

History of the Crusades.
Episode 3.
The Speech That Launched The Crusades.

Hello again. Something important is about to happen.

It's Tuesday, the 27th of November, in the year 1095. We're in Clermont, in the Auvergne, Gaul, in what is now central France. Pope Urban II has left Italy and is doing a tour of France. He has stopped in Clermont to hold a Council attended by 13 Archbishops, 82 Bishops and many Abbots and other clerics. Each of the attendees has been asked to bring along the most powerful nobles from their region to listen to a public speech the Pope is to give at the end of the Council session. So many people are expected to attend this speech that a platform has been hastily erected in a field outside the eastern gate of the Cathedral, as the Cathedral itself is too small.

A hush descends. The Pope makes his speech, and it changes the course of history. Robert of Reims describes what happened. The Pope said "A grave report has come from the lands around Jerusalem that a race, absolutely alien to God, has invaded the land of the Christians. They have either razed the churches of God to the ground or enslaved them to their own rights. They cut open the navels of those whom they choose to torment, drag them around and flog them, before killing them as they lie on the ground, with all their entrails out. What can I say of the appalling violation of women? On whom does the task lie of avenging this, if not on you? Take the road to the Holy Sepulchre. Rescue that land and rule over it yourselves, for that land, as the Scripture says, floweth with with milk and honey. Take this road for the remission of your sins, assured of the unfading glory of the kingdom of Heaven." When Pope Urban had said these things, everyone shouted in unison "Deus vult! Deus vult!" "God wills it! God wills it."

Members of the crowd, led by Bishop Adhemar of Puy, then rushed to the front, volunteering to take the Cross and march to the Holy Land, retaking it by force for Christendom.

Thus, the Crusading movement began, except that's probably not precisely what happened. No official record of Pope Urban's speech at Clermont survives. There are five versions of the speech, all differing from each other. All were written years after the event by people who may or may not have been present when this speech was made. The version by Robert of Reims, who was also known as Robert the Monk, was written perhaps 25 years after the speech. But at least most historians believe that Robert was present when the speech was made.

And here we encounter one of the stumbling blocks in trying to recount the history of the Crusades. Contemporary accounts, which purported to record events, generally don't do so with a high degree of accuracy. Often, people recorded what they believed ought to have happened, rather than their own, often less interesting, actual observations. This, unfortunately, makes the piecing together of what actually happened quite a challenge. But we will do our best.

One document that has survived is a letter sent by Pope Urban II to future Crusaders in Flanders, a month after he spoke at Clermont. This is what it said. "From Urban, Bishop, servant of the servants of God, to all the faithful, both princes and subjects, waiting in

Flanders, greeting, apostolic grace and blessing. Your brotherhood, we believe, has long since learned, from many accounts, that a barbaric fury has deplorably affected and laid waste the Churches of God in the regions of the Orient. More than this, blasphemous to say, it has even grasped in intolerable servitude its churches and the Holy City of Christ, glorified by his passion and resurrection. Grieving with pious concern at this calamity, we visited the regions of Gaul and devoted ourselves largely to urging the Princes of the land and their subjects to free the churches of the East. We solemnly enjoined upon them at the Council of Auvergne the accomplishment of such an undertaking, and as a preparation for the remission of all their sins, and we have constituted our most beloved son, Adhemar Archbishop of Puy, leader of this expedition and undertaking in our stead, so that those who perchance may wish to undertake this journey, should comply with his commands as if they were our own, and submit fully to his loosings or bindings as far as shall seem to belong to an office. If moreover, there are any of your people whom God has inspired to this vow, let them know that he, Adhemar, will set out with the aid of God on the day of the Assumption of the Blessed Mary, and that they can attach themselves to his following."

So, taking together the Pope's letter and the less trustworthy account of his speech, what was the Pope saying in late 1095? This is what he was saying. Muslims have invaded the Holy Land, or the land of the Christians, destroyed churches and occupied the Holy City of Christ, or Jerusalem. He may also have mentioned the pilgrims journeying through the Islamic states have been killed or tortured. He urged the aristocracy, or the Princes, of Europe, and their subjects, to free the churches in the Middle East by basically invading and occupying the Holy Land in return for remission of their sins. The military expedition was to be led not by one of the Kings of Europe, but by the Pope himself, not personally, as he was around 60 years old at the time, which is an old man by medieval standards, but but his representative, Bishop Adhemar.

This really is absolutely extraordinary. He's implying that Islam is the aggressor, that somehow the churches in Jerusalem and across the Middle East are in immediate danger, and that military invasion is justified to retake them in the name of Christianity. But as we learned last week, Jerusalem had fallen to the Muslims back in 638 AD, some 450 years ago, and due to their tolerance of the religious practices of other People of the Book, churches had by and large been left intact, and pilgrims had been allowed to visit them. And while it is true that the Church of the Holy Sepulchre was destroyed by the Muslim Caliph Hakim him in 1009, he had also destroyed synagogues and had banned Ramadan, while the next Caliph, Zahir, assisted in the rebuilding of the church. There was simply no evidence to suggest that any of the churches were in immediate danger, and while it was true that the odd pilgrim had come to a sticky end, there was certainly no evidence of a wholesale campaign against pilgrims in the Islamic states.

So why in 1095 did the Pope make these claims and urge the invasion and occupation of Muslim territory by the aristocrats of Latin Christendom? And how did he come to make a speech which would result in 200 years of conflict between Europe and the Middle East?

To find the answer to this question, we need to find out a bit more about Pope Urban II. He was born Odo of Lagery, and was a scholar from a noble family in Champagne. He knew how the aristocracy, particularly the French aristocracy, operated, and was able to exploit this knowledge later. He was a reformist who had been a Prior of Cluny before becoming Pope.

The Burgundian monastery of Cluny in eastern France was at the peak of its popularity at the time of Pope Urban. Previously, monasteries had been established along Benedictine lines. They were secluded units which operated independently of each other, relying on the land and villages around them for support. The Abbey at Cluny operated differently. Firstly, it was large, ornate and wealthy, and housed one of the richest and most extensive libraries in Europe. Secondly, it operated like a large network of monasteries, with Cluny at the center. Clunaic abbies sprung up all over Europe, all of them administered by local monks who were themselves deputies of the Abbot of Cluney, who had overall control of the entire monastic network. As a Prior of Cluny, the man who was to become Pope Urban II would have had access to the vast hierarchy of Cluny, and witnessed the interaction between the monastery and the local aristocracy. At its peak, there were some 2,000 Clunaic monasteries across Europe, providing a rich learning ground for the arts of diplomacy, statesmanship, administration and politics, all of which the future Pope Urban II was going to need.

As an aside, all that's left of the Cluny Abbey, which was one of the largest and most impressive monasteries in Christendom, is one single transept. The Church's opulence made it a target for French revolutionaries in 1790, and it was dismantled. Then the Emperor Napoleon had a stud farm built on the empty site. Sad.

Anyway, Pope Urban was an educated, aristocratic former Prior of Cluny. At the time he was appointed Pope, the Catholic Church was undergoing some upheavals, to put it mildly. Nowadays, in our largely secular society, the Church and the state are very separate entities. The Pope today rarely makes an overtly political statement and generally confines himself to the matters of the Church. Not so back in the late 1000's. In its recent history, the Church had been attempting to assert authority over the secular rulers of Latin Christendom, and those rulers had responded by trying to seize control of the Church.

This battle for supremacy came to a head in 1076, when the reformist Pope Gregory VII excommunicated the German King Henry IV. It was the first time a reigning monarch had been excommunicated since Theodosius the Great, seven centuries earlier, and the political consequences for Henry were severe. The excommunication absolved all Henry's subjects from allegiance to him, and anyone supporting Henry risked being excommunicated themselves. Henry retaliated by calling together a synod of German and Italian Bishops, who elected a new Pope, Pope Clement III, whom Henry attempted to install in Rome in place of Gregory. Gregory, was eventually saved by the military intervention of the Normans, who unfortunately, then went on to rampage and plunder their way through Rome.

Pope Urban II was elected and consecrated in 1088 at Terracina, since Rome at that time was back in the hands of the anti-Pope Clement III. It wasn't until Easter 1094, with military assistance again from the Normans, that Pope Urban was finally able to assume his rightful position in Rome.

Pope Urban began his term by extending the hand of diplomacy to Constantinople. He invited the Byzantine Emperor Alexis to send representatives to the Council of the Roman Church, which was to be held in March 1095. At this meeting, matters of importance to the Church would be raised and policies formulated. The Emperor Alexis took full advantage of the invitation, and his delegate spoke at the Council, imploring for assistance from Latin Christendom to drive out Turkish forces from the previously Byzantine province of Anatolia. It is likely that the representatives were persuasive speakers, talking in emotive

terms of the Holy Lands being submerged under an Islamic tide, and of the threat that Muslim states posed, not just to Constantinople but all Christendom, it is likely they touched a nerve deep within Pope Urban.

Shortly after this meeting, he made his decision. He intended to go further than just providing assistance to Constantinople, as proposed by Alexius. What Pope Urban was considering was nothing short of a holy war, to drive Muslims not just out of Anatolia, but out of the entirety of the Holy Lands, including Jerusalem.

This was something absolutely unique. The idea that the Pope could raise an army and go to war, granting the remission of sin to participants, was a novel concept. Take Christianity. On paper, if you had to nominate one of the three Abrahamic religions most likely to declare war, for my money, it wouldn't be Christianity. Central to the teachings of the New Testament are the themes of love and peace. Then, of course, there's the fact that one of the Ten Commandments of the Old Testament is "Thou shalt not kill". How, then, did we get to the situation in 1095, where the leader of the Christian Church in the West felt justified in calling for Christians to take up arms and invade the Islamic states.

Political leaders and theologians had struggled with the concept of warfare, and Christian teachings ever since the Roman Empire became Christian under Constantine the Great in the fourth century. The North African Bishop St Augustine of Hippo, who was writing from the late 300's to the early 400's AD, wrestled with his concept. He ended up concluding that a war could be just in the eyes of the Church, if it was proclaimed by a legitimate authority such as a King or Bishop, was for a just cause, such as defense against enemy attack or recovery of territory, and was carried out with a minimal amount of violence. The idea of Church-sanctioned military actions developed over the following centuries. Under the reign of the Carolignians, Bishops supported and promoted campaigns of conquest and conversion against pagans in Eastern Europe. By the late 1000's, the Pope had blessed the Norman invasion of England, and supported the Norman conquest of Sicily against Islamic forces.

In 1085, only ten years before the Clermont speech, Alfonso VI of Spain retook the ancient Christian capital of Toledo, which is now in central Spain, from the occupying Muslim Moors. After appointing an Archbishop to the city, Alfonso issued a charter of endowment which read: "By the hidden judgment of God, this city was for 376 years in the hands of the Moors, blasphemers of the Christian name. After many battles and numberless slaughter of the enemy, I seized populus cities and strong castles from them, with the help of God's grace. Thus inspired by God's grace, I moved an army against this city where my ancestors once reigned in power and wealth, deeming it acceptable in the sight of the Lord, if that which the perfidious race, under their faithless leader Muhammed, took from the Christians, I, Alfonso the Emperor, with Christ as my leader, should restore to the adherence of that faith."

You can see from the content and tone of this document that by the late 1000's, when secular leaders were evicting Islamic forces from ancient Christian cities in the name of Christianity, it wouldn't be such a huge leap for the Pope to initiate such a campaign himself. In fact, the Pope would have been able to mobilize a greater military force than any other leader in Europe. Unlike today, where countries have their own armies at their disposal, who are paid by the state, provided with weapons and equipment by the state, this was not the case back in the late 1000's. Pretty much the entire population was militarized to some degree at the time Pope Urban made his speech at Clermont.

Society was run along feudal lines. It operated pretty much like a pyramid, with the King at the top of the pyramid; under him would be a few powerful nobles who held vast tracts of land; under each of those nobles would be lesser nobles who owned land within that domain, and had allegiance over them, and so on, and so on, until at the bottom of the pyramid were a vast number of peasants. If you were called upon to provide military assistance to anyone above you on the pyramid, you were pretty much obliged to do so, using your own men, equipment and weapons. The size of the pyramids invariably shifted and altered as allegiances changed, by such events such as marriages between aristocratic families, disputes and territorial conquests.

You can see here why the Pope was in such a unique position. While the French or German kings could only call for military assistance from their own particular vassals and subjects, the Pope's influence extended across every pyramid in Latin Christendom. He just had to ensure that a core number of influential aristocrats supported his cause, and a vast number of forces could be mobilized.

So, how did he ensure that he gained the support of as many aristocrats, or "princes" as he called them, as possible? Did he give just one speech and leave it at that? He didn't. He embarked on a tour of France, travelling hundreds of miles northwards, then turning south to Bordeaux, Toulouse and Montpellier. In a semi-literate society, the best way to spread the news about an upcoming event was by word of mouth. Knowing he had to attract as many people as possible, Pope Urban timed his arrival in the various towns he visited perfectly. This was no random amble. A sitting pontiff hadn't toured France for a generation, and the arrival of such a celebrity in a town would attract a crowd. But Pope Urban made sure that he happened to be in a certain town on the feast day of a local saint. Or he just happened to arrive when a public building was being completed, so he could perform a ceremony of consecration. And at the end of each speech or ceremony, when he had everyone's attention and people were thinking what a great bloke he was, he mentioned that he was organizing an expedition to the Holy Land, to retake Jerusalem in the name of the Church. Might the local nobility be interested in joining? Hell, yeah.

This tour would have taken a lot of forward planning. In fact, quite a bit of evidence points to the fact that Pope Urban II was a savvy operator and that his speech at Clermont also had been months in the planning. It's likely that the Pope had discussed his plan with key Archbishops and the Abbot of Cluny. They may even have helped formulate it. He then seems to have enlisted the support of the Count of Toulouse, Raymond IV, a veteran of wars in Spain, as well as Adhemar, the Bishop of Puy, a cleric from aristocratic stock like Pope Urban, who was an excellent horseman and who was to lead the expedition.

At the end of the speech of Clermont, Pope Urban called for those who wish to take part in the Crusade to make a public vow, and they were marked, with the sign of the cross, which involved having a cloth cross pinned to their shoulder. Again, he wouldn't have had these things just lying around, and they would have been made beforehand, especially for the ceremony.

The forethought continues in the timing of the speech at Clermont and the subsequent Papal Tour. The Clermont speech was made in November, just on the approach of winter, and Pope Urban decreed that the Crusade would depart the following August, after the harvest. This gave people plenty of time to get their affairs in order, to arrange financial backing, and to equip themselves for the journey.

And who did Pope Urban envisage would take up his call to march to Jerusalem? It was pitched squarely at the nobility. Monks were prohibited from going, a savvy move that we will discuss in a subsequent episode, and non-fighting participants such as women, the young, and the elderly were discouraged, unless they had the financial backing of a nobleman. Conspicuously absent were the Kings of Europe. King William Rufus of England was currently in conflict with his local clergy, Emperor Henry IV of Germany, the same one who had installed the anti-Pope Clement III, was never anywhere near the invitation list, and King Phillip of France had just been excommunicated for adultery. So that left the Pope, via his deputy Bishop Adhemar, as undisputed leader of the expedition, and he was just fine with that.

So here we have it. Pope Urban came up with a novel idea of leading a military expedition to the Holy Land, and set about recruiting the nobility, and you can see why he did it. It ticked a lot of boxes. It mobilized a bunch of nobles who had been preoccupied fighting amongst themselves, to focus on a common cause. In the power struggle between the Church and the Kings, it was a clear win for the Church, placing a vast number of armed men directly under Church control, and it improved relations with the Eastern Orthodox Church in Constantinople. Last but not least, it had the potential to extend the boundaries of Latin Christendom out of Europe into the Middle East and across its most holy sites.

And you'd have to say that Pope Urban's recruitment campaign was pretty successful. Within a year of his speech at Clermont, as many as 70,000 to 80,000 people had left Europe to march to the Middle East. A high proportion of noble recruits came from the towns Pope Urban had personally visited, or within a day's ride of those places. Others came from further afield. The Pope wrote letters to some countries he couldn't visit, and sent a delegate to England. Word of the Crusade also spread among the network of monasteries and Churches, and through interlinked aristocratic families.

So, through a lot of hard work on his part, the vision of Pope Urban, first announced in his speech at Clermont, for Christianity to march on the Holy Lands and conquer them, was realized.

But wait, what's this? There's a bunch of people marching to Jerusalem already, but it's only Easter, and the Crusade isn't meant to start till August. There's thousands of them, and they just looked like ordinary people. That wasn't part of the plan. What's happening? Who are these people? That, listeners, is the Peasant's Crusade, and we'll be joining them in their journey south in next week's episode. I hope you join me then.

Right, further reading. If you'd like to know more about the Popes, and in particular the conflict between the Church and the state prior to the time of Pope Urban II, you could read the book, "The Popes" by the wonderful John Julius Norwich. In fact, even if you're not interested in those things, you should read it anyway. It's a very well written book. It's informative and it's entertaining, as any good book should be. Right, that's it from me. Until next week, bye for now.

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