

The Fourth Crusade

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Did you know...

...that the classical Gothic Cathedral of Notre Dame in Amiens, largest in France, was built to contain the head of St. John the Baptist, stolen during the commission of one of the greatest crimes in history: the sack of Constantinople by the Latin West at the time of the Fourth Crusade? It is but one of the countless examples of treasures looted from that Orthodox city after its capture. This is an account of that event, telling what has to be told, about which the Orthodox Church long has been silent.

The Crusades were fought with several aims in mind: to free the Holy Land, to stop the spread of Islam, and to unify the Eastern and Western Churches. They failed in all of these: the holy places remained under Mohammedan control, Islam extended its influence, and a deeper wedge was driven between the two churches. If anything, the Crusades hastened the demise of the Byzantine Empire and its ultimate fall into Moslem hands. Overall, the Crusades had a devastating effect on the Orthodox Church.

Pope Innocent III called the Fourth Crusade in 1196. Essentially, it was a French enterprise, supported by Swabians, and later, by Venetians. Because Mohammedan power had shifted from Palestine to Cairo, the objective was to take Egypt. This meant launching a maritime campaign, requiring ships and related supplies, which the French did not have. They turned to Venice, ruled by the aged, blind doge Enrico Dandolo, who hated the capital city and envied its wealth and success in commerce. Constantinople and Venice were old rivals.

Dandolo persuaded the Crusaders to move on Constantinople instead of on Egypt by offering to advance the 85,000 silver marks needed for ships. All conquests and loot were to be divided evenly. The French agreed. Here the Crusade turned away from the control of the pope and into the hands of schemers, politicians, and adventurers. Greeks themselves were not entirely blameless in the plot against the city. The emperor Isaac had been deposed by his brother, Alexius III. Isaac's son, Alexius (the Younger), sat down with Dandolo and the Crusaders and made them an offer: he would pay 200,000 silver marks, put up an army to fight against Islam, assign 500 knights for life to guard the Holy Land, and he offered the submission of the Eastern Church in exchange for help in regaining the throne. Later, when it came time to pay Alexius could not raise the money. The Crusaders were infuriated and used this as another excuse to attack the city. In any event, the original intent of the Crusade was forgotten, and the armies stood before Constantinople. Inside the walls most of the inhabitants were Orthodox Christians. Outside the walls the men wore crosses on their mantles and called themselves Christians. It was Holy Week of the year 1204.

Their own historian wrote that the Crusaders never had imagined that there could be a city like this anywhere in the world. These men, who came from mud huts with thatched roofs, gaped in astonishment. Here it was: the imperial city, called "Tsargrad" by the Russians, greatest in the world, hub of culture and commerce, center of the civilized world. Here was more wealth than in all of Europe put together. This was the inheritor of the Roman Empire. Here was a city of churches, monasteries, palaces, towers, forums, arenas, bazaars, baths, libraries and monuments. Here stood Hagia Sophia (Holy Wisdom), crowning glory of the city, marvel of the

world, built by Justinian six centuries earlier. The Theotokos being the patron and protectress of the city, over a hundred churches were dedicated in her name. Her maphorion, which twice had saved the city: once from the Avars and once from the Russ, was kept in the Blacharnae Church, as was her wonder-working icon. The Theotokos' belt (zone) was preserved in the Chalkprateia Church in the copperware district. In the center of the city stood the Church of the Holy Apostles, built as a shrine for St. Luke, and which also was the custodian of the relics of Sts. Timothy and Andrew, as well as the head of St. John the Forerunner, in whose name there were some 35 churches. St. John Chrysostom was brought to this church from far-off Armenia for burial eight centuries earlier. Elsewhere were the relics of St. Stephen and St. James, as was the wood of the True Cross found by St. Helena. The Pantocrator Monastery was the guardian of the Icon of the Theotokos of Nicopeia, which preceded the emperor into battle. At Blacharnae stood two gigantic pillars, on the tops of which sainted stylites in past centuries had spent the remaining years of their lives in prayer and meditation. Throughout the city were numerous other churches and monasteries which guarded the many relics of Apostles, martyrs and Church fathers. Such was the city before which the western armies stood in awe and disbelief.

After receiving absolution, the Crusaders attacked. Constantinople fell after three days of the final, furious attack by land and by sea. Once inside the walls, the Crusaders began an orgy of carnage, brutality and vandalism not seen in Europe since the barbarians invaded seven centuries earlier. No one was spared: not bishop, priest, nun, man, woman or child. Few women escaped being violated, whether at home, in the street, or in the convent. Fires were started throughout the city. The butchery ended only when the Crusaders were so tired that they no longer could lift their swords. Then began looting and profanation on a scale

unparalleled in history. A mob rushed into Hagia Sophia. With the Image of the Pantocrator looking down upon them from the great dome, they broke up the altar for its gold content, smashed the icons, threw the Holy Gifts to the floor, seized the church vessels for their jewels, and tore mosaics and tapestries from the walls. Horses and mules were brought into the church the better to carry off the sacred vessels, gold, silver, and whatever else they could gather. Drunken soldiers drank from chalices and ate from patens while riding asses draped with priestly vestments. A mocking prostitute was placed on the Patriarch's chair to dance and sing obscene songs. This pattern of pilferage and desecration was repeated in churches, monasteries and palaces throughout the city. The tombs of the emperors were rifled, and all of the classical statues and monuments which had survived from ancient Greece and imperial Rome were destroyed. One writer wrote that never in history had so much beauty, so much superb craftsmanship been so wantonly destroyed in so short a space of time. What was not carried off was burned, smashed, melted down for its precious metal content, or stripped for its jewels.

After the killing, after the city had been subdued, there began a slow and steady removal of treasures out of the Orthodox temples and into the cathedrals, churches, monasteries, convents, cities and towns of Latin Europe. Some of these items had been venerated, cherished, and protected for centuries, others for a millennium. Now they were being carted away from over a hundred and fifty churches: altars, altar screens, tabernacles, antimins, icons, icon frames, processional, pectoral and altar crosses, gold and silver chains, panagias, mitres, croziers, chalices, patens, star covers and spears, Gospels, Epistle books, ladles, church plate, censers, votive lights, relics, candelabra, epitaphia, fans, reliquaries, vestments, banners, manuscripts, miniatures, ivories, carvings, mosaics, thrones, tapestries, furniture and architectural items. Cartloads of

gold and silver from Hagia Sophia found their way into the Vatican treasury. Constantinople had become the gold mine which supplied Latin Christendom.

The wealth was so great that the looting continued for sixty years. A century earlier, after the First Crusade, Jerusalem, Antioch, and Edessa were similarly stripped for a period of forty years. Now it was happening to the imperial city. A scandalous traffic in relics was started. The head of St. John the Baptist was carried off to Amiens. Amalfi, Italy took the head of St. Andrew the First-Called from the Church of the Holy Apostles, along with a set of heavy bronze doors. The bishop of Soissons shipped home the head of St. Stephen and a relic of St. John. The remains of St. Clement, pillaged from the Church of St. Theodosia, were taken to Cluny. St. Albans received the relics of St. Marina. Halbstadt claimed the relics of St. James. The True Cross was divided up among the barons, with a portion sent to the pope, and another fragment taken to Paris. A priceless gold and enamel reliquary encrusted with jewels, containing a fragment of the Wood wound up in a nunnery in Steuben. King Louis IX of France paid 10,000 silver marks for the "true" Crown of Thorns, for which he built St. Chapells in Paris.

Gone was the maphorion of the Theotokos, as was her zone and the wonder-working icon. Gone or destroyed---the relics of St. Luke and St. Timothy; no trace of the relics of St. John Chrysostom. An altar cloth with the relic of St. Paul was missing. Nothing is known of the stone seat of St. Mark.

The Venetians were the most discriminating---they knew exactly what to take. From the Monastery of the Pantocrator they appropriated a group of exquisite gem-crusted enamel cameos, (a

vast collection of panagias), to enhance the Palo D'Oro, an elaborate Byzantine bejeweled gold screen which was used in the Cathedral in Venice to cover the relics of St. Mark. (We will recall that St. Mark was stolen from Alexandria in the ninth century). They also carried off the Icon of the Theotokos of Nikopeia, as well as a relic of St. Stephen (the feet already were in Venice). The golden tabernacle from the Church of the Holy Apostles, a replica of the church itself, was added to their booty. Venice's prized possessions are the four magnificent gilded bronze horses, cast in Constantine's time, which once stood in the Hippodrome; today, except when removed for cleaning, they stand atop the gallery of St. Mark's basilica. The porphyry statue of four tetrachs, taken from a palace, stands in a corner of St. Mark's treasury.

Venetians valued craftsmen, and they took away the best: gold smiths, silver smiths, jewel workers, iconographers, woodcarvers, stone and glass workers. Much of the Venetian glass technique so famous today originated in Constantinople. St. Mark's contains the finest collection of Byzantine craftsmanship in the world. It includes 32 Byzantine chalices, plus assorted relics, reliquaries, altar pieces, Gospels, jewels, vestments, manuscripts and church plate. The collection includes the Veroli casket, the finest Byzantine carved ivory in the world, and the Psalter of Emperor Basil. Dandolo sent home shiploads of mosaics, panels, stones, pillars, precious marbles, columns of rare stones and the many building components which have gone into creating the texture of the city which today is Venice. Pope Innocent was very distressed when he heard about the outrages in Constantinople. He denounced the perpetrators harshly, and excommunicated most of them. The pope was unaware that, before the attack, his legate had absolved the Crusaders from their original vows. Later, when confronted with the possibility that he might have a unified church

on his hands, Innocent acquiesced and went along with the reality that what was done was done. He did nothing to stop the flow of desecrated wealth into Latin cathedrals and churches. Baldwin of Flanders was put on the throne and a Latin kingdom was established in the East. A Venetian replaced the Patriarch. Orthodox bishops were deposed and replaced by Roman prelates. Pressure was put on priests to submit to the papacy, but they resisted firmly. There was no union.

Dandolo demanded for Venice "one half and one quarter of the Roman Empire" as its share of conquered lands. Along with other territories, Venice took over all of the Greek islands, which it was to hold for four centuries. On Crete all of the churches were seized, the bishops were thrown out, and the priests forced to submit to Latin prelates. The Greek language was forbidden in the churches. A precious relic, the head of St. Titus, was taken away to Venice, (A century earlier, Venetians carried off the head of St. Isidore from the island of Chios, and the relics of St. Donatus from the island of Cephalonia, as well as a marble slab on which Christ was supposed to have stood. The looting continued on the islands as on the mainland. The empire was being stripped bare.

Enrico Dandolo performed his final and lasting profanation of Hagia Sophia by being buried there. Recently, when asked whether he knew the location of Dandolo's tombstone, a Greek scholar replied, "Yes, I go there to spit on it".

One might ask, "Why bring up something which happened so long ago? It is past history". The answer is simple. These church items were not taken from a dead, vanquished emperor; they were taken from a living, active, performing Orthodox Christian Church. They were stolen from the Patriarchate of Constantinople, in whose care they were placed. The Patriarchate of Constantinople still exists. It is a viable, active body which has been functioning

without interruption since it was founded by the Second Ecumenical Council in 381 AD. This is not the first time such depredations had taken place. Of the five sees extant after the Second Council, three of them: Antioch, Jerusalem and Constantinople all had been violated by the one which was accorded primacy, but which demanded supremacy. It is easier to report on these deplorable events than it is to suggest what to do about it. Picketing Latin institutions with placards and chanting slogans would be foolhardy and non-productive. After all, the problem is not entirely that of the Orthodox Church.

Someone does have a problem. Whoever possesses these articles is a receiver of stolen goods. Moreover, they are a receiver of stolen goods obtained by murder, rape, and desecration---not an enviable position in which to be, especially if such a holder happens to be a Christian church. Unfortunately, there is little to indicate that "the West", to use a general expression, even realizes the enormity that has taken place in Constantinople so long ago.

The Orthodox Church long has been accustomed to suffering in silence. Perhaps it is time we learned a lesson from other religions or nations: that when a calamity befalls you----be sure that the world never is permitted to forget. A great injustice persists, even after almost eight centuries: sacred Orthodox items are being held by a Christian church, items acquired under most distressing circumstances. This is what we must never let the world forget, by one means or another. Perhaps one day, by the grace of God, this great wrong will be made right. In the meantime, scientists tell us that Venice slowly is sinking into the Adriatic. It deserves to do so. Perhaps it is trying to hide from its sins.