

A ZENIT DAILY DISPATCH

Crusades: Truth and Black Legend

Italian Writer Vittorio Messori Joins Debate
ROME, 27 JUL 1999 (ZENIT).

Debate over the nature of the Crusades has not abated in this 900th anniversary year of the first Crusade. At the end of the millennium it might well be exacerbated by lack of understanding between the West and Islam.

According to Italian Catholic writer Vittorio Messori, the Enlightenment cast a "black legend" shadow on the Crusades, and used it as a weapon in its psychological war against the Roman Catholic Church. In an article in "Corriere della Sera," Italy's most important newspaper, Messori wrote, "In order to complete the work of the Reformation, it was 18th century Europe that began the chain of 'Roman infamies' that have become dogma."

"In connection with the Crusades, it was anti-Catholic propaganda that invented the name, just as it invented the term Middle Ages, chosen by 'enlightened' historiography to describe the parenthesis of darkness and fanaticism between the splendors of Antiquity and the Renaissance. It goes without saying that those who attacked Jerusalem 900 years ago would have been very surprised had they been told that they were engaged in what eventually would be known as the 'first Crusade.' For them it was an itinerary, a 'pilgrimage,' a route, a passage. Those same 'armed pilgrims' would have been even more surprised had they foreseen the accusations leveled against them of trying to convert the 'infidel,' of securing commercial routes to the West, of creating European 'colonies' in the Middle East..."

Sadly, Messori said, "the dark invention of the 'Crusade' has ended by instilling a feeling of guilt in the West, including among some members of the Church, who are ignorant of what really happened." In addition, "in the East, the legend has turned against the entire West: we all pay -- and will continue to pay, the consequences of the Islamic masses' desire for revenge, of their call for vengeance against the 'Great Satan,' which, by the way, is not just the United States, but the whole of Christianity, the very one responsible for the 'Crusades.' After all, is it not Westerners themselves who insist on saying that it was a terrible, unforgivable aggression against the pious, devout and meek followers of the Koran?"

"But there is a question we must ask ourselves. In the context of more than a thousand years of Christian-Islamic relations, who has been the victim and who the aggressor?" asked the journalist who interviewed the Pope in "Crossing the Threshold of Hope." When Caliph Omar conquered Jerusalem in 638, the city had been Christian for over three centuries. Soon after, the Prophet's disciples invaded and destroyed the glorious churches of Egypt, first, and then of North Africa, causing the extinction of Christianity in places that had had Bishops like St. Augustine. Later it was the turn of Spain, Sicily and Greece, and the land that would eventually become Turkey, where the communities founded by St. Paul himself were turned into ruins. In 1453, after seven centuries of siege, Constantinople, the second Rome, capitulated and became Islamic. The Islamic threat reached the Balkans but, miraculously, the onslaught was stopped and forced to turn back at Vienna's walls. If the Jerusalem massacre of 1099 is execrated, Mohammed II's action in Otranto [Italy] in 1480 must not be forgotten, a raw example of a bloody funeral procession of sufferings," Messori stated.

Messori concluded by asking a number of questions: "At present, what Moslem country respects the civil rights and freedom of worship of any other than their own? Who is angered by the genocide of

Armenians in the past, and of Sudanese Christians at present? According to the devotees of the Koran, is the world not divided between the 'Islamic territory' and the 'war territory' -- all those areas that must be converted to Islam, whether they like it or not?"

The Italian journalist provided his answers to these questions in his final remarks. "A simple review of history, along very general lines, confirms an obvious truth: Christianity is constantly on the defensive when it comes to Moslem aggression; this has been the case from the beginning until now. For example, in Africa at present there is a bloody offensive by the Moslems to convert ethnic groups that the heroic sacrifices of generations of missionaries had succeeded in baptizing. Admittedly, some in the course of history need to ask for forgiveness. But, in this instance, must it be Catholics who ask for forgiveness for actions in self-defense, and for keeping the road open for pilgrimage to Jesus' places, which was the reason for the Crusades?" ZE99072705