

## "NOT OUR POWER AND ARMS . . ."

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**S**HORTLY after his accession in 1566, Pope Pius V announced a threefold program of combating heresy, uniting the princes, and engaging the Turk.<sup>1</sup> To achieve this purpose the peace-loving pontiff would have elected, if possible, to restrict himself to spiritual weapons. His understanding of the protection which Our Lord had promised to His Vicar was so exact that he would have preferred to dispense with the secular arm. To his mind spiritual means were of paramount importance. When he finally did ally himself with the civil powers, he continued to insist on the absolute necessity of prayer and fasting. These were the more desirable instruments, and he would have employed them alone had not the exigencies of the time demand otherwise.

In considering the activities of Pius V, we must understand his position in the Christian field. He was one of God's saints and, as such, a warrior who fought with conspicuous gallantry for the cause of his Divine Master. As the successor to the Prince of the Apostles, he was entrusted with the supreme command which is the burden of the papacy. Inspired by the realization of his position and responsibility, he zealously strove for the enforcement of the decrees of the Council of Trent and battled for religious unity throughout Europe, while waging unceasing war against the heresies born of the prolific sixteenth century. He had to contend with the caesaropapistical aims of Spain and the oppression of the Catholics in France, England, Scotland, and the Low Countries. The attainments of Pius in these fields immortalized the holy Pontiff. Added to them is the distinction brought by the third point of his program. Even more clearly does it make Pius V stand out as the Catholic Champion and the Pope of the Rosary. Just as the magnificent victory of Lepanto must be attributed to the successful formation of the League that fought the Turk, so must the worldly credit for the formation of that coalition be given to the Dominican Pope. He, in turn, would have no such honor for himself, but insisted that the triumph of the Christian arms

<sup>1</sup> Pastor, L., *History of the Popes*, (St. Louis, 1929), xvii, 68.

was to be ascribed to the Queen of the Rosary.<sup>2</sup>

During the second half of the sixteenth century the condition of Europe was critical. The various countries were rent asunder by political and religious differences. To the south there existed the Ottoman's restless cupidity, desirous of satiety with the blood of the continent. From his coign of vantage on the throne of Peter, Pius clearly saw the danger threatening Christendom. The Protestant powers were not adverse to leaguings with the Moslem, while the Catholics assumed a lethargic attitude toward the peril. Concerted action would have been impossible had Pius been limited to the strength of a temporal prince. It was only because his ally was the Help of Christians and the Queen of the Most Holy Rosary that he was able to perform the seemingly impossible.

To combat the Turk, the formation of a league was necessary, for none of the individual powers was able or willing to meet the danger single-handed. Standing in the way of such a union was the policy of armed neutrality adopted by Venice, the primary consideration of Philip II for the Low Countries, the religious dissension and lack of concern in France, and the trepidation of the Emperor, who preferred to pay tribute rather than offend the Porte. Slowly this picture which was so unfavorable to the plans of Pius, changed. His prayers were heard in the courts of heaven. Suleiman the Magnificent, the last of the great sultans, died during the siege of Sziget in 1566. He was succeeded by the incapable Selim the Sot. Selim, by threatening Cyprus, forced Venice to action. Pius, as only a saint could, overlooked the differences existing between the papal states and the republic of St. Mark and promised aid. After long and painstaking negotiations, the Pope induced other states of Italy and Spain to join the alliance. The difficulties encountered were disheartening in the extreme, but the assistance that the holy man derived from prayer enabled him to attain his goal.

The unity at first achieved by the league was inefficient. Pius discovered this when the first fleet dispatched against the enemy failed to accomplish anything. Instead of being discouraged, the Pope redoubled his efforts. He ordered more processions in Rome and at the same time had his envoys beseech the various governments for united support. Through his persistence, a fleet was assembled at Messina. In command of the forces was Don John of Austria, to whom the Pontiff was later to apply the words of the disciple whom Jesus loved: "There was a man sent from God whose name was John."

<sup>2</sup> *Acta et Ordinationes de SS. Rosario*, (Lyons, 1891), II, p. 85.

In the eyes of the disinterested Pius, the assembling of the Christian forces meant the attainment of only one of the material steps in his plan. This and the removal of the selfishness and mutual distrust of the Spaniards and Venetians were hardly enough. To insure victory, the Holy Father had recourse to spiritual means. He placed the expedition under the protection of the Queen of the Rosary. Devotion to her was practiced on all the vessels of the fleet. Before the battle was fought on the seventh of October, the members of the Catholic host said the Rosary and received general absolution. They then met and conquered the Turk in the great naval engagement of Lepanto. The hitherto invincible foe was defeated and his power broken by Catholic children fighting for their Holy Mother the Church.

While the Christian fleet had been sailing to meet the enemy, Pius was intensely active. The Pope ordered extraordinary prayer, and he himself set the example. Fasting was extended for three days and the Rosary was recited during the public processions that were held. This was the aid given to the League by those at home. Don John used all the skill and courage of a mariner and warrior; but Pius knew how vulnerable man is, how limited his knowledge and wisdom, in comparison with the knowledge, wisdom, and power of God. It was this realization that led him to the Rosary, and, ultimately, brought victory to the cause.

To the Holy Father was revealed the outcome of the struggle prior to the arrival of information concerning the conflict.<sup>3</sup> The official news of the triumph reached Rome near the end of October. This was the signal for rejoicing throughout the Catholic world. The *Te Deum* was sung in all churches, and in commemoration of the event the Pope had a medal struck on which was inscribed the words: "The right hand of the Lord hath wrought strength; this is the Lord's doing."<sup>4</sup> Reflecting on the intercession of Our Lady, the Father of Christendom naturally adverted to the fact that the contest was won on the first Sunday of the month, the day when the Rosary confraternity held its procession in Rome. Pius saw the font of success in Mary, the Help of Christians. In her honor he ordered that every year, on the anniversary of the battle, there should be celebrated a feast commemorating Our Lady of Victory. His successor on the throne of the Apostle, Gregory XIII, changed this to the feast of the Rosary and commanded that it should be observed on the first Sunday of October. This in itself was but one of the tributes paid

<sup>3</sup> Walsh, W. T. *Philip II*, (New York, 1937), p. 523.

<sup>4</sup> Pastor, *op. cit.*, xviii, 443.

to Our Lady. The Venetian Senate declared that "not our power and arms, nor our leaders, but the Madonna of the Rosary helped us to victory."<sup>6</sup> There were many personal tributes to the Dominican Pope, but he refused to accept such credit. Instead he turned to the Queen of the Rosary to give thanks for her mighty intercession before the throne of God. While men were wont to glory in the strength of their arms, Pius knew that strength came from the Mother who deigned to protect her harassed children.

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<sup>6</sup> Pastor, *op. cit.*, xviii, p. 444.