The Fifth Crusade (1217 – 1229)  
AKA The Children's Crusade

Christian children dreamed they were chosen to save the Holy Land. But their dreams morphed into nightmares. Stephen, a French Christian boy, had an inspirational vision in 1212—that he would conquer the Muslims and recapture the Holy Land. Jesus had constructed him to form a crusade of pure-hearted young boys, travel to Jerusalem and expunge the Muslim infidels. The spirits must have been busy that fateful year, for Nicholas, a German child, had a similar vision—guided by a cross in the sky.

The air in medieval Europe was humming with Holy Crusade talk. Morally distraught by the unchristian acts of the Fourth Crusade, Europe yearned for a cleansing. The Children's Crusade of Stephen and Nicholas seemed to be just the right tonic. Tragically, the children's dreams of Holy victories quickly morphed into nightmares.

Young Stephen scampered merrily around his village of Cloyes, preaching his Holy Crusade to every boy in sight. His words were infectious. In short order, Stephen rallied 30,000 children to his cause. As they marched toward the sea, the boys pithily responded to skeptics that:

They were equal to the Divine will in this matter and that, whatever God might wish to do with them, they would accept it willingly and with humble spirit.  
— James Brundage, The Medieval Sourcebook

Fearing nothing, the unarmed and untrained, defenseless little lambs were on their way to

Stephen was not the only overnight evangelist success story. Nicholas was also busy turning his vision into a Crusade. So effective was his heartfelt preaching that—in short order—thousands of young German boys gathered around his Holy Crusade banner.

While the young and innocent today are vulnerable to cruel and greedy adults, in medieval Europe, lacking any form of civil law, the Children Crusaders were walking into a deathtrap. When Stephen's boys made it to the French coast, they were in a pinch, for the Mediterranean Sea did not part as Stephen promised. Unable to "walk to Jerusalem," they boarded seven small ships, 700 boys per ship, and set sail for the Holy Land. A merciless Mother Nature destroyed two ships, killing all 1,400 boys, and the remaining five ships touched shore not in Jerusalem, but in Egypt. Greedy sailors had decided to make some fast money by selling their children passengers to the Muslim Egyptians. Instead of destroying the Muslims, the boys became their slaves.

The children with Nicholas fared even worse. They crossed the Alps during stormy weather and thousands fell to their deaths from the treacherous mountain trails. The few boys who survived the crossing split into small groups and attempted to find a passage to the Holy Land. Many were raped or killed, or just disappeared. As quickly as it began, the Children's Crusade was over—inspired by the visions of children, devastated by the reality of war.