

# **“If I Forget You, O Jerusalem”**

## **The Truth About the Crusades**

**By Benjamin D. Wiker**

**ISSUE:** What were the Crusades?

**RESPONSE:** The Crusades were an integral part of the attempt to reform, defend, and renew the Church during the Middle Ages. The term “crusade” comes from the Latin *crucesignati*, referring to the crosses (*cruces*) of cloth sewn on crusaders’ tunics after taking their vows. The “taking of the cross” was a penitential act directed to the defense of the faith. From 1095 up until the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, numerous crusades were proclaimed against the Muslims in the Holy Land, Spain, and North Africa; against various pagan peoples threatening the northern and eastern borders of Christendom; against a variety of heretics in France, Germany, and eastern Europe; and against the enemies of the papacy in northern and southern Italy.

**DISCUSSION:** A balanced view of the Crusades entails a firm grasp of the complexities of the historical situation in which they occurred. It is certainly true that well-intentioned Christians have sometimes glossed over the regretful acts that darken the history of the Crusades. In his apostolic letter “On Preparation for the Jubilee of the Year 2000,” Pope John Paul II urged that “the Church should become more fully conscious of the sinfulness of her children” (no. 33), reminding the faithful that, however painful it may be, “[a]cknowledging the weaknesses of the past is an act of honesty and courage which helps us to strengthen our faith, which alerts us to face today’s temptations and challenges and prepares us to meet them” (*Ibid.*). Yet at the same time, one must not pretend (as many anti-Catholic historians have done) that western crusaders were simply evil aggressors out for plunder and revenge. The truth is much more complex.

### **“If I forget you, O Jerusalem...” (Psalm 137)**

Even though crusading efforts were not directed exclusively to Jerusalem, the Holy City was the core, the very heart, of the Crusades. As the ground made holy by the passion, death, and resurrection of Christ, Jerusalem was the most sacred sight of pilgrimage for Christians from the earliest centuries on.

From the time of Christ up until the conversion of Constantine in 312, Jerusalem was in pagan hands. With the emperor’s conversion, Jerusalem became a Christian city and was thereupon adorned with great shrines and churches commemorating all aspects of Christ’s final days, the most glorious edifice being the great Church of the Holy Sepulcher.

Jerusalem remained in Christian hands until 614. At that time, Zoroastrian Persians under Khosrau II invaded it. They slaughtered tens of thousands of inhabitants, and sold the survivors into slavery. In 630, the Christian Byzantine emperor Heraclius recovered Jerusalem, but Muslims took the Holy City in 638. Even though pilgrimage routes to the Holy Land remained open, Muslims controlled the most important site of Christian pilgrimage.

During the first century of the second millennium things came to a head. In 1010 the Muslim caliph al-Hakim ordered the destruction of all Christian shrines and churches. In 1071 the Muslim Seljuq Turks defeated the Christian Byzantine forces and cut off the pilgrimage routes, thus setting the stage for the declaration of the first crusade.

### **A Call for Help!**

In the Spring of 1095 an embassy from Byzantine emperor Alexius petitioned Pope Urban II for help against the invading Muslim Turks who were pressing through Asia Minor, ever-closer to Constantinople, the capital of the Byzantine empire (and the gateway from the East to the West).

Urban had every reason to come to the aid of the emperor. First of all, he hoped that the Latin West and

the Greek East could end the schism of 1054, thereby uniting all Christians under the spiritual authority of the papacy. Second, if Constantinople fell, the invading Muslims would have a straight shot into Europe. Thus, helping the East also served to protect the West. Third, recovery of the Holy Land was deemed the only way to reopen the pilgrimage routes, and settlement the only way to keep them open. Finally, Christians felt that having the holiest sites of Christianity in the hands of infidels was an affront to the faith and to Christ Himself, and consequently, that they had a religious duty to recover them.

### **Taking the Cross**

It is essential to understand that the Crusades were actually penitential pilgrimages. “Taking the cross” meant taking a vow. Integral to this penitential vow was the papal granting of indulgences for those who fulfilled the vow. The indulgence simply recognized the intense, prolonged hardships involved in the journey to the Holy Land, and the danger of battle to secure it, as satisfactory penances for confessed sins.

### **Triumph and Tragedies**

Although the first crusade did result in the triumphant recovery of Jerusalem (July 15, 1099), it manifested all the difficulties and ambiguities which would plague every crusading effort to the East thereafter. To begin with, although the popes proclaimed the crusades, they had great difficulty controlling the crusaders. One of the blackest marks on the crusades occurred at the beginning. Departing crusaders perpetrated an outbreak of violence against, and forced conversion of, Jewish communities in France and Germany. Neither the pope nor the local bishops were able to stop this misguided zeal.<sup>1</sup>

Second, the Latin West and the Greek East had been growing apart for some time, splitting formally in 1054. Christianity in the West was unified under the papacy. Christianity in the East was unified under the emperor. This division, and the distinct goals of each, contributed greatly to frustrating every crusade including the first.

The papacy wanted, above all, to reclaim the Holy Land, rebuild the shrines and churches, and reestablish and protect pilgrimages. The Greek emperor wanted, above all, to reclaim the lands lost to the Muslims. As a result, the Greeks tended to treat the Latins as disposable political mercenaries, and often broke promises of escort, aid, and provisions. Several times, the Greek emperors even united with the Muslims and attacked the Latins. The Latins, in their turn, did not see why they should return the lands they gained to the Byzantine empire when the Greeks themselves would not do the fighting, and further, positively hindered the efforts of the crusaders.

Third, the crusaders themselves were, through internal dissensions, often their own worst enemies. After the initial success of the first crusade, the Holy Land had to be settled and fortified to protect it from the continual threat of Muslim invasion. It was settled with the only system the Latins knew, the feudal system. After one generation, all the complexities and intrigues that plagued feudalism in Western Europe blossomed in the Holy Land thereby making united effort impossible.

Fourth, crusading was expensive. It is often said that the crusading ranks were filled with young, landless nobles out for land and booty in the East. While that might be true for a small number, for most the expense of crusading meant that they had to sell, borrow, and mortgage to fund their pilgrimage. Even with the near depletion of their resources, the money proved grossly insufficient. All too often, crusaders turned to pillaging in order to survive.<sup>2</sup>

Owing to all these difficulties, and innumerable others, the Christians were able to hold Jerusalem for only 88 years, until the Muslim Saladin captured it in 1187. Except for a few years in the mid 1200s, Jerusalem would remain under Islamic control for centuries to come. All other crusades to the Holy Land were either ineffective or disastrous.

### **The “Other” Crusades**

Again, the recapturing of the Holy Land was only one aspect of the general crusading effort. It was not just the Muslim occupation of the Holy Land that worried Christians. Islam had steadily conquered the area

around the Mediterranean since its inception in the early 600s, and by the second millennium it occupied all of North Africa (bringing it within easy striking distance of Italy), southern Spain, and much of Asia Minor. The Christian West felt itself caught in the pincer of an ever-encroaching Muslim advance. In this respect, the Crusades in Western Europe were strictly defensive.

Beginning in the early 1100s crusade after crusade was proclaimed for the sake of driving the Muslims out of Spain, a task that was only completed in 1492 under Ferdinand and Isabella.

In addition to the continual crusading in Spain, there were, at the same time, a series of crusades declared by the papacy against pockets of heretics in France, Germany, Bosnia, and Hungary, and against pagans all around the northern and eastern rims of Christendom.

There were also the so-called “political crusades” against the enemies of papal authority who threatened Rome from northern and southern Italy. Much has been made of these last crusades, especially insofar as the burden of the papal taxes fell upon Germany, France, and England. The friction generated by such taxation helped to kindle resentment from (especially) German princes. (And it was to the German princes that Luther would later appeal.) But generally the criticisms at the time came from enemies of the papacy. Most considered the preservation of Rome from secular control in the same way that we, today, might regard the necessity of defending the city of Washington, D. C. from foreign takeover.

The advent of the Renaissance and the Reformation in the 1500s did not end the crusading spirit. In 1517, the “birthday” of the Reformation, the pope issued a special crusade indulgence against the Ottoman Turks who had been threatening Europe since the previous century, and a crusade was preached in preparation for the great Battle of Lepanto (1571), where the Turks were finally turned back. In 1572 Pope St. Pius V addressed a crusade letter to all the faithful, but Europe was now too involved with its own inner turmoil to worry about the Holy Land. Thus, the last call to crusade fell upon deaf ears.

### Assessing the Crusades

In light of the celebration of Jubilee Year 2000, the International Theological Commission, under the guidance of Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, released *Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and the Faults of the Past*. Echoing John Paul II’s plea in *Incarnationis Mysterium*, the document calls the Church to a “purification of memory,” making explicit mention of the Crusades as ripe for historical and theological evaluation.

According to John Paul II, the purification of memory is “an act of courage and humility in recognizing the wrongs done by those who have borne or bear the name of Christian.”<sup>3</sup> We, today, share in these wrongs insofar as we too are part of the Mystical Body.

This Church, which embraces her sons and daughters of the past and of the present in a real and profound communion, is the sole Mother of Grace who takes upon herself also the weight of past faults in order to purify memory and to live the renewal of heart and life according to the will of the Lord. She is able to do this insofar as Christ Jesus, whose mystical body extended through history she is, has taken upon himself once and for all the sins of the world.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, while the holiness of the Church is maintained by the Holy Spirit, the holiness of those in the Church can fail. For these failings, we must express genuine sorrow and seek forgiveness.

As in any confession, an accurate grasp of the particulars is necessary for judging culpability. As explained in *Memory and Reconciliation*, “The determination of the wrongs of the past, for which amends are to be made, implies, first of all, a correct historical judgment, which is also the foundation of the theological evaluation” (no. 4). Furthermore, in evaluating the Crusades, we must avoid both “an apologetics that seeks to justify everything and an unwarranted laying of blame, based on historically untenable attributions of responsibility” (*Ibid.*).

With these important considerations in mind, three aspects of the Crusades seem especially worthy of

confession. Because the “relationship between Christians and Jews is one of the areas requiring a special examination of conscience,” certainly the forced conversion and the slaughter of Jews is entirely regrettable (*Ibid.*, no. 5). Likewise, even though the Greek East is not without blame, we can regret any actions on the part of the crusaders which, by scandal and violence, helped to cement “the schism between the Eastern and Western Churches” (*Ibid.*). Finally, while it is certainly true that both the desire to recover the Holy Land and the defensive crusading wars are understandable, we must confess that “the use of force in the service of truth” often led to “doubtful means...employed in the pursuit of good ends...” (*Ibid.*). In confessing our sins as members of the Mystical Body, we remember the prayer uttered by Christ Himself: “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us” (Mt. 6:12).

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<sup>1</sup> The continual frustration of the papacy is evident in Pope Innocent III’s words written after crusaders sacked Constantinople explicitly against his command. “How is the Greek Church, so afflicted and persecuted, to return to ecclesiastical union and a devotion for the Apostolic See when she sees in the Latins only an example of perdition and the works of darkness, so that with reason she already detests them more than dogs?” Innocent III, *Opera Omnia, PL*, vol. 215, col. 701. Quoted in Riley-Smith, *The Crusades: A Short History*, page 130.

<sup>2</sup> To meet the crushing expenses involved Innocent III initiated the first direct tax on the universal church in 1199, just prior to the fourth crusade. The recourse to such taxation only increased over time. In preparation for the fifth crusade Innocent extended the possibility of taking the cross to everyone, allowing that those who were unfit for crusading, could redeem their vows with money, thereby gaining the remission of punishment for sins, both in this life and the next, through papal indulgence. However good Innocent’s intentions were here, and however desperate the need for money, the abuses of this linking of money to papal indulgences helped to spark the Protestant Reformation almost exactly 300 years after Innocent’s crusading encyclical.

<sup>3</sup> *Incarnationis mysterium*, 11; *Memory and Reconciliation*, Introduction.

<sup>4</sup> *Memory and Reconciliation*, 3.2.

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