 Reading time: 10 min.

(continuation from previous article)

Chapter 9. Battle of Lepanto.

Having thus expounded some of the many facts that confirm in general how Mary protects Christian armies when they fight for the faith, let us turn to more particular ones that have given the Church reason to call Mary by the glorious title of *Auxilium Christianorum*. Chief among them is the battle of Lepanto.

In the middle of the 16th century, our peninsula was enjoying some peace when a new insurrection from the East came to wreak havoc among the Christians.

The Turks who had been established in Constantinople for over a hundred years saw with regret that the people of Italy, and particularly the Venetians, possessed islands and cities in the middle of their vast empire. They therefore began to ask the Venetians for the island of Cyprus. When they refused, they took up arms and with an army of eighty thousand foot soldiers, three thousand horses and formidable artillery, led by their own Emperor Selimo II, they besieged Nicosia and Famagusta, the strongest cities on the island. These cities, after heroic defence, both fell under enemy control.

The Venetians then appealed to the Pope to come to their aid to fight and lower the pride of the enemies of Christianity. The Roman Pontiff, who was then St Pius V, fearing that if the Turks were victorious they would bring desolation and ruin among Christians, thought to engage the powerful intercession of She whom holy Church proclaims as terrible as an army arrayed for battle: *Terribilis ut castrorum aeies ordinata*. He therefore ordered public prayers for all of Christendom: he appealed to King Philip II of Spain and Duke Emmanuel Philibert.

The King of Spain set up a mighty army and entrusted it to a younger brother known as Don John of Austria. The Duke of Savoy willingly sent a select number of valiant men who joined the rest of the Italian forces and went to join the Spaniards near Messina.

The clash with the enemy army took place near the Greek city of Lepanto. The Christians attacked the Turks fiercely; the Turks made fierce resistance. Every vessel turned suddenly amidst whirlwinds of flame and smoke and seemed to spit out lightning from the hundred cannons with which it was armed. Death took all forms, the masts and ropes of the ships broken by the balls fell on the fighters and

crushed them. The agonising cries of the wounded mingled with the roar of the waves and cannons. In the midst of the communal upheaval Vernieri, leader of the Christian army, noticed that confusion was beginning to engulf the Turkish ships. Immediately he had a few shallow galleys full of skilled gunners set in place, surrounded the enemy ships, and with cannon shots he ripped them apart and stunned them. At that moment, as the confusion among the enemies increased, great enthusiasm arose among the Christians, and from all sides there was a cry of victory! Victory! and victory was with them. The Turkish ships fled, the Venetians pursued and smashed them; it was no longer battle but a slaughter. The sea was strewn with clothes, sails, shattered ships, blood and mangled bodies; thirty thousand Turks had died; two hundred of their galleys were taken over by the Christians.

The news of the victory brought universal joy to Christian countries. The senate of Genoa and Venice decreed that 7 October should be a solemn and festive day in perpetuity because it was on this day in the year 1571 that the great battle took place. Among the prayers that the holy Pontiff had ordered for the day of the great battle was the Rosary, and at the very hour that the event took place, he himself prayed the Rosary with a host of faithful gathered with him. At that moment, the Blessed Virgin appeared to him and revealed to him the triumph of the Christian ships, a triumph which St Pius V quickly announced in Rome before anyone else had been able to bring the news. Then the holy Pontiff, in gratitude to Mary, to whose patronage he attributed the glory of that day, ordered that a prayer be added to the Litany of Loreto: *Maria Auxilium Christianorum, ora pro nobis*. Mary Help of Christians, pray for us. The same Pontiff, so that the memory of that prodigious event might be forever remembered, instituted the Solemnity of the Most Holy Rosary to be celebrated every year on the first Sunday in October.

Chapter 10. The Liberation of Vienna.

In 1683, in order to avenge their defeat at Lepanto, the Turks made plans to take their armies across the Danube and the Rhine, thus threatening the whole of Christendom. With an army of two hundred thousand men advancing in forced marches, they came to lay siege to the walls of Vienna. The Supreme Pontiff, who was then Innocent XI, thought of appealing to the Christian princes, urging them to come to the aid of threatened Christendom. Few, however, responded to the Pontiff’s invitation, for which he, like his predecessor Pius V, decided to place himself under the protection of She whom the Church proclaims *terribilis ut*

castrorum acies ordinata. He prayed, and invited the faithful of the whole world to pray with him.

In the meantime there was general consternation in Vienna and the people, fearing that they would fall into the hands of the infidels, left the city and abandoned everything. The emperor had no forces to oppose the armies and abandoned his capital. Prince Charles of Lorraine, who had scarcely been able to gather thirty thousand Germans, managed to enter the city to somehow attempt its defence. The neighbouring villages were set on fire. On 14 August the Turks opened their trenches from the main gate, and encamped there despite the fire of the besieged city. They then laid siege to all the city walls, set fire to and burnt down several public and private buildings. It was a painful situation that increased the courage of the enemies and decreased that of the besieged.

They set fire to the Church of the Scots, burned down that superb edifice, and on their way to the arsenal, where the powder and munitions were kept, the city was about to fall to the enemy if, by a very special protection of the Blessed Virgin Mary on the day of her glorious Assumption, the fire had not been extinguished, thus giving them time to save the military munitions. The sensitive protection of the Mother of God rekindled the courage of the soldiers and inhabitants. On the twenty-second of the same month the Turks attempted to bring down more buildings by throwing a great number of balls and bombs with which they did a great deal of damage, but they could not prevent the inhabitants from begging day and night for heaven’s help in the churches, nor the preachers from exhorting them to place all their trust, after God, in the one who had so often given them powerful help. On the 31st the besiegers pushed their efforts to the limit and the soldiers on both sides fought hand-to-hand.

The city was a heap of ruins when on the day of the Nativity of Our Lady the Christians redoubled their prayers and, as if by a miracle, received notice that help was at hand. Indeed, the next day, the second day of the octave of the Nativity, they saw the mountain which stands opposite the city, all covered with troops. It was John Sobieski, King of Poland, almost alone among the Christian princes yielding to the Pontiff’s invitation, who came to the rescue with his brave men. Convinced that with the small number of his soldiers victory would be impossible for him, he too resorted to the one who is formidable in the midst of the most orderly and fierce armies. On 12 September he went to church with Prince Charles, and there they heard holy mass, which he himself wished to serve, holding his arms outstretched in the form of a cross. After he had taken communion and received a holy blessing for himself and his army, the prince stood up and said aloud: “Soldiers, for the glory of Poland, for the liberation of Vienna, for the salvation of all

Christendom, under the protection of Mary we can safely march against our enemies and victory will be ours."

The Christian army then came down from the mountains and advanced towards the Turkish camp. After fighting for some time, the Turks retreated to the other side of the Danube with such haste and confusion that they left behind the Ottoman banner, about one hundred thousand men, most of their crews, all their war munitions and one hundred and eighty pieces of artillery. There was never a more glorious victory that cost the victors so little blood. Soldiers laden with booty could be seen entering the city, driving in front of them many herds of oxen which the enemies had abandoned.

Emperor Leopold, having heard of the defeat of the Turks, returned to Vienna on the same day, had a *Te Deum* sung with the greatest solemnity, and then, recognising that such an unexpected victory was entirely due to the protection of Mary, had the banner he had found in the Grand Vizier's tent brought into the main church. The banner of Mohammed, richer still, and which was hoisted in the middle of the field, was sent to Rome and presented to the Pope. The holy Pontiff, also deeply convinced that the glory of that triumph was all due to the great Mother of God, and desirous of perpetuating the memory of her gift, ordered that the feast of the Holy Name of Mary, already a custom for some time in some countries, should in future be celebrated throughout the Church on the Sunday between the octave of her Nativity.

Chapter 11. Association of Mary Help of Christians in Munich.

The victory of Vienna marvellously increased devotion to Mary among the faithful and gave rise to a pious society of devotees under the title of the Confraternity of Mary Help of Christians. A Capuchin father who preached with great zeal in the parish church of St Peter in Munich, urged the faithful with fervent and moving expressions to place themselves under the protection of Mary Help of Christians, and to implore her patronage against the Turks who threatened to invade Bavaria from Vienna. The devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary Help of Christians grew to such an extent that the faithful wanted to continue it even after the victory of Vienna even though the enemies had already been forced to leave their city. It was then that a Confraternity under the title of Mary Help of Christians was established to eternalise the memory of the great favour obtained from the Blessed Virgin.

The Duke of Bavaria, who had commanded a part of the Christian army,

while the King of Poland and the Duke of Lorraine commanded the rest of the militia, in order to follow up on what had been done in his capital, asked the Supreme Pontiff, Innocent XI, for the erection of the Confraternity. The Pope willingly agreed and granted the institution with a Bull dated 18 August 1684, enriching it with indulgences. Thus, on 8 September the following year, while the prince besieged the city of Buda, the Confraternity was established by his order with great solemnity in St Peter's Church in Munich. From then on, the brethren of that Association, united in their hearts in the love of Jesus and Mary, gathered in Munich and offered prayers and sacrifices to God to implore his infinite mercy. Through the protection of the Blessed Virgin this Confraternity spread rapidly that the greatest personalities were keen to be enrolled in it to secure the assistance of this great Queen of Heaven in the perils of life and especially at the point of death. Emperors, kings, queens, prelates, priests, and an infinite number from all parts of Europe still consider it a great fortune to be enrolled in it. The Popes have granted many indulgences to those who are in that Brotherhood. priests who join can get others to join. Thousands of Masses and Rosaries are said during life and after death for those who are members.

Chapter 12. The feast of Mary Help of Christians.

The facts we have set out so far in honour of Mary Help of Christians make it clear how much Mary likes to be invoked under this title. The Catholic Church observed, examined and approved everything, guiding the practices of the faithful herself, so that neither time nor human malice would misrepresent the true spirit of devotion.

Let us recall here what we have often said about the glories of Mary as the Help of Christians. In the holy books she is symbolised in the ark of Noah, who saves the followers of the true God from the universal flood; in the ladder of Jacob, which rises up to heaven; in the burning bush of Moses; in the ark of the covenant; in the tower of David, which defends against all assaults; in the rose of Jericho; in the sealed fountain; in the well-cultivated and guarded garden of Solomon; she is figured in an aqueduct of blessings; in the fleece of Gideon. Elsewhere she is called the star of Jacob, beautiful as the moon, chosen as the sun, the iris of peace; the pupil of God's eye; the dawn and bringer of consolations, the Virgin and Mother, and Mother of her Lord. These symbols and expressions that the Church applies to Mary make manifest the providential designs of God who wanted to make her known to us before her birth as the first-born among all creatures, the most excellent

protector, help and support of the human race.

In the New Testament, then, figures and symbolic expressions cease; everything is reality and fulfilment of the past. Mary is greeted by the archangel Gabriel who calls her full of grace; God admires Mary's great humility and raises her to the dignity of Mother of the Eternal Word. Jesus, immense God, becomes the son of Mary; he is born of her, brought up and assisted by her. And the Eternal Word made flesh submitted in all things in obedience to his august Mother. At her request Jesus worked the first of his miracles in Cana of Galilee; on Calvary she is made de facto common Mother of Christians. The Apostles made her their guide and teacher of virtue. With her they gathered to pray in the Upper Room; with her they attended to prayer, and in the end they received the Holy Spirit. She addressed her final words to the Apostles and gloriously flew to Heaven.

From her highest seat of glory she continues to say, *Ego in altissimis habito ut ditem diligentes me et thesauros corum repleam*. I inhabit the highest throne of glory to enrich with blessings those who love me and to fill their treasuries with heavenly favours. Hence, from her Assumption into heaven, there began the constant and unbroken contest of Christians to Mary, And St Bernard said that there has never been anyone who has confidently appealed to her who was not heard. Hence the reason why every century, every year, every day and, we may say, every moment is marked in history by some great favour granted to those who have invoked her with faith. Hence we also have the reason why every kingdom, every city, every country, every family has a church, a chapel, an altar, an image, a painting or some sign recalling a grace granted to those who had recourse to her in the necessities of life. The glorious events against the Nestorians and against the Albigensians; the words Mary said to St Dominic at the time that she recommended the preaching of the Rosary, which the Blessed Virgin herself named *magnum in Ecclesia praesidium*; the victory of Lepanto, of Vienna, of Buda, the Confraternity of Munich, Rome, Turin and many others erected in various countries of Christendom, make it sufficiently clear how ancient and widespread the devotion to Mary Help of Christians is, how much this title is pleasing to her and how much benefit it brings to Christian peoples. So that Mary could quite rightly utter the words that the Holy Spirit put into her mouth: *In omni gente primatum habui.* I am acknowledged as teacher among all nations.

These facts, so glorious to the Blessed Virgin, meant the express intervention of the Church to decide on the extent and ways in which Mary could be invoked under the title of Help of Christians, and the Church had already intervened in a certain way with the approval of confraternities, prayers and many pious practices to which the holy indulgences are attached, and which throughout the

world proclaim Mary as *Auxilium Christianorum.*

One thing was still missing and that was an established day of the year to honour the title of Mary Help of Christians, which is to say, a feast day with a rite, Mass and Office approved by the Church, and the day of this solemnity was fixed. In order for the Pontiffs to determine this important institution, some extraordinary event was needed, which did not take long to make itself manifest to human beings.

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