

Muslims and Lepanto

by Dr. Rosalie Ann Turton

The battle of Lepanto was decisive and world changing. To read about it is gripping and thrilling, and to study it makes us realize that the world as we know it would have become completely different if the outcome of the battle had prevailed in the opposite direction. And, by all rights and calculations, *it should have!*

At that time, in 1571, Europe and much of the world could have become controlled by Muslim forces. I do not want to call them Muslim leadership, because they are not leaders, but rather forces, who often *force* their members to stay in that practice of the Islamic religion or face a severe punishment, and sometimes even death.

Yes, there are many good people who keep that faith and belief, but not always by choice. Since every human being has an innate need for God, some Islamic people may truly believe in that religion and live it well.

I recall that, at one time, Our Lady of Medjugorje told the children, when they asked Her, "Who is the holiest person in Medjugorje?" She responded that it was a certain old Muslim woman.

In many cases, those in religions other than the Roman Catholic Faith, may know that the holy Roman Catholic Church is the true church and that Jesus Christ is God, but they feel that it may be too difficult to live.

Generally, many other religions can be very easy. In them, you can often be your own "God" and justify doing almost whatever you want to do. You can make up your own rules for salvation, but in doing so, if you disobey God, you are on the road to perdition and not salvation.

However, if you have some good Catholic or holy relative or friend praying for you, there is great

hope that you will ultimately go in the right direction. *Prayer is tremendously powerful.* Never doubt it. You will see the truth of it as we look more closely at the great battle of Lepanto.

Before The Lepanto Battle

G.K. Chesterton, in his book *Lepanto*, (www.chesterton.org) states that most of Christian Europe at that time was "diseased and divided." In stark contrast, the Turkish Ottoman Empire (the Muslims) was, to all outward appearances, remarkably strong and unified.

Every Ottoman Sultan was under pressure to further expand the reaches of his Empire, and was expected to bring at least one foreign state under Islamic rule during his reign. Much of Europe was trembling with fear. The Muslims had openly boasted that they were going to *turn all Christians into Muslim slaves!*

Undeclared and Ruthless

No Turkish force *had been defeated in living memory*, and the Turks had a propensity for garish displays of power and cruelty in battle, as well as upon the civilian populations after a victory.

In 1570, Ali Pasha, the deceitful Commander of the Islamic fleet, enticed Niccolo Dandolo, the governor of the island of Cyprus, with generous terms for surrender. After Dandolo complied, Pasha had him flayed alive, before having his head cut off and sent in a basket to Marc Antonio Bradigan, the Venetian Commander.

After six months of fighting, Ali Pasha played the same trick on Bradigan, offering him surrender terms of military honors, safe transport of his troops out of the city, and security for those families which either chose to follow Bradigan or stay behind.

Once again, Ali Pasha duped his enemy. Bradigan accepted the terms, and upon entering the city, Ali Pasha ordered his soldiers to *cut off Bradigan's nose and ears!*

Two weeks later, he had Bradigan flayed to death. Then Pasha directed his troops to quarter the body, stuff the skin with straw, and to take it to Constantinople (now, Istanbul) to be paraded through the streets.

One Bright Light

In this seemingly dire situation, there seemed to be only one bright light in Europe, and that was (St.) Pope Pius V, elected in 1566.

Formerly a Dominican monk, he was old, sickly, brilliant, holy, and much respected. He ate his very frugal meals in solitude. He enjoyed walking barefoot and without a cloak to the major churches in Rome, and he knelt late into the night in long hours of meditation.

Probably because of his own personal holiness and his unflinching devotion and confidence in Our Pure Mother Mary, from then on, all popes after him wore white.

He was stunningly different from his immediate Renaissance predecessors, in that they all came from the aristocratic class and were some of the most notoriously corrupt popes in history ...and often under whom Christendom splintered.

Pope Pius V knew that the most important issues of his day were the threats of Protestant heresies dividing Europe, and the threat of the Muslim Turks conquering it. He knew that the victory in these humanly impossible struggles could only be won by utter reliance on the power and mercy of God!

He understood that the real battle being fought was spiritual; a clash of creeds was at hand, and the stakes were *the very existence of the Christian West.*

The Holy Father was certain that an attack from the Muslims would take place the following year, and he was convinced that *the only chance to repel such an attack* was to assemble as large a fleet as soon as possible to engage the Turks at sea, rather than sit and wait for them to advance on Rome ...and to fortify the fleet with much prayer by Christians.

He knew that *both* factors were *essential elements.*

The Year Of The Battle

As the Spring of 1571 approached, Pius V's almost five years of pleading with Monarchs and government officials to unite in opposition to the threat of the Turkish fleet *seemed without effect*. The various Christian countries were jealously guarding their own interests and seemed almost completely unwilling to cooperate with one another.

The piety and religious zeal that Pius V brought to the papacy were perfectly suited to the crisis at hand, and he then turned to the faithful under his charge for prayers and supplications to God.

On March, 7, 1571, exactly seven months before the Battle of Lepanto was fought, the Holy League was formed by Spain, Venice, and the Papal States, each pledging a certain number of ships and men to the fleet to meet the Turks at Sea.

The Pope ordered more prayers and fasts for the success of the League, and in particular, stressed the importance of one prayer: *the Holy Rosary*.

As the summer of 1571 progressed, the Turkish fleet began raiding Venetian islands in the Adriatic, and the signs were clear that an attack on Italy was imminent. The Holy Father, and many others, well realized that an attack on Rome, Venice, Naples, Genoa, Florence, and Sicily, the "bread basket" of Spain, could lead to the collapse of Christianity in Europe.

Pius V ordered the Holy League to advance south into the Gulf of Patras to seek out the Ottoman Muslim fleet, reported to be lying at anchor in the fortified harbor of Lepanto, Greece (now known as Naupaktos, which is situated between the Gulf of Patras and the Gulf of Corinth). The Ottoman fleet was fresh from its recent victory at Cyprus. Sultan Selim II *was now assembling the men and ships necessary to sack Rome*.

In their advance throughout the Mediterranean, the Turks desired to take over Rome. They called it "the Red Apple," ripe, bright, and full of juicy plunder.

Don Juan, Christian Commander

The Pope had personally, and successfully, advocated to place the leadership of the Holy League's fleet in the hands of Prince Don Juan of Austria, the 24 year old illegitimate and holy half-brother of King Philip II of Spain.

It was Don Juan's reputation for valor, honesty, and military skill that recommended him. He also understood the stakes at hand.

Don Juan was clear in his own mind as to the terms on which Islamic aggression must be fought. He knew that he had been given the task of fighting a total war against another system of ideas — historically, the hardest of all wars to win.

The Holy Father told Don Juan that God would give him the victory, as long as he did not recruit any soldiers living an evil life. It followed that in the ships of the Holy League, *blasphemy, or any other kind of religious doubt, openly expressed, had to be treated as sedition requiring a severe punishment*. The impending battle could only be won by men who were unanimous.

Our Lady appeared to Venerable Catherine, a Carmelite nun who had previously been the governess of Don Juan. Our Lady said that the Christian Forces were not worthy of winning the battle, and that Catherine could "help" them. Catherine agreed, and she flagellated herself to blood (see *Sign of Her Heart*).

The Odds

According to researcher, retired U.S. Army Colonel, Melvin Kriesel, the forces were approximately as follows:

Christians: The fleet was comprised of 30,000 soldiers, 50,000 oarsmen (who could be trusted to fight against the Muslims, and were left unchained and supplied with weapons during the battle). They had some 250 vessels (208 of which were war galleys, and the rest were various smaller craft), *lined up for*

battle in the form of a crucifix. (A battle formation gunnery advantage.) ... front line, 6 heavily armed war Galleys (galleasses) with 400 harque-busiers (musket guns), and 54 cannons each;

... the center, 63 galleys (the main battle commanded by Don Juan);

... the right, 64 galleys (commanded by Giovanni Andrea Doria, bringing an exact copy of O.L. of Guadalupe, appearing 40 years before in 1531);

... the left, 63 galleys (commanded by 76 year old Sebastian Veniero, the oldest man in the battle);

... the rear of the main battle, 35 galleys and some smaller ships (commanded the Marquis of Santa Cruz).

Muslims: The fleet was comprised of 100,000 soldiers (*more than three time the number of soldiers that were on the Christian ships!*) ... (and many thousands of oarsmen, of which more than 14,000 were known to be Christians. *Thus, none of the oarsmen could be trusted to fight, so all of them had to remain chained to the galleys during the battle. A sinking ship meant their demise*).

They had some 370 vessels (over 300 major war galleys, and a number of other assorted gun ships), *lined up for battle in the form of a crescent*.

Prayer And The Battle

As the Holy League's fleet sailed out to meet the Turks in the late summer of 1571, all Europe waited, and the faithful prayed the Rosary.

The Christian fleet was outnumbered, less trained, and perhaps less ferocious... *but they had God and the Rosary on their side*. For the faith, they were determined to fight to the death! And if, because of the winds, the oarsmen needed to remain at the oars during the battle and could not assist in the fighting, they realized that they could all be lost. *...So be it! They knew that only God controlled the winds and all the circumstances*.

The Day Of The Battle

Pius V, himself, had prayed for the expedition almost incessantly, and on the very day and hour that

the battle was raging, Rosary processions in the church of the Santa Maria sopra Minerva in Rome, the headquarters of the Dominicans, were pouring forth petitions for victory. It was the very church, where exactly 7 months earlier to the day, on March 7, the Holy League had originally been proclaimed!

The Holy Father granted each man in the fleet a general absolution — an indulgence in this life and a pardon in the next, to all who served and died on this fateful day.

They eventually entered in the Gulf of Lepanto to meet the Turkish fleet on Sunday, October 7, 1571, in, as Chesterton puts it, “one of the most splendid and appalling battles that ever stained the sea or smoked to the sun.”

It would be the *largest galley fight* with some almost 700 ships, and the *bloodiest deck-to-deck sea battle* in naval history! The event was spectacular with all the elements of good and evil stretching their spiritual and physical strengths to their limits!

Crucifixes adorned all of the Christian ships. Each man in the Holy League’s fleet had been given a Rosary, and on the morning of the battle they prayed the Rosary together, before a pre-dawn Mass was said on every ship.

The Turkish fleet, with the wind at their backs, sailed confidently out to meet the Christians...

The Battle

On October 5 and 6, a dense fog enveloped the Christian Fleet. On October 7, the day did not begin well for them. For reasons of safety, Don Juan had given strict orders that only he was to fire the first shot. The men obeyed.

The rowers manning the banks of heavy oars on the Christian ships had to struggle to keep the galleys in motion against stiff head-winds blowing up the coast of Greece. Bosons with whips paced the catwalks, ready to lash any man not thought to be pulling his weight. With great difficulty, the fleet worked its way South and

rounded into the narrows of the Gulf of Patras.

As the Christian advance guard entered the Gulf, it saw the enormous, startling, and fearsome force of Ottoman war galleys commanded by Ali Pasha bearing in from the east in full battle array. Less than 15 miles of open water now separated the struggling force of Christendom from an Islamic multitude that stretched *shore to shore across the Gulf!*

The Flagships

On the flagship, the *Sultana*, the Christians could see Ali Pasha’s green and gold battle pennant streaming high on the mast. The Islamic pennant was covered with verses from the Koran, and emblazoned with the name of Allah embroidered 28,900 times in gold calligraphy. It was the banner of the Sultan, and one of the Islamic treasures of Mecca. The Prophet Mohammed, himself, had carried the sacred symbol... it had *never* been captured in battle.

Don Juan then signaled that he intended to engage. He ordered that the battle pennant of the Holy League be run up the mast of his command ship, the *Reale*. The great banner, blessed and given to the Holy League by Pius V, unfurled to display a gigantic cross. The consecrated banner was heralded by a great shout from the soldiers of the Holy League, who until this time had been ominously quiet.

However, from the crescent Turkish ships, as they sailed closer to their Christian enemies, came yells, shots, gongs, clashing cymbals, and blaring conches. The Turkish uproar was meant to shake the nerves of their enemy.

From the ships of the Holy League, not a shot had yet been fired. Don Juan sailed on a small *fregata* to each of the Christian ships, and with a Crucifix in his hand, he shouted up to each one, “You have come here to fight the battle of the Cross — to conquer or to die. But whether you die or conquer, do your duty this day. In death or in victory, you will

win immortality!” He then went back to the *Reale* and knelt at the bow and prayed. Across the fleet, thousands of officers and men followed his example by dropping to their knees in heart-felt prayer to God.

Inspirations From The Holy Spirit

The Christians had some surprises for Ali Pasha and his men. I believe that these inspirations came directly from the Holy Spirit, *as they had never been thought of or tried in battle before.*

The first surprise was the six heavily armed war galleasses placed a mile in advance of the Christian line. It was the *first time* that the high walled galleasses with their cannons were ever used in battle.

When the battle started, the Turks mistook the galleasses to be merchant supply vessels, and set out to attack them. They thought it would be “easy pickings” to obtain the treasure of their cargo, and they felt that they had plenty of time to engage in the main battle, which they thought would be a quick Christian defeat.

This proved to be disastrous for the Turks, for the galleasses with their many guns, alone were able to *sink some 70 Turkish galleys* in the advancing crescent, *even before* it met the extended battle line of the Christian fleet!

Then, a miracle occurred. A sudden shift in the wind utterly turned the advantage from the Turks to the Holy League. All along Don Juan’s battle line, lateen sails were quickly raised, as if from a mighty and confident breath, just as Ottoman sails were hastily dropped. Ali’s ships visibly lost momentum. No one doubted that *God had intervened!*

The favorable winds freed up the many thousands of Christian galley slaves, and they were handed swords or half-pikes for the battle.

Ironically, this battle proved that the day of the oared ship was already past. Future battles would be decided by broadside cannon and sail, and not by infantry men assaulting from the decks of oared galleys.

The second surprise was having some of the burdensome iron ramming rods removed from the Christian war galleys, so that they were able to get in closer, making their shots more deadly and effective.

The third surprise was that the Christian fleet had installed boarding nets stretched from stem to stern, so that the enemy could only board the ships after much carnage.

In those days, to protect the cause and the leadership, the flagships usually did not engage directly in the battle, but Ali and Don Juan, in central positions in their fleets, seemed to have the desire to crush one another, just as evil and good often strive to totally overcome the other.

They went toward each other with resolute determination, each thinking perhaps, *how dare he try to overcome!*

Not far from the splendid Papal Banner, Don Juan hoisted a life-size Crucifix, eliciting screams of joy from the Christians. But when Ali Pasha and his men saw it, in hatred they cried out, "There is the Christ, the leader. Destroy Him, and the Christians, as well. Let us kill all the unbelievers of Allah!"

They aimed their weapons directly at the Crucifix, and one well-aimed musket shot came toward the legs of Christ on the cross... but suddenly, Jesus came alive, and moved His legs sideways. (Today, you can see that Crucifix, still in the miraculous position, in the Blessed Sacrament Chapel in the Cathedral of Barcelona, Spain.)

Don Juan broke the Christian silence with a shot fired directly toward Ali Pasha, like a personal challenge. At the third attempt, Don Juan's ship pounded the larger Turkish flagship, and Don Juan's men were able to board it, even while his own ship the *Reale*, was sinking!

The men fought harder. Because of the greater skill of the Turks, several times it seemed that the Christians were out-maneuvered or out-numbered, but often just in time, other Christian galleys

were able to come to the rescue!

The vengeance between the warriors was so great that all the men on both sides chose to kill, rather than to take captives. Scores of dead and dying men soon littered the decks.

The muskets of the West slowly overcame the bows of the East. Even if a Bowman might get off as many as 30 arrows before an individual gun could be fired again, the Turkish arrows could not penetrate the armor of the Spanish infantry. However, the musket balls from the gun could seriously devastate the ranks of the unarmored Turks.

Don Juan gave instructions not to kill Ali, but some of the soldiers who remembered Bradigan and Ali's treachery could not be restrained. They sought him out and sent a musket ball into his forehead. A freed oarsman quickly severed Ali's head and hoisted it up on a pike for all to see.

The sacred banner of the Prophet was swept from the masthead of the invaded *Sultana*, and the Papal banner was raised in its place to the tremendous joy and cries of "Victory" by the Christians, as triumphant trumpets blared across the waters.

The fighting took place all day, and by 4 p.m., the gigantic bloody battle of Lepanto was over. The specific menace which had brought the Holy League fleet into being — the Turkish battle fleet — had finally been destroyed. More than 12,000 Christian galley slaves, many of whom were victims of kidnapping raids in past years around the Mediterranean, were now free men.

The Holy League is estimated to have lost only 7000 men in battle, while the Ottoman, lost some 30,000, with untold numbers more wounded. The Christian fleet destroyed or captured more than 300 Muslim ships (only some 13 were said to have returned to the Ottoman empire), but amazingly, only 20 or so Christian ships were lost.

Vision By The Pope

On October 7, the Pope, who was conversing on business with some

of his cardinals, suddenly turned from them abruptly and opened a window, remaining there for some time with his eyes fixed outwardly. He was having a vision of the battle, and its victorious outcome.

Then, closing the window, in tears of joy, he said, "This is not a moment in which to talk business; let us go to give thanks to God for the victory that He has granted to the arms of the Christians."

After The Battle

The Pope's proclamation was confirmed 19 days later, on October 26, when official news of the victory finally reached Rome. After that, he ordered that the title, *Auxilium Christianorum — Help of Christians*, be added to the Laetian Litanies.

Even the Venetian Senate, whose members were tough and hard-tempered people used to facing any sort of danger on sea and land, attributed the principal merit of the victory to Our Lady, so much so that they inscribed the following sentence on a new commemorative painting in its meeting hall:

"Non virtus, nor arma, non duces, sed Maria Rosarii, victores nos fecit" (Not courage, nor arms, nor generals, but Our Lady of the Rosary made us victors.)

Pope St. Pius V, in 1572, ordered an annual commemoration of Our Lady of Victory to be made on October 7. Then, a year later, Pope Gregory XIII changed the name of the observance to that of Our Lady of the Rosary, fixing it to the first Sunday of October.

Pope Clement XI finally decreed that the feast of the Holy Rosary should be observed throughout the western Church on October 7, the actual date of the battle of Lepanto. Pope Leo XIII then added the invocation, "Queen of the Most Holy Rosary, pray for us" to the Litany of Loreto.

Death of Pius V

Pope Pius V, died on May 1, 1572, not even one year after the battle, and was canonized on May 22, 1712 ...dates at the beginning and end of

Mary's month. Fittingly, Pope Sixtus V, on January 9, 1588, had Pius V's remains transported in Rome from St. Peter's Basilica to St. Mary's Major Basilica.

Indeed, it can be said that Lepanto and Pius V have both helped make October and May be called *the months of the Rosary*. Since that time, the traditional call for Marian prayers, and especially the Rosary, with King Philip, to muster ships and forces to invade and conquer England, to free Mary, the Queen of the Scots, and to marry her. If it had happened, it could have been the beginning of a Catholic England!

However, after the battle of Lepanto, King Philip of Spain, Don Juan's half-brother, gave Don Juan to a series of tasks, all of which he accomplished successfully. He was then sent to the Netherlands to straighten some things out there.

While there, Chesterton implied that, out of jealousy and distrust, King Philip had Don Juan poisoned. His untimely death, at the age of 31, was attributed to typhoid, but unlike a typhoid attack, he died within a few hours. It is certain, however, that King Philip arranged the murder of Don Juan's secretary, Juan de Escobedo, which lends support to Chesterton's theory.

Philippines Battle

Shortly afterwards, the Philippine Islands were attacked by Muslims, pirates, marauders, and Dutch and English Protestant Calvinists, many of whom sought to crush the people and the Catholic faith there.

Remembering Lepanto, the people sought the help of Our Lady of La Naval (Our Lady, Help of Christian Navies), and hundreds of Rosary devotions took place.

A magnificent statue of Our Lady of La Naval was carved, and still today, Our Lady is greatly venerated by thousands of people at the National Shrine of *Our Lady of the Rosary* in the Philippines, at the Santo Domingo Church in Quezon City in Manila. ...Again, the great weapon then was the *Our Lady's Rosary*... and it always will be. +++