

St. Louis IX

Louis's insistence on taking the cross [in December 1244] and journeying to the Holy Land was an outgrowth of his deep faith and love for Christ. He yearned to see Jerusalem under Christian control once more. His desire was so great that he was prepared to risk his personal and royal fortunes on the expedition. He was sovereign of the wealthiest region in all Christendom and the king of the most populous Christian country. There was much to lose by going on Crusade, but King St. Louis IX knew that the eternal reward greatly outweighed the temporal risk.

The thirteenth century was the "century of St. Louis," as no man more exemplified the tenor of the age than the saintly king of the Franks. Louis was blond, slender, handsome, gentle though firm, decisive in policy and generous in charity. He was a devout and dutiful son and a loving husband and father. Along with the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II, Louis was the most important political figure of the thirteenth century and the central figure in Christendom. Those two men could not have been more opposite in all aspects of their lives. Frederick was the "Crusader without faith" whereas Louis was the "perfect Crusader." One man seemed to eschew all religious faith, whereas the other embraced it and was declared a saint of the Church. Frederick kept a harem of Muslim women, whereas, uncharacteristic of the age for monarchy, Louis was a monogamous husband. Louis was a product of his times, but he also shaped the era in which he lived, and his influence (and intercession) continues to the modern world.

There was perhaps no greater king in the history of France. He governed his realm peacefully and justly for forty-four years, following three principles: devotion to God, self-discipline, and affection for his people. Even in an age of faith, the king's personal piety and sanctity stood out. He wore simple clothing, especially after his return from the Crusade, and kept a regimented prayer life. He awoke each night at midnight to participate with his royal chaplains in the Liturgy of the Hours, and said fifty Hail Marys each evening, kneeling and standing for each prayer. Louis's prayer life was augmented by penitential practices, including fasting, the wearing of a hair shirt, weekly confession, and the special personal mortification of not laughing on Fridays. He was concerned for his own salvation, but even more so for the salvation of his subjects, which he considered "his highest duty."