

ST. JOAN OF ARC (1412 - 1431)

“Be strong and courageous, do not be afraid or tremble at them, for the Lord your God is the one who goes with you. He will not fail you or forsake you.”¹

—Deuteronomy 31:6

In Need of a Miracle. Near the end of the Hundred-Years War,² early 15th-century France was divided. Repeated military setbacks, including a catastrophic defeat in 1415 at Agincourt, had culminated in the disastrous Treaty of Troyes (1420), in which the French king, Charles VI,³ accepted Henry V, king of England, as the lawful successor to the throne of France. Charles’ son, Charles VII—recognized by many Frenchmen as the rightful heir to the French crown—was bottled up in southern France. The Duke of Burgundy and his English allies controlled northern and eastern France, including Paris, and were steadily advancing southward. France needed a miracle. She would receive it from an unlikely source—a young girl.

Jeannette d’Arc (better known to us by the English version of her name, Joan of Arc) was born on about January 6, 1412, in Domremy, a small village in northeast France, along the Meuse River. Domremy remained loyal to Charles VII, despite its location deep within territory under the control of Burgundy. Joan’s father, Jacques d’Arc, was a reasonably prosperous farmer who had sired five children—Joan being the youngest. She received minimal religious training, but soon acquired a reputation for kindness, generosity, and piety. She never learned to read or write.

Joan’s Voices. When Joan was 13 years old, she heard the voice of St. Michael telling her to be a good child and go often to church. The voice also promised God’s help. As time went on she received more frequent revelations—which she called her “voices”—from the Archangel Michael, St. Catherine, and St. Margaret.⁴ Joan prayed often and refused to marry, pledging to remain a virgin

¹ All Biblical quotations are from the *New American Standard* translation.

² The Hundred Years War was fought between England and France, off and on, from 1337 to 1453. The war ended with England’s defeat and expulsion from France in 1453.

³ Charles VI was the king of France from 1380 to 1422.

⁴ The archangel Michael is referred to in Jude 1:9 and Revelation 12:7. See also Daniel 10:13, 10:21, and 12:1. St. Catherine is St. Catherine of Alexandria, an early martyr of the church, who died during the 6th Roman persecution under the Emperor Maximinus Thrax (ruled 235-238 A.D.). St. Margaret is probably St. Margaret of Pisidian Antioch, who was martyred in the 10th Roman persecution under the Emperor Diocletian (ruled 284-305 A.D.). (For more on the Roman

“for so long that it pleased God.” Joan’s voices eventually told her that she would help to restore the kingdom of France, and that she would lead Charles VII to Reims (or Rheims) to be anointed by the Church as King. Her voices also instructed her to go to Robert de Baudricourt, the Governor of the nearby walled town of Vaucouleurs, who would conduct her to the King. When Joan’s father learned of her voices and their instructions, he vehemently opposed the plan and tried to marry her to a local youth. But with the help of an uncle, Joan fled to Vaucouleurs. She was 16, or perhaps just turned 17.

Baudricourt at first did not take Joan seriously, and so refused to send her to Charles. But within two months Joan’s piety and growing fame convinced Baudricourt to change his mind.⁵ In February, 1429, she left for Chinon, Charles’ residence, with a small escort of about three to six soldiers, including one of her earliest supporters, Jean de Metz. For the journey Joan donned men’s clothing, including a sword given to her by Baudricourt.

The group travelled 350 miles to Chinon, much of the journey through enemy territory. Within a short time after her arrival, Joan impressed Charles greatly.⁶ He ordered that she be sent to Poitiers, to be physically and spiritually examined by Church doctors and bishops. These authorities concluded that Joan was a virgin, as well as a sincere and pious believer. Joan informed Charles that she would have little more than a year to accomplish her mission. Her prediction proved to be all too accurate.

The Girl Commander. In 1429, Charles placed Joan, at age 17, in charge of a French army—at least symbolically—which had been sent to relieve the town of Orleans, a strategic key to the region. Considered the gateway to southern France, the city’s capture might easily have caused widespread defections among the nobles who still remained loyal to Charles. The English had besieged Orleans for seven months by the time of Joan’s arrival.

Joan insisted that her soldiers behave morally, and encouraged them to have faith in God. Despite her lack of military training, Joan’s bravery, faith, and determination turned the tide of the battle, and of the war. In one key battle she returned to the battlefield after being shot with an arrow through the neck and shoulder. (Interestingly, she knew she would be wounded at Orleans at least two

persecutions of Christianity, see the article, “Roman Persecution of Christianity,” at this web site.)

⁵ Joan’s standing with Baudricourt may also have been helped by her announcement of a French defeat outside Orleans, at the Battle of the Herrings. When word of the defeat reached Vaucouleurs a few days later, Joan’s reputation as a prophetess was greatly enhanced.

⁶ Joan claimed to have won over the King by showing him a sign from God. Joan never disclosed the nature of this sign, but some believe that Joan revealed to him her knowledge of a secret that none but the King knew.

weeks before it occurred.) Urged on by her voices, she led the French to victory, forcing the English to withdraw on May 8, after three days of fighting. Seizing the initiative, Joan aggressively exhorted her military commanders to attack and won decisive victories at nearby Jargeau and Patay, destroying English power in the regions south of Paris.

Now Joan led Charles VII to Reims—where French kings were traditionally crowned by the Church—to officially become King of France. Towns all along their route switched allegiance from Burgundy to France, and Charles' stature grew immensely. However, after the coronation on July 17, 1429, friction developed between the saintly girl and her King. Joan wanted to immediately march on Paris, but Charles delayed, seeking to win Burgundy away from England through diplomacy. Charles' delay proved fatal to Joan's plans. When the attack upon Paris finally came, the English were ready and repulsed it. Joan was wounded again, shot by an arrow in the thigh. Charles quickly called off the attack and withdrew his army to the south.

Captivity. After a few further victories, Joan was captured by the Burgundians on May 23, 1430, while attempting to relieve the siege of the town of Compiègne.⁷ So far as we know, Charles and the French made no effort to rescue or ransom her, although either may have been possible while she remained in Burgundian custody. By November, Joan had been sold to the English,⁸ who sent her to the town of Rouen, in northern France, and put her on trial for heresy.⁹ This trial would be her most difficult test—and perhaps her finest moment.

In preparation for the trial, the English launched a thorough investigation into Joan's life, searching for evidence of evil or hypocrisy even in her home town of Domremy. They found none. Joan was examined and again found to be a virgin. As

⁷ Joan led a French attack which was repulsed. As her troops retreated, the city gates were closed. Joan and a few others were trapped outside the city and captured.

⁸ When first captured, Joan became a prisoner of John of Luxembourg, who was loyal to the Duke of Burgundy. John treated her well and resisted English efforts to obtain custody of her. When persuasion and bribery failed, the English brought economic pressure upon John by placing an embargo on trade with Flanders (Belgium), the source of most of John's income. This induced John to accept the English bribe and deliver Joan into English hands.

⁹ To counter the many con-men and charlatans who duped the populace with claims of magical or supernatural powers, the Church had decreed that any claim to divine inspiration was a heresy punishable by death. Obviously, Joan's voices were such a claim. In addition, the Church insisted that it was the final arbiter of the validity of any claim of divine inspiration, and thus maintained that it had the right to judge whether or not Joan's voices were from God. Joan, supremely confident in her divine calling, would not concede the Church's authority to so act, and this too was considered heresy.

a prisoner of the Inquisition,¹⁰ charged in an ecclesiastical court, Joan should have been detained in a church prison, with female attendants. Instead, she remained in English custody, where she was continuously insulted, harassed, and spied upon by male English guards. In this environment, prayer proved difficult and she often had trouble hearing her voices. The English kept her bound with heavy chains, and barred her from attending church services or receiving communion.

The Trial. Joan's trial lasted from February 21st to May 30th, 1431. Bishop Pierre Cauchon, a Frenchman who supported the English, presided.¹¹ One of Cauchon's assistants acted as prosecutor. A Dominican monk representing the Inquisition, along with forty theologians and lawyers, constituted the rest of the court. The accusations included heresy, sorcery, witchcraft, unseemly male dress, and wanton behavior. Joan had no defense counsel; she was presumed guilty; and she could call no witnesses on her own behalf. Any members of the court who questioned her guilt or expressed sympathy for her were intimidated, threatened, imprisoned, or simply removed.

Nevertheless, Joan's defiance and unshakable faith frustrated her accusers. She refused to take an oath to answer all questions truthfully, because she had sworn to God not to reveal certain matters. When asked a question she did not wish to answer, she replied, "Pass on to something else." At one point she told Bishop Cauchon, "Consider well what you do, for in truth I am sent by God and you put yourself in great peril." Another time, she warned her judges that evil would befall them, body and soul, if they carried out their judgment upon her.

Joan's answers throughout the trial revealed a clever mind and a deep understanding of the Christian faith. The prosecutor asked if she was in a state of grace, free from all sin. This was a trick question, for her answer would necessarily lead to accusations of either sinfulness or conceit. Joan amazed all with the wisdom of her reply: "If I am not, may God put me there; if I am, may God keep me there. I would be the most miserable person in the world if I knew I were not in God's grace."

Yet she was not without wit. Asked if St. Michael had appeared to her naked, Joan responded, "Do you think God cannot afford to clothe him?"

¹⁰ The Inquisition lasted from 1227 until as late as 1834. Its primary purpose was to investigate and try persons who were suspected of actions or beliefs contrary to the doctrines of the Church. The Inquisition's procedures and punishments varied with time and geography, but in most countries persons accused by the Inquisition had few rights and little opportunity to defend themselves. If a suspected heretic were actually placed on trial, he or she was usually presumed to be guilty. In many cases torture was utilized to obtain a confession. In the 18th and early 19th centuries, the Inquisition gradually became discredited and abandoned because of the injustices it fostered. For more on the Inquisition, see "Predecessors of the Reformation," on this web site.

¹¹ Cauchon was the Bishop of Beauvais.

Her accusers claimed that her voices were evil spirits, but Joan insisted they were from God. She humbly attributed her victories to God, rather than to anything she had done. She steadfastly maintained that she had acted at God's direction, and that God would one day give the French victory. Joan even prophesied that "within seven years' space the English would have to forfeit a bigger prize than Orleans,"¹² and thereafter all of France. Yet she repeatedly declined opportunities to denounce the English. Asked if her voices hated the English, she said, "They love what the Lord loves, and hate what He hates." Asked if God hated the English, she replied that she did not know; she only knew that God would drive them out of France.

When the trial began to arouse public sympathy for Joan, the English moved it for a time to the restricted spaces of the prison, making the trial even more oppressive for her. Exhausted by the ordeal, she became seriously ill, but recovered. Her tormentors threatened Joan with torture, and with death by fire. Most terrible of all, they assured her that her refusal to renounce her voices and repent would result in eternal damnation. Such threats must have been dreadfully frightening for a young, ignorant farm girl. Yet she persisted in her claim of divine inspiration.

Recantation and Martyrdom. On May 23rd, the day Joan was scheduled to burn, she apparently lost her courage and signed a retraction, renouncing her voices and promising to wear women's clothing. It is likely that she was secretly promised her freedom, or at least confinement in a church prison. If so, her hopes were quickly dashed. Three days later—after probably being raped by her English guards—Joan resumed wearing men's clothing and repudiated her retraction, stating that she had signed a lie out of fear of the fire. The next day, May 30, 1431, the English burned her at the stake.¹³ She was only 19 years old. Shortly before her execution, Joan fell on her knees and prayed for forgiveness for herself, for Charles, and for those who had condemned her. She also asked for a cross, which she embraced. As the fire enveloped her, onlookers heard her calling to her saints and crying out, "Jesus, Jesus." A secretary to the English king prophetically remarked at the time: "We are lost; we have burned a saint."¹⁴

Four years after her death, the Duke of Burgundy switched his allegiance to Charles, and a series of French victories quickly followed. As Joan had predicted, the English lost a "bigger prize than Orleans" in 1437, when the French captured Paris.¹⁵

¹² This prophesy is confirmed by several sources, based on the transcripts from Joan's trial. The prophecy was uttered on March 1, 1431. The quotation is taken from the Catholic Encyclopedia article on "St. Joan of Arc."

¹³ Joan's ashes were dumped in the Seine River.

¹⁴ See Durant, p. 86.

¹⁵ The French captured Paris on November 12, 1437, six years and eight months after Joan uttered the prophesy.

They finally expelled the English from France in 1453. Charles VII reigned as French king until 1461, and proved to be highly competent.

When the town of Rouen came under French control, so did the transcripts of Joan's trial. Charles ordered an exhaustive investigation, which lasted from 1450 to 1456. The investigators held hearings in Paris, Orleans, Domremy, and Rouen, and questioned nearly every person then living who had known her. In 1456, a court of Church officials appointed by the Pope¹⁶ invalidated the original trial and posthumously acquitted Joan of the charge of heresy. In 1920, the Roman Catholic Church and Pope Benedict XV canonized Joan as a saint.

Sources:

- (1) *The Girl in White Armor: The Story of Joan of Arc*, by Albert Bigelow Paine (1927).
- (2) *Beyond the Myth: the Story of Joan of Arc*, by Polly Schoyer Brooks (1990).
- (3) *The Story of Civilization, Volume VI (The Reformation)*, by Will Durant (Simon and Schuster, New York, 1957).
- (4) *A History of Christianity, Volume I (Beginnings to 1500)*, by Kenneth Scott Latourette (Harpers and Row, New York, 1953, 1975).
- (5) *Microsoft Encarta 98 Encyclopedia* (1998 Edition).
- (6) "St. Joan of Arc," in the Catholic Encyclopedia, found at <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08409c.htm>.
- (7) "Charles VI of France," in Wikipedia, found at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_VI_of_France.
- (8) "Charles VI, king of France," in The Columbia Encyclopedia, Sixth Edition, 2001-2005, found at <http://www.bartleby.com/65/ch/Charles6Fr.html>.

¹⁶ Pope Callistus III, who was Pope from April 8, 1455 until his death on August 6, 1458