**Communication and the Crusades:**

**Achievements and Failures**

The status of the medieval papacy was conditioned by the ability of the popes to maintain fluent communication with the faithful and with their leaders in particular. In the face of the fragmentation that characterized feudalism, medieval popes were able to strengthen their leadership within the social order that they defined as *Societas Christiana*. As such, it was the Christian faith and the popes’ status as Vicars of Christ (**Matt.** xvi: 18-19; **John** xxi: 17) that justified the papacy’s existence and goals.

Papal influence went beyond rhetorical theology and paved the way for sociopolitical movements, such as the Peace of God movement and the Gregorian Reform. Both developments were closely connected and indicate a level of fluent communication that existed between the pope at the head of the Church, the clergy, and the laity in the Central Middle Ages.[[1]](#footnote-1) The Crusades were considered another example of papal leadership and an unprecedented propaganda success. As such, the Crusades are often taught in Communication Studies programs. Deeper study of the Crusades from a communication perspective leads to more sophisticated insights that can reveal a more complex perspective of the phenomenon. This article investigates two main aspects of the Crusades, namely, the success commonly attributed to the papal plans for the Crusades and the subsequent propaganda campaigns. A communication-oriented approach, further complicates our understanding of the decline of crusading in the Late Middle Ages.

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Pope Urban II launched the First Crusade at the Council of Clermont (27 November 1095), where the ideological fundamentals of the cause, its recruitment pool, and its targets were established. Unfortunately, as claimed by Joshua Prawer, it is however “a scorn of history” that the original apostolic homily was not preserved.[[2]](#footnote-2) The available historical records were produced about ten years after the Council; they reflect some of Pope Urban’s original plans as well as the successes of the First Crusade. The various surviving versions reflect some common trends that provide evidence of the original goals of the Papacy. These were the “liberation” of the Holy Land, safeguarding pilgrims on the route to Jerusalem, and protecting Eastern Christians who were suffering under the Muslim yoke. [[3]](#footnote-3) According to Robert of Rheims – who was present at the Council and wrote one of the most widely-read histories of the First Crusade[[4]](#footnote-4) – the Pope was appealing to a specific audience, in particular French knights:

*Frenchmen…men chosen by and beloved of God…it is to you that we address our sermon…Disturbing news has emerged from Jerusalem and the city of Constantinople…that the race of Persians, a foreign people and a people rejected by God…has invaded the land of those Christians…. May the deeds of your ancestors move you and spur your souls to manly courage….And most especially let the Holy Sepulcher of Our Lord the Redeemer move you – in the power as it is of four races – and the holy places now abused and sacrilegiously defiled by their filthy practices…*[[5]](#footnote-5)

Urban confirmed this trend in his letter to the faithful in Bologna (19 September 1096), while clearly establishing strict criteria for enrollment:

*But we do not allow either clerics or monks to go unless they have permission from their bishops and abbots. Bishops should also be careful not to allow their parishioners to go without the advice and foreknowledge of the clergy. You must also see to it that young married men do not rashly set out on such a long journey without the agreement of their wives*…[[6]](#footnote-6)

The papal letter is all the more relevant for being addressed to the faithful of Bologna, the site of the first university in Europe –the *alma mater studiorum –* and an important center of legal studies at the time. The pope again emphasized the military nature of the forthcoming expedition, which, consequently, excluded the clergy and other social classes from participating:

*We have heard that some of you want to set out with the knights who are making for Jerusalem…This is the right kind of sacrifice, but it is planned by the wrong kind of person. For we were stimulating the minds of knights to go on this expedition, since they might be able to retrain the savagery of the Saracens by their arms and restore the Christians to their former freedom…*[[7]](#footnote-7)

Urban’s call, however, quickly expanded beyond the boundaries of the French knighthood, and, within a few months, his plans for a *Gesta Dei per Francos* turned into an overall Holy War of Christendom. Although it is quite difficult to quantify participation in the First Crusade (1096–1099), it is clear that it involved all social strata, regardless of gender, age, occupation, or military skill.[[8]](#footnote-8) Urban’s demonization of the Muslims,[[9]](#footnote-9) and his evocation of venerated holy places transcended fragmented feudal structures and created a pan-European Christian movement for the first time in medieval history. According to Jonathan Riley Smith, the reaction, unprecedented in its scale, resulted *inter alia* from Urban’s association of the war “…with the most charismatic of all traditional penances, the pilgrimage to Jerusalem.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

Contemporary chroniclers were aware of the unprecedented response to Urban II’s call to arms and considered the speed at which it spread to the four corners of the Latin Christian world a divinely inspired miracle:

*How many of various ages and abilities and stations in life took crosses and committed themselves to pilgrimage to the Holy Sepulcher! The news of that revered council spread throughout every country, and the story of its important decision reached the ears of kings and princes. It touched a chord, and more than 300,000 decided to go on pilgrimage and took action to carry out their vow insofar as God had given them the ability…*”[[11]](#footnote-11)

Furthermore,

*When it was God’s will and pleasure to free the Holy Sepulcher…from the power of the pagans and to open the way to Christians desiring to travel there for the redemption of their souls, he showed many signs, powers, prodigies and portents to sharpen the minds of Christians so that they should want to hurry there.*[[12]](#footnote-12)

“The many signs, powers, prodigies and portents” achieved their purpose since, by the month of December, only one month after the Council of Clermont, the pope could rightly assume that “it is **widely** known… [that] we imposed on them the obligation to undertake such a military enterprise for the remission of all their sins”(emphasis mine).[[13]](#footnote-13) Urban promoted the cause of the Holy War against the Muslims in person around Angers, Tours, and Limoges.[[14]](#footnote-14) Peter the Hermit complemented papal efforts in *urbes et municipia*,[[15]](#footnote-15) turning medieval cities into a focal point for crusader preaching and recruitment.[[16]](#footnote-16)

The question, however, remains as to whether the widespread attraction of the First Crusade should be regarded as a direct result of papal propaganda alone. Noteworthy in this regard is that neither the call to a Holy War against the Muslims nor the offer of indulgences were unprecedented. On the contrary, they both were consistent with papal policy throughout the eleventh century.[[17]](#footnote-17) The popular response to Urban II’s call should therefore be regarded as the manifestation of deeply-rooted ideas, symbols, and expectations, which the papacy *tried***,** but did not always *succeed* in channeling into military enterprises against the Muslims in the Holy Land by a specifically targeted social class.[[18]](#footnote-18) Indeed, contemporary reactions to Urban’s call either at the cognitive, emotional, and/or practical levels sometimes differed from the Church’s traditional recruitment policy,[[19]](#footnote-19) as evidenced in the heterogenous makeup of the mob which thronged to join the Crusade.[[20]](#footnote-20) The systematic massacre of Jews that accompanied the People’s Crusade (1096) is the starkest expression of the disconnect between the disorganized mob roving through the “land of honey and milk” and the original papal vision for the Crusade.[[21]](#footnote-21) It furthermore ran counter to both the Augustinian principle of *testes fidei* – which advocated for the Jewish presence in Christendom – and the tolerant policy of the medieval papacy, which prohibioted anti-Jewish riots and the expulsion of Jews from Christendom.[[22]](#footnote-22) The outbreak of anti-Jewish riots during the First Crusade was not exceptional; it also characterized the first stages of the Third Crusade in England.[[23]](#footnote-23) The repeated attempts of the high clergy to defend the Jews, while putting their own lives and possessions in jeopardy, provides additional proof of the crusaders’ independent actions, which often ran contrary to the position of the Church. It further justifies an additional analysis of the papacy’ attributed success vis-à-vis the development of the Crusades in actual practice.

The gap between papal plans and the Crusades only increases when considering the popes’ pursuit of monarchical rule at the time. The Crusades, indeed, were part of attempts at strengthening apostolic leadership in eleventh-century Christendom. The meeting point between the pursuit of plenary papal power (*plenitudo potestatis)* andthe struggle against the anointed rulers of Christendom, and in parallel, the planned Christian enterprises against the Muslims crystallized already during the pontificate of Gregory VII (1073–1085). Indeed, the *servus servorum Dei* was the first pope who provided apostolic support to Eastern Christians and Byzantium, following a papacy-led military campaign against the insurgent Normans in Southern Italy. Gregory also bestowed his apostolic blessing on the *Reconquista* of Sicily and the Iberian Peninsula. In parallel, he fought for the *libertas ecclesiae*, thus beginning the Investiture Contest. As rightly claimed by Paul Chevedden, “Once the recovery of the lost lands of Christendom became a stated objective of a newly emancipated papacy, attempts to achieve this political purpose were put into effect and crusading was born.”[[24]](#footnote-24) Urban II’s call from Clermont a few years later was, therefore, consistent with Greogry’s ambitions. As claimed by Thomas Asbridge, “Urban’s genius was to construct the idea of crusading within the framework of existing practice, thus ensuring that, in eleventh century terms at least, the connection he established between warfare and salvation made clear, rational sense.”[[25]](#footnote-25) Still, Gregory VII’s failure, as opposed to Urban II’s ostensible success, was, in part, due to a shift in emphasis. Urban’s priority was the liberation of Jerusalem and the Holy Sepulcher, while the Eastern Christians and Byzantium were considered of secondary importance. The goals declared by the eleventh-century papacy in both cases were, however, manipulated in the service of the immediate interests of the Papacy. As Palmer A. Throop has convincingly claimed, the Crusades were an important tool to achieve the desired, but unattainable interaction between the Vicar of Christ, the anointed kings of Christendom, and the Holy Roman Emperor at their head.[[26]](#footnote-26) The complete lack of participation of any crowned monarchs in the First Crusade and, in parallel, Urban’s banning of the clergy from participating were both, undoubtedly, connected to the kings’ reservations concerning papal monarchical plans, on the one hand, and the indispensability of the clergy’s presence in Europe for achieving these exact goals, on the other.

The widespread support of the First Crusade does not, however, indicate popular identification with papal political goals that, for the most part, remained limited to the ongoing conflict between the *rex et sacerdos*. Rather, the widespread popular support for the First Crusade was a result of socioeconomic developments that characterized this period of the Middle Ages, first and foremost demographic growth. Indeed, the papal call for the liberation of the Holy Sepulcher coincided with an ongoing shift that involved large parts of the European population. Both goals – the liberation of the Holy Land and the pursuit of new markets for a growing population – were not contradictory but complemented each other. Together, they ensured the seeming propaganda success of the First Crusade without necessarily requiring identification with the long-term political goals of the papacy.

Nonetheless, the considerable mobilization occasioned by the call to the Crusade in eleventh-century Christendom indicates the effectiveness of contemporary communication channels by which the papal message was spread throughout Europe.[[27]](#footnote-27) The question remains, however, whether these same channels were suitable for the execution of this challenging enterprise overseas. Indeed, the Crusades necessitated the development of efficient communication channels to maintain contact with those who had departed for the Holy Land. While this was especially true for the papacy, it proved rather difficult owing to the multinational character of the crusaders:

*And whoever heard of such a mixture of languages in one army? There were present Franks, Flemings, Frisians, Gauls, Allobroges, Lotharingians, Alemanni, Bavarians, Normans, English, Scots, Aquitanians, Italians, Dacians, Apulians, Iberians, Britons, Greeks, and Armenians. If any Briton or Teuton wishes to question me, I could neither reply nor understand.*[[28]](#footnote-28)

During the Crusader period, however, a magnanimous God seems to have reversed the biblical myth of the Tower of Babel (**Gen.** XI: 1‒9), and those who departed for the Holy Land eventually came together as brothers in arms:

*Consider, I pray, and reflect how in our time God has transformed the Occident into the Orient. For we who were Occidentals have now become Orientals. He who was a Roman or a Frank has in this land been made into a Galilean, or a Palestinian […]. We have already forgotten the places of our birth […]. Words of different languages have become common property known to each nationality, and mutual faith unites those who are ignorant of their descent […]. He who was born a stranger is now as one born here; he who was born an alien has become as a native.*[[29]](#footnote-29)

Notwithstanding Fulcher’s enthusiastic, if fantastical, description, linguistic barriers did not disappear, but instead characterized much of the Crusade period. Indeed, twelfth-century chroniclers recognized the “diversity of nations, customs, and languages” apparent also among those who restored Christian rule to Lisbon on 25 October 1147.[[30]](#footnote-30)

Linguistic diversity had an effect on preaching, the principal means of disseminating propaganda at the disposal of medieval speakers. Bernard of Clairvaux, for example, preached the Second Crusade in the urban centers of France, Lothringia, Flanders, and Germany (1146–1147).[[31]](#footnote-31) Bernard, however, was able to preach only in French and Latin and yet, German listeners were as captivated by the zeal and force of the abbot’s sermons as if they had been delivered in their own vernacular. In Vézelay, Bernard’s preaching aroused such enthusiasm that he had to tear up his clothing to meet the crowd’s demand for crosses.[[32]](#footnote-32) Similarly, Archdeacon Gerard of Wales preached the Third Crusade (1188–1192) in Latin to Welsh people, who had absolutely no knowledge of the ecclesiastical language, declaring that preaching about the Crusade was less about content and more about the emotions raised in the delivery.[[33]](#footnote-33) Mass weeping and the manifestation of miracles were considered proof of success.[[34]](#footnote-34)

The widespread reception of both Bernard of Clairvaux and Gerard of Wales makes it clear that, beyond linguistic skills, body language and mass suggestion played crucial roles in enlisting medieval audiences in the Holy War against the infidel.[[35]](#footnote-35) Indeed, the need to enter into a dialogue with their contemporaries and elicit from them an immediate, active response – i.e., not only taking the crusader vow but also departing for abroad – saw the preachers making use of a variety of techniques to arouse visceral reactions amount the faithful, such as loud shouting, songs (mostly in the vernacular), bells, processions, public prayers, ornaments, and gestures.[[36]](#footnote-36)

Beyond the many communication challenges within Europe itself, the Crusades imposed further challenges in the form of long, treacherous distances between Europe and the crusader destinations in the east. The slowness of transmission between the two shores of the Mediterranean critically affected communication and its effectiveness. An example from the Second Crusade highlights how long it took news of events in the east to reach the European heartland: according to Bishop William of Tyre, “when the city of Edessa was captured [at the hands of ‘Imad al-Din Zengi, ruler of Mosul and Aleppo, on 25 December 1144] the news of the ominous disaster was carried by rumor[[37]](#footnote-37) throughout the entire west.”[[38]](#footnote-38) However, messengers from Antioch formally delivered the distressing news to the pope almost one year later. Eugenius III reacted immediately, issuing bulls calling for the Second Crusade dated 1 December 1145.[[39]](#footnote-39) The pope repeated his call for a new Crusade three months later, probably because the original letters were lost and did not reach their destinations. Carried by monastic messengers, the successive epistles safely arrived in England, Denmark, Tournai, the Low Countries, Flanders, and Lisieux relatively quickly after their publication. Eugene III also wrote about his Crusade project to Emperor Manuel, who replied in August 1146 and again in March 1147.[[40]](#footnote-40) Still, the Christian armies only left Europe by April 1147, almost eighteen months after the papal call and two and a half years after the fall of Edessa.[[41]](#footnote-41)

The considerable delay in communication transmission appears to be the rule rather than the exemption. The news of Emperor Henry V’s death and his succession by Lothar only reached Jerusalem by means of pilgrims almost one year after the events, on 11 April 1126, Easter day.[[42]](#footnote-42) Similarly, the news of Frederick I’s death in Asia Minor (10 June 1190) only reached Germany four months later.[[43]](#footnote-43)

While the average crusader could cope with the lack of information, the leaders required up-to-date reports and, crucially, the delivery of supplies. However, the West was usually slow to respond, if they responded at all, to the urgent needs of the Latin Empire in the East, neutralizing the already fragile cohesion between the two shores of the Mediterranean.[[44]](#footnote-44) The long delays in communication further justified, even dictated, independent policies, since it was impossible to rely on timely orders and, even less so, on resupplies, from Christendom. A communication perspective thus calls for a reconsideration of the colonial relationship often considered to prevail between the West and the crusader state in the form of the Latin Empire, whose rulers had no choice but to act, and more often to react, independently.[[45]](#footnote-45)

The continuous use of traditional communication channels, on the other hand, hints at a conservative approach that were hardly adequate to meet the novel needs and the many challenges faced by the Christians in their new settlements *outremer*. Regular mail services, like those operating in the neighboring Muslim states and Byzantium, moreover, remained completely alien to the crusaders’ world.[[46]](#footnote-46) In the light of the absence of new communication channels, available letters may hint at the timeframes involved in communicating between the Latin East and Christendom. Patriarch Daibert of Jerusalem, for example, referred in early February 1100 a letter from Henry of Castella and John Michael written to his predecessor approximately three months earlier, in November 1099.[[47]](#footnote-47) News of the Templar Master Gerard of Ridefort’s death on 8 October 1189 reached Rome by 11 January 1190.[[48]](#footnote-48) Similarly, the Temple preceptor’s report on the losses at Hattin (3–4 July 1187) inspired Gregory VIII’s encyclical *Audita tremendi*,dated 24 October 1187,and a lost letter of Clement III the following year.[[49]](#footnote-49) It is therefore reasonable to conclude that letter exchange across the Mediterranean took at between two and three months at least. Sometimes, however, the delay was much longer. For example, a letter bearing the seal of Patriarch Evremar of Jerusalem dated 3 April 1104 took until 17 November of the same year to reach Lambert, Bishop of Arras.[[50]](#footnote-50) Pope Alexander III urged the prelates and Christian rulers to help the Templars on 22 February and, again, on 12 April 1180, following their request dated 29 August 1179 –between six and eight months earlier.[[51]](#footnote-51) King Louis VII referred to the Bishop of Nablus’ appeal for contributions from earlier that year in his letter dated 28 August 1170. Hostile conditions, the danger that letters might be stolen, and frequent accidents along the route, led to the parallel use of multiple messengers despite the possibility of repetition.Prior Guido of La Grande Chartreuse, in his letter to Master Hugh of the Temple (c. 1129), specifically mentions that he is sending copies of the same letter by two separate messengers.[[52]](#footnote-52) Similarly, Stephen of Blois referred to the possibility of repetition in his moving letter to his wife Adele.[[53]](#footnote-53) Worse still, writers and recipients were aware of the disturbing possibility that their messages might be falsified.[[54]](#footnote-54)

Although letter exchange across short distances – e.g., between Byzantium, Antioch, Jerusalem, and Acre – was relatively efficient, it could still fail in the crossing of the Mediterranean.[[55]](#footnote-55) The maritime journey between Christendom and the Latin East was relatively short – from fifteen to twenty-five days with favorable winds – but only during specific seasons, from late March to late October.[[56]](#footnote-56) Climatic conditions therefore posed additional difficulties, leading to an inflexible schedule of missions and messengers,[[57]](#footnote-57) hindering the flow of communication between the Latin East and Europe. Although the crusaders embraced the Muslim practice of using carrier pigeons,[[58]](#footnote-58) these avian messengers could hardly be expected to cross the Mediterranean.

Considering the precarious geopolitical conditions, there is a considerable quantity of surviving testimonies of the many perils experienced on the route eastwards and, eventually, for the lucky ones, travelers’ joy upon safely arriving at the Holy Land.[[59]](#footnote-59) These feelings of relief were not simply rhetorical, since divine help or the forces of nature did not always favor the crusaders*.* Communication problems thus became a constant concern for the population *outremer*, especially the leaders. In his letter to Archbishop Henry of Reims, King Amalric refers to his continuous attempts to send a suitable delegation to Christendom (May 1169). After the ship carrying the first delegation sank, the king had to appoint a new suitable delegation. Archbishop Tyre, Bishop Banias, and Hospitaller Knights thus replaced the members of the first mission, namely, the Patriarch of Jerusalem, the Archbishop of Caesarea, the Bishop of Acre, as well as Hospitallers and Templars.[[60]](#footnote-60) The high dignitaries selected for both missions, are evidence of the king’s desire to entrust the task to the most reliable messengers possible and to his his reluctance to rely on written messages, which could be intercepted and falsified.

The careful selection of messengers thus reflects a most important feature in message transmission between the Latin East and Christendom, mainly, the combination of written and oral channels. Along with their original duty as couriers, messengers orally transmitted pieces or even large amounts of information.[[61]](#footnote-61) In his letter to the Catholic prelates and laymen in the German region (May or June 1100), Patriarch Daibert of Jerusalem formally declared that:

*… we would have written at length on the amazingly great miracles and countless blessings which the generous goodness of God frequently showered on the army of Jerusalem on its journey and in the capture of the holy city of Jerusalem, but the practiced eloquence of brother Arnulf, who was there to see and hear everything, will provide you with a full chronological account of events if you are kind enough to lend him an ear.*[[62]](#footnote-62)

Arnulf of Chocques was undoubtedly well-qualified to fulfil his mission, being the former chaplain of Robert of Normandy, papal legate in the First Crusade, elected Patriarch of Jerusalem (1099, 1112–1115, 1116–1118), and eventually, also Archdeacon (1099–1112) and Chancellor of the Kingdom (1099–1118).[[63]](#footnote-63)

From a statistical perspective, available correspondence reflects the recurrent military-political crises in the Holy Land. Not surprisingly, they encouraged dramatic appeals to the pope and other leaders of Christendom, especially to the kings of France. The King of Jerusalem, the Masters of the Military Orders, and some members of the high clergy wrote fifteen letters to King Louis VII starting in April 1163, appealing for the *Gesta Dei per Francos,* and more specifically, for the personal involvement of the Most Christian King.[[64]](#footnote-64) The number of addressees increased when the critical situations requiring decisive solutions were needed, such as Saladin’s progress in the Latin East. The Grand Commander and the Preceptor of the Temple wrote a series of letters (July–August 1187 to January 1188) to Pope Urban III, Philip II of France, Henry II of England, Philip of Alsace, and the Western knights describing the traumatic defeat at the Battle of Hattin[[65]](#footnote-65) and the resulting execution of 230 Templars.[[66]](#footnote-66) The deteriorating situation *outremer* found was vividly expressed in a letter from Conrad of Montferrat – ruler of the Kingdom of Jerusalem as consort to Queen Isabella I – to Baldwin, Archbishop of Canterbury, two years after Hattin (1189):

*The holy city of Jerusalem, despoiled of its worshippers, is to be mourned and lamented. As a consequence of their sins, its inhabitants have been placed under tribute to Saladin, and, having paid the capitation tax, are driven far from the kingdom. The walls of Jerusalem are bereft of their hermit occupants. God has stood back as if from the defilement of our evil, and Mohammed has taken over; where Christ was prayed to day and night at the appointed hours, now Mohammed is praised with uplifted voice.*[[67]](#footnote-67)

Unfortunately, letters of this kind did not result in the hoped-for assistance in terms of manpower and supplies. On the contrary, a growing sense of frustration and disillusionment characterized prevailing attitudes to the Holy Land the thirteenth century. The promise of “a land flowing with milk and honey” (**Ex.** III: 8) was gradually being replaced by the ominous Biblical warning of “a land that eateth up the inhabitants thereof” (**Num.** XIII: 32).

These sorts of “emergency pleas” accompanied the advance of the Mongol hordes in the following century, too.[[68]](#footnote-68) The Master of the Temple wrote to the Order officials about the Mongol advance and the fall of Aleppo and Damascus, which brought about a large number of refugees (4 March 1260).[[69]](#footnote-69) Thomas also complained about the distressing incidents of letters being stolen, a crime rather common in the Levant.[[70]](#footnote-70) In the light of the critical situation and the many dangers on the route eastwards, the papal legate and the Bishop of Belen advised pious women to convert their Crusade vows into financial contributions, instead of departing on pilgrimages to the Holy Land.[[71]](#footnote-71)

The crusaders’ repeated calls for assistanceusually encountered a positive response from the Apostolic See.[[72]](#footnote-72) It would be rather redundant here to detail the continuous efforts on the part of the popes to provide assistance and their abortive attempts to bring about the mobilization of the Western rulers. Pope Gregory X, for example, a former crusader himself, sent the Archbishop of Corinth to Philip III of France asking the king to strengthen his support of the crusaders (4 March 1272).He used the occasion to also inform the high dignitaries of the Military Orders about his diplomatic efforts.[[73]](#footnote-73) Papal policy, however, did not reflect the hesitant attitude of most Christian princes, whose support for the Crusade tended to be conditioned by their own immediate political interests.[[74]](#footnote-74) In most cases, especially in France and England, the crusader vow was used just as a means to replenish royal coffers and, as such, were a vital factor in the renewal of the Crusades.[[75]](#footnote-75)

The growing indifference toward the Holy Land throughout the thirteenth century had multiple causes, some successfully encapsulated by Guillaume Lagarde in the title of his book, *The emergence of the lay spirit in the Late Middle Ages*(translation mine)*.*[[76]](#footnote-76)The processes of laicization and secularization embraced all fields of life and left their mark on prevailing attitudes to the Crusades. [[77]](#footnote-77) It is true that the diversity and heterogeneity of the crusader armies could be regarded as “a byproduct of a changing world…ever evolving historical reality.”[[78]](#footnote-78) They further embodied more realistic attitudes toward the Holy Land – which included a better knowledge of the Levant and the Muslims – instead of the mythical beliefs of former generations.

This process of change resulted in a gradual split from the original papal plans for the Crusade, if not their total abandonment. Venice’s conquest of Constantinople during the Fourth Crusade (13 April 1204) and the Children’s Crusades (1212),[[79]](#footnote-79) both exemplify not only the polarity of the Crusades but also the relegation of papal leadership to a, at the very most, marginal position. Although the *realpolitik* of Venice fighting for economic markets was in open contrast to the mythical approach of the youth, neither movement reached the Holy Land or received apostolic approval. Nonetheless, the Holy See did sometimes enjoy the consequences, like following the emergence of the Latin Empire (1204–1265) in the Fourth Crusade, that seemingly ended the painful schism. In the long term, however, Venetian achievements were only provisional and brought about the deterioration of the already problematic relationship with Byzantium and the much-desired alliance with the Eastern Christians.

Deviation from Urban II’s original goals, however, was not the monopoly of the laity. It actually permeated the policy of the papacy that, throughout the thirteenth century, turned the Crusade into an effective tool to be used against political adversaries and so-called heretical movements.[[80]](#footnote-80) Although *realpolitik* was characteristic of the Italian city-states, the policy of the Vicar of Christ was not met with much approval and strengthened the criticism of the Crusades, the papacy, and other relevant ecclesiastical sectors. The growing criticism justify a revision of the meaning of the Crusades toward the Late Middle Ages.

Jonathan Riley-Smith defined the Crusades as a Holy War proclaimed by the pope in the name of God; as such, it was Christ’s own enterprise, legitimized by His mandate.[[81]](#footnote-81) Although this definition does not restrict the Crusade to any enterprise in the Holy Land and against the Infidel, the First Crusade did create these links in actual practice. Furthermore, the Christian victories on the battlefield were perceived as irrefutable proof of Christ’s blessing of the Christian enterprise abroad:

*…each faithful soul had no leadership but that of God alone, while he saw himself as God’s companion-at-arms and did not doubt that God went before him, by whose will and inspiration he had started out and with whom he would rejoice as his consolation when he was in difficulties*.[[82]](#footnote-82)

Rather predictably, the later repeated reversals of the Christians’ fortunes on the battlefield, brought about the opposite, while sowing the first seeds of doubt. The main advocate of the Second Crusade, Bernard of Clairvaux, voiced his frustrations at the crusaders’ defeats to Pope Eugene III, expressing his own strong feelings of *mea culpa*:

*[F]ear and sorrow and confusion are in the inner chambers of their kings... we have promised good things and you see there is disorder, so that it looks as though we have gone into this business rashly without stopping to think…. But perhaps our contemporaries say, ‘How can we know that what you say is truly inspired by the Lord? What proof can you give us to make us believe in you?’ I have no answer to their questions; they must spare my embarrassment….*[[83]](#footnote-83)

The confusion and mortification alluded to by St. Bernard resulted from the disappointing results of the Second Crusade, the undertaking about which the Cistercian monk had so vehemently preached by a few years earlier. The frequent defeats in the Levant further stimulated doubts and even suspicions, about whether the Crusades were indeed inspired by an almighty God or by the greed and ambitions of human beings, the Vicar of Christ at their head. The crusaders’ failure to recover Edessa prompted a process of dissociation in the minds of the faithful between God’s hidden designs and those voiced by His vicar, who was not considered immune to error and miscalculation.[[84]](#footnote-84)

The continuous failure to defend and maintain the achievements of the First Crusade raised difficult questions for the faithful. Why would Christ withhold victory from the Christian armies and, instead, favor the Infidel, whose terrible crimes were by then well-known. The most common ecclesiastical response of *peccatis nostris exigentibus* (required by our own sins), transferred the guilt from the pope, the sponsor of the Crusades, to his sinful flock, especially *outremer*. But this trend, traditional as it was, did not receive much support. As well-expressed shortly after the fall of Arsuf at the hands of Sultan Baybars at late March1265 by the Templar knight Ricaut Bonomel:

*Anger and grief are entrenched in my heart*

*So that I am almost ready to kill myself*

*Or abandon the cross that I had taken*

*In honor of the One who was put on the cross;*

*For neither cross nor faith bring me succor or protection*

*Against those felon Turks, God curse them!*

*On the contrary, from what one can see,*

*God wants to support them to our detriment….*

*So, he is really mad who wages war against the Turks*

*Since Jesus Christ does not oppose them;*

*…And every day they defeat us here,*

*Since God, who used to be vigilant, is asleep,*

*Mohamed is operating with all his might,*

*…For here the Turks have dominated us,*

*Captured, defeated and sold us for cash.* [[85]](#footnote-85)

The balance of power between Jesus and Mohamed thus gradually shifted in favor of the latter. Considering the constant defeats, moreover, the Muslims’ mockery of the many weaknesses and lack of initiative of the Christian God – “Who … is asleep” – turned into irrefutable truth. Austore d'Aurillac, a poet from Southern France, did not hesitate to criticize the designs of Providence, which seemed to have allowed, if not favored Louis IX’s defeats in Egypt (Battle of Faraskur, 6 April 1250).[[86]](#footnote-86) Austore even went a step further and hinted at the possibility that some of the faithful would embrace Mohammed and Islam in light of this outrageous injustice.[[87]](#footnote-87) Contemporary chroniclers also referred to the widespread disappointment with King Louis IX’s Crusades, while casting the zealous struggle of the papacy against Emperor Frederick II in Europe as the main cause of Christian defeats overseas.[[88]](#footnote-88) At a time when the “Holy War” flourished on the continent at the service of papal interests rather than in the Holy Land against the Muslims, Guillem Fabre, a citizen from Narbonne, could therefore conclude:

*He who is our head, placed to govern our faith, merits even greater blame. In fact, although the greater part of the known world obeys him, he did not command a crusade against the perfidious wretches who hold the Holy Land before the present discord occurred and before the world became bad; for [if he had done this] I believe that all the great who maintain hatred would now be there [in the Holy Land] doing good*.[[89]](#footnote-89)

The deteriorating situation overseas appears over and again in thirteenth-century reports. Humbert of Romans, the Minister-General of the Dominican Order, a high office in the ecclesiastical hierarchy, was aware of his contemporaries’ reservations not only about the papal policy but also about the Crusades in general:

*…are asking what is the use of this attack upon the Saracens? For they are not roused to conversion by it, but rather are provoked against the Christian faith. When we are victorious and have killed them, moreover, we send them to hell, which seems to be against the law of charity. Also when we gain their lands we do not occupy them as colonists, because our countrymen do not want to stay in these regions, and so there seems to be no spiritual, corporeal, or temporal benefits from this sort of fighting*.[[90]](#footnote-90)

Other contemporaneous sources also emphasized the inherent contradiction between the blood-letting of the Crusades and Christ’s pursuit of peace.[[91]](#footnote-91) Dante Alighieri could therefore sarcastically refer to “the Holy Land, which seems to have slipped from the pope’s memory,” notwithstanding the continuous, but still abortive, efforts on the part of the papacy to renew the Crusades after the fall of Acre. [[92]](#footnote-92)

The papacy was well aware of the growing criticism and tried to neutralize it with the same argumentation that had served Urban II’s purposes so well at Clermont. Pope Innocent III exemplified this trend at the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) when trying to enlist Christendom to the Fifth Crusade:

*Because at this time there is a more compelling urgency than there has ever been before to help the Holy Land in her great need…For it was entirely in the power of almighty God, if he had so wished, to prevent that land from being handed over into hostile hands…since nothing can resist His will. He has granted them an opportunity to win salvation, nay more, a means of salvation so that those who fight faithfully for him will be crowned in happiness by him, but those who refuse to pay him the servant’s service that then owe him in a crisis of such great urgency will justly deserve to suffer a sentence of damnation on the Last Day of severe judgment…So rouse yourselves, most beloved sons, transforming your quarrels and rivalries, brother against brother, into associations of peace and affection; gird yourself for the service of the Crucified, not hesitating to risk your possessions and your persons for Him…*[[93]](#footnote-93)

Although expressed in the feudal vocabulary needed to facilitate its reception, papal exhortations failed once and again to arouse enthusiasm. The growing criticism was targeted against other ecclesiastical institutions too, such as the Military Orders, the very existence of which was identified with the heroic defense of the Holy Land. The same knights who, only a century earlier had been regarded as *milites Christi,* ready to sacrifice their lives and possessions in the Holy War against the Infidel, [[94]](#footnote-94) by the mid-thirteenth century had come to be associated with pride and avarice.[[95]](#footnote-95)

The deterioration of relations with Byzantium and the Eastern Christians, the papacy’s inability to reinvigorate the crusader spirit and, ultimately, the fall of Acre on 28 May 1291, reflect the collapse of papal plans for the Crusades. It is rather doubtful if the many projects *De recuperatione Terrae Sanctae –* which did not materialize – could balance the decline of papal leadership.[[96]](#footnote-96) As claimed by Palmer Throop, “as long as the pope could organize public opinion in the interest of the Holy Land, his power was superior to that of temporal rulers.” [[97]](#footnote-97) Hence, there is a clear link between the decline of the Crusades and the regression of the medieval papacy up until the papal exile in Avignon.

To conclude, the success or failure of the Crusades was concomitant with the papacy’s ability to be receptive to its contemporaries’ needs in time and space. As time went by, however, the papacy failed to adapt its message and goals to a changing world. The Holy War of a united Christendom did not suit the needs of the thirteenth century with its emerging territorial states and process of secularization. The papacy further failed to adapt its traditional communication channels to need the needs of its Latin outposts across the Mediterranean whose very existence relied on Christendom. The failure came on two fronts: first and foremost, in the form of a European audiences who were no longer receptive to the papal call to defend the Holy Land and, second, the almost complete lack of initiatives that could have facilitated fluent communications across the Mediterranean necessary to bring desperately needed assistance to the crusaders. One may therefore conclude that the Crusades were not just a propaganda fiasco but in the long term, perhaps, also a communication blackout.

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