The Medieval Papacy, Crusading, and Heresy, 1095–1291

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15.1 Introduction

From the 11th century, popes authorized crusades against Muslims in the Near East and from the 13th century against heretics. Contemporary chroniclers, annalists, canon lawyers, and preachers leave us in no doubt that during the High Middle Ages the papacy’s authorization of such crusades had a profound effect on Christians: religiously, socially, and politically. From Urban II’s call for the First Crusade at Clermont in 1095 to the fall of Acre in 1291, they not only changed the politics of the Near East and Europe, but helped to mould and foster European Christian society. Some crusades were large, elaborately organized affairs employing vast numbers of professional soldiers. Others were small – no more than scattered bands of men known as pilgrims or *crucesignati*, those “signed with the Cross” who answered the papal call.1

15.2 The Papacy and Crusades to the Near East

The impetus for the First Crusade began in 1095 at the Council of Clermont when Pope Urban II (1088–1099) preached a sermon calling for an armed pilgrimage to the Near East to support Byzantine Christians against the Seljuk Turks and liberate the Holy Land, particularly Jerusalem. His preaching at Clermont brought together ideas of pilgrimage and holy war that would form the theological and ideological basis for future crusading.2

We have a number of contemporary sources that recorded his speech and we know from these that Urban journeyed through France with a large Italian entourage.3 One in a long line of 11th-century reforming popes, Urban saw it as

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a principal duty of his pontificate to reform the French church and was at pains to stop en route in order to dedicate cathedrals, churches, and altars, and to preside over ecclesiastical councils before preaching his first public crusade sermon at the Council of Clermont. This was a carefully stage-managed event in which the crowd responded fervently to a sermon by the bishop and papal legate Adhémar de Monteil and monks were on hand to act as recruiting agents.

When Urban II preached this sermon at Clermont, he not only encouraged Christians to take part in the First Crusade but set in motion the machinery to propagandize the expedition. According to contemporary sources, he instructed bishops and other clerics present to preach the crusade when they returned to their dioceses and parishes and cautioned them to be selective in their recruitment. Urban's speech was aimed primarily at able-bodied males, particularly the knightly classes with military experience and sufficient means to pay their own expenses for the crusade's duration.

Urban's speech at Clermont was skilfully crafted, marrying together ideas of pilgrimage and of knightly service for Christ. It not only inspired his contemporaries but was highly influential on later crusading since it served as an exemplum for the propaganda devices employed by subsequent crusade preachers. There is a substantial amount of agreement among medieval writers about the topics Urban covered. Responding to an appeal for assistance from the Byzantine emperor Alexius Comnenus, Urban strongly stressed the need for Western Christians to aid their beleaguered Greek Orthodox brothers in the Near East, appealing to their sensibilities with graphic accounts of Turkish victories over Eastern Christians and the sufferings of those under Turkish rule. He emphasized the desecration and destruction of Christian places of pilgrimage, in particular the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, and the fact that ancient pilgrimage routes were no longer safe for Christian travellers. He preached that God wished them to avenge the injury done to the places of Christ's life and Passion. In particular he stressed that those who fought against the infidel for such a righteous cause would be rewarded by God. These topoi, emphasizing the defense of Christian territory and the certainty of eternal reward for military action, were to become staple themes used by preachers to sell the idea of crusading throughout the High Middle Ages.

In calling for aid for Eastern Christians and the recovery of the Holy Sepulchre, Urban hoped to achieve the shorter-term goal of freeing the holy places for Christian pilgrims and the longer-term goal of uniting Greek and

5 Riley-Smith, *The First Crusaders*, 58.