CHAPTER FIVE

THE POPES AND THE BALTIC CRUSADES:
CONCLUSIONS AND REFLECTIONS

The papal policy on the Baltic crusades from Pope Eugenius III’s proclamation of a crusade against the pagan Slavs in 1147 to the end of Pope Innocent IV’s pontificate in 1254 was not a gradually evolving one. The first half of this period saw great discontinuity with the papal policy varying considerably from pope to pope, as some of Eugenius’s successors did not regard these campaigns as equal to the crusades in aid of the Holy Land. From Pope Honorius III’s pontificate onwards, however, the papal line was consistent and the Baltic campaigns were recognized as being on a par with the crusades undertaken in the East.

The crusades in the Baltic came into being with Eugenius III’s call for the crusade against the pagan Slavs as part of the Second Crusade. In the next decades, however, the papacy did nothing to follow up this new venture. There were no attempts to resurrect the fight against the pagans or to expand the Christian faith under papal leadership, and there was no change of the view held hitherto in the curia that mission was the purview of local archbishops, bishops and princes. This may partly have been because the curia was usually passive, but it was also because more important matters dominated its agenda: after the failure of the Second Crusade the situation in the Holy Land worsened, and crusading morale in the West was low.

The proclamation of a crusade against the pagan Slavs had come about at the initiative of German magnates who had persuaded Bernard of Clairvaux, when he arrived in Frankfurt in the early spring of 1147 to preach the crusade in aid of the Holy Land, to allow them to serve the Church in the Baltic rather than in the East. The extension of the crusade concept was thereby instigated by laymen, but mediated by the pope’s adviser and former teacher. Warfare against the pagan neighbours was not a new phenomenon, but with the papal authorization of such campaigns and their transformation into a crusade the magnates now received spiritual rewards for their undertakings and realized ideas about meritorious warfare
against pagans long in existence in the region. They did not, however, take any more initiatives of this sort. We do not know of any princely attempts at lobbying the curia for new crusades. This may reflect the princes' lack of experience in dealing and negotiating with the papacy. Although there was a growing recognition of papal authority, the involvement of the curia in the warfare against the pagans would have been a break with tradition and the way in which the northern princes had hitherto perceived and organized their wars against their neighbours. After all, the sequence of events which in 1147 had led to the proclamation of a crusade against the pagans had not demanded much forward planning from the laymen: they were handed the opportunity to meet Bernard to discuss warfare in the service of the Church at a meeting they had not instigated.

The next attempts to obtain papal authorization for campaigns in the Baltic came from within the Church, from archbishops and bishops who were used to operating within the ecclesiastical hierarchy and found it natural to appeal to its head. Around 1170 the Danish archbishop petitioned Pope Alexander III for support for a planned mission in the eastern Baltic region and two decades later the new Livonian missionary bishop, working under the auspices of the archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen, approached the curia for papal backing. Only in the early thirteenth century did princes approach the curia and I have suggested that the Danish king's strategy originated with and was orchestrated by the Danish Archbishop Anders Sunesen, who knew the curial procedures well and worked actively to strengthen the links between the curia and Denmark. He also appears to have been influenced by the crusading ideology which had developed with respect to the Holy Land. Soon Swedish, Polish and Pomeranian princes followed suit.

The papal response to these petitions varied greatly. Alexander III did not follow the precedent set by Eugenius III, who had granted the crusades in the Baltic the same status as that of crusades to the Holy Land and had rewarded participants with a full crusade indulgence. Instead, Alexander gave the participants only a partial indulgence and made no attempt to involve the curia in the campaign's organization or to secure its success by setting up measures for recruitment and financing. In effect he created a hierarchy of penitential warfare in the service of the Church in which campaigns in the Baltic, and in Spain, were given less priority and hence less backing in the form of privileges than crusades in aid of the Holy Land.