

## Crusading for Truth

By Robert P. Lockwood

The Catholic urban legend of the Crusades is of a ruthless, intolerant Church driving Europe into a barbaric war of aggression and plunder against a peaceful Islamic world. As the common portrait paints it, the Crusades, led by mad preachers and manipulating popes, were a Church-sponsored invasion that descended into slaughter in Jerusalem, the persecution of European Jews, and papal manipulation that led to the sack of Constantinople.

Of course, the Crusades are a far more complicated series of events in history than portrayed in anti-Catholic rhetoric. But there are a few prejudices that can be addressed in a way that any serious historian—no matter his perspective—would agree.

### 1. "The Crusades were an unwarranted European invasion of an innocent Islamic people."

This claim was never part of general European or Islamic understanding until the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when the Ottoman Empire, as it was dying, tried to stir up Islamic nationalism by painting the Crusades as eleventh-century colonialism. The reality is that the Crusade announced by Blessed Pope Urban II in 1095 was the answer to an urgent plea from Constantinople for Western assistance against an Islamic invasion from the Seljuk Turks.

Islam, springing from Arabia, had been militarily aggressive for centuries, conquering Jerusalem in A.D. 638 and most of northern Africa by 700. Spain was conquered in 711, and it was not until the victory of Charles Martel at Tours and Poitiers in 732 that the Islamic advance in Western Europe ended. Constantinople was able to maintain the Eastern Empire, although it was stripped of Syria, Palestine, and northern Africa by the military advance of Islam. Over the next three centuries, the empire recovered somewhat, but it was never able to reclaim the Holy Land itself.

By the eleventh century, there were three different centers of Arab rule—in Spain, Egypt, and Iran/Iraq—with the Fatimid dynasty of Egypt exercising control over Jerusalem. At the same time, there were a number of Islamic leaders with their own military forces, dynasties, feuds, and battles for power. By 1027, the Eastern emperor had negotiated relief for the Christians of Jerusalem, and pilgrimages from Europe had resumed to the holy sites. The rise of the Islamic Seljuk Turks shortly thereafter, though, destroyed this peaceful interlude and was a direct cause of the First Crusade.

The Seljuks quickly overran Armenia, threatening the entire Anatolian peninsula. Imperial forces were destroyed at the battle of Manzikert in 1071, considered the greatest defeat in the history of the Eastern Empire. Ten years later, when it appeared that the entire empire was on the verge of collapse, Alexios Komnenos took over the imperial throne. Through negotiations and careful manipulation of Islamic disunity, he was able to survive and rebuild a base of power against the Seljuks.

As part of his plan, Komnenos also mended fences with the papacy, and it appeared that the East-West schism of 1054 could be healed. He developed a cordial relationship with Pope Urban II, who held a council of the Church in 1095 that was attended by representatives of the empire. In desperate need of soldiers, these representatives begged for assistance from the West to fight the Seljuk advance. In November 1095 at a Church council in Clermont, France, Urban issued the formal call for a crusade to rescue Eastern Christendom from Islamic invasion and recover the Holy Land to make it safe for pilgrimage.

On July 15, 1099, nearly two years after they began to fight their way to the Holy Land, the Crusaders

successfully took Jerusalem. But unfortunately, the papal legate who had accompanied them had died. Without his restraint—which had been evident throughout the march to Jerusalem—the crusading army stormed the walls and engaged in a general slaughter of the population. (This was not uncommon at the time. If a city staunchly resisted an attack, its slaughter was almost inevitable. When the Islamic leader Saladin retook Jerusalem in 1187, his charity became legendary: After negotiations, instead of slaughter, those who could afford it were allowed to buy their freedom. Those who could not—men, women and children—were sold into slavery. Such were the times.)

Why did Urban support the idea of a crusade to the Holy Land? His primary objectives were, first and foremost, the return of the Holy Land and the defense of the Christian communities under siege in the Near East. But there was an additional concern. There was the direct threat of an Islamic advance into Europe. If Constantinople fell, Charles Martel's victory at Tours would be rendered moot, and all of eastern Europe would be wide open to Islamic advance. And that's exactly what happened once Constantinople fell to Islam in the fifteenth century.

## 2. "The Crusades were an exercise in Church-inspired anti-Jewish riots throughout Europe."

Anti-Jewish riots took place in a swath of the Rhineland—not throughout Europe—and primarily in a short period before the First Crusade began. These riots were not instigated or preached by the Church; in fact, Church leadership worked mightily to save Jewish lives.

In the Rhineland, disparate groups of peasants and townsfolk proclaimed themselves ready to march to Constantinople to fight Islam. They quickly descended into violence and began to launch attacks on local Jews. The bishop of Speyer managed to protect most of the Jews, but at Worms there was greater violence. The bishop opened up his home to protect the Jewish community, but the mobs broke in and slaughtered them. At Mainz, another slaughter followed in this rag-tag army's wake. As the army approached Cologne, Jews were hidden in Christian homes, and the archbishop was able to protect most of them. At Trier, most of the Jewish community was protected in the archbishop's palace. Eventually, Christians and Turks destroyed the peasant armies.

The attacks on Jews in the Rhineland took place despite the constant intervention of Church authorities on behalf of the Jews. When the Second Crusade was preached, St. Bernard of Clairvaux went to the Rhineland to stamp out any anti-Jewish riots, and they ceased.

## 3. "The sack of Constantinople took place under the indirect orders of Pope Innocent III as a means to recapture Byzantine Christianity for the Western Church."

Pope Innocent III, who was elected in 1198, dedicated his pontificate to recapturing Jerusalem, which had been lost to Saladin. He negotiated with the Eastern emperor, Alexios III—who had ascended to the imperial throne in 1195 after overthrowing (and blinding) his brother—for a healing of the schism and a joint effort to reclaim the Holy Land.

But Innocent lost control of the endeavor virtually from the start. The French barons leading the Crusade planned to sail directly to the Holy Land and bypass Constantinople. The Crusaders' transportation from Venice was secured, but when the time came, a much smaller army assembled in Venice than had been planned. The Venetians had constructed a fleet for a much bigger invasion, and they wanted to be paid accordingly. It was finally decided that the Crusaders could start to make good on the cost by subduing the rebellious city of Zara on the Dalmatian coast. The problem was that Zara was Catholic and under the control of a Catholic crusading king whose lands the Pope had pledged to protect. When the Crusaders attacked Zara, an outraged Pope Innocent excommunicated them.

Eventually the French Crusaders were reconciled to the Church, and it seemed the Crusade was finally ready to embark. Then, the son of the former emperor (who was deposed by his uncle, Alexios III) entered the picture. This young Alexios hoped to regain the throne taken from his father by his uncle. He convinced the Crusaders that, if they helped him retake Constantinople and place him on the throne, he would pay the Crusaders what they still owed the Venetians and supply them with all they needed to proceed to the Holy Land. Innocent, thinking little of the young Alexios, called on the Crusaders to move on to Palestine and forget any interference in Christian Constantinople, warning them against attacks on fellow Christians.

In June 1203, the Venetians and the French Crusaders, along with young Alexios, arrived at the gates of Constantinople. Alexios had assured them that the city would rise up in his favor. That did not happen. His uncle did flee, his father was restored to the throne, and Alexios co-ruled with his father as Alexios IV. But the treasury he found could not pay off the Venetians. In February 1204, he was overthrown and killed by the citizens of Constantinople. The Crusaders saw this revolution as a direct attack on them, and they abandoned their plans to continue on to the Holy Land. The French and the Venetians poured into the city, and plunder and murder became the order of the day. Constantinople fell completely to Islamic invasion in 1453.

No serious historian of the Crusades would argue that Pope Innocent brought about or wanted the sack of Constantinople, but this Catholic urban legend remains. The simple fact is that the Pope explicitly begged them not to attack Constantinople; besides, the Crusaders paid little mind to a pope far away when there was plunder nearby. Though some argue that Innocent was privately pleased at Constantinople being brought back under Latin control, there is nothing in his actions that would lend credence to this. Three times he warned the Crusaders not to travel to Constantinople, he incessantly warned against any attack on Christians, and he complained bitterly after the fact about the ruin of the city.

#### The Moral of the Story

Catholic urban legends always have an anti-Catholic moral. The moral of this one is that the Catholic faith promotes zealotry, which leads only to intolerance and violence: "Just look at the carnage and bigotry associated with the Crusades."

No real historian would make that case. Historians have and will disagree in interpreting the Crusades and their impact on European and Islamic life. But they would agree that we could do without the misinformation surrounding them. Like most Catholic urban legends, they are propaganda disguised as history.