

The Lost Crusade

- Tom Garfield, for more on Classical Education see Tom's book, Dear Parents: Communicating the Christian & Classical Vision to Families.

Without doubt there was anguish. No parent with a heart of flesh could have borne their decision without much fear and trepidation. But the purpose was one with a higher calling – for most it was regarded it as “the will of God.” Therefore, though the parting was more tearful than joyful, especially for the mothers, the children went forth. The older ones, that is, those twelve years old and above, assured their parents that they would look out for the “little ones.” So, they marched off, the older ones herding the younger ones in groups of a dozen or more, their heads high, proud that their mission was one that God would undoubtedly bless. From across the entire country, hundreds of children, with their parents' heart-rending acquiescence, responded to the call.

The mission, now a holy crusade, was indeed one fraught with great danger, but surely with God's blessings the children would be victorious. They were marching to wrest the Holy Land from the hands and presence of the heathens. Where the adult knights had failed, these children would succeed. They would be the “salt and light” of which our Lord spoke, to the pagan peoples who had taken Jerusalem. There was no need for training with the sword or shield, no need for battle-hardened veterans; these children with full hearts and innocent eyes would conquer with soft words and gentle hands.

Actually there would be two children's crusades, one from France and one from Germany, around 1212 AD. The children were given little, if any provisions, protection, and transportation to travel from their home lands to the far-off, mid-east countries. Not much is written about their pitiful, sorrow-filled journeys. What became of them? Did God indeed bless their sincere, but horribly misguided purpose? We do know that hundreds of those who set out never returned home. Many died of exposure, starvation, abduction, and murder. Others returned half-alive to their homes, with tales of horror. Some got as far as the Holy Land, only to become slaves of the Muslims. The “glory” of these crusades wasn't even a memory that could be distorted to legendary proportions in the years to come. They were best forgotten, if possible.

Someone said that “the only thing we learn from history is that we don't learn from history.” But surely today thinking, loving parents would never knowingly send their children en masse into a situation that is so dangerous that even adults need good training and protection there. Even when presented with the glowing admonitions to consider it a “higher calling,” or being “salt and light,” parents would certainly consider carefully all aspects of any “crusade.” They would ask: Is this truly children's work? Will my child be nourished and protected as I would want? Will my child come home to me stronger in the Lord, or will his faith be attacked and his spirit crushed by heavy-handed adults? Will he be victorious or taken captive? And most importantly: Does God, in His Word, really require this of my children?

What would have happened if all those French and German parents had examined the “call” of the crusade in the above light? At the very least their children would not have been lost, for they would not have gone. The Holy Land would have remained in the hands of the Muslims, as it did anyway, crusade or no. Let's not indulge in more lost crusades. And let us be extremely cautious and biblically discerning, with whom and to what we entrust our precious children. “And whoever receives one such child in My Name receives Me; but whoever causes one of these little ones to stumble, it is better for him that a heavy millstone be hung around his neck, and that he be drowned in the depth of the sea.” Jesus Christ (Matthew 18:5,6)