

## THE QUINCENTENNIAL OF ST. JOAN OF ARC

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*THEODORE R. SMITH, O.P.*



ALF a thousand years have passed since one of the purest, brightest, most dazzling and meteoric figures that ever flashed across the face of history ended its strange career in the flames of Rouen. It was the autumn of the Middle Ages, that period when the wintry hand of approaching death cast its chilling shadow over all the world that was; the shades of evening were already falling on Chivalry, the clouds of superstition had begun to overcast the sun of the bright medieval Faith, and the venom of worldliness was doing its deadly work on that which was human in the Church, when for one brief moment there was shown to the world an incarnation, as it were, of the grandest ideals of the dying era joined to the noblest aspirations of the time that was to be. This apparition came not like the ray of a sunset, but rather as the dazzling glare and potent rush of the comet. It came whence it could not be expected; it disappeared before men could solve what it was. In its wild rush it overset a structure that had been a hundred years in the building and was now almost complete; it breathed forth in its passing the soul of Patriotism to inform with new life a re-born nation; it left behind it a legend so rich that its lessons seem destined to affect all nations and all times. This figure was the figure of a young girl in shining armor, daughter of a peasant and saviour of a kingdom, heroine of her country and saint of God—Jeanne, Demoiselle du Lys, St. Joan of Arc.

Her story is perhaps one of the best known in history. In one form or another either the true account or the many legends which are its by-products, have been told and re-told in every language of Europe. Histories, novels, pageants, dramas have been written about the life and death of the Maid, and many and varied are the interpretations given to her character and career. In a way, her story tells itself. Almost all the documentary evidence needed for writing her biography can be obtained from records of her trial at Rouen and the Process of Rehabilitation

of 1450-56. The material amassed by Quicherat<sup>1</sup> has been utilized, amplified and corrected innumerable times. Two of the best works in English are those by Lang<sup>2</sup> and Paine.<sup>3</sup>

It is indeed a story that never grows stale and though we cannot here retell it in detail, it is proper and even necessary to review in broad outline that glorious epic, culminating in that sublime tragedy which we commemorate this year, and in its retelling there may come to notice some few of those brilliant and supra-mundane characteristics incarnate in St. Joan which have been a wonder and a challenge to subsequent generations.

St. Joan of Arc was born in the little village of Domremy on the Bar-Lorraine border during the night of Epiphany, January 6, 1412. A daughter of a peasant, she was brought up as were the other peasant children at her village, learning her prayers and her religion from her mother, and working and playing with other children. Though always pious and devout, she had nothing of the mystic about her and her childhood passed normally until she reached her thirteenth year. Then one day she "had a voice from God to help me in my conduct. . . . It came, that Voice, about midday in summertime in my father's garden. . . . I heard the voice from the right side towards the Church, and I rarely hear it without seeing a light."<sup>4</sup> Thus she told the story of her first call. St. Michael, Prince of the Armies of Heaven, had come to deliver to this young girl a commission from his King to go forth and lead to victory the armies of her country and restore to her King the crown that was his by right.

The last act of a long drama had just begun. The attempts to unite England and France under one crown had filled all the middle ages. Beginning when Henry Plantagenet, Duke of Anjou and grandson of William the Conqueror, already lord in feif of a great part of France, ascended the English throne, the attempt had been carried on with varying success for well-nigh three hundred years. First the feudal wars had stripped the English king of his French possessions, and one French Prince had actually been crowned in London. Then the tide turned, and when Edward III of England put forward his baseless claim to

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<sup>1</sup> Jules Quicherat. *Procès de Condamnation et Réhabilitation de Jeanne d'Arc dite la Pucelle*. Paris, 1841-1849. (5 vols.)

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Lang: *The Maid of France*. London: 1909.

<sup>3</sup> Albert Bigelow Paine: *Joan of Arc*. New York: 1925. (2 vols.)

<sup>4</sup> Lang: *op. cit.*, p. 42.

the French throne, victory rested on his banners. Crécy and Poitiers were glorious victories for him, terrible defeats for France. Though he failed to gain the crown, the treaty of Bretigny restored to him practically all the old Plantagenet domains. The statesmanship of Charles V and the generalship of Du Guesclin had recovered most of the lost territory, but the blood-feud between the French Princes very nearly gave everything to the foreigner. Henry V of Lancaster, whose father had usurped the English throne, took advantage of the distracted condition of France to renew the English pretensions to the Throne of St. Louis.<sup>5</sup> The battle of Agincourt (Oct. 25, 1415) laid France at his feet and the Treaty of Troyes (June 2, 1420) gave him the daughter of Charles VI as his bride, and the crown as his inheritance. But a human wrong cannot take away a right that is divine. The King of Heaven is not bound by men's treaties in appointing his lieutenants, the kings of earth. Two years after Troyes the brilliant English Conqueror, Henry V was dead, and the liberatrix of France was already ten years old. Two months later the old, mad French King also died and the disinherited Dauphin became rightful King of France, though seven years were yet to pass before Jeanne La Pucelle led him to the altar at Reims for his coronation.

Seven years were to elapse before the King's coronation, seven years of darkness and defeat. Another Agincourt, the defeat of Verneuil, marked the second year of his reign, and left him a homeless wanderer, but in the year of Verneuil the angel spoke to Joan.

For five years the heavenly messengers made frequent visits to the Maid, and the instructions she received were such as no other girl has ever received, before or since. She was told to don armor, sword and shield, go to the King, and at the head of his army rout the English enemy and secure for him the crown of his fathers. Finally in the spring of 1428 she announced her mission.

Robert de Baudricourt, commandant of Vaucouleurs, and nearest of the King's captains, was the person she first approached, under the protection of her famous and kindly "uncle" Laxart. Though she received no encouragement and returned

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<sup>5</sup> For a resume of the more remote events, cfr. Rev. Dennis Lynch, S.J., *St. Joan of Arc* (New York, 1919) pp. 42 ff. For the details of the Orleans-Burgundian feud see also Lang, *op. cit.*, pp. 16-24; Paine, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, pp. 71-83, and Rev. L. H. Petitot, O.P., *Sainte Jeanne d'Arc*. (Paris, 1921) pp. 1-52.

home for the summer and autumn, the celestial messages in the meantime were further instructing her in the details of her mission, and when she again approached Baudricourt in January, 1429, it was with the determination to go at once to the Dauphin, as she called Charles VII, and turn back no more. Orleans had already been besieged some months, and the darkest clouds of the entire war seemed to be gathered over the legitimate royal cause. It is true, as Lang shows,<sup>6</sup> that the English fortunes were not as bright as is generally supposed, but neither Englishman nor Frenchman knew that at the time, and the morale of France was at its lowest ebb. After six weeks of waiting Baudricourt, on receiving news of the defeat at Rouvray, as a last and forlorn hope, provided escort and equipment for the Maid, and sent her off to the court with the now famous words, "Go, and let come what may!"<sup>7</sup>

Her journey to Chinon, her reception by the King, her confiding to him the secret sign he had privately asked of Heaven (assurance of his legitimacy) were marked by characteristics extraordinary enough to increase the conviction that God or the Devil was working through the maid. The convening of the ecclesiastical commission of Poitiers, though it caused her to become impatient by the delay it entailed, was a prudent step, and she submitted to it gracefully enough. Though firmly convinced of her divine mission she was too loyal a daughter of the Church to rebel against its authority. Her simplicity and piety won the favorable decision of the commission who judged that "The King ought not to prevent her from going to Orleans to show the sign of heavenly succor."<sup>8</sup>

Then the events begin to dance before our eyes with the brilliance and rapidity of strokes of white lightning. Tours, where her white armor was forged, her lily-standard designed, and her sword of St. Catherine brought to her, was the point of departure. Thence, mounted on the horse given to her by her "beau Duc" d'Alencon, Prince Royal of France, she rode to meet *her* army assembling at Blois.

The reform in conduct and religious enthusiasm which St. Joan inspired in both leaders and soldiers has been the wonder

<sup>6</sup> Lang, *op. cit.*, pp. 65 ff. and 95-96.

<sup>7</sup>As a matter of fact a sword and horse were all the equipment the Captain gave her and as for escort he assigned to her company two men who happened to be going to the King. See Paine, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, pp. 46-47. Though Petitot, *op. cit.*, p. 111, says her uncle bought the horse.

<sup>8</sup> Lang, *op. cit.*, p. 104.

and admiration of all subsequent historians as it seems to have been of the very soldiers themselves. But few days passed between her arrival at Blois and the departure of the Army, yet in those two or three days this desperate crew of war-worn Armagnac raiders had been converted, temporarily at least, into as religious a host as had marched since the First Crusade.

Her arrival before Orleans, and the discovery of the deception practised on her furnished an opportunity for a display of her keen understanding of the situation, as well as of the heavenly approbation of her mission; at least the sudden shift of wind at her word was regarded as a sign of such approbation. According to the testimony of Dunois and others the presence of the Maid had from the first a demoralizing effect on the English. When her Army came up the second time from Blois, on May 4, the entire force marched past the strongest English garrisons unopposed. That same day the bastille of St. Loup was taken, Joan turning an incipient rout into a complete victory. It was this day, too, that she sent her last summons to the English, her next message would be written in blood.

The fighting on the 6th and 7th of May make glorious tales, the one the taking of *Augustins* fortress, the other the fall of the Tourelles itself and the final raising of the siege. It was in the fight at the Tourelles that Joan received the wound in the shoulder that she had foretold weeks before. It was here that the English defense held all day, that the sun went down as the French bugles sounded the retreat, but the Maid returning from a few moments prayer in the midst of battle gave a new order for attack and as her banner touched the wall, her soldiers carried the forts. Within a week of her baptism of fire she had shown her sign; the siege of Orleans was raised and the English tide was on the ebb, which was to be more rapid than its rise.

For nearly six weeks after the relief of Orleans nothing was done; then in mid-June, the Maid again took the field with the army of the Duc d'Alencon, and what followed was the rapid succession of hammer-like blows of the Week of Victories, Jargeau, Beaugency, Meun and finally the great victory of Patay on June 18th, which wiped out forever the long score of Crécy, Poitiers, Agincourt, and Verneuil.

A short but damaging delay followed Patay, then the march to Reims. But one obstacle blocked the way, Troyes, which Joan took when the entire council had voted for retreat. The rest of the journey was a triumphant march till finally Reims

was entered and Jeanne La Pucelle stood in the Sanctuary of the Cathedral by the side of her "Gentle Dauphin" while he was anointed with the oil from Heaven and crowned King of France as Charles VII. Thus in less than five months after her setting out from Vaucouleurs two great objectives of her mission had been taken. Orleans had been relieved and the King crowned. The other two which she had announced at Chinon, the submission of Paris and the release of the Duc d'Orléans were not fulfilled until after her death.

Historians of today reject the idea that she considered her mission ended with the coronation. It is true, nevertheless, that the period of her greatest military glory was over. She had warned the King that she would have only a year in which to serve him, and now the government began to waste her time in fruitless negotiations for peace with Burgundy. The march to Paris was dilatory, the attack half-hearted and unsupported, and finally ordered abandoned, much to her distress. Though it seems certain that she now held officially a general's rank, her wishes were not followed by the King and his advisers. A small but brilliant victory at St. Pierre-le-Moustier and an attack on La Charité, which failed from the lack of equipment furnished the army, ended her work in the field for that year. She was not permitted to do more.

Her allotted time was passing swiftly yet she was still kept inactive. King and Council, duped by false hopes and ever willing to chase rainbows, seemed still unconvinced; the army was disbanded, and its soul and strength, Joan, forced to follow the Court listlessly. The King was kind, but never whole-heartedly enthusiastic; doubt never gave away to certainty. In December he conferred on her and all her kith and kin a patent of nobility that was to descend in male and female line. It is practically the only act of gratitude on his part to the girl who gave him his crown and kingdom.

With the coming of Spring Joan took the field again, with a handful of men going to the relief of Compiègne. The end of her year was nigh; her Voices no longer gave warlike counsel, and in Easter week, after the capture of Melun which she seems to have taken *en passant* they told her that she would be taken before midsummer's day. The warning came in the moment of victory, at her brilliant opening of the Oise campaign. This warning of imminent captivity and certain death at the stake—the English had long been promising to burn her if they caught

her—was enough to make the stoutest of hearts quail. “But the Maid rode on, first in the charge, last in the retreat. She was the bravest of the brave.”<sup>9</sup>

Then came the actual advance to Compiègne. She entered at sunrise on the twenty-third of May. At five o'clock that evening, in company with d'Aulon, her brothers, and other captains, she led a force of about five hundred men in a sortie to clear out an isolated outpost of the enemy. By what seems the merest chance the sortie was discovered in time to bring up enemy reenforcements. At first success was with her, and by her own supreme efforts “as she that was the chief and most valiant of her band” in the words of the Burgundian chronicler, “doing deeds beyond the nature of woman, there, as Fortune granted it, for the end of her glory and for that her last day under arms” she drove back the foe, until, overwhelmed by the enemy reenforcements, she was forced into the fields, dragged from her horse and taken. The retreat was secured, the draw-bridge raised, but the Maid, a prisoner, had gloriously ended her last feat of arms.

It were best to pass over the long months of captivity, during which she was put up for sale to the English. It is very doubtful that her king could have ransomed her; we have no proof and but few vague rumors that he ever tried to do so. Silence is the best cloak to throw over the efforts of Bishop Cauchon and the Burgundian Ecclesiastics to secure her for trial by the Inquisition. The only good word we can say is for the three ladies of the house of her captor, Jean de Luxembourg, who befriended her in prison. Her rash but valiant effort to escape by jumping from the tower and the months in the dungeon while she steadfastly refused to give her parole are testimony to her dauntless spirit.

Handed over at length to the English, and by them to the Inquisition, she was summoned to trial on February 21, 1431. The court that tried her was without authority. The presiding Bishop, Ordinary of Beauvais, was trying a diocesan of Toul in the diocese of Rouen, where he had no jurisdiction. The Inquisitor refused to appear and his Vicar declared the trial illegal and tried to escape, but was forced to act under pressure. No witnesses were summoned, nor were any of the accusations proved. For three months this poor girl of nineteen, uneducated and alone, withstood the theological and canonical onslaughts of the

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<sup>9</sup> Lang, *op. cit.*, p. 229.

brightest scientific lights of the day. Even these could not have condemned her on evidence submitted. The decision was set beforehand; Joan must burn as a witch and a heretic that her mission might be discredited. To this all must be bent. She appealed to the Council of Basle and to the Pope, thus stripping her judges of authority. Illicitly and invalidly they denied her appeal.

When finally they brought her out to burn her in the cemetery of Saint-Ouen she gave up at last and signed her submission to the Church. Much discussion has raged around the actual document of submission. It seems certain that what was read to her was a document of six or seven lines; what Cauchon entered in the records is an abjuration of some five hundred words, patently a forgery. Even this was not enough. In direct violation of a pledge made to her when she signed she was returned to the military prison, and within a week had been forced in one way or another to resume male attire which constituted a relapse. She was condemned and cited to appear at the Old Market on May 30.

On Wednesday morning, May 30, 1431, they brought her out to die. With all formality she was delivered to the secular arm as a relapsed heretic. Without formality the secular Bailiff delivered her to the executioners. As she mounted the scaffold she asked for a cross. An English soldier crossed two sticks and handed them to her, but the Dominican, Isambard de la Pierre, brought her the cross from the nearby church, and held it for her on the scaffold till she begged him to descend as he was endangered by the flames. She long embraced it, gazing at it even through the smoke. As the fire was kindled she called on her saints, St. Catherine, and St. Michael, who had first called her; then as a mercifully swift burst of flame swept upward she cried out with a great voice the name of her Lord "Jesus" and the Maid of France was with her "Brothers of Paradise."



Five hundred years have passed and still the afterglow of that white comet leaves a light as bright as that which glowed from her first victories, and penumbra wider and more diffused. In November, 1437, Charles VII, "the Victorious" entered his capital in triumph and two years later Rouen. In this city of her martyrdom he ordered, a few months later, the trial of Rehabilitation. The new Inquisitor, Jean Brehal, O.P., worked night and day to bring out the truth and on July 7, 1456, in the



Archiepiscopal Palace of Rouen where she had been condemned a quarter-century before, in the presence of her brother Jean, Sieur du Lys, the sentence of Rehabilitation, authorized by Pope Callistus III, was pronounced by the Legate, Cardinal d'Estouteville. Her appeal at last had reached the Pope, and he had rendered justice to her memory.

Many have tried to represent St. Joan as a herald and forerunner of the Reformation and Revolution. Their cry has been for "Joan of Arc, betrayed by the King and burned by priests," but the cry does not ring true. Morning-star of the new time she may indeed have been. Patriots and even feminists may see their patron and model in her, but rebels and heretics, never. The Throne of St. Peter and the Crown of St. Louis were the lodestar in her life, and the second in order to the first.

For, despite what infidel writers may claim, the "Daughter of God" was a true daughter of His Church. "La Sainte de la Patrie" is the saint, and not merely the patriot. Her piety bloomed and blossomed in Domremy ere she had any indication of the role she should play as a patriot. Her loyalty to her King was actuated by her conviction, her knowledge through revelation, that he was the naturally appointed "Lieutenant of God" the "true prince with the heaven-born right to rule."<sup>10</sup> Her devotion and whole-hearted religious feeling never left her. Her Catholicity inspired and actuated her whole life, her action and her passion. She started with the approbation of the commission of Poitiers; she ever enjoyed the support of such men as Gerson and Archbishop Gélú. Her sweetness and sanctity as well as her dashing heroism won for her the lasting affection and reverence of men like d'Aulon and de Laval, Dunois and d'Alençon. Her very judges were melted by her in the end. Spirited she was, but no rebel nor "Protestant Saint." Submissive always to the Church, she rightly refused to deny the known truth at the command of her enemies, and in this she was upheld by the Inquisitor, Brehal and his colleagues of the rehabilitation.<sup>11</sup>

There is no longer need to defend her on these grounds; Rome has spoken, the cause is finished—a sentence more final and definitive than that of 1456. Seventy weeks of years had all but passed since the time of her martyrdom when the authority to whom she appealed from the stake spoke the final word. On

<sup>10</sup> Paine, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

<sup>11</sup> Cfr. Lang, *op. cit.*, pp. 876-281; also Msgr. Baudrillart "Joan the Saint," in *For Joan of Arc* (New York; 1930). p. 111.

May 16, 1920, Pope Benedict XV from the Throne of St. Peter promulgated the Bull of her canonization . . . "we declare that the blessed Joan of Arc is a saint and we inscribe her name in the list of the saints."

The comet is enthroned with the stars.

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## APOSTATES

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*PHILIP REILLY, O.P.*

They seem at times like driftwood cast  
Upon a surging sea;  
Some quivering fledgelings in lush grass  
A dog spied in the lea.

Their lives a song—a poignant song  
Upon the strings of Time;  
Chaotic chords, discordant sounds—  
Sad overtones, supine.

Of faith and hope, no dawn for them,  
Grim shadows haunt their path;  
Until they swoon in ecstasy . . .  
Once smitten by His wrath.