

# The Battle Over the Crusades

*by Robert P. Lockwood*

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When the Showtime premium cable channel planned to air a film version of the viciously anti-Catholic play “Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All For You,” the director of the production, Marshall Brickman, was asked to respond to the controversy. “Any institution that has backed the Inquisition, the Crusades and the Roman position on the Holocaust deserves to be the butt of at least a couple of jokes,”<sup>1</sup> Brickman gave as an excuse for the bigotry. In doing so, he lumped together two traditional historical excuses for anti-Catholicism – the Inquisition and the Crusades – along with a canard that has developed only in recent years. The “Roman position on the Holocaust” is contemporary code for the alleged “silence” of Pope Pius XII in the face of the Nazism.<sup>2</sup>

One reason for the persistence of anti-Catholicism is the historical legacy of the post-Reformation world. Myths, legends and anti-Catholic “histories” created in the bitterness of theological, national and cultural divisions in the centuries after the Reformation have colored our understanding of the past, and are often used in the present as a club against the Church. Our understanding of the world in which we live and the events of the past that helped to shape it are often determined by this anti-Catholic legacy. The popular image of the Inquisition, for example, is rooted in the anti-Spanish polemics of the Sixteenth Century. Of course, the current conventional wisdom on Pope Pius XII is of more recent vintage, beginning with a German playwright in 1963.<sup>3</sup>

With the Crusades, the assumption is of a ruthless Church

driving Europe into a barbaric war of aggression and plunder against a peaceful Islamic population in the Holy Land. As the common portrait paints it, led by mad preachers and manipulating popes, the Crusades were a Church-sponsored invasion and slaughter that descended into a massacre at Jerusalem, the sack of Constantinople and the persecution of European Jews.

The Crusades are also viewed as concretizing the schism of the Orthodox churches, a division that remains today. Though that division was not caused by the Crusades, it was certainly exacerbated by the Fourth Crusade, and remains its saddest legacy. When Pope John Paul II visited Greece in the spring of 2001, he apologized for the actions of Western Catholics involved in the sack of Constantinople,<sup>4</sup> though that sack had not been ordered, determined or intended by the Church or the papacy itself.

The Crusades, of course, are a far more complicated series of events in history than the anti-Catholic statements of Brickman. The Crusades should be understood within the context of the times and by their reality, rather than through the myths created for purposes of propaganda. Narrowly and traditionally defined, the Crusades involved a military attempt under a vow of faith to regain the Holy Land – containing the sites of the Gospel accounts of the life of Jesus – from its Islamic conquerors. The goal as defined by the Church was to allow safe pilgrimage to these sites and to protect and maintain a Christian presence in the Holy Land.<sup>5</sup> This narrow papal purpose, however, would become caught up in dynastic feuds, schism and heresies, economic warfare over Mediterranean trade, the reunification and rise of an aggressive Islamic military movement, and the final destruction of the Eastern Roman Empire.

Pompey had conquered the Holy Land for the Roman Empire in 63 BC. As such, the country where Jesus lived His earthly

ministry would be under Roman hegemony. It would continue so for centuries after Him. The Emperor Constantine legalized Christianity in 313 AD and began the process of identifying the Roman Empire with the Christian faith. Christianity, which had existed throughout the Empire prior to Constantine, would soon become the dominant faith in all the old Roman territories. The Holy Land itself, as well as Egypt and North Africa, became strong and vibrant Christian communities. The first Church of the Nativity would be erected in Bethlehem in 325 AD.<sup>6</sup>

In 331 AD Constantine moved the seat of the Roman Empire to Constantinople. This would accelerate the decline of Rome and the inheritance of the Empire would shift east. The Holy Land would remain a faithful center of Christianity in the Near East. Yet, along with the ancient Patriarchal Sees such as Antioch, the Holy Land would look toward Imperial Constantinople as its political and, to a certain extent, religious center. As a result, the Church in the Near East would take its liturgy and characteristics from Constantinople. As relations between the Eastern Church under imperial leadership and the Western Church under papal leadership became more strained over the centuries, the future of the Holy Land would be tied directly to the politics of Constantinople than Rome.<sup>7</sup>

In the early Seventh Century, the Persian Empire overtook the Holy Land, sacked Jerusalem and slaughtered the Christian inhabitants. While the Eastern Empire was eventually able to recapture it, in 638 Jerusalem was taken by invading Arabian forces under the sword of the new Islam only six years after the death of the prophet Mohammed. Egypt was lost to the Moslem forces and by 700 AD Roman Africa was conquered. In 711 Spain was occupied and it was not until the victory of Charles Martel at Tours and Potier in 732 that the Moslem advance in the West ended. Constantinople was able to hold off an invasion and the remnant Eastern Roman Empire, stripped of

Syria, Palestine and North Africa, continued to exist. Over the next three centuries, the Empire would recover somewhat, though never able to reclaim the entire Holy Land itself.

The differences within the Church as it developed in the East and West became more pronounced over the centuries. Differences in language, tradition, history, theology and religious sensibilities created divisions particularly as the Church in the West began to both adjust to and convert the successive invading ethnic tribes of Europe. The Eastern Church, seeing itself as the intellectual and cultural center of the world, resented the juridical authority of Rome. While consenting to Rome as a court of last resort in doctrinal concerns, it did not accept Roman leadership over its daily affairs. Additionally, thorny theological issues would divide the Church in the East far more than the West. Schisms and heresies would breakdown the unity of the Church in the East even before the major break between East and West in the schism of 1054 that created the Orthodox churches.

Briefly, the Schism of 1054 was the result of that long history, though the specific events began in Southern Italy. Southern Italy was still ruled by the Eastern Empire, while Sicily was in the hands of Islam. Neither exercised any great authority, however, and the lands "were a paradise for landless adventurers. By the mid-eleventh century, Norman mercenaries, called in by local princelings struggling against Muslim or Byzantine overlords, had broken the Muslim power in Sicily and established themselves as a threat in their own right."<sup>8</sup> Pope Leo IX feared this Norman advance that was closing in on papal territory and organized an armed resistance. Expecting assistance that never came from the Eastern Empire, his forces were defeated in 1053. The Empire might loath the Normans, but they resented papal authority even more and saw the pope's advance into Southern Italy as an attempt to claim jurisdiction over part of the eastern Church. When Leo named a new bishop for Sicily and the Normans were

amenable to the establishment of the Western Church in their newly conquered lands, the Patriarch of Constantinople, Michael Cerularius responded by angrily closing the Western Latin-rite churches that existed in Constantinople. Leo answered with a bull of excommunication in July 1054 and, in turn, the patriarch pronounced the pope excommunicated, though Leo was already dead.<sup>9</sup>

This schism would serve as a backdrop to the Crusades. The popes were convinced that assisting the successive emperors in their battles with the Seljuk Turks and other Islamic enemies of the Empire would heal the schism. In turn, various emperors would use the bait of possible reunification to encourage papal support in their military efforts. Unfortunately, the roots of the schism were far too deep in the East that any emperor could simply negotiate it away.<sup>10</sup> Crusading armies would only exacerbate resentment against the West, deepening rather than healing the long-standing division in Christendom.

Unity in the Islamic world had also begun to break down in the generations after Mohammed's death. By the 11<sup>th</sup> century there were three different centers of Arab rule – in Spain, Egypt and Iran/Iraq – with the Fatmid dynasty of Egypt exercising control over Jerusalem. At the same time, there were any number of independent Islamic states with their own military forces, dynasties, feuds and battles for power. The death of any leader seemed to immediately result in endless family battles for power. The Holy Land was certainly never a part of a peaceful united Islamic empire.<sup>11</sup>

By 1027, the Eastern Emperor had negotiated relief for the Christians of Jerusalem after their persecution under the mad caliph Hakim and pilgrimages from Europe had resumed to the holy sites. However, the rise of the Islamic Seljuk Turks in the 11<sup>th</sup> Century would destroy this peaceful interlude and be a direct cause of the First Crusade. The Seljuk Turks had

overrun Armenia and the entire Anatolia peninsula was threatened. 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, Alexius Comnenus would take over the imperial throne when it appeared that the entire Empire was on the verge of collapse. Through negotiations and careful manipulation of Islamic disunity, he was able to survive and to rebuild a base of power against the Seljuks. As part of his plan, he also mended fences with the papacy and it appeared that the schism of 1054 could be healed. He developed a cordial relationship with Pope Urban II who held a council of the Church in 1095 in which representatives of the Empire were in attendance. In desperate need of soldiers, they begged for assistance from the West. In November 1095 at a Church council in Clermont, France, Pope Urban II issued the formal call for a Crusade to rescue eastern Christendom and recover the Holy Land to make it safe for pilgrimage.<sup>12</sup>

Why did Urban support the idea of a Crusade to the Holy Land and put the weight of the Church behind it? Clearly, the return of the Holy Land and the defense of the Christian communities in the Near East were the first objectives. But there were additional concerns. There was the clear threat of the Islamic advance into Europe that threatened the entire Christian community. If Constantinople fell, the victory at Tours could be rendered in vain and all Eastern Europe would be wide open to Islamic advance. Additionally, the pope certainly believed that allying with Constantinople and rescuing the ancient sees of Antioch and Jerusalem could heal the disunity of Christianity caused by the schism of 1054.<sup>13</sup>

Urban was of the line of the great reforming popes that had greeted the new millennium and would continue through the 13<sup>th</sup> Century. Freed from the control of local Roman aristocrats, a true reformation in Church life – spiritual and juridical –

was underway at the direction of the papacy. Urban had a vision of a united Christendom controlled by no petty lords, kings or emperors. Most of Europe had been converted to Christianity by the year 1000. During the 11<sup>th</sup> century a spirit of religious reform argued that the salvation of the world would be greatly increased if the world itself were reformed. Led by a strong papacy, the goal was to sanctify the world through a combination of the Church's need to reform its institutional life free from control by secular lords, and to build a Christian society.<sup>14</sup> The defense and unity of this goal of a new Christendom was at stake.

An additional part of this reformation of Christian life was to somehow end, or deter, the incessant warfare that plagued the European community. The incessant Christian slaughter of Christians had led to the "truce of God" movement in the 11<sup>th</sup> Century as part of the general attempt at creating this new Christendom. Warfare was banned on the Sabbath. Under the influence of the great abbey of Cluny, a driving force in the reformation of the church, the truce was extended to holy days. In various territories it expanded to Advent, Lent, Easter and Pentecost. By the middle of the 11<sup>th</sup> Century it was closely knit to the Peace of God movement, which protected Church property and the poor from war. Violation of the Peace or the Truce was considered grounds for excommunication. While it seems contradictory to encourage a Crusade in the interest of peace, there was certainly the papal hope that by turning the incessant warring fervor outward in the purpose of defending Christendom there was greater purpose than the continuing scandal of Christians slaughtering Christians.<sup>15</sup>

There were other forces at work in the Crusades, however, that would negatively impact both the image and the results of the Crusades. First, these were violent times and warfare was waged ruthlessly. The Frankish lords taking part in the First Crusade were among the most ruthless. These men viewed the

Crusade as a holy venture that could save their souls. But they also saw an opportunity for conquest and new lands to rule. At the same time, the Emperor Alexius in Constantinople viewed the Crusaders as a means to preserve the Empire by assisting him in destroying the Turks and recapturing the ancient lands of the Empire now dominated by Islam. These contrary expectations would increase the bad blood between East and West.<sup>16</sup>

In the Holy Land itself, various Islamic dynasties would see the Crusaders as much as potential allies than enemies. The “kingdoms” established after the First Crusade would be caught up in the regional power disputes of the Islamic leaders, as well as their own dynastic ambitions.<sup>17</sup> And finally, there was the ambition of the Italian cities to extend their rising commercial power. They saw the Crusade as an opportunity to end both Islamic domination of trade in the Eastern Mediterranean and the power of Constantinople. The commercial ambitions of Venice would lead to the devastating sack of Constantinople in the Fourth Crusade.<sup>18</sup>

Pope Urban had hoped that the great kings of Europe would lead the Crusades. Instead, the First Crusade began out of papal control when virtual leaderless mobs of the poor began to assemble and “march” toward Constantinople. In the Rhineland these disparate mobs of peasants and townsfolk began to launch attacks on the Jews. The bishop of Spier had 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 armies’ 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. These attacks on Jews in the Rhineland continued by these mob armies despite the constant



intervention of Church authorities on behalf of the Jews. Eventually, Christians and Turks destroyed these peasant armies and most of western Christendom viewed it as just penalty for their anti-Jewish atrocities.<sup>19</sup> When the Second Crusade was preached, St. Bernard of Clairvaux went to the Rhineland to stamp out anti-Jewish riots, and they effectively ceased as part of the crusading movement.<sup>20</sup>

The First Crusade with papal blessing was made up of four Frankish armies that assembled at Constantinople. From the beginning, relations were cool at best with Emperor Alexius who feared the size and reliability of armies he considered little more than barbarian. After extracting pledges from three of the four Frankish leaders that any land conquered would be returned to the Empire, each army was quickly dispatched to Asia Minor on its own. In 1097, the armies faced a divided Moslem power. The Fatmids of Egypt held southern Syria while their enemies, the Seljuk Turks, held most of Asia Minor and northern Syria.<sup>21</sup> But with collective armies of possibly 30,000 men, including an army of Emperor Alexius, the Crusaders found the heat and lack of water a greater problem than disunited Islamic forces. The Crusaders first captured Nicea, capital of the Seljuk Turks, then defeated the major Seljuk force at Dorylaeum which left a clear passage across Asia Minor. On June 3, 1098, Antioch was captured and a large Turkish contingent defeated in front of its walls. On July 15, 1099, the Crusaders took Jerusalem. The papal legate, however, had died. Without his restraint, the crusading army – now reduced to about 12,000 – stormed the walls and engaged in a horrific slaughter of the Islamic and Jewish population. Though the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem was then established, that slaughter would help to reunify Islamic resistance to the new conquerors.<sup>22</sup>

The Crusaders essentially held four areas – Jerusalem, Antioch, Edessa and Tripoli. After first seeing the Crusaders

as possibly useful allies in their internecine conflicts, the Islamic world in the Near East become less enamored of the invaders. The Crusaders, for the most part, were not colonizers. Most fought, then returned to their homelands. As a result, the Latin kingdoms established in the Holy Land were in incessant need of reinforcement for defense. The famous crusading orders of vowed knights would develop from this need. But it would also necessitate calls to Europe whenever the situation grew threatening.

In 1144, Edessa was retaken and the Islamic leader Nur-ur-din emerged as the principal enemy of the Crusader kingdoms. It was these events that led to a call for a Second Crusade. Emperor Conrad of Germany and King Louis VII of France led their armies into what became essentially a debacle. Convinced that the emperor had betrayed them to the Turks, the Second Crusade collapsed in a failed attempt to conquer Damascus. Nur-ur-din, meanwhile, took Damascus from a rival Islamic dynasty in 1154 and solidified his power.<sup>23</sup>

Amalric, now the Frankish King of Jerusalem, was lured into an attempt to conquer Egypt by the Syrian Shirkuh, whose master was Nur-ur-din and who was also the uncle of the young Saladin. Shirkuh had been betrayed after helping to restore the Egyptian chief Shawar to power. The invasion failed when the King of Jerusalem was forced to return to defend Antioch from an attack by Nur-ur-din. In a curious switch of alliances, by 1166 Amalric would decide to help Egypt from a renewed attack by Shirkuh, fearing the expanding Syrian power under Nur-ur-din. Almaric was defeated and then proceeded to Alexandria to attempt a siege. Shirkuh left his nephew Saladin with a small garrison to defend the city. A treaty was eventually concluded but the battle for Egypt was rejoined and, in 1169, Shirkuh avoided Almaric's forces and took Cairo. Syria and Egypt were united in an aggressive two-prong front that would directly threaten the Holy Land. However, shortly after Shirkuh's victory, he died and was succeeded by Saladin,

whom Nur-ur-din did not trust. For a brief time, Saladin preferred that a Frankish buffer state existed between Egypt and Nur-ur-din. But with the death of Nur-ur-din in 1174 and Almaric two months later, Saladin's star was rising rather than setting.<sup>24</sup>

Shortly thereafter, the Byzantine Empire suffered a major defeat at the hands of the Turks that effectively removed the Empire as a serious source of support. This would leave the Latin kingdoms of the Holy Land at the mercy of a more and more united Islamic force. Saladin advanced out of Egypt expecting a quick and easy march on Jerusalem. But he was surprisingly defeated. In 1180 a truce was concluded and Saladin continued to consolidate his power while the Byzantine Empire faced revolution and the dynasties in the Holy Land engaged in petty internal squabbles. In 1182 war was resumed after a Christian raid on an Islamic caravan. After failing to win any important victories, Saladin turned toward his Islamic enemies once again. By 1183 he took the vital city of Aleppo and was now the most powerful Islamic prince, controlling Syria and Egypt. He concluded a new four-year truce with the Christian enclaves to prepare to complete the conquest of the Holy Land. In 1187, after a large caravan was attacked by one of the Frankish knights, Saladin launched his war of conquest. At the Horns of Hattin, Saladin defeated the Christian armies and by October he had taken the city of Jerusalem. Only Tyre, Antioch and Tripoli remained as the Christian-held outposts.<sup>25</sup>

The Third Crusade was launched in response to Saladin's successes. This Crusade would create much of the romantic legends and myths that surround the battle for the Holy Land, in both the West and Islamic culture. An army under the German Emperor Frederick Barbarossa entered the fray in June 1190, but the emperor himself drowned crossing a river. Saladin considered it a miracle of faith. The emperor's dispirited army took refuge in Antioch. In the meantime, the remnants of the Frankish forces besieged Acre, a port of the Gulf of Haifa

that had been one of the wealthiest of the Frank communities. The battle was essentially a stalemate until the arrival of the Kings of England and France.

It was in the Third Crusade that Richard the Lion Heart of England would engage Saladin in a ritual of attacks and counterattacks, as well as chivalrous courtesies. The French king had come to Acre before him, but it was Richard's arrival in June 1191 after taking the island of Cyprus that energized the Christian army. In July the stalemate was broken and the port of Acre seized from Saladin. The French king soon departed for home while Richard planned to take back Jerusalem. He defeated Saladin at the battle of Arsuf and moved to secure the port of Jaffa. But this delay in approaching Jerusalem allowed Saladin to reinforce the city's defenses. Richard decided that even if he took the city, he could never hold it once the crusaders returned home. After a few more desultory campaigns, Richard saved Jaffa from Saladin's attack and a treaty was eventually negotiated between Richard and Saladin. The Christians regained the coastal cities and pilgrims would be allowed to visit the holy shrines in Jerusalem peacefully. Richard left the Holy Land in 1192, ending the Third Crusade.<sup>26</sup>

The Fourth Crusade began as a fundamental part of the reforming zeal of Pope Innocent III. Elected in 1198, he dedicated his pontificate to recapturing Jerusalem. He negotiated with the Eastern Emperor Alexius III, who had ascended the imperial throne in 1195 after overthrowing his brother, for a healing of the schism and a joint effort to take the Holy Land. French knights took up the mantle of the crusades under Tibauld of Champagne while in Germany, Philip of Swabia made clear his designs were bigger than the Holy Land. He was after Constantinople and the Eastern Empire itself. Innocent presumed that a Crusade without kings would lead to the same success as the First Crusade. But virtually from the start Innocent III lost control of the endeavor. The

knights decided that Egypt should be the power conquered to reclaim the Holy Land (which had been the advice of Richard the Lion Hearted). Meanwhile, Philip entered into negotiations with the son of the emperor deposed by Alexius III. This young Alexius hoped to regain the throne taken from his father and Philip was more than willing to assist, assuming that would turn the old empire into his virtual puppet.

Soon, Venice entered the picture. The Venetians would give transport and supplies for the Crusading force in return for payment and one-half of its conquests. The Venetians, however, were uninterested in supporting an attack on Egypt, having arranged a trade agreement with the Sultan of Egypt at the very time they were negotiating with the Crusaders. When the Crusaders failed to come up with the payment necessary, the Doge of Venice, Enrico Dandolo, offered to delay payment if they assisted in an attack on the city of Zara, control of which Venice hoped to wrestle from the king of Hungary. (Dandolo also held a long grudge against Constantinople.) In November 1202 the fleet sailed for Zara and the city was taken and pillaged. The Crusaders and Venetians decided to stay there for the winter.

Pope Innocent was outraged that a crusading army was used to attack a fellow Christian king. He excommunicated the entire expedition. Discovering the machinations of the Venetian Doge, he lifted the excommunication of the crusading knights, but not the Venetians. But over the winter, news reached Zara that young Alexius would pay the Crusaders what they owed the Venetians and supply them with all they needed to proceed to Egypt, if they would take Constantinople and place him on the throne. The Doge supported the plan as a means to enlarge its trade in the Mediterranean at the expense of a puppet Constantinople. Innocent called on the Crusaders to move on Palestine. He thought little of the young Alexius and warned against attacks on fellow Christians. The record is unclear if the pope had any advanced knowledge that the Crusaders would

turn on Constantinople, but in any case, he had lost any control he might have exercised to the Venetians and the friends of Philip of Swabia.

In June 1203 the Venetian and the Crusaders, along with young Alexius, arrived at the gates of Constantinople. Alexius had assured them that Constantinople would rise up in his favor. That did not happen. His uncle, Emperor Alexius III, fled and his father was restored to the throne. It was argued that therefore there was no need to continue the attack. Alexius would co-rule with his father as Alexius IV. He tried to force the city to accept the supremacy of Rome in matters of faith which the clergy rejected outright. He also found a treasury that could not pay off the Venetians. In February 1204, he was deposed and killed by the citizens of Constantinople. The Crusaders saw the revolution as a direct attack on them and any plans to continue on to the Holy Land were abandoned. The Franks and the Venetians poured into the city. The victorious Doge and the knights of the crusades then allowed the sack of the city. It was horrific. For 900 years the city had been the remnant of imperial Rome. It was virtually destroyed, its art works stolen or destroyed, its citizenry ruthlessly murdered. A Western empire was set up that would last a short time and Innocent, seeing in it the hope of reunification of Christendom, accepted it at first as a *fait accompli*. However, he became more enraged as stories of the savagery waged against Constantinople reached Rome. Innocent wrote angrily to the Westerners in Constantinople denouncing the sack of the city. "Then, to his disgust, he heard that his legate...had issued a decree absolving all who had taken the Cross from making the further journey to the Holy Land. The Crusade was revealed as an expedition whose only aim was to conquer Christian territory."<sup>27</sup>

The sack of Constantinople ended the Fourth Crusade and effectively determined that the Crusades would never succeed in its original purpose. The Empire was effectively destroyed

and would be of no assistance in future crusades. The Church was not reunified, as the Greeks would never forgive the West for the atrocities at Constantinople. The schism of 1054 would become permanent.

The end of the Fourth Crusade actually created a breathing space for the surviving Latin kingdom of Acre in the Holy Land. The unity of the Islamic peoples began to crumble after the death of Saladin in 1193. After years of internecine warfare, al-Adil became the effective Sultan and successor to Saladin's empire. He had concluded a truce with the surviving Western rulers in the Holy Land as he dealt with his Islamic enemies. The truce was scheduled to end in 1217 and appeals were made to the West for a new crusade when the peace would end.<sup>28</sup>

Pope Innocent III died in 1216 and was succeeded by Honorius III who was importuned by the king of Acre to move forward with a Crusade. The other Frankish rulers in the Holy Land, however, were less interested. The peaceful interlude had allowed them to expand their wealth and, since Saladin's death, had felt far less threatened. Honorius supported the Crusade and a force soon arrived in Acre. A desultory campaign followed that was essentially purposeless. However, it was soon decided that if Egypt could be captured, the entire balance of power could change. The Fifth Crusade of 1217 captured Damietta in Egypt. The sultan of Egypt and Syria offered the surrender of Jerusalem, but the crusaders refused believing that the conquering of Egypt and the Holy Land was at hand. But their moment had gone and they eventually withdrew from Egypt when promised reinforcements under Frederick II of Germany never came.<sup>29</sup>

Frederick II, excommunicated for his constant delays in undertaking a crusade, set out on the Sixth Crusade in 1228. Arriving in the Holy Land, he sent emissaries to the sultan and arranged a treaty that returned Jerusalem to Christian

control. But after Frederick departed, the Christian rulers of Jerusalem allied with the Muslim ruler of Damascus against the sultan. By 1244, Jerusalem would be back under the control of Islam. The Sixth Crusade under Louis IX of France once again captured Damietta but failed to take Egypt. The king was eventually captured and released for ransom. He returned to France in 1254. After his departure, a series of civil wars among the Venetians and the Genoese in the Holy Land further weakened the kingdoms there. The new sultan of Egypt marched up the coast and took one city after another, including Antioch in 1268. Louis attempted another crusade but died shortly after arriving on the African coast in 1270. In 1291, the kingdom of Acre was sacked and the Latin kingdom in the Holy Land came to an end.<sup>30</sup>

With the end of Acre, there was no Christian base left from which crusading forces could operate. If the popes wished to re-establish crusading fever, there were few places they could turn to after 1291. The remnant Empire, once more under Greek control, was fighting for survival and Europe itself had lost interest. King Peter of Cyprus – who claimed the kingdom of Jerusalem – launched a Crusade in 1365 with the support of Pope Urban V. Another attempt was made on Egypt as the key to regaining the Holy Land. Alexandria was sacked, but soon evacuated and peace was made with the sultan of Egypt when subjects tired of his crusading spirit overthrew King Peter.<sup>31</sup>

The sack of Alexandria led to a revived Islamic persecution of Christians within their territories under the Egyptian Mameluks. In 1426 Cypriot would face a devastating invasion, while, by 1375, the Christian kingdom of Armenia disappeared under combined Turkish and Mameluk forces. The rising power of the Islamic Ottoman Turks soon threatened Eastern Europe, as well as Constantinople. A crusade was assembled in Hungary but was defeated by the Turks at the battle of Nicopolis in 1396. It would only be a matter of time before Constantinople would fall. In 1439, the eastern emperor agreed to end the schism at



the Council of Florence to obtain western aid. But his own subjects rejected the union and in 1453 the Turks would capture Constantinople.

The fall of Constantinople did not come as a great shock in Europe. But Pope Pius II, elected in 1458 would labor toward one last crusade to throw back the Turks from Constantinople. The threatened king of Hungary facing the Turkish onslaught readily agreed but little other support was engendered before the ailing pontiff died in 1464. From this point on, the Crusades as a narrowly defined holy war of a united Christendom supported by the popes essentially disappeared. In Church histories, the crusade of King Louis of France in 1270 marked the last of the traditional international crusades made under vow.<sup>32</sup> Certainly from the 15<sup>th</sup> Century on, battles against the Islamic forces were national enterprises for limited national goals, the most well known being the *Reconquista* of Spain completed by Ferdinand and Isabella in 1492.

Yet, even from the First Crusade, it would be a mistake to see the Crusades as wars that were controlled by the Church. Supported by the papacy in an attempt to secure Christian rights in the Holy Land, the Crusades themselves were dominated by the kings and princes who took part in them. A movement that began as essentially a limited religious quest for a union of sovereigns, papacy and people to secure the right of safe pilgrimage to the Holy sites associated with the life of Christ became caught up in the wider history of the period. Additionally, however, the negative caricatures of the Crusades that are used as a contemporary club against the Church have little to do with their reality. The Crusades were far from colonizing efforts. The small kingdoms established after the first Crusade suffered chronically from a lack of population to support or defend themselves. Most crusaders served for a short period of time then returned home. The Holy Land and its environs were far from a peaceful Islamic enclave invading by vicious European knights. The Islamic peoples

spent far greater time and energy fighting among themselves than they would fighting crusading forces. The crusading kingdoms would often serve as allies of one side or the other in this warfare.

Certainly, the Church supported the ideal of the Crusade, but rarely controlled events and was often at direct odds with the Crusaders themselves. The horrors of warfare as fought at the time – and the ruthlessness of the slaughter that often followed victory – was neither caused by the Church, or was the Church capable of limiting it in any great fashion. The means used by the Franks in particular in warfare were hardly surprising for the time, or subject to control by the Church. There was no Church presence to mitigate the sack of Jerusalem in the First Crusade. In the Fourth Crusade, the responsibility for the destruction of Constantinople must be placed on the Doge of Venice and the schemes of the pretender to the imperial throne, rather than at the foot of Pope Innocent III who was horrified at the Christian slaughter of Christians that made a crusade to the Holy Land impossible. The attacks on the Jews in the Rhineland that took place on the eve of the First Crusade were in direct contradiction to Church teaching and the local hierarchy would be the only physical defenders of the Jewish population.

It is difficult to argue that the Crusades for the Holy Land had any real positive impact on Western culture and the Church. They certainly did nothing to improve relations between Islam and Christianity, though they also certainly did not cause what had already been a violent confrontation between East and West since the Islamic emergence under Mohammed centuries earlier. The persistent division of Western Christianity in the Orthodox schism was hardened by the Fourth Crusade, but the schism itself and the causes of it pre-existed the Crusades. The schism has persisted for too many long centuries not because of the Crusades, but for a host of other reasons grounded in culture, nationalism, spirituality

and theology.

Initiated at the request of the Byzantine emperors and by the dream of successive popes for a safe Holy Land and a united Christendom, the Crusades and the crusaders were never controlled by the Church. Even the First Crusade, though inspired by lofty ideals, essentially became a means for Frankish knights to recreate small feudal kingdoms in a backwater of the Islamic Empire. The negative results of the Crusades are clear. But to point to the Crusades as a symbol of a power-crazed Church engaging in slaughter to pursue its own nefarious ends is to misunderstand history and simply to look for an excuse for contemporary bigotry.

## **SUMMARY POINTS**

*One reason for the persistence of anti-Catholicism is the historical legacy of the post-Reformation world. Myths, legends and anti-Catholic "histories" created in the bitterness of theological, national and cultural divisions in the centuries after the Reformation have colored our understanding of the past, and are often used in the present as a club against the Church.*

*With the Crusades, the assumption is of a ruthless Church driving Europe into a barbaric war of aggression and plunder against a peaceful Islamic population in the Holy Land. As the common portrait paints it, led by mad preachers and manipulating popes, the Crusades were a Church-sponsored invasion and slaughter.*

*Narrowly and traditionally defined, the Crusades involved a military attempt under a vow of faith to regain the Holy Land – containing the sites of the Gospel accounts of the life of Jesus – from its Islamic conquerors. The goal as defined by the Church was to allow safe pilgrimage to these sites and to protect and maintain a Christian presence in the Holy Land.*

*This narrow papal purpose, however, would become caught up in*

*dynastic feuds, schism and heresies, economic warfare over Mediterranean trade, the reunification and rise of an aggressive Islamic military movement, and the final destruction of the Eastern Roman Empire.*

*The Church in the Near East would take its liturgy and characteristics from Constantinople. As relations between the Eastern Church under imperial leadership and the Western Church under papal leadership became more strained over the centuries, the future of the Holy Land would be tied directly to the politics of Constantinople than Rome.*

*In 638 Jerusalem was taken by invading Arabian forces under the sword of the new Islam only six years after the death of the prophet Mohammed. Egypt was lost to the Moslem forces and by 700 AD Roman Africa was conquered. In 711 Spain was occupied and it was not until the victory of Charles Martel at Tours and Potier in 732 that the Moslem advance in the West ended. Constantinople was able to hold off an invasion and the remnant Eastern Roman Empire, stripped of Syria, Palestine and North Africa, continued to exist.*

*The Eastern Church, seeing itself as the intellectual and cultural center of the world, resented the juridical authority of Rome. While consenting to Rome as a court of last resort in doctrinal concerns, it did not accept Roman leadership over its daily affairs. Additionally, thorny theological issues would divide the Church in the East far more than the West. Schisms and heresies would breakdown the unity of the Church in the East even before the major break between East and West in the schism of 1054 that created the Orthodox churches and provided the backdrop to the Crusades.*

*Unity in the Islamic world had also begun to break down in the generations after Mohammed's death. By the 11<sup>th</sup> century there were three different centers of Arab rule – in Spain, Egypt and Iran\Iraq – with the Fatmid dynasty of Egypt exercising control over Jerusalem. At the same time, there*

were any number of independent Islamic states with their own military forces, dynasties, feuds and battles for power. The death of any leader seemed to immediately result in endless family battles for power. The Holy Land was certainly never a part of a peaceful united Islamic empire.

The Seljuk Turks had overrun Armenia and the entire Anatolia peninsula was threatened. 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, Alexius Comnenus would take over the imperial throne when it appeared that the entire Empire was on the verge of collapse.

In November 1095 at a Church council in Clermont, France, Pope Urban II issued the formal call for a Crusade to rescue eastern Christendom and recover the Holy Land to make it safe for pilgrimage.

Why did Urban support the idea of a Crusade to the Holy Land and put the weight of the Church behind it? Clearly, the return of the Holy Land and the defense of the Christian communities in the Near East were the first objectives. But there were additional concerns. There was the clear threat of the Islamic advance into Europe that threatened the entire Christian community. If Constantinople fell, the victory at Tours could be rendered in vain and all Eastern Europe would be wide open to Islamic advance. Additionally, the pope certainly believed that allying with Constantinople and rescuing the ancient sees of Antioch and Jerusalem could heal the disunity of Christianity caused by the schism of 1054.

These were violent times and warfare was waged ruthlessly. The Frankish lords taking part in the First Crusade were among the most ruthless. These men viewed the Crusade as a holy venture that could save their souls. But they also saw an opportunity for conquest and new lands to rule. At the same time, the Emperor Alexius in Constantinople viewed the Crusaders as a means to preserve the Empire by assisting him

*in destroying the Turks and recapturing the ancient lands of the Empire now dominated by Islam. These contrary expectations would increase the bad blood between East and West.*

*In the Holy Land itself, various Islamic dynasties would see the Crusaders as much as potential allies than enemies. The “kingdoms” established after the First Crusade would be caught up in the regional power disputes of the Islamic leaders, as well as their own dynastic ambitions. There was also the ambition of the Italian cities to extend their rising commercial power. They saw the Crusade as an opportunity to end both Islamic domination of trade in the Eastern Mediterranean and the power of Constantinople. The commercial ambitions of Venice would lead to the devastating sack of Constantinople in the Fourth Crusade.*

*The First Crusade began out of papal control when virtual leaderless mobs of the poor began to assemble and “march” toward Constantinople. In the Rhineland these disparate mobs of peasants and townsfolk began to launch attacks on the Jews. In many cases, the Church provided the only protection for the Jews though even at Trier, where they were sheltered in the archbishop’s palace, the mobs broke-in and slaughtered them. Eventually, Christians and Turks destroyed these peasant armies and most of western Christendom viewed it as just penalty for their anti-Jewish atrocities. When the Second Crusade was preached, St. Bernard of Clairvaux went to the Rhineland to stamp out anti-Jewish riots, and they effectively ceased as part of the crusading movement.*

*The Crusaders first captured Nicea, capital of the Seljuk Turks, then defeated the major Seljuk force at Dorylaeum which left a clear passage across Asia Minor. On June 3, 1098, Antioch was captured and a large Turkish contingent defeated in front of its walls. On July 15, 1099, the Crusaders took Jerusalem. The papal legate, however, had died. Without his restraint, the crusading army – now reduced*

to about 12,000 – stormed the walls and engaged in a horrific slaughter of the Islamic and Jewish population. Though the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem was then established, that slaughter would help to reunify Islamic resistance to the new conquerors.

The Crusaders, for the most part, were not colonizers. Most fought, then returned to their homelands. As a result, the Latin kingdoms established in the Holy Land were in incessant need of reinforcement for defense. The famous crusading orders of vowed knights would develop from this need. But it would also necessitate calls to Europe whenever the situation grew threatening.

In 1144, Edessa was retaken and the Islamic leader Nur-ur-din emerged as the principal enemy of the Crusader kingdoms. It was these events that led to a call for a Second Crusade. Emperor Conrad of Germany and King Louis VII of France led their armies into what became essentially a debacle. Convinced that the emperor had betrayed them to the Turks, the Second Crusade collapsed in a failed attempt to conquer Damascus.

In 1187, after a large caravan was attacked by one of the Frankish knights, Saladin launched his war of conquest. At the Horns of Hattin, Saladin defeated the Christian armies and by October he had taken the city of Jerusalem. Only Tyre, Antioch and Tripoli remained as the Christian-held outposts. The Third Crusade was launched in response to Saladin's successes.

It was in the Third Crusade that Richard the Lion Heart of England would engage Saladin in a ritual of attacks and counterattacks, as well as chivalrous courtesies. The French king had come to Acre before him, but it was Richard's arrival in June 1191 after taking the island of Cyprus that energized the Christian army. In July the stalemate was broken and the port of Acre seized from Saladin. The French

king soon departed for home while Richard planned to take back Jerusalem. He defeated Saladin at the battle of Arsuf and moved to secure the port of Jaffa. But this delay in approaching Jerusalem allowed Saladin to reinforce the city's defenses. A treaty was eventually negotiated between Richard and Saladin. The Christians regained the coastal cities and pilgrims would be allowed to visit the holy shrines in Jerusalem peacefully. Richard left the Holy Land in 1192, ending the Third Crusade.

The Fourth Crusade, the dream of Pope Innocent III, collapsed in the sack of Constantinople that resulted from the manipulations of the Doge of Venice. A Western empire was set up that would last a short time and Innocent, seeing in it the hope of reunification of Christendom, accepted it at first as a *fait accompli*. However, he became more enraged as stories of the savagery waged against Constantinople reached Rome. Innocent wrote angrily to the Westerners in Constantinople denouncing the sack of the city.

The sack of Constantinople ended the Fourth Crusade and effectively determined that the Crusades would never succeed in its original purpose. The Empire was effectively destroyed and would be of no assistance in future crusades. The Church was not reunified, as the Greeks would never forgive the West for the atrocities at Constantinople. The schism of 1054 would become permanent.

It was decided that if Egypt could be captured the entire balance of power could change in the Holy Land. The Fifth Crusade of 1217 captured Damietta in Egypt. The sultan of Egypt and Syria offered the surrender of Jerusalem, but the crusaders refused believing that the conquering of Egypt and the Holy Land was at hand. But their moment had gone and they eventually withdrew from Egypt when promised reinforcements under Frederick II of Germany never came.

Frederick II, excommunicated for his constant delays in



*undertaking a crusade, set out on the Sixth Crusade in 1228. Arriving in the Holy Land, he sent emissaries to the sultan and arranged a treaty that returned Jerusalem to Christian control. But after Frederick departed, the Christian rulers of Jerusalem allied with the Muslim ruler of Damascus against the sultan. By 1244, Jerusalem would be back under the control of Islam.*

*The Sixth Crusade under Louis IX of France once again captured Damietta but failed to take Egypt. The king was eventually captured and released for ransom. He returned to France in 1254. After his departure, a series of civil wars among the Venetians and the Genoese in the Holy Land further weakened the kingdoms there. The new sultan of Egypt marched up the coast and took one city after another, including Antioch in 1268.*

*Louis attempted another crusade but died shortly after arriving on the African coast in 1270. In 1291, the kingdom of Acre was sacked and the Latin kingdom in the Holy Land came to an end.*

*The rising power of the Islamic Ottoman Turks soon threatened Eastern Europe, as well as Constantinople. A crusade was assembled in Hungary but was defeated by the Turks at the battle of Nicopolis in 1396. It would only be a matter of time before Constantinople would fall. In 1439, the eastern emperor agreed to end the schism at the Council of Florence to obtain western aid. But his own subjects rejected the union and in 1453 the Turks would capture Constantinople.*

*The fall of Constantinople did not come as a great shock in Europe. But Pope Pius II, elected in 1458 would labor toward one last crusade to throw back the Turks from Constantinople. The threatened king of Hungary facing the Turkish onslaught readily agreed but little other support was engendered before the ailing pontiff died in 1464. From this point on, the Crusades as a narrowly defined holy war of a united*

*Christendom supported by the popes essentially disappeared. In Church histories, the crusade of King Louis of France in 1270 marked the last of the traditional international crusades made under vow.<sup>32</sup> Certainly from the 15<sup>th</sup> Century on, battles against the Islamic forces were national enterprises for limited national goals, the most well known being the Reconquista of Spain completed by Ferdinand and Isabella in 1492.*

*The negative caricatures of the Crusades that are used as a contemporary club against the Church have little to do with their reality. The Crusades were far from colonizing efforts. The Holy Land and its environs were also far from a peaceful Islamic enclave invading by vicious European knights. The Islamic peoples spent far greater time and energy fighting among themselves than they would fighting crusading forces.*

*The Church supported the ideal of the Crusade, but rarely controlled events and was often at direct odds with the Crusaders themselves. The horrors of warfare as fought at the time – and the ruthlessness of the slaughter that often followed victory – was neither caused by the Church, or was the Church capable of limiting it in any great fashion. The means used by the Franks in particular in warfare were hardly surprising for the time, or subject to control by the Church. There was no Church presence to mitigate the sack of Jerusalem in the First Crusade.*

*In the Fourth Crusade, the responsibility for the destruction of Constantinople must be placed on the Doge of Venice and the schemes of the pretender to the imperial throne, rather than at the foot of Pope Innocent III who was horrified at the Christian slaughter of Christians that made a crusade to the Holy Land impossible.*

*The attacks on the Jews in the Rhineland that took place on the eve of the First Crusade were in direct contradiction to Church teaching and the local hierarchy would be the only*

*physical defenders of the Jewish population.*

*It is difficult to argue that the Crusades for the Holy Land had any real positive impact on Western culture and the Church. They certainly did nothing to improve relations between Islam and Christianity, though they also certainly did not cause what had already been a violent confrontation between East and West since the Islamic emergence under Mohammed centuries earlier. The persistent division of Western Christianity in the Orthodox schism was hardened by the Fourth Crusade, but the schism itself and the causes of it pre-existed the Crusades.*

## NOTE ON SOURCES

The single most reliable narrative on the Crusades is the three-volume "A History of the Crusades" by Steven Runciman (Cambridge University Press, 1999 editions.). This was the primary source used in the narrative of the actual events of the Crusades.

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Cited in Scripps Howard News Service syndicated story, by Lualne Lee, May 2001

<sup>2</sup> For an in depth response to the allegations against Pius and for a historical investigation of the Inquisition, see Research Papers at the website of the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights at [www.catholicleague.org](http://www.catholicleague.org)

<sup>3</sup> The myth of Pius XII began in earnest in 1963 in a drama created for the stage by Rolf Hochhuth, an otherwise obscure German playwright born in 1931. In 1963's *Der Stellvertreter* (The Representative or The Deputy) Hochhuth charged through a fictional presentation that Pius XII maintained an icy, cynical and uncaring silence during the Holocaust. More interested in Vatican investments than human

lives, Pius was presented as a cigarette-smoking dandy with Nazi leanings. The Deputy, even to Pius' most strenuous detractors, is readily dismissed. John Cornwell in "Hitler's Pope" describes Der Stellvertreter as "historical fiction based on scant documentation...(T)he characterization of Pacelli (Pius XII) as a money-grubbing hypocrite is so wide of the mark as to be ludicrous. Importantly, however, Hocchuth's play offends the most basic criteria of documentary: that such stories and portrayals are valid only if they are demonstrably true." Yet The Deputy, despite its evident flaws, prejudices and lack of historicity, laid the foundation for the charges against Pius XII, five years after his death.

<sup>4</sup>See Catholic News Service coverage, March 2001

<sup>5</sup> *Medieval History*, Norman F. Cantor (Macmillan Company 1970) p. 320

<sup>6</sup> *A History of the Arab Peoples*, Albert Hourani (Harvard University Press 1991) p. 7

<sup>7</sup> *A History of the Crusades* (Volume I), Steven Runciman (Cambridge University Press 1999 edition) p. 5-7

<sup>8</sup> *Saints and Sinners, A History of the Popes*, Eamon Duffy (Yale University Press) p. 90

<sup>9</sup>bid p. 91

<sup>10</sup> *The Barbarian Conversion*, Richard Fletcher (Henry Holt and Company, 1997) pp. 327-329

<sup>11</sup> See *Hourani* pp. 83-86

<sup>12</sup> See *Runciman* (Vol. I) pp. 61-63; 106-108

<sup>13</sup> *Canton*, p.320

<sup>14</sup> *Inquisition*, by Edward Peters (University of California Press, 1989) p. 40

<sup>15</sup> *Runciman* (Vol. I) pp.83-87

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.* pp. 169-171

<sup>17</sup> *Hourani*, pp. 38-43

<sup>18</sup> The sack of Constantinople is discussed below. The Fourth Crusade had been a goal of Pope Innocent III from his election to the papacy in 1198. However, the destruction of Constantinople that resulted from the Fourth Crusade was not at Innocent's direction and had been the goal of Venice, particularly its Doge who sought both revenge for maltreatment at the hands of Constantinople and to eliminate the competition from the Eastern Empire for Mediterranean trade.

<sup>19</sup> *Runciman (Vol. I)* pp. 135-141

<sup>20</sup> *Runciman (Vol. II)* pp. 254-255

<sup>21</sup> *Hourani*, p. 84

<sup>22</sup> *Runciman (Vol. I)* pp. 279-288

<sup>23</sup> *Runciman (Vol. II)* pp. 288, 341

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.* pp. 381-390; 399

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.* pp. 459-462

<sup>26</sup> *Runciman (Vol. III)* pp. 69-74

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.* p. 129

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.* p. 146

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.* pp. 169-170

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.* pp. 421-423

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.* p. 448

<sup>32</sup> See entry for Crusades, *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (Vol. IV) Robert Appleton Company (1908)