

Our Lady of the Rosary and the Battle of Lepanto

by Father Joseph A. Sirba

The feast of Our Lady of the Rosary is celebrated by the Church on October 7th, and the story of how this feast came about is a fascinating one. A detailed account of it is given below. It is perhaps one of the most important events in the history of western civilization, and yet, it is largely unknown. Nevertheless, what is described below is true, and you can look it up in the history books.

Occasionally, events occur that are later recognized as major turning points in history. Had things gone some other way, our modern world would look very different. For instance, just think how different our world would be if the Japanese had won the Battle of Midway. Had they won, it's almost certain that the Pacific would be under Japanese influence today. The same could be said if General Robert E. Lee had won the Battle of Gettysburg. Had the South been victorious, it's very possible that the Confederate States would be an independent country today.

Several centuries ago, another one of these turning points in history occurred, a turning point whose significance was far greater than those mentioned above. Yet that turning point is hardly known today. Nevertheless, had its outcome been different, it's very likely that Europeans and people of European descent throughout the western hemisphere would be Moslems worshipping Allah in Mosques rather than Christians who acknowledge Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior.

In fact, it's very likely that our whole outlook on life and death and salvation would be fundamentally different. We would not honor the most Blessed Trinity, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We would not acknowledge Jesus Christ as both true God and true man. We would not celebrate Christ's birth on Christmas nor His Resurrection from the dead on Easter. We would not honor the Blessed Virgin Mary nor any of the saints. We would not have the seven Sacraments, and so, we would not be baptized nor be able to receive Holy Communion. We would not have our Holy Father in Rome to guide us and lead Christ's Church. We would have none of these things which God has given to us through His Holy Catholic Church. Instead, we would be praying to Allah and bowing down to Mecca five times each day. It would be a very different world indeed.

So, what was this event, what was this turning point in history that we know so little about today? Well, that event was the Battle of Lepanto, and it took place on October 7th, 1571. Below is an account of what happened on that momentous day and the events which lead up to it.

Up until the birth of Mohammed about 570, the vast majority of people living around the Mediterranean Sea, both in Europe, Asia and in Africa, were Catholics. At that time, there were no separate Orthodox Churches, nor were there any Protestants. Nearly everyone who called himself or herself a Christian was Catholic. That included the Patriarch of Constantinople (the

ancient capital of the Eastern Roman Empire), the Patriarch of Alexandria in Egypt, and the Patriarch of Antioch in Syria, as well as all the other bishops of the Roman Empire's principal cities.

This all changed with the coming of Mohammed and the later spread of his religion in the 7th century. Jerusalem, where Christ died and rose again, fell to the Moslems in 638. Egypt, the birthplace of Saint Anthony of the Desert, the founder of monasticism, and of Saints Cyril and Athanasius, battlers of Arianism, also fell in 642. So too did all of North Africa. Carthage, the City associated with Saint Augustine fell in 698.

In 711, Moslem armies crossed the Straights of Gibraltar and overthrew the Visigothic Kingdom of Spain conquering most of the Iberian Peninsula (the area occupied by modern Spain and Portugal). In 717-718, Constantinople successfully defended itself from the Moslem onslaught, and in 732, a large Moslem army which had crossed the Pyrenees Mountains into France was met at Tours by Charles Martel, King of France, and defeated. If the Moslems had prevailed either at Constantinople or at Tours, Western Europe would be Moslem today.

Both chronologically and geographically, the Battle of Tours marked Islam's farthest advance into western Europe. From that point, Catholics from the tiny Spanish kingdoms that remained free of Moslem control, those in the north and west of the Iberian Peninsula, would spend the next 760 years (until 1492), driving the Moslem invaders from their homelands.

In the east, the Byzantine Empire, all that was left of the ancient Roman Empire, saw its influence and prestige gradually decline. Its crown jewel was Asia Minor (modern Turkey) which contained some of the oldest Christian communities of the world. It was in Asia Minor that Saint Paul had preached to the Galatians, to the Ephesians, perhaps to the Colossians, and to the people of many other cities mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles. Indeed, the City of Tarsus, Saint Paul's own birthplace was located in Asia Minor.

In the eleventh century, Seljuk Turks consolidated Moslem control in the Middle East and threatened much of Syria and Asia Minor. At the Battle of Mantzikert in 1071, the Byzantine Emperor Romanus IV was captured and with him, eastern and central Asia Minor were lost to this Moslem tribes. In 1224, the Ottoman Turks emigrated to Asia Minor after being pushed from their ancestral homes by Genghis Khan. Near the end of the 13th Century, this particular tribe gained control of the Turkish holdings, and from that time on, it continued to press Christian Europe from the east. The Ottomans defeated the Serbian Christians at the Battle of Kosovo in 1389, and in 1453, they captured Constantinople, the capital of the Byzantine Empire. It was the beginning of the end. Always pressing forward both by land and by sea, the Turks captured the Island of Rhodes from the Knights of Saint John (later known as the Knights of Malta) in 1522. Their Sultan, Selim II took complete control of the Island of Cyprus with the fall of Famagosta on August 18th, 1571.

The Turk's goal was to eliminate Christianity altogether. Mehmet II vowed to stable his horses beneath the Dome of Saint Peter's and to wind the Pope's head in a turban.¹ His grandson is said to have vowed that he would repeat what had taken place at Constantinople's great church,

Hagia Sophia, the Church of the Holy Wisdom (and which still stands to this day in Istanbul). He intended to replace the cross over Saint Peter's Basilica with the Moslem crescent and turn the Church into a mosque.

At this point things looked very bleak for Christendom. All of the east, the lands where Christianity had first taken root, were firmly in the hands of the Moslems. To make matters worse, northern Europe was in turmoil due to the teachings of Luther, Zwingli, Calvin and others. Whole nations which had once been Catholic had left their baptismal faith to follow the new Protestant teachings. Things looked bleak indeed.

It was during these turbulent times that Pope Saint Pius V was elected. He would rule over the Church a little more than six years, from January 7, 1566 until his death on May 1, 1572. Yet, in that short time, he would institute numerous reforms and save Christendom.

Pope Saint Pius V was born of poor parents on January 17, 1504. As a child he cared for his family's flocks. When he was fourteen, he joined the Dominicans, the mendicant order founded by Saint Dominic to whom our Lady gave the Rosary. He was ordained to the priesthood in 1528 at the age of 24, and in 1556, he became a bishop. He was named a Cardinal the following year.

During his years as bishop, Saint Pius V worked for the reform of the Church, addressing areas legitimately criticized by the Protestant reformers. As Pope, he worked to eliminate moral evils in the Papal States. Some of his contemporaries were of the opinion that he was trying to turn the City of Rome into a monastery. He especially worked to put into effect the decrees of the Council of Trent. That Council met in a number of sessions over the years from 1545 to 1563.

Pope Pius V ordered that bishops live within their dioceses, and he opposed nepotism. He revised the liturgy of the Church and published the Catechism of the Council of Trent. He worked to eliminate heresy, and he declared the great Dominican theologian, Saint Thomas Aquinas, a doctor of the Church. After his years of hard work for God and His Church, this saintly pope died repeating the words, "O Lord, increase my sufferings and my patience!"ⁱⁱ

Pope Saint Pius V was beatified on May 1, 1672 by Pope Clement X and canonized on May 22, 1712 by Clement XI. His feastday is April 30.ⁱⁱⁱ

It was to Saint Pius V that the defense of Europe fell by default. For nearly ten centuries, the Moslems had threatened Christendom with destruction. Now the Moslems were seeking absolute control of the Mediterranean Sea. The rulers of western and northern Europe had little interest in the Moslem advances that had occurred in the south and east. Only the Pope saw the danger, and not just to the Mediterranean countries, but to all of Christendom. To that end, he worked to form a league of defense.

Pope Saint Pius V was able to enlist Christian forces from Spain and Venice as well as smaller contingents from the Knights of Malta and the Genoese. Forces of the Papal States would round out this combined naval force. The league was in place and documents were signed on March 7, 1571, formerly the feast of Saint Thomas Aquinas.^{iv}

Unwilling to rely on merely human or worldly powers to save Christendom, the Pope turned to Our Lady and involved her as a principal partner in the League. He proclaimed a Rosary crusade and ordered fasting and continual prayer to save Christendom.

The Christian naval forces were placed under the command of Don John of Austria, the half-brother of the Spanish King, Philip II. The ships provided by the Papal States were under the command of Marcantonio Colonna, a member of the famous Italian family.^v

As time for the battle drew near, Pope Saint Pius V ordered Christians to say the Rosary daily, and before the battle, he ordered a day of fasting and prayer. People made pilgrimages to the shrine of Loretto.^{vi} The Pope blessed the Christian fleet and assured its commander of victory. He also ordered Don John to rid his forces of any soldiers who were not leading lives in harmony with Christian teachings and morals.^{vii}

In late summer, the Christian fleet left Messina in Sicily, and each ship and its crew were blessed by the Papal Nuncio as they passed from the harbor. Don John sailed under the Blue Banner of Our Lady of Guadalupe. The fleet crossed the Adriatic and sailed down its eastern coast past the Greek island of Corfu.

The Turkish forces were under the command of Ali Pasha. Their fleet was moored at the Port of Lepanto, the Italian name for the modern Greek city Nafpaktos. The City is located on the north side of the Gulf of Corinth where the Gulf narrows markedly. The Turks had 208 galleys and 66 small ships, and the Christians about the same. It was there in the Gulf of Corinth off Lepanto that the Christian forces discovered the Turkish fleet.

The great battle took place on October 7th, 1571. On that day, the entire Christian army knelt and received Holy Communion. Capuchin priests accompanied the Venetian navy as chaplains. One, Father Anselmo da Pietramolara, urged the Christian forces on with a raised crucifix and helped prevent the ship he served from being captured.^{viii} Don John gave the signal for battle by raising a banner he had received from the Pope. On it was the image of Christ crucified.

The Turkish forces formed a line in the shape of a crescent and were driven forward by a brisk wind which gave them the advantage. However, just as the battle began, the wind died and was followed by a strong wind which favored the Christian ships. That wind blew before it the smoke and fire of battle blinding the Turkish ships.

The battle lasted from about six in the morning until darkness fell in the evening, and when it was over, the Christian forces had lost only 17 ships and 7500 men killed while the Turks had

lost 15 ships and 177 captured. The Turks also lost between 20,000 and 30,000 men killed, and among them was their commanding general Ali Pasha. In addition, between 12,000 and 15,000 Christian slaves used as rowers were freed from the captured ships.^{ix}

In a note of historical interest, this was the last major naval battle fought with ships propelled primarily by oars.^x Another note of historical interest is that the Spanish author, Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, author of *Don Quixote*, was injured in this battle by a shot through his left hand, and he never regained use of it.^{xi}

The Pope learned about the victory in a miraculous vision. He had been working on certain matters with some of the Cardinals in Rome when suddenly he became still. It is said that he left his work, opened the window and looked up to heaven for some time. Then he said, "A truce to business; our great task at present is to thank God for the victory which He has just given the Christian army."^{xii}

Two weeks later, an official courier arrived from Venice to Rome with news of the victory. When the Pope heard of the victory, it's said that he burst into tears.^{xiii} It was later determined that he spoke these words at the same time that the battle was won (remember, there were no means of modern communications at that time, and the Pope was in Rome, some 550 miles away).

Pope Saint Pius V knew who was responsible for the victory. He attributed the victory to the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary. In gratitude, he inserted a new petition into the Litany of Loretto, "Mary, Help of Christians." He also instituted a feast, which he named Our Lady of Victory declaring that "By the Rosary, the darkness of heresy has been dispelled and the light of the Catholic faith shines out in all its brilliancy."^{xiv}

Two years later, on April 1st, 1573, Pope Gregory XIII changed this new feast's name to the feast of the Holy Rosary to be celebrated on the first Sunday in October.^{xv} Later popes extended its celebration to more and more churches, and Pope Clement XII extending it to the whole Church in 1716 following another Christian victory over the Turks at Peterwardein in Hungary. Later, in 1913, Pope Saint Pius X transferred its celebration to October 7th, the actual date of the Battle.^{xvi}

The Venetian Senate proclaimed: "Neither valor, nor arms, nor leaders but the Mary's Roses made us the victors."^{xvii} In thanksgiving, the Venetians commissioned a chapel to Our Lady of the Rosary. They lined the walls with records of the battle and inscribed them with the above quotation in Latin, "*Non virtus, non arma, non duces sed Mariae Rosiae victores nos fecit.*"

Philip II had the pennant of the Turkish Admiral Ali Pasha hung upon the walls of the Escorial, the famous monastery and burial place of Spanish royalty, and decreed that after his death, his coffin should be lined with the timbers from the Spanish galleons that had fought at Lepanto.^{xviii}

While the Battle of Lepanto didn't mark the end of Turkish power (they lost the battle but they didn't lose Greece), it was, nevertheless, a turning point in history. The Christian Navy handed the Turkish navy their first defeat ever, and that defeat shattered the perceived Moslem superiority in the Mediterranean. The Catholic victory at Lepanto gave Christendom the breathing space it needed to survive and regroup.

Every victory implies a contest, and the Battle of Lepanto was truly a contest; indeed, it was a very open and visible confrontation between forces loyal Jesus Christ and those opposed to Him.

Jesus has promised peace to those who follow Him, but more often than not, this peace is internal rather than external. Those who follow His teachings and keep His commandments will be at peace with themselves and with God, but that peace will often be obtained only with great effort. We must often battle with ourselves, with others and with society in order to follow Jesus.

Indeed, it's interesting how often the Christian life is described in the scriptures as a battle or even a war. Saint Paul says that we must "be strong in the Lord" and "put on the whole armor of God...for we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places (Eph 6:10-12)." To fight them, he says we must take the whole armor of God, put on the breastplate of righteousness, take the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, the sword of the Spirit and pray at all times (Eph 6:13-18).

Saint Paul's words should remind us that we have spiritual enemies and that we are in a spiritual battle for our souls. To win we must have spiritual help and spiritual weapons, and indeed spiritual allies, and our greatest ally is the Mother of God, Mary most holy. She will not only help us to triumph over ourselves and over the devils, but also when necessary, even over human adversaries who would try to destroy us or the Holy Catholic Church itself.

The spiritual weapon Mary has placed in our hands in none other than the Rosary. It is tried and true, and generations have experienced this. Indeed, after the Mass, it is the spiritual weapon *par excellence* for doing spiritual battle. Consequently, saying the Rosary daily, especially during the months of October and May is a most powerful weapon in defense against the enemies of God and His Church. We would be wise to use this weapon our Lady has entrusted to us.

i. The Story of the Rosary, p. 98.

ii. The Catholic Encyclopedia, Vol. XII, p. 131.

iii. The Oxford Dictionary of Popes, Pius V, Saint, p. 268.

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- iv. The Story of the Rosary, p. 102.
- v. The Catholic Encyclopedia, Vol. IV, p. 127.
- vi. Mary's Garden of Roses, p. 17.
- vii. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
- viii. The Catholic Encyclopedia, Vol. III, p. 323.
- ix. The Catholic Encyclopedia, Vol. IX, p. 182
- x. The National Geographic Traveler: Greece, 2001, p. 141
- xi. The Catholic Encyclopedia, Vol. III, p. 543; The National Geographic Traveler: Greece, 2001, p. 141.
- xii. The Catholic Encyclopedia, Vol. XII, p. 131.
- xiii. *Ibid.*
- xiv. Mary's Garden of Roses, p. 18-19.
- xv. The Catholic Encyclopedia, Vol. XV, p. 415.
- xvi. The Roman Calendar: Text and Commentary, p. 62; Mary's Garden of Roses, p. 19.
- xvii. The Story of the Rosary, p. 108.
- xviii. The Story of the Rosary, p. 107.