

Were the Crusades Just?

By Graham Osborne

As we approach Holy Week, the thoughts of Christians around the world invariably turn to the Holy Land – to the places where Jesus taught and walked, and was eventually crucified. But today, these places are also inextricably linked to another period of history – one shrouded in doubt and misunderstanding: the time of the Crusades.

Much has been written about the Crusades over the centuries, but often, what is claimed as “factual history” is far from it. Anti-Catholic writers such as Martin Luther, Voltaire [the French writer/philosopher of the 1700’s], and even more recent historians, have greatly misrepresented the Crusades over the years. But recent unbiased historical scholarship, coupled with the release of large historical archives from this period, has helped to better illuminate a very complicated period in Christian history.

Let's start with an overview of the Crusades – what they were, what they were not, and what prompted them.

The term, “crusade”, historically, has been used to describe various movements that developed roughly between 1000 AD to as late as 1700 A.D. For our purposes, we will confine the term to apply to military actions called for by the Catholic Church in response to Muslim aggression in historically Christian lands.

True Crusades had very clear elements. They required Papal endorsement, and participants took public, ecclesiastical vows when joining these clearly defined military expeditions, sewing red crosses to their clothing as an outward sign of this vow. The term, “crusade”, derives from this red cross [croisée in French, crux in Latin], but was actually not adopted until the 1700’s. An indulgence [the forgiveness of temporal punishment due to already forgiven sin] was also granted to all Crusaders fulfilling their vow – highly valued and desired in those days, but sadly, much less so today. Participants also received certain exemptions and privileges from the Church as well [like protection of family and property while away].

Most participants saw these missions as true religious pilgrimages to the Holy Land to aid and rescue persecuted Christians and recover stolen Christian lands, particularly the most sacred sites of Christianity.

They were not motivated by greed [the cost of participating in a Crusade was exorbitant, and they were extremely dangerous] nor an excuse to grab land as some contend today – virtually all Crusaders returned home after their pilgrimages.

Catholics in these days took their faith very seriously: no greater love than to lay down your life for another. And this was exactly what they were doing. And while there are always exceptions in any human endeavour like this, most Crusaders saw these expeditions as rescue missions to save their brothers in distress – and an opportunity to repent and make restitution for past sins.

The historical backdrop to the Crusades is perhaps the most revealing part of this story. Prior to 600 AD, North Africa, Egypt, Palestine, Syria, Asia Minor, Spain, France, Italy, and various Mediterranean islands were all Christian. But trouble begins in the early 600's, as Muslim aggression, led by its founder, Muhammad, began to sweep across the ancient world, beginning with the Arabian Peninsula.

Unfortunately, it did not stop there, but rapidly spread into other adjoining Christian lands, as Islamic conquest intensified. By 638, The Holy City of Jerusalem was captured, as Muslims flooded into the Holy Land, conquering the most sacred places in Christianity, and forcing many Christians to either convert, flee or endure heavy taxation, persecution, enslavement, and even death.

Medieval history and Crusade expert, Dr. Paul Crawford, writes that, "By A.D. 732, a century later, Christians had lost Egypt, Palestine, Syria, North Africa, Spain, most of Asia Minor, and southern France. Italy and her associated islands were under threat, and the [Mediterranean] islands would come under Muslim rule in the next century. The Christian communities of Arabia were entirely destroyed in or shortly after 633, when Jews and Christians alike were expelled from the peninsula. Those in Persia were under severe pressure. Two-thirds of the formerly Roman Christian world was now ruled by Muslims." Stunning!

This wave of aggression continued, as Islamic armies launched attacks throughout the Mediterranean and Europe, even attacking Rome in 846. In 1009, things escalated yet again, as the Egyptian Caliph [a Muslim regional leader], Al-Hakim, destroyed the Holy Sepulchre and many other Christian and Jewish sacred sites within the Holy Land. Christian persecution also intensified, including attacks on pilgrims journeying to the holy Land. Good Friday in 1065 saw the massacre of thousands of German pilgrims [some historians place this number at 12,000], just two days journey from Jerusalem.

Meanwhile, Seljuk Turks (non-Arab Muslims) were advancing into Byzantium as well, the heart of Eastern Christianity, defeating the Byzantine army at Manzikert in 1071. This put the Turks within striking distance of the great Christian city of Constantinople. Renowned Catholic historian, Hilaire Belloc, would write that this was the "the shock that launched the Crusades", though it was more likely just the last straw in some 450 years of virtually unanswered Muslim aggression.

To add insult, the once great Christian city of Nicaea [think Council of Nicaea and the Nicaean Creed] became the invaders capital. Antioch also fell in 1084, and by 1092 not one of the great Christian cities of Asia remained in Christian hands. Enter Blessed Pope Urban II.

The Pope Responds

At the Council of Clermont [1095], Urban finally made the call that had been in the mind of several popes before him: an armed pilgrimage to the lost Christian territories of the East. Citing the invasion of Christian lands, Muslim persecution of native Christians and pilgrims, and the overall threat posed to the whole Christian world [and particularly the Christian

Byzantine Empire], he claimed there was sufficient, even necessary reason to engage in a defensive war.

His sermon that day clearly outlines his intentions: “[for] both the grace of the pilgrimage and under the protection of God, to exterminate wickedness and unrestrained rage of the pagans by which innumerable Christians have already been oppressed, made captive, and killed”. Carrying on, he added encouragingly: “it ought to be a beautiful ideal for you to die for Christ in that city where Christ died for you.” He then granted an indulgence to anyone who “for devotion alone, not to gain honor or money, goes to Jerusalem to liberate the Church of God”. This would be the ideal that would guide this and all successive Crusades [historians list about eight Crusades to the eastern Christian world in total].

Just War?

But the question remains: were Christians justified in carrying out the Crusades? After all, didn't Jesus command us to love our enemies, and turn the other cheek? He who lives by the sword... And doesn't the Fifth Commandment read: "thou shalt not kill? Could there possibly be grounds for a just war based on Christian principles?

St. Augustine argued absolutely yes. And the Catechism outlines 2000 years of Christian teaching on this exact point in sections 2258-2317.

But before we examine these, ask yourself a simple question. If your child was being threatened by someone, possibly even to the point of death, would you be justified in doing whatever you had to do to defend your child, even if that meant killing the attacker? This, in very simplified form, illustrates the concept of a just war. Similarly, imagine if the world had let Hitler carry on unopposed. Where would we be now? How many innocent people would have died?

And Scripture has many examples of God sanctioning legitimate warfare, particularly against the enemies of His chosen people, the Jews. Additionally, the Fifth Commandment applies primarily to the taking of *innocent* life. And there are other places in Scripture where God commands the defense of the innocent [e.g. Exodus 23:7: Do not slay the innocent and the righteous], and allows, even decrees, the death of the guilty: “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for God made man in his own image” [Gen 9:5-8]. But some will reply that this is “Old Testament stuff”. Not a good answer, but space doesn't permit a response here.

Instead, let's consider Jesus words in Luke 21. Here, he predicts the destruction of the Jewish temple. But Scriptural context and the Old Testament passages Jesus quotes here clearly show that not only will this all come about as a just judgment of God against the Jews who have rejected him, but that it will be carried out as a military campaign –“when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies” [Luke 21:20]. God himself will allow the Roman army to carry out His just judgment against Jerusalem.

So yes, the Catholic Church does teach that there are limited conditions for a just war. Catechism section 2309 boils these down to four specific points: “the damage inflicted by the

aggressor on the nation... must be lasting, grave, and certain; all other means of putting an end to it must have been shown to be impractical or ineffective; there must be serious prospects of success; the use of arms must not produce evils and disorders graver than the evil to be eliminated". There is no question that all of these points were met with regards to the Crusades.

Additionally, in this Crusading era, there were multiple battles that almost certainly prevented the spread of Muslim domination to the whole Christian world. Too little is made of the dangers that the Muslim faith poses to both individual Christians and the Christian faith as a whole.

Jesus counsels us not to fear those who can simply kill the body. He is far more concerned about the soul. And Muslim aggression often involved forced conversion to Islam. And much Muslim teaching is both heretical and contrary to the Gospel. For example, the Muslim faith not only denies the divinity of Jesus, but denies the doctrine of the Trinity as well. These teachings are at the heart of Christianity! If a Christian were to deny these truths, or to be lead astray by Muslim teaching, he could endanger his immortal soul.

Were There Abuses?

So were the Crusades just wars. Absolutely yes. But were there abuses in the pursuit of otherwise noble intentions? Unfortunately, yes. And this is arguably where the Crusades have received such a bad reputation.

When Jerusalem was finally taken back by the Christians Crusaders in 1099, some of them went on a rampage, ignoring their commanders and killing many inside the city. Scholarly estimates range from several hundred to 10,000, but the exact number is uncertain [some inflated Muslim accounts cite numbers far greater than the actual population of the city].

Similarly, through a series of complicated monetary and political twists and turns, Crusaders of the 4th Crusade, many of them already excommunicated for attacking the Christian city of Zara, found themselves at the walls of the Byzantine Christian city of Constantinople. After being denied payment of a huge sum of money that resulted in the Crusaders failing to gain the needed funding to reach the Holy Land, and against the orders of Pope Innocent III, they stunningly and tragically attacked and sacked Constantinople. There were also sad cases of anti-Semitic Crusaders attacking European Jews, which were also condemned and resisted by the Church [for example, several Bishops hid Jews from unsanctioned Crusaders].

But whatever the extenuating circumstances [and there were many], such actions are reprehensible, and can't possibly be defended on any level. And the intention of this article is certainly not to justify or defend these abuses. But just because there were instances of Crusaders failing to act according to Christian principles, this certainly does not invalidate the Crusades themselves, or the noble intentions they were called under.