The Story of the Battle of Lepanto...

Almost from the very beginning of Islam, there were wars upon wars between Christians and Muslims. We remember the Crusade wars, seven major and several minor, which lasted for centuries. This is the story of the Battle of Lepanto, which marked the end of the Crusades and was a turning point in the history of Christianity.

Charles Martel's victory at Poitiers definitely stopped the Moslem invasion of western Europe. In the east Christians held firm against attacks of the Muslims until 1453. In that year, Mohammed II threw huge assaults against Constantinople and by the evening of May 29 the Byzantine capital fell. By 1571 the Muslims were firmly installed in Europe. Their ships ruled the Mediterranean Sea from the Strait of Bosporus to the Strait of Gibraltar and constantly preyed on Christian vessels unless they flew the French flag.

Pope Pius V, in the last year of his papacy in 1571, tried to rally the nations of Europe to join in a Holy League to stop and roll back the Moslem enemy which threatened the entire continent. Spain, whose King Philip II was also King of Austria, responded favorably. The Muslims were then engaged in the conquest of Cyprus, an island belonging to the Republic of Venice.

Leading Venetian officials would have preferred to have worked out some peaceful-coexistence agreement with the Sultan, but under the crusading influence of Saint Pius V, they decided to join the Holy League along with the republics of Genoa and Lucca and the dukes of Savory, Parma, Ferrara and Urbino.

The Papal fleet was of course part of the Holy Alliance. Pius V asked Philip to appoint Don John of Austria, the 25-year old son of Emperor Charles V, as commander-in-chief of a planned expedition against the Muslims. After receiving the banner of the Holy League from the Pope, through Cardinal Granvalla, Don John's fleet set sail from Genoa for Naples on June 26, 1571.

Few historians mention that just before the departure, Philip II presented Don John with a picture of Our Lady of Guadalupe which she had caused to be miraculously imprinted on the cloak of the Indian peasant Juan Diego in Mexico 40 years before. Don John placed the picture in the chapel of the admiral-vessel, the Genoese John Andrew Doria, asking for Mary’s protection of his expedition.

On September 16, the Christian fleet put to sea. Don John anchored off of Corfu where he learned that the Muslims had leveled entire towns and villages and then retreated to the coast of Lepanto in the Gulf of Corinth.

At dawn on October 7, at the entrance to the Gulf of Patras, the Christian and Moslem fleets finally came face to face for the battle of Lepanto.

The wind and all military factors favored the Muslims, but Don John was confident. He boarded a fast ship for a final review of his fleet. He shouted encouraging words to the men and they shouted back. After Don John returned to his own position, the wind mysteriously changed to the advantage
of the Christian fleet. First-hand witnesses wrote about this moment as a most dramatic turn-of-
events resulting from an "unknown factor".

At that very moment, at dawn on October 7, 1571-- as Vatican Archives later revealed--Pope
Pius V, accompanied by many faithful, was praying the Rosary in the Basilica of Santa Maria
Maggiore. From dawn to dusk the prayers continued in Rome as the Christians and the
Muslims battled at Lepanto. When it was all over the Muslims had been defeated. Of some
270 Moslem ships, at least 200 were destroyed. The Turks also lost 30,000 men while
Christian casualties numbered between 4,000 and 5,000.

The Rosary had won a great military victory. Like all truly great military leaders who hate war and
love peace, Don John retired after his victory at Lepanto. He died a few years later at the age of
31. Another who took part in the great battle of Lepanto, Miguel de Cervantes, lived longer to
write his famous tribute to Christian chivalry, Don Quixote.

For more information, please visit http://www.tldm.org/news6/lepanto.htm