



# 51 POPE URBAN II

1042 - 1099

Not many people today remember Pope Urban II. Yet there have been few men whose impact on human history has been so obvious and so direct, for Urban II was the pope whose call for a Christian war to recapture the Holy Land from the Moslems inaugurated the Crusades.

Urban, whose original name was Odo de Lagery, was born about 1042, near the city of Châtillon-sur-Marne in France. He came from a great family of French nobles, and he received a good education. As a young man, he was an archdeacon at Reims. Later, he became successively a Cluniac monk, a prior, and a cardinal-bishop, before his election as pope in 1088.

Urban was a strong, effective, and politically astute pope, but this is not what has earned him a place in this book. The action for which Urban II is principally remembered occurred on November 27, 1095. He had convoked a great church council, held at the city of Clermont in France. There, before a crowd of thousands, Urban delivered what was perhaps the single most effective speech in history—one that was to influence Europe for centuries to come. In his speech, Urban protested that the Seljuk Turks, who were occupying the Holy Land, were defiling the Christian holy places and molesting Christian pilgrims. Urban urged that all Christendom join together in a holy war—a great crusade to recapture the Holy Land for Christianity. But Urban was far too clever to appeal to altruistic motives alone. He pointed out that the Holy Land was fruitful and wealthy—far richer than the overcrowded lands of Christian Europe. Finally, the Pope announced, participation in the crusade would take the place of all penances and assure the crusader of remission of all his sins.

Urban's brilliant speech, which appealed at the same time to his listeners' highest motives and to their most selfish ones, aroused passionate enthusiasm in his audience. Before he had finished, the multitude was shouting, "*Deus le volt!*" (God wills it), which was soon to become the battle cry of the crusaders. Within a few months, the First Crusade was under way. It was to be followed by a long series of holy wars (there were eight

major crusades and many smaller ones), which took place over a period of roughly two hundred years.

As for Urban himself, he died in 1099, two weeks after the First Crusade succeeded in capturing Jerusalem, but before news of that capture had reached him.

It hardly seems necessary to explain the importance of the Crusades. Like all wars, they had a direct influence upon the participants, and upon the civilian populations caught in their path. In addition, however, the Crusades had the effect of bringing western Europe into close contact with the Byzantine and Islamic civilizations, which at that time were considerably more advanced than western Europe. That contact helped prepare the way for the Renaissance, which in turn led to the full flowering of modern European civilization.

Pope Urban II is on this list not only because of the enormous significance of the Crusades, but also because it is unlikely that they would have taken place without his inspiration. Obviously, conditions were ripe; otherwise his speech would have fallen upon deaf ears. However, to start a general European movement, the leadership of some central figure was needed. No national king could have done it. (Had a German emperor, for example, declared a holy war against the Turks, and led his armies on a crusade, it is doubtful that many English knights would have joined him.) There was only one figure in western Europe whose authority transcended national boundaries. Only the Pope could propose a project for all western Christendom to engage in, with a hope that large numbers of persons would follow his suggestion. Without the leadership of the Pope, and the dramatic speech which he made, the Crusades, as a mass European movement, would probably never have begun.

Nor were circumstances such that virtually any person holding the papal office would have proposed a crusade to liberate the Holy Land. On the contrary, it was in many ways an impractical suggestion. Most prudent leaders would be very reluctant to make an unusual proposal, the consequences of which were so difficult to predict. But Urban II dared to do so; and by so doing he had a greater and more enduring effect on human history than many far more famous men.