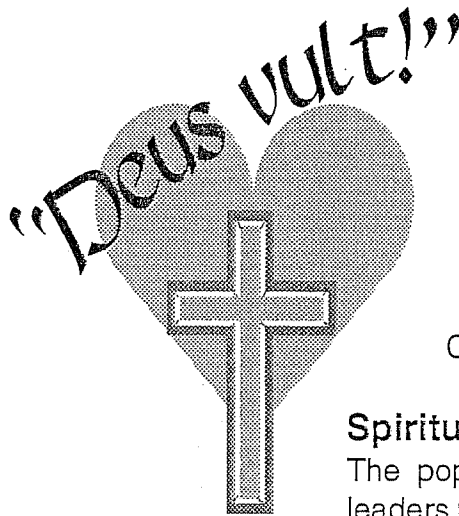


BACKGROUND ESSAY: Crusades - 1



"Deus vult!" they cried ... and the Crusades began.

The Crusades were a series of Holy Wars in which the Christians of Western Europe attempted to regain control of the Holy Land (Jerusalem) from the Muslims. The area on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean was sacred to the Christians because this was the home of Jesus. For 200 years the Christians fought, unsuccessfully, against the Muslims in an effort to bring the Holy Land back under Christian control.

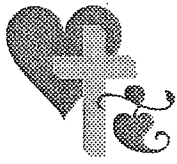
Spiritual rewards promised

The popes and other promoters began the Crusades. Religious leaders promised spiritual rewards for those who risked their lives for the holy cause. Pope Urban II, in 1095, called on leaders of the church to rise up in battle against the Seljuk Turks and recapture the Holy Land. He promised Christians who fought for the cause, remission of all sins, and, to those who died, immediate entry into heaven. At the urging of religious leaders, ignorant peasants by the thousands set off from Western Europe for the Holy Land. They were ill-prepared and unaware of the hardships they would face. Many believed God would see them through and provide guidance for them.

Religion was not the only reason the people of Western Europe went crusading. Economic factors also played an important role. For the peasant, the Crusades gave him a chance to escape the slavery of manorial life. The lure of land and wealth in the East prompted lords and knights to take up arms. The cities of Western Europe also joined in the Crusades. Merchants and ship owners from the cities saw opportunities to expand their markets and increase their commercial bases. The promise for improvement in one's economic status convinced many people to join the Crusades.

The Crusades fail but have impact

The Christian Crusades were a failure. The Holy Land was never recaptured from the Muslims. Christian Crusaders were not united. They were met in the Holy Land by a well-organized and united Muslim empire. For almost two hundred years, soldiers from all over Europe fought for the church. By 1300, Europeans began losing interest in the East and the Holy Land. The West and the Atlantic Ocean had caught the attention of Europe. Later, Europe saw America as the new land for expansion and opportunity.



BACKGROUND ESSAY: Crusades - 2

The impact of the Crusades upon Western Europe was significant. They opened up Europe to the rest of the world and prepared it for expansion. Merchants of Italy became prosperous during the Crusades through the introduction of new Middle Eastern and Oriental products such as silks, spices, and pearls. New materials for clothing and new foods increased the standard of living. The insatiable desire for these luxury items prompted sailors to explore for newer and faster routes to Asia. The crusaders brought back to Western Europe new manners of behavior and cultural knowledge which were assimilated into Western European culture.

Feudalism wanes

The decline of feudalism can be attributed to the Crusades. Feudal lords often financed their Crusades to the Holy Land through creditors. When they met with failure on their journeys, many had no choice but to forfeit their lands to their creditors. Thousands of feudal lords were also killed and left their families with huge debts.

Most importantly, the Crusades left the common man with a broader perspective and better understanding of the world. Men who had never left a manor brought back with them knowledge of new places, cultures, and peoples outside of Europe through their experiences as crusaders. This new-found knowledge helped to stimulate Western Europeans and

increased their desire for further exploration. Thus, the Crusades quickened the progress and prosperity of Western Europe, brought Western Europe out of the "Dark Ages" and set the stage for the Renaissance—a "rebirth" in so many ways.

