The Crusades
During the **Middle Ages**, Europeans had only one significant unifying aspect of life. The **Catholic Church** permeated every aspect of society. Waging war with another feudal lord was often viewed as an economic venture where loyalties were easily broken if the price was right. Battling for the Church was an entirely different thing, animosities and rivalries were forgotten if the Church needed defending.

For about 200 years, Western Europe under the sway of the Catholic Church, attempted to retake the **Holy Land** away from the **Muslims**. The largest target was the holy city of **Jerusalem**, however, other areas were fought over, such as the city of Constantinople. Jerusalem remains a religiously significant and contested site today with **Islam**, **Judaism**, and **Christianity** all having a vested interest. The Christians were never able to effectively take, and then maintain control, however, many changes occurred as a result of the Crusades.

The majority of feudal lords were killed, which allowed the few remaining to gain more power, eventually resulting in the rise of nation-states and absolute monarchs. Also, **cultural diffusion** occurred between the Arab and European worlds. New ideas and trade goods flowed between the two areas which eventually brought Europe to the forefront of world affairs.

Toward the end of the European Middle Ages, the Catholic Church launched a series of Holy Wars against the Muslims in the Middle East. These wars were known as the **Crusades**, and while their original goals were not achieved, they nevertheless, had long reaching effects. A major result of the Crusades, was an **increase in trade.** European interest in goods from the east was stimulated by returning Crusaders who brought back many things. As the Crusades ended, ships that were once used to carry soldiers to the **Middle East**, now carried trade goods. **Merchants** from rich **Italian** **city** **states**, such as **Venice and Florence**, dominated this trade. Goods from the Middle East would arrive in Venice, before following newly established trade routes to the rest of Europe. Along these new trade routes, **trade fairs** were established in towns with larger populations, or at major crossroads. Over time, merchants and craftsman settled in these towns, and some grew to be cities of several thousand people. This fundamentally altered the way people lived in Europe, and marked the beginning of the end of feudalism as serfs began to pay their feudal obligations with cash instead of service.