intent upon forcing conversions.³⁶ There seems to be overwhelming evidence that uppermost in their minds was exacting vengeance, and they seemed unwilling, or unable, to distinguish between Muslims and Jews. After all, if one has been called to avenge the loss of patrimony to Muslims, why draw the line there? Why not also avenge the indignities of Christ at His crucifixion?³⁷ But once this notion of kinship and brotherhood had been engaged, it took on a life, albeit a destructive one, of its own.

Remission of Sins?

³² This was Louis IX's second crusade. His first effort some twenty years previous is now known to most historians as the Seventh Crusade.

³³ Joinville, Sir John, "The Life of St. Louis," in *Chronicles of the Crusades*, trans. by M.R.B. Shaw, (New York, Dorset Press, 1963) pg. 345.

³⁴ *Ibid*, pg. 346.

³⁵ Geoffrey of Villehardouin, "The Conquest of Constantinople," in *Chronicles of the Crusades*, pg. 29-31.

³⁶ Riley-Smith, *The Crusades*, pg. 17.

³⁷ *Ibid*, pg. 17.

Probably the most significant of reasons why people took the cross were the spiritual benefits. Urban II had successfully synthesized the “pilgrimage” with the “holy war,” it remained only for him to delineate what these “benefits” amounted to.

By becoming crusaders it was possible to obtain God’s favor without leaving the world as was necessary in taking the vows of a religious order, and giving up liberties or lay garments. Thus the pope offered the opportunity for a new kind of religious service, in which, without giving up their customary pursuits of fighting and brigandage, knights could obtain moral and spiritual rewards. The privileges that Urban offered were definite and precise.³⁸

Perhaps not “definite and precise” enough. Found in the canons adopted at Clermont is one that specifies an indulgence was to be granted to all who made the trip to Jerusalem, provided they went out of devotion to God. But this was not “remission of sins,” something very different. Instead, it was remission of the *penance* which the church imposed for sins.³⁹ Perhaps the uneducated laity of this time can be forgiven for not making the distinction. “Not until after the First Crusade did the theologians of the twelfth century, first among them Hugh of St. Victor, work out – in practical, if not yet in formal terms – the distinction between the guilt of sin and the punishment due to sin which is crucial to the theory of indulgences.”⁴⁰ It wasn’t until 1230, more than a century after Clermont, that an explanation of the so-called Treasury of Merits was even worked out. “Where even theologians found much obscure, there was little chance of popular opinion being well-informed.”⁴¹ Indeed. What is probably one of the strongest, if not *the* strongest, personal motivations to go crusading, then, was founded on a misunderstanding. The opportunity to go straight to heaven was just too good to pass up.

Many, in fact, literally viewed this as a license to kill in the name of God, if the subsequent pogroms against the Jews in France and elsewhere are any indication.

The Piety of Louis IX

As we have seen, only recently have the idealistic notions of the crusaders been appreciated by contemporary historians. We would be remiss if we did not take a look at one of the more compelling figures in the history of the Crusades, Louis IX. John Joinville’s account of the life and career of St. Louis nearly approaches hagiography, but there is a certain verisimilitude in his stories and anecdotes, made all the more believable by the fact that he (John) does not always come off well in them.

It seemed that Louis enjoyed quizzing his knight, almost in a Socratic way, about matters moral and theological.

King Louis once sent for me and said: “You have such a shrewd and subtle mind that I hardly dare speak to you of things concerning God. So I have summoned these two monks to come here, because I want to ask you a question.” Then he said: “Tell me, seneschal, what is your idea of God?” “Your Majesty,” I replied, “He is something so good that there cannot be anything better.” “Indeed,” said he,

³⁸ Duncalf, “The Councils of Piacenza and Clermont,” in *A History of the Crusades*, pg. 245.

³⁹ *Ibid*, pg. 246.

⁴⁰ Mayer, *The Crusades*, pg. 24.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, pg. 25.

“You’ve given me a very good answer; for it’s precisely the same as the definition given in this book I have here in my hand.”⁴²

“Now I ask you,” he continued, “which you would prefer: to be a leper or to have committed some mortal sin?” And I, who had never lied to him, replied that I would rather have committed thirty mortal sins than become a leper. The next day, when the monks were no longer there, he called me to him, and making me to sit at his feet said to me: “Why did you say that to me yesterday?” I told him I would still say it. “You spoke without thinking, like a fool,” he said. “You ought to know there is no leprosy so foul as being in a state of mortal sin; for the soul in that condition is like the Devil; therefore no leprosy can be so vile. Besides when a man dies his body is healed of its leprosy; but if he dies after committing a mortal sin, he can never be sure that, during his lifetime, he has repented of it sufficiently for God to forgive him...So I beg you,” he added, “as earnestly as I can, for the love of God, and for love of me,⁴³ to train your heart to prefer any evil that can happen to the body, whether it be leprosy or any other disease, rather than let mortal sin take possession of your soul.”⁴⁴

The story Joinville writes of the life of Louis is fascinating, but the tale is also a sad and tragic one. Of all the Crusades, the Seventh may well have been the best financed and planned, and headed by the most worthy leader of the entire epoch – but it was also the greatest failure. Taken ill by what probably was dysentery, Louis’ army of approximately 50,000 was surrounded, defeated, and its leader, captured. The vast majority of his forces were never heard from again, either sold into slavery, mingling into the local population, or in some instances, perhaps, straggling back home. Louis and his faithful knight, John, were among the fortunate few.

We close with these accounts because it is an appropriate remedy for the unbalanced accounts and impressions many have of the Crusades. That they constitute some of the saddest chapters in church history is undoubtedly true – but it is also true that many crusaders were inspired by the most legitimate and honorable of motives, sometimes poorly demonstrated, to be sure. But the passion, the willingness to turn one’s back on everything to further the kingdom, is sorely missing in these days. One cannot help but look at the past with some wistfulness.

⁴² It’s interesting to speculate as to what book Louis had in his hand, but judging from the question, and Joinville’s answer, it may well have been *The Proslogium*, penned by St. Anselm.

⁴³ This writer cannot help but be impressed with the sincerity and benevolence of such a king.

⁴⁴ Joinville, *Chronicles of the Crusades*, pg. 168-169.

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