

The First Crusade

A Stepping Stone of Centralization

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Abstract

In the midst of struggles between the Church and noble lords over the political and spiritual wellbeing of Western Europe, Pope Urban II preached the First Crusade to install an essential foundation that allowed papal authority to gradually expand beyond the walls of Rome. Taking advantage of events external to Western Europe, as well as the existing religious and political framework, he successfully harnessed vast measures of military force and believers, allowing him to help establish, for the first time, spiritual and political control over the Church and its flock. Based on works of Thomas Asbridge and Thomas Madden, as well as a variety of accounts of Urban's speech at Clermont, this paper describes Urban's methodology for successfully preaching and launching the First Crusade within the context of the power struggles between the papacy and Christendom's kings. Building upon the crucial reforms of Pope Gregory VII, Urban's methodology included masterfully integrating crusading ideology into existing societal systems, using feudal familiarities to connect with members of the ruling class, as well as with lesser members of society. At the core of these teachings was a powerful principle that linked righteous warfare to obtaining salvation. Such a pursuit appealed to the knightly class, which centered largely on warfare and violence. Describing the development of the First Crusade illustrates the genius of Urban to act, thereby placing a critical stepping-stone that critically shifted the balance of centralized power to the Church's side of the scale, a shift that gradually continued over the next several centuries and resulted in the Church's dominant position in the Christian world.



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In the midst of struggles between the Church and noble lords over the political and spiritual wellbeing of Western Europe, Pope Urban II preached the First Crusade as a means to centralize the Church's spiritual and political power over European society. Taking advantage of events external to Western Europe, as well as the existing religious and political framework, he successfully harnessed vast measures of military force and believers, allowing him to help establish, for the first time, spiritual and political control over the Church and its flock. This paper will describe Urban's approach for successfully preaching and launching the First Crusade within the context of the power struggles between the papacy and Christendom's kings, an approach that frequently used spiritual rhetoric to validate political and military action. This approach illustrates the genius of Urban to act, thereby centralizing and increasing the Church's authority for generations to come.

For almost one hundred years prior to the launching of the First Crusade, Europe was undergoing gradual political recentralization as both the Church and kings sought to extend their influence. The Cluny Reform movement, which commenced largely during the 10th Century, coupled with the Gregorian Reforms of the 11th Century, had serious ramifications in church administration over the peoples of Europe. Initially, these reforms intended to better educate monks living in monasteries by teaching celibacy, poverty, and discipline, thereby upholding a stricter monastic hierarchy. However, as the Church asserted itself as the sole spiritual authority over the people, many of these reforms extended beyond monastic communities to the rest of the Church's flock, particularly to surrounding lords and nobles.¹

This shift marked the transition of the monastic Cluny Reforms to reforms headed by the popes themselves. Pope Gregory VII, a former Cluny monk, was a critical figure in converting Cluny Reforms to the entire Church hierarchy, a process that substantiated the Gregorian Reform movement. Gregory expanded two reforms, in particular, that contributed directly to conflict between the Church and kings as each competed for influence and authority. The first forbade the practice of simony, or buying positions in the church, in an effort to keep the power of church appointment within the papacy's control. The second prohibited consanguinity, or marriage between close relatives. The implementation process lasted several centuries, ending about 1300,

¹ Peter von Sivers, History 4420-001: The Crusades, lecture notes, 1-15-2013.

before the Church was able to meaningfully enforce these laws.² The Pope desired successful enforcement because successful enforcement promised stronger, more direct control over spiritual, and often political, affairs. However, efforts to extend control over others were not exclusive to the papacy.

Unfortunately for the Pope, obediently submitting themselves to every canonical reform was not in the interest of Europe's kings, many of whom were trying to centralize and reclaim power from vassal lords within their own kingdoms. It was in the kings' direct interest to marry close relatives, namely first cousins, to keep wealth, land, and power within the family. Buying church offices and staffing them with clergy comprised of family members was another common practice that not only broadened the royal family's influence within the kingdom, but also provided a valuable source of revenue through the collection of tithes and offerings. Relinquishing these valuable methods of influence was not in the interest of the kings, a factor that fueled struggles for power with the Church.³ Competing for control over the peoples of Western Europe inevitably resulted in extended clashing between the papacy and Europe's kings. Because of these conflicts, relations between Popes and kings were certainly less than amiable, especially when a Pope threatened kings with excommunication for incompliance with canon law.⁴

Pope Urban II, Gregory VII's successor, was at the forefront of this battle between kings and the Church. The crusade chronicler Fulcher of Chartres characterized him as "a man distinguished in life and character"⁵ who enthusiastically worked to increase the Church's standing.⁶ Fulcher also tells us how deeply disturbed Urban was because of Christianity's declining faith, as well as the ceaseless warfare, pillaging, and squabbling between the various European powers.⁷ Indeed, the spiritual and secular authorities continued to battle and "by 1095...the papacy's notional right to act as head of the Latin Church and spiritual overlord to every Christian in Western Europe was still far from realized."⁸ It was in this

² von Sivers, Lecture, 1-15-2013.

³ von Sivers, Lecture, 1-15-2013.

⁴ von Sivers, Lecture, 1-15-2013.

⁵ Fulcher of Chartres, *Chronicle of the First Crusade*, trans. Martha Evelyn McGinty (London: Humphrey Milford, 1941), 11.

⁶ Fulcher, *Chronicle of the First Crusade*, 11.

⁷ Fulcher, *Chronicle of the First Crusade*, 11.

⁸ Thomas Asbridge, *The Crusades: The Authoritative History of the War for the Holy Land* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), 34.

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year that Pope Urban II recognized a unique opportunity to assume his role as the supreme figure in Western Europe and repair the damaged state of his flock.

“Moved by long suffering compassion and by love of God’s will,”⁹ Pope Urban II travelled to Clermont France in November of 1095 to hold a massive council. Although various accounts of his proclamation exist, Urban’s message was clear. At this time he called upon the ruling class, rather than upon the kings, to join in an unprecedented march to the East to fulfill a number of objectives.¹⁰ Primarily, Urban proclaimed to the knights that “you must help your brothers living in the Orient, who need your aid for which they have already cried out many times.”¹¹ Urban was referring to the Byzantine Emperor Alexius I Comnenus’ appeal to the Latin Church earlier in the year for aid in fighting against the Muslims. An expedition to aid the Byzantines offered a chance to defend eastern Christendom from an impending Muslim invasion, improve relations with the Greek Church, and most importantly, reassert and expand Rome’s authority by harnessing the mighty military forces of Western Europe.¹² However, Urban designed this revolutionary venture to extend beyond simply aiding Byzantium. He proclaimed that once Byzantium was secure, the Latin Christians needed to continue on and liberate Christian lands from Muslim control, including Jerusalem itself and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher.¹³ Successfully organizing the First Crusade to accomplish these objectives would be a great victory for Christendom, but an even greater victory for the Church in the struggle to centralizing power and controlling the peoples of Europe.

In order to gain the support necessary for such an expensive and extreme expedition, Urban portrayed the Muslims as heretical, barbaric savages who were enemies of all good and true followers of Christ. As long as the Muslims controlled the holy sites of Christianity, no one could stop them from committing all manners of crime and sacrilege against Christ and his followers. Urban and other preachers told tales of murder, rape, and

⁹ Fulcher, *Chronicle of the First Crusade*, 11-12.

¹⁰ von Siviers, Lecture, 1-15-2013.

¹¹ Fulcher, *Chronicle of the First Crusade*, 15.

¹² Asbridge, *The Crusades*, 34-35.

¹³ von Siviers, Lecture, 1-15-2013.

oppression to enflame the Christians with anger, inspiring them to action against the Muslims¹⁴ because “Christ commands it.”¹⁵

Along with portrayals of Muslims as barbarians, Urban and the preachers assigned to spread the word masterfully combined crusade ideals with the existing framework of Christianity and their feudal society. Quoting a variety of scripture, preachers proclaimed that Christ himself was calling for willing warriors to fight for Jerusalem on his behalf. Using feudal familiarities, preachers reminded vassals that it was their duty to come to the aid of his lord when called upon to reclaim lands unjustly taken. If vassals knew and respected these feudal ties, then certainly Christ’s vassals owed an even greater deal of loyalty and servitude.¹⁶

For those who were reluctant to leave children, parents, and wives, Urban reminded them of Christ’s words, “He that loveth father or mother more than me, is not worthy of me.”¹⁷ Urban urged individuals to surpass love of family and possessions and set out on the road to deliver the Holy Land from the wicked. In the same breath, Urban also called for an end to the quarrels, conflicts, and disputations that plagued Europe by concentrating that disposition towards the East.¹⁸ Using religious references as motivation provided a powerful link between crusaders and the Church, justifying and organizing political and military action by using religious rationale. With such religious reasoning as the initial driving force behind Crusader motives and action, the Church was able to further consolidate power and increase its role in European society.

Redirecting the violent energy from Europe to the East was one of the most intriguing ways crusading meshed well with existing beliefs, namely through the strong connection Urban established between righteous warfare and salvation. At this time, Latin Christians were familiar with the idea of obtaining forgiveness of sins through performing penitential activities, such as prayer, fasting, pilgrimage, etc.¹⁹ The idea of the crusading indulgence is heavily influenced by this notion. Those who took the oath of a crusader were promised a remission of sins applicable

¹⁴ Thomas F. Madden, *The New Concise History of the Crusades* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 8-9.

¹⁵ Fulcher, *Chronicle of the First Crusade*, 16.

¹⁶ Madden, *The New Concise History of the Crusades*, 9.

¹⁷ Robert the Monk, *Historia Iberosolimitana*, trans. Carol Sweetenham (Ashgate, 2005), 80.

¹⁸ Robert the Monk, *Historia Iberosolimitana*, 80-81.

¹⁹ Asbridge, *The Crusades*, 38-39.

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specifically to the temporal punishment of confessed sins, as canon law only allowed the Church to forgive sins on earth, but God still had to forgive sins at the time of the Last Judgment. Receiving the crusading indulgence was not necessarily a catchall guarantee for salvation, though many crusaders misunderstood and believed otherwise. This apparent misunderstanding reveals an important gap of understanding between the Pope's intentions and the actions of those taking on the cross of Christ, thereby fueling a conflict between the Church's official policy and people's popular conception.²⁰ While this conflict did exist and is manifest in the quarrelling and disputations amongst the crusaders, it is critical to recognize that regardless of specific details and nuances, it was generally understood that God had instituted holy wars so that the order of knights could "attain in some measure God's grace while pursuing their own careers [as warriors], with the liberty and in the dress to which they are accustomed."²¹ Another account of Urban's speech at Clermont claims crusading is "the only warfare that is righteous, for it is charity to risk your life for your brothers."²² Fighting for God was a new way to find salvation, an intriguing idea for aristocratic knights, the incipient martial elite of the times.²³ Once again, Urban's use of spiritual rhetoric proved to be an effective way of instigating widespread political and military action throughout Christendom.

A wide variety of reasons inspired thousands to answer the call and leave on the First Crusade. Hope of material gain, no doubt, inspired lesser and greater men alike. Such hope is understandable because the cost of crusading was extremely expensive; those who relied on their lord's support had little to begin with, so any idea of material increase certainly was appealing. This mixture of pious, crude, arrogant men of the sword received an opportunity to use their war-centered talents as a means for obtaining personal salvation. A unique blend of saints and sinners, crusading forces could not have come into being without a sense of devout idealism that inspired men to make incredible sacrifices to liberate the land of their spiritual Master.²⁴

²⁰ Asbridge, *The Crusades*, 40.

²¹ Guibert of Nogent, "Guibert of Nogent considers the First Crusade..." in *The Crusades: Idea and Reality, 1095-1274*, ed. Louise and Jonathan Riley-Smith (London: Edward Arnold, 1981), 54-55.

²² Baldric of Dol, "The Version of Baldric of Dol," in *The First Crusade*, ed. Edward Peters (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), 9.

²³ Asbridge, *The Crusades*, 42-43.

²⁴ Madden, *The New Concise History of the Crusades*, 12-13.

It was this exact result that illustrates Pope Urban II's genius to act and assert the Church's political and spiritual prominence over the peoples of Europe. Even though crusaders did not operate in a uniform manner directly under the control of the pope, the response to his call was great. After making their oaths to God, not to the pope or any other man, crusader forces left Europe at varying times in smaller contingents and were only loosely organized.²⁵ The fact that crusaders misinterpreted some of the pope's intentions does not diminish the miracle of assembling the First Crusade. Indeed, even though the crusaders' ideas and intents experienced organic development along the road to Jerusalem, they shared some of the same goals and a sense of the same devout idealism that inspired them to leave in the first place.²⁶

Urban did not succeed in expanding and centralizing the Church's prominence by directly controlling the crusading armies. He did succeed by mobilizing thousands of Europeans with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, in the name of God, to march and fight for Christ. His approach used a virtually universal characteristic of Europeans, their Christianity, as a primary source of rationale and reason for pursuing the political and military goals of the First Crusade. The kings of Europe did not accomplish such an incredible feat. Building upon the reforms of his immediate predecessor, Pope Gregory VII, Urban was a man "who always strove wisely and actively to raise the status of the Holy Church above all things."²⁷ He successfully sponsored this movement in the name of God and the Church, thereby critically shifting the balance of centralized power to the Church's side of the scale, a shift that gradually continued over the next several centuries and resulted in the Church's dominant position in the Christian world.

²⁵ Madden, *The New Concise History of the Crusades*, 9-10.

²⁶ Asbridge, *The Crusades*, 39-40.

²⁷ Fulcher, *Chronicle of the First Crusade*, 11.

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