

Lepanto, Franco and 9/11.

October 7, 1571

450 years on

'... marvelous in our eyes' (Psalm 118:23.)

Pius V instructed that the Psalmist's words - 'this is the Lord's doing' be stamped on medallions commemorating the Holy League's destruction of the Ottoman fleet off Lepanto on October 7, 1571. Of 230 enemy warships, thirty escaped, leaving behind 30,000 dead or dying. His Holiness dedicated the day of the battle to Our Lady of Victory; two years later, his successor, Gregory VIII, renamed it for Our Lady of the Rosary, a devotion which the Christians had recited before sailing into the fray. Beneath the depiction of the battle in the Doge's palace, the Venetian Senate inscribed: 'Not our power and arms, nor our leaders; but the Madonna of the Rosary helped us to victory.'

The legend that the Virgin revealed the practice to St Dominic early in the thirteenth century as a weapon against the heretical Albigenses is a confection from 1470; the ritual emerged from multiple sources, including Islam, to take something like its most prevalent form by the sixteenth century.

I These convictions thrive among members of the American Society for the Defense of Tradition, Family and Property who venerate Pius XII, wish that the Second Vatican Council had never happened, and attribute to the Rosary not only Lepanto but also the 1565 relief of Malta, the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Austria in 1955 and the 1964 military coup in Brazil. Our Lady of Fatima who, he told his assailant, had deflected the bullet. To many a Christian, such claims sound quaint while even Roman Catholics respond uneasily from within a culture where the TV dinner long ago took over from family prayers.

No usable notion is ever utterly lost. Neo-Con crusaders resurrected the defeat of Islam at Lepanto for their war on Terrorism after 9/11. The title of Niccolo Capponi's *Victory of the West* (2007) set the *New Criterion's* Donald Johnson off cannonading 'then as now':

'Lepanto' is a word that has only lost its symbolic power in the last generation. In our parish church in Kensington, there is a stained glass window that depicts the battle. As the church was bombed in the Blitz, this window dates only from the post-war period. There is nothing unusual about this. Lepanto is there to remind the faithful that their civilisation is under constant threat, whether from the Ottomans or the Nazis, and to be defended by force of arms. Not for nothing is the church dedicated to Our Lady of Victories.

Johnston's theology overlaps with that of the Tradition, Family and Property Society in seeing the Holy League as 'a coalition of Catholicism and capitalism.' Despite deploring the triumph of secularism, Johnson forgot to mention the miraculous power of the rosary.

Grace abounding

David Hume would have considered it little short of miraculous had the Holy League's supporters not embraced their victory as a miracle before sustaining that enthusiasm for a generation or two. That some of their co-religionists are doing so 450 years later is for his perturbed spirit to marvel at and for us to unravel.

The persistence of religion as 'the *expression* of real distress' sustains belief in a sequence of miracles so remote from the morale-boost of praying together in the face of death on October 7, 1571, as to call for fresh lines of explication. For instance, how are we to interpret a conviction among Barcelona's faithful that the figure of Christ (known as 'Santo Christo') on the life-size crucifix from the topmast of Don Juan's flagship had assumed its right-leaning posture in order to get itself out of the way of a cannon ball? The absence of any contemporary report of this miracle enriches its retellings.

Here, a materialist investigator would first compare the contortion of this crucifix with those being produced around Rome in the second half of the sixteenth-century to see whether the pose was peculiar.

Meanwhile, we are not surprised to hear that the agility of a stick figure has spawned a further miraculous intervention. Suspended in front of the chapel containing the contorted crucifix in Barcelona's Santa Eulalia basilica is a model of Don Juan's *Real*, which changes direction to guide fisher-folk towards a catch. Local sceptics attribute the movements of this 'supernatural wind-vane' to the draughts from opening and closing the cathedral doors.

More than forensics are called for to apprehend the identification of the apostle James with the cadaver found early in the ninth century in the north-west of Spain when a star hovered overhead. James's spirit was resurrected to serve as the patron warrior saint, appearing on a white charger to turn the tide of battle for the Christians during their *Reconquista* with the battle cry *Santiago y cierra Espana!* (St James and close in, Spain!).

Galician atheists know that there is no heaven from which James can intercede on behalf of tourist promoters along the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostella but, after 1,300 years of Christian propaganda, Iberian unbelievers might find it harder to accept that James never set foot on their peninsula but had been martyred in Jerusalem in 61 CE. His bones went missing until 1879, when they resurfaced in time to bless the defeat of the Carlist liberals, grace the installation of Alfonso XII (1875-85) and console the

populace for the loss of 100,000 troops in suppressing the revolt in Cuba, if not redeem the kingdom from bankruptcy.

A measure of the vulgarity of bourgeois historians is that their accounts of the Lepanto, Capponi's excepted, mention the military efficacy of prayer. Dialectical materialists, on the other hand, acknowledge the significance of belief as a material force as firmly as we spurn the capacity of dead wood to defy the laws of physics.

Although we Marxists nowadays can dismiss any notion of inanimate objects shifting their poses as absurd without being accused of crude reductionism, we still are obliged to account for the creation and persistence of the legends around the 'Santo Cristo,' as we do those regarding Santa Diego at the opposite corner of Spain. Irrespective of one's beliefs about the *Real's* crucifix, the wellsprings of its 400-year veneration as an exemplar of the Cross's triumphing over the Crescent have never been confined to a single naval battle at the far end of the Mediterranean but forever invoke a crusade fought out for more than a thousand years in every corner of the *patria*.

On May 19, 1939, Generalissimo Franco presented his 'sword of victory' to the Primate of all Spain under the banner that Pius V had given to Don Juan in 1571. The manipulation of *In hoc signo* for political ends would have lost some of its credibility had it not been embroidered with the everyday miracle of putting fish on Catalan tables. It is from within such 'sensuous human activity' that practitioners of the materialist conception of history set out to explicate beliefs in the supernatural, ever mindful of Montaigne's '*Que sais-je?*'