

# Saint Neophytos of Cyprus and the Crusades

## by Father Panagiotes Carras

For the majority of people brought up within the European and North American cultures the word *Crusade* means a *sacred and noble struggle against evil*. The Oxford Dictionary defines the word as *an aggressive movement against public evil*. However, a very elementary historical examination into the history of the Crusades will lead us to realize that there was nothing sacred or noble about them. At the of the Crusades many people were led to believe that this *holy war* was sacred and noble and for this reason many of them *took up the Cross* and marched off to battle.

The Crusades were a product of the *Dark Age* of Europe just about the time when the Medieval Age was coming to an end. In the Tenth and Eleventh centuries Europe was a kaleidoscope of powers which were constantly struggling against each other. The Germans, Franks and Normans were the dominant powers, each one trying to control the many other lesser powers which existed and in this way become the ruling force. One of the lesser powers which played a significant role in this struggle for the domination of Europe was the Papacy. Life in Europe during this age and earlier revolved around these struggles. Poverty and disease, which were ever present, made the life of the average person of that age unbearable.

Learning had become virtually non-existent in this Feudal society where the majority of people were either serfs or slaves, totally dependent on the lord of the land to which they were attached. The clergy were just about the only ones who had an access to learning. More often than not, the Lord of the land was illiterate and depended on various clergy to undertake the administration of the land. This along with the fact that the clergy, as Gods vicars, could guarantee Eternal Beatitude, gave such power to the Church, that the Kings, Lords and Knights of Europe were constantly trying to find ways to control the Roman Church. The feudal lords came to control all ecclesiastical positions. Bishops and abbots were appointed by the lords. These bishops and abbots often were appointed to powerful positions in the lord's administration. Not to be outdone, the Church also struggled to control the secular rulers. This resulted in many power struggles.

In Medieval Society there were only two paths which might alleviate the misery of the individual: join the clergy or be part of an army. The whole of European Society was controlled by the Lords and their Knights on one hand and the Bishops and their clergy on the other. The Feudal way of life had permeated every aspect of Medieval Society. Even the Church eventually succumbed and was eventually absorbed by the feudalistic society which surrounded it. The taking up of arms was blessed by the Roman Church and made holy. Special monastic military orders were established and it was at this time that the *Knights Templar*, the *Teutonic Knights* and the *Knights of St. John Hospital* were founded by the Church. For a sacred cause, monks, priests, bishops and even the Pope would take up arms and go into battle.

This was contrary to the Canons of the Ancient Church and when Orthodox Christians

came into contact with such clergy they were thoroughly scandalized. Anna Comnena, a Byzantine princess during the Fourth Crusade expresses the common feelings of the Orthodox in the following words:

*The Latins have not the same notion of a priest as we have. . .The Latin barbarian celebrates the divine mysteries and at the same time girds a shield on his left arm and holds a lance in his right: while he gives communion with the divine Body and Blood, he watches carnage and becomes a man of blood himself (Alexiad, 10, 8).*

The Papacy during the tenth and eleventh century had capitulated to the Feudal spirit thereby affecting its life and theology. It was going through some of the worse days in its history. The Papacy was no longer in control of its destiny. The Vatican had become a minor power in the secular world, alternately at the mercy of Roman nobility, the German King or the Norman chieftains, Corruption was rampant to such an extent that we find the Papacy during the tenth century ruled by the Pope's mistress, the infamous Roman noblewoman, Marozia (c. 890 – 932/937). She was so powerful that she was able to place her illegitimate son and grandson on the throne of Rome. In 962, Pope John XII, her grandson was forced to crown Otto, King of Germany, Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. Within a year, Otto deposed John XII and forced the Romans to accept his young cousin as the first German Pope of Rome. Church strife was so intense that it led to the simultaneous existence of many Popes. In 1046, just eight years before the Schism, the turmoil in Rome had led to the existence of three separate Popes. This conflict between Rome and Germany lasted for many years and during this time the Germans were able to force the Papacy to accept the *Filioque* and its theology as developed by Carolingian court theologians.

The Normans were descendants of the Vikings who settled in northern France, thereafter known as Normandy. In 911 they accepted Christianity and started to take an active part in the life of Europe and the Papacy. In the eleventh century Europe experienced a population explosion which led the major powers to look for new lands to inhabit. The Germans absorbed Slavic territories in the East, whereas the Normans conquered England, southern Italy and Sicily. When they invaded Italy they found that they were opposed by the German Pope Leo IX. In June 1053, Pope Leo IX, in full armour, led his army against the Normans and was defeated. The Normans now faced a dilemma. If they allowed the Pope to go free he would be a threat, but they could not place the leader of their Church in a prison. They decided to take the Pope captive and to treat him as a guest. He brought his whole court with him to Benevento. He returned to Rome in March 1054 and died on April 19, 1054.

While still a captive of the Normans, Pope Leo IX received a letter from Michael Cerularios, the Patriarch of Constantinople, who complained about certain Papal innovations of which the *Filioque* was the most important. The Pope, who upon his returning to Rome, was now under the control of the most powerful member of the Roman Curia, Cardinal Humbert, who was appointed by the Germans to control the Pope. It was decided that Cardinal Humbert would lead a delegation to Constantinople to protest what was considered an insult on the part of Patriarch Michael. Early in the spring of 1054, Cardinal Humbert started his trip to Constantinople which he reached in July. Meanwhile, Pope Leo IX died in captivity on April 19th, 1054 thus nullifying the authority of the delegation.

There was no Pope of Rome until September 1054 when Henry, the King of Germany, appointed a new one. On Saturday, July 16th, 1054, however, Cardinal Humbert with the other legates entered the Church of Aghia Sophia during the Divine Liturgy. In his hands he held a *Bull* which he himself had authored. He then paraded up to the Holy Table where he laid the *Bull*, excommunicating and anathematizing Patriarch Michael and all those who followed him. Cardinal Humbert then rushed out of the Church stopping only to symbolically shake the dust off his robes. In this manner the Papacy officially separated itself from the Church of Christ. Cardinal Humbert returned to the Papacy where he still was very influential and was successful in having his actions approved.

In the following years a reform movement sought to consolidate the power of the Papacy and to force its rule on all Christians. By 1059 the reform movement within the Papacy had fully allied itself with the Normans and with their support the *College of Cardinals* received its first definite constitution as the electors of the Pope. The Papacy was increasing its power base.

In 1095 Pope Urban II realized that it would be extremely beneficial for the Papacy to be able to unite all the warring factions of Europe in a struggle against a common foe. On Thursday, November 27th, Pope Urban II preached a sermon in France during which he summoned all the warring powers of Europe to unite, take up the banner of the Cross and go off to fight a Holy War to liberate Jerusalem and the Holy Cross from the hands of the infidel Arabs. All this was said knowing full well that although the Arabs were the political masters of the Holy Lands, all of the Holy Sites were in the hands of the local Orthodox Christians. In actuality, the Pope had a greater hatred for the Orthodox Christians than for the Moslem Arabs and this contempt was shown in the manner with which they dealt with the Orthodox population of the lands which the Crusaders conquered.

Preachers, monks, priests and bishops were dispatched throughout Europe to instruct the faithful that it was their sacred duty to fight for Christ. Within the next three hundred years hundreds of thousands of Europeans would set out for the East bringing havoc and destruction to the Orthodox Christians of Southern Italy and Sicily, Serbia, Bulgaria, Greece, Cyprus, Asia Minor and the Middle East. Their destruction did not suffice; they wanted complete control. To accomplish this they formed various kingdoms within the conquered lands and, after expelling the local Orthodox hierarchs, they would, replace them with Papal bishops. The Crusades were responsible for the virtual destruction of the Christian Church of the Middle East. They weakened the Byzantine Empire so much that it could not survive the attacks of the Turks. The Papacy, however, did not restrict the use of the Crusades against the schismatic Greeks and the infidel Arabs but soon learned how to destroy heretics in Southern France and the Hohenstaufen dynasty of Germany. Years later the tortures and deaths of the inquisitions which plagued Europe were a result of this new doctrine of sacred warfare.

Wave after wave of kings and nobles with their armies descended on the East. During the Third Crusade on May 6th 1191, on his way to Jerusalem, Richard the Lion-hearted, the Norman King of England, stopped to attack and conquer the island of Cyprus. Within a few months he sold it to the Knights Templar and they soon sold it to the deposed King of Jerusalem. Needless to say, the inhabitants of Cyprus were the ones who were expected

to pay the costs. The Crusaders established themselves on Cyprus, immediately making the inhabitants serfs. All educated persons were expelled and the Orthodox Dioceses were now headed by Latin bishops. It appeared as if the Orthodox Church in Cyprus would be annihilated in a matter of time.

Through God's Providence, the Papal plans were not allowed to bear fruit. The Orthodox people of Cyprus had at that time a great man of God in their midst and through his efforts the people were strengthened in their Orthodox Faith.



St. Neophytos was born in the year 1134 of pious Orthodox parents who had eight children. His parents, Athanasios and Evdoxia, strove to impart to their children a love for our Lord. Evdoxia upon the death of her husband entered a convent. The family was extremely poor and the Saint had to till the fields with his father and was not able to attend school even for one day. When Saint Neophytos became eighteen years old, his parents, according to the custom of the time, undertook to arrange a marriage for him.

The blessed one, even at that young age, had come to understand the vanity of this world and his soul desired to give itself completely to our Saviour. He secretly departed from his paternal home and sought to find a monastery where his parents would not find him. He reached Mount

Koutsoventes where he found a monastery dedicated to Saint John Chrysostom. When the Holy one arrived at the monastery, the Fathers were in Church and so Saint Neophytos entered. The Fathers were reading the first verse of the Book of Genesis, *In the beginning God created the Heaven and the Earth*. These words filled the Saint's soul with a joy that he had never felt before. In his heart there was kindled the love of the knowledge of the Mysteries of God. He asked God to give him the Grace to understand the words of the Divine Books, for as we said earlier, he was illiterate.

The Holy Neophytos struggled devoutly in the monastery. He was obedient to the rule that he was given and supplemented it with trying to teach himself to read the Service Books of the Church. Cyprus, however, does not cover a great expanse and his parents soon discovered where he was concealed. His parents pleaded with him for many hours to return to their home and Neophytos as an obedient son agreed to follow them. Upon returning he immediately began to speak to them of his fervent desire to follow the angelic life. He appealed to them to grant him their blessing and when his parents saw the fervour of his faith, they acceded to his request. Once again he set out for the Monastery of Saint John Chrysostom.

On arriving, he sought out the abbot and begged him to put upon him the holy Schema of the monks. Wherefore, the righteous one was tonsured and was clothed in monastic garments. As soon as the service was completed the blessed one began to weep with joy and to kiss his new robes, all the while fervently praying that the Lord would give him the Grace to keep his garment pure. Saint Neophytos describes the joy that he felt at that

moment In the following words: *Never has anyone been so captivated by their wedding clothing as much as I have by the wearing of the monastic garment.*

In the monastery, the Saint was given the obedience to work in the vineyards. He remained in this service for five years, praying and studying the word of God night and day. Although unlettered, through the Grace of God he was soon not only able to read, but could recite by heart the Psalms of Prophet David. Here we see a great wonder. We know that Saint Neophytos had never attended a school even for one day and yet our Lord gave him such understanding that his writings can be compared with the works of the great Fathers of the Church. It is estimated that he was the author of many works totaling as much as five thousand pages. Currently scholars at the University of Edinburgh Scotland are preparing to publish the surviving writings of Saint Neophytos. They expect that the publication will contain about one thousand pages. This great Father wrote interpretations to the *Psalms*, *Song of Songs* and the *Six-day Creation*. Included In his works are many Homilies, Hymns and Odes along with many letters written to the faithful. This is an accomplishment which can only be brought about by the Grace. of God.

There are many events in the Saints life that witness to the fact that his gift was God-sent. On one occasion the righteous one was visited by a priest who had a great veneration for Saint Diomedes and requested that the Saint compose a homily on Saint Diomedes so that those who would hear it would be encouraged to emulate the Saint. The man of God, however, did not heed the priest's request. Earlier he had decided not to write any more because some people inspired by Satan were scandalized by the abundance of the Saints writings. The priest would not leave the site of the cave. After twenty four hours, Saint Neophytos, not wishing to be unbending, acceded to the priest's pleas. That very night, Saint Diomedes appeared to the great ascetic and asked him to put his life in writing. When Saint Neophytos awoke he realized that this day was the feast day of Saint Diomedes.

After working obediently in the monastery's vineyard for five years, he was given a blessing by the abbot to become the monastery's ecclesiarch in which capacity he served for two years. At this time he asked for a blessing to become a hermit but the abbot would not give this blessing. Obediently he continued in his position as ecclesiarch and then a year later the abbot approached him and told him that he was free to go and become a desert dweller. His desire was to go to the Holy Lands to live as an ascetic under the guidance of a desert father. Upon reaching the Holy Land he venerated all the holy places around Jerusalem. He then set forth northwards to the mountains of Magdala, Tabor and Jordan. During his six-month stay in the Holy Lands he sought out every cave and crevice in search of one to whom he could place himself under obedience. The fathers of the Palestinian deserts, however, had been driven away by the incursions of the Arabs and later by those of the Crusaders. In vain did the righteous one search for a spiritual guide. One day as he was asking for Gods direction our Lord appeared to him and spoke to him in the following words: *Not in this desert but go to another place where the king will descend and grant you a morsel.*

Saint Neophytos returned to the Monastery of Saint John Chrysostom until he could determine to which desert our Lord was directing him. He learned that many desert fathers had fled from Palestine and Egypt to Mount Latros in Asia Minor. Once more with the blessing of the abbot he set out In search of the desert which his soul longed for. The Lord

God in His wisdom and out of love for the Orthodox people of Cyprus did not allow the blessed one to leave the Island. When the Saint reached the port city of Paphos, he was arrested by the guards of that city who suspected that he was a fugitive. He was bound and cast into prison where he remained for a sufficient length of time. Certain Christians of the city learned of his situation and arranged for his release. Seeing this as a sign from God, he determined not to leave Cyprus.

Not having any particular place in mind he left the city and directed himself toward the highlands. North of Paphos, high on a mountain he found a desert place with a steep precipice. On closer examination he was able to discern a small cave and immediately the Saint knew that this was the desert which the Lord selected for him. This cave was found on the Feast of Saint John the Baptist, June 24th, 1159. He began cleaning and leveling it out, using his own hands or stakes that he found nearby. The site was extremely rugged and it took him about fifteen months to complete his task. On the Feast of the *Elevation of the Holy Cross* his cave was ready. He dedicated it to the Feast not only because on that day his labours ceased but more so in order to have the Cross of our Lord always before him. For the Saint, a monk had to be above all a Cross-bearer. He had a great love for the Holy Cross and this can be seen in the many hymns he wrote glorifying the Precious Cross.

Along with preparing a place to sit and lie down he also prepared his tomb inside the cave. Once the tomb was completed he inscribed underneath it the following: *You will gain no more than this, even if you should acquire the whole world*. Truly the King descended here and granted His Saint much Grace. One may imagine the suffering and hardships of the flesh that Saint Neophytos must have endured in that desert place. These the man of God countered with readings from the Holy Fathers, prayers, prostrations, vigils and standing all night with his hands extended towards our Heavenly Father begging for a morsel of His Grace. Here he would remember that Paradise was lost because of sin and that man was a prince who had lost his inheritance. He would weep and lament for hours, pleading to regain Divine Sonship. He was no longer the King's son but a stranger in a strange land, a captive in a foreign land. How could he not weep?

Within this cave he vowed to enclose himself giving it the name *Enkleistra* or *Enclosure*. He confined himself to physical darkness so that he may receive the Heavenly and Uncreated Light of the Most Holy Trinity. In a vision our Lord revealed to the Saint the time of his departure from this life. Our Lord first told him that he would be taken up to worship the Heavenly Cross in fifty years and then said that it would take place in sixty years. This extension was given so that Saint Neophytos would be able to make the faith of the Cypriot people firmer. The holy one then increased his ascetic struggles vowing not to eat cooked food and to wear chains on his body. Later he commanded his disciples to bury him with these chains.



His fame spread everywhere and many flocked to him for his prayers and blessing. Those who loved this God-loving man came nearly every day and besought him fervently to become his disciples. After much pleading he consented to accept a few disciples, later commanding that his monastery never exceed eighteen fathers. The holy one avoided the esteem of men, but the all-merciful God, Who cares for the salvation of our souls ordained that the Saint's



Grace become known to all. In a divine vision Basil, the Bishop of Paphos, was commanded by our Lord to ordain His Saint to the Priesthood. For four years the bishop, who had great love and veneration for Saint Neophytos, pleaded with him to accept ordination from his hands. Finally, in obedience the man of God received the Grace of the Priesthood. He was thirty-six years of age when through Gods Providence he entered the final stage of preparation which would make him the spiritual father of all Cyprus when the Latin cloud would descend upon it.

Every day during the Divine Liturgy he would receive the Sacred Mysteries which would restore the lost sonship. With his few disciples he started the construction of a monastery not too far from his cave. For thirteen years they worked unceasingly to build this future spiritual centre of Cyprus, as if the man of God knew what the Lord had ordained for him. The people of Cyprus were about to go through great temptations, but the Lord would provide them with the means to withstand. The funds for the construction of the monastery were provided by the Emperor of Constantinople himself and many other Byzantine nobles, as a Patriarchal document which survives to this day attests to.

The Saint called the fathers of the monastery the *Enkleistoi* or the *Enclosed Ones*. He diligently instructed them not only in the ways of ascetic struggle but also gave much attention to teaching them the Orthodox Faith. Not only did he insure that the monastery had as many writings of the great Fathers as possible, but he zealously endeavoured to acquire the Holy Relics of many Saints for the fathers to venerate and from which they would receive enlightenment.

The monastery was filled with many Holy Ikons. Especially noteworthy are the frescoes depicting scenes from the Holy Gospels. It is at this point where we notice how concerned Saint Neophytos was to lead not only his monks but all Christ-loving people closer to our Lord. We observe that the Saint commanded the ikonographer to include him in many of the ikons. In the ikon of the Mystical Supper he places himself next to Judas, in the Washing of the Disciples feet, near Saint Peter, and in the Descent from the Cross he puts himself in the place of Saint Joseph of Arimathea. This was done to set an example of how we should fervently desire to be inseparably united to our Lord.

On May 6th 1191, Richard the Lion-hearted invaded and captured Cyprus on his way to Jerusalem to take part in the Third Crusade. From this day on the people of Cyprus were ruled by non-Orthodox foreigners until 1958. Richard the Lion-hearted sold Cyprus to the monastic order of the Knights Templars, who in turn sold it to the deposed King of Jerusalem, Guy de Lusignan, in 1192. The Franks introduced the Feudal system and all Cypriots became serfs. The Orthodox Church was persecuted and all educated people and most bishops were forced to leave. Using similar methods in Southern Italy and in Sicily, the Papacy forced the people to become Roman Catholics.

Saint Neophytos, at fifty-eight years of age, was called on by God to undertake a new struggle as the spiritual guide of all Cyprus. In 1196 under the direction of Pope Celestine III, a Latin Metropolitan along with suffragan bishops were given the spiritual leadership of the people of Cyprus. This was the Papal policy in all the conquered lands where there were Orthodox. Saint Neophytos led the resistance against the latinization of Cyprus without going against his vow to remain in his cave. When it was necessary, he would

write general epistles which were sent to the various parish throughout Cyprus. On Sunday or a Feast day the priest would read the epistle to the people who had come to partake in the Divine Liturgy. The Orthodox Christians would heed the words of the Saint just as if they were coming directly from the mouth of God. The righteous one would instruct the faithful in all the matters that were needed for one to remain in the Faith. His letters would include admonitions against laxity regarding the holy fasts, the significance of the Great Feasts, and exhortations to stand firm in the current struggle against the Latins. On occasion he would also stipulate that an *epitimion* should be given for violating the Holy Canons. In one letter when he referred to the Crusaders coming to save Jerusalem, he wrote that *it is similar to the wolves coming to chase away the dogs...* In another letter he wrote: *Our country now is no better than that of a raging sea, under a great storm and tempest. Nay it is worse than a wild sea. For a calm succeeds the wildness of the sea, but here day by day the tempest increases and its fury knows no end.*

Saint Neophytos observed that the growing numbers of the faithful and those who desired to attend to his teaching were depriving him of his cherished solitude. He decided that after forty years in his beloved cave of the Holy Cross he would have to leave and go higher up on the precipice. Placing a ladder on the ledge outside his cave he stood on top of the ladder and excavated a small opening which with time he enlarged so that it would become his new place of habitation. Once the new cave was complete he wished to make a ledge upon which he could walk. As the ledge was nearing completion, Satan, the hater of good, caused a boulder to dislodge and, as it rolled, it took with it the man of God. The Lord, however, wished to glorify His Saint even more and just as the Saint was about to roll off the ledge and fall to his death, the boulder was held back by the hand of God. Underneath the boulder the Saints right hand and part of his robe were caught whereas the rest of him was already over the ledge. The Fathers who were watching helplessly from down below glorified God for His mercy and rushed to dislodge the Saint from the boulder.

This new cave was named New Zion. There, he accustomed himself to living in total silence not even attending the Divine Services except on the Lords Day, on which day he would also instruct his disciples. At other times he would listen to the Divine Services and prayers of the fathers through a hole which was his only contact with the cave below. The Saint struggled in this way for a long time. He foreknew the day of his departure from this world, which he did not hide from his disciples; rather he summoned them and instructed them both verbally and in writing on how they were to continue after his departure. He also ordered that, after the funeral service, they bury him in the tomb which he had prepared and that it should be walled up and an ikon painted on the wall because he wished his tomb to remain unknown. He also expressed his desire to be buried in the burial garments which he himself had prepared and with the chains which he always wore. He bade them live in peace and harmony and in a God-pleasing manner to obey the abbot they would elect. After he uttered these things, he prayed for them, gave them his blessing, and gave up his blessed soul into the hands of God.

The man of God reposed on April 12th, 1219 after having given the people of Cyprus the guidance which would assist them in resisting the efforts of the Papists to separate them from the Kingdom of Heaven. He had become a spring of living water that did not dry up after his departure from this world. The sixty years of his struggle in the *Enkleistra*, just as the Lord had foretold him, had come to an end. The Grace that flowed from that holy cave, however, would not cease. His presence was something the people of Cyprus



always felt although for hundreds of years no one knew where his Holy Relic was. Through the Grace of God its presence was revealed in the following manner. On September 27th, 1750, a certain monk who had thought that he found a hollow space in the wall of the *Enkleistra* was overcome by temptation and imagined that there was a treasure to be found behind the wall. That night he waited for the fathers to sleep and he went to the Cave of the Holy Cross with a pickaxe and made an opening in the wall. He was then struck down by a Divine hand. When he came to himself, he ran to the abbot to confess his sin. The abbot, realizing the true nature of the treasure that was found, summoned the other fathers and lifted the marble cover and immediately the cave was filled with indescribable fragrance. Since then the 28th of September is also kept as a feast day by our Holy Church.