



St. Joan - Charismatic! by Fr. Tom Bill, C.S.C.

Jeanne, the daughter of Jacques d'Arc and Isabelle Romee, was born in Domremy, France, probably on January 6 in 1412. Nineteen years later she was burnt at the stake on May 30 of 1431. English soldiers had invaded the northern part of France and her home was in English territory. Joan has become her traditional English name. The French people acclaim Joan as a national heroine who saved France. To acclaim her as a Saint, we must put ourselves *in her shoes* as we reevaluate her life. Dare we honor her as a charismatic -- in the Christian meaning as one guided and empowered by the Holy Spirit?

Joan's unusually mature and gifted Christian life. Joan had no schooling and could neither read nor write. Not only during her trial and martyrdom but throughout her life **God intervened**. At the age of 13 she reports hearing a voice and seeing a light and being very much afraid. After several such experiences she was totally convinced this voice was a good angel and from God, and eventually the Archangel Michael revealed himself to her. Later Saints Catherine and Margaret began speaking to her. She was always careful to discern whether her "voices" and appearances were truly from God. They called her "*Jeanne la pucelle*." She thereafter identified herself as *Joan la pucelle* -- which means the maid, the little one, *of no manifest importance*.

When the Archangel Michael first spoke to the 13-year-old Joan, she was deeply transformed by grace and she reports being led to commit herself completely to God by a vow of virginity, both of body and spirit. **Only God could have her body. Only God could have her inner spirit.** The essence of her *virginity of spirit* was an utter reliance on God, not on herself or on her own choices. (Consult Fr. George H. Tavard, A.A., a respected theologian who wrote *The Spiritual Way of St. Jeanne d'Arc*, Collegeville, MI: Liturgical Press, 1998.) Because of her complete surrender to God, Joan treasured the name *la pucelle*, for she had a clear awareness of her littleness and unimportance in her relationship with Almighty God. She wanted only what God wanted. This grace to *experience* one's complete availability to God is frequently a grace *during* or *after* a conversion experience like the "Baptism in the Holy Spirit." Joan was a loyal daughter of the Church as she committed herself completely to God. She faithfully attended Mass and received Holy Communion, even daily when possible. Even when leading armies, she would take out time for Mass and Communion. She frequently purified her interior consecrated conscience in the Sacrament of Penance -- even daily when she had a priest chaplain in the army! She encouraged her soldiers and others to receive the Sacraments.

Joan's Discernment. Joan increasingly heard her "voices." The realist that she was, this faith-filled teenager carefully discerned that these voices were from God. But why her, why was she instructed to become involved politically and militarily? Joan had to be sure that these messengers were really from God. And she became sure as they continued to teach and guide her and as their Divine assignments were amazingly accomplished. But why did the Holy Spirit speak through these messengers? In her religious formation Joan became familiar with these saints, their churches, their stained glass windows. To judge from the practices of the time, there seemingly was little *personal reliance* on the Holy Spirit. Yet Joan was totally convinced that Saints Michael, Catherine and Margaret were voicing messages from God Himself. On no other grounds would she have been submissive to these voices. Without identifying the presence of the Holy Spirit, Joan nonetheless was being led and strengthened and gifted by the Holy Spirit. And she faithfully cooperated. Significantly she did choose to feature a **Dove** on one side of the **standard** she carried in battle.

Words of Knowledge. When she was 17 God gave Joan a command, a *word of knowledge*, to convince King Charles VII of France that God wanted Joan to free Orleans surrounded by the English invaders and then lead him to be crowned at Rheims. When King Charles agreed to see this teenager who had never seen him, he dressed in plain clothing in a room full of men in official and royal garb. Joan entered, scanned the crowd and walked

directly to Charles and addressed him as her King under God. Clearly this awareness was a charismatic *word of knowledge* from the Holy Spirit through one of His agents. Later Joan was told by the Spirit to secure and wear a sword buried in St. Catherine's Church. With this *word of knowledge* a buried sword was found and she wore it. She was informed ahead of time by the Spirit that she would be wounded by an arrow in the shoulder, and later by a wound in the thigh. She apprised others and in time she experienced both wounds in battle. With conviction she predicted at Poitiers in 1429 that the English would be driven from Orleans, that the King would be consecrated in Rheims, that Paris would again belong to France, and that the Duke of Orleans would return from England - and it all happened. As she had predicted during her trial, Paris was recaptured in seven years and the English were driven out of France. The Holy Spirit was providing her with these and other *words of knowledge* as well as with *prophetic words*.

Before King Charles would allow Joan to lead a small army against the English at Orleans, he had her examined at Poitiers by a panel of Archbishops, Bishops, a Dominican and Carmelite priest and lay theologians. Because of her male attire and the fear of witchcraft, two women examined Joan and found that she was indeed a woman and a virgin; this confirmed the credulity and sincerity of all her assertions. Without immediately accepting her claims to have words, visions, guidance, prophecies, and predictions from God, this panel did conclude that God may be going to use her for the good of France. Joan got her army from Charles VII and went on to liberate Orleans from the English troops. Then she led Charles VII to Rheims where he was crowned King of France on July 17, 1429.

The panel at Poitiers was impressed with her bold, simple and profound answers to their searching but respectful questions, and with her keen awareness of grace working through nature. One member discerned she was led by the Spirit. During this three-week discernment process at Poitiers, and during the five-month trial in Rouen, the judges found no grounds to conclude that Joan who was "hearing voices" was mentally disturbed. All her words and behavior were too sound and balanced. Twenty years after her death, practicing lawyers who read the trial accounts did appeal for a new trial. They also commended the caution, skill, preciseness and timely wit in Joan's answers to the countless befuddling and entrapping questions. Her realism was also confirmed by her military leadership. Joan proved herself to be of sound mind.

Joan's Wisdom. A troubling *word of knowledge* in 1430 was that she would be captured by the English and imprisoned; nonetheless she knew that the dreadful consequences of falling into English hands would be part of God's providence for her and that He would be with her. Meanwhile she calmly continued her errands of mercy by freeing cities from the English soldiers. Joan displayed a profound wisdom in continually *seeing all events from God's perspective* -- whether encouraging others, or responding to menacing questions, or making plans. Wisdom sees everything from God's perspective. Her mature wisdom embraced the *charismatic word of wisdom* and the infused gift of wisdom. Joan was convinced that God told her to wear the attire of men in order to protect her *physical* virginity while living with the soldiers. In keeping with her *spiritual* virginity as *la pucelle*, Joan chose to maintain all her words and actions in keeping with the directions and desires of her God. Joan knew that her relationship with God was entirely *at His initiative* and that He [the Holy Spirit] chooses to manifest *His initiatives* to her through angels and saints.

Joan was captured and imprisoned by the English-Burgundians on May 23, 1430. The English and even many French intellectuals and clergymen were opposed to her military victories, to her views on who should rule France, and especially to her claims to have leadings from God Himself. In November she was sold to the English who took her to Rouen. She was confined in a large, cold, dark cell and three English guards were always in the cell, day and night, staring at her, taunting and harassing her. After all, she had inflicted defeat on the English armies. Moreover she was in leg irons and was chained by the waist to a large block of wood. She rightly claimed she had to wear her masculine leggings and keep them tightly laced. The cell did have a secluded toilet. Her imprisonment was most irregular, for the Church had its own jails and jailers for heretics. For seven months this was the isolated and malicious environment that would deplete the energy and inner vivacity of any woman or man. But not Joan -- by the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Illegal Ecclesiastical Trial. Joan was repeatedly informed that the court in Rouen, as a tribunal of the Roman Inquisition, was an agency of the institutional, hierarchic, militant Church, guided by the Holy Spirit, with full authority to find her innocent or guilty. But her trial was contrary to Church and Civil laws on many scores. Joan

discerned these Catholic clergymen -- whether for personal benefits, or in agreement with the English, or through fear -- were under the control of the English military, not the Holy Spirit. Joan was on trial for being a witch (sorceress), blasphemer and heretic. Firmly she repeatedly claimed that her "voices" were from God, that she was a good daughter of God and the Catholic Church, that she had a mission from God, that God had wanted the King crowned at Rheims, that God still wanted her to dress in men's leggings to protect her chastity when living among men, that she had never been open to the powers of darkness, that she would submit to the Pope and a Church court that was not under English control. Prior to the Rouen trial sessions, she again had been examined by women and found to be a virgin - which kept the judges from claiming that all her statements were lies and from the father of lies. For her religious crimes her trial officially began on January 9, 1431. On February 21 Joan had the first of 28 confrontations with the Catholic priests and theologians who were the ecclesiastical court under Bishop Pierre Cauchon. Since this court under Bishop Cauchon permitted her no counsel or defense throughout the trial, Joan was totally alone in responding to all the questioning and cross-examining and vicious attacks of the judges against this "heretic" and "witch." Her judicious responses to the judges were Spirit-led and miraculous as she responded with God's wisdom to self-condemning questions.

Most of the lengthy encounters were written in detail. After six public sessions of her trial, Bishop Cauchon decided to hold private sessions in her jail room because Joan was winning the acclaim of the people! And he charged the secretaries not to quote her *directly* but to report *indirectly* what she said -- apparently to weaken the impact of her profound responses. Clearly her common sense, her reliance on God [the Holy Spirit] and her love for the truth enabled her to speak the truth convincingly to the judges trying to browbeat and trap her. (To be inspired by reading the exchanges between the educated court and this Spirit-led teenager, go to this address on the internet: [http:// www. stjoan-center.com](http://www.stjoan-center.com) for thorough reports of the trial.)

Repeatedly her judges tried to get her to submit to the discernment of the Church, to deny that her voices were from God, for learned men declared them untrue and diabolical. For four months, except for the episode in the cemetery which she quickly rejected, she clung to her statements that she was guided by Almighty God. Apparently none of her theologically educated judges were attuned to the charismatic dimension of the Catholic Church. Because women and men in the Middle Ages were receiving visions and locutions, the judges were aware that private revelations should be submitted to the discernment of the Institutional Church. Joan too was submitting her visions to this Church court, but while she was willing to not publicize them she could not deny or reject the Divine origin of what she was experiencing.

When the tribunal insisted that she should submit to the judgement of the Church Militant, not having been taught adequately about the Holy Spirit and the charismatic dimension of the Church, Joan emphatically insisted that she was taking orders from the Church Triumphant. With her limited theology she rightly used the Church Triumphant to categorize her charismatic experiences. Clearly she was being guided by the Spirit and was experiencing the charismatic gifts of the Spirit, but neither she nor her judges nor the literature of the day provided such an interpretation of her mature Christian life.

"Whether or not people believe, I am sent by God." "I believe implicitly what my voices tell me." Among other things her voices told her not to fear martyrdom, for she would go straight to heaven. "Even if I were within the fire, I would maintain unto death what I have said in this trial." Her judges claimed she was consumed with pride. She chose to die rather than deny her charismatic experiences. For Joan, God was more real and more significant than anyone else.

Her Condemnation. In a public session on May 24 in a cemetery Joan, exhausted and fearful, signed a document and stated that she would renounce her voices as not from God. Unable to maintain what she was pressured to do in the cemetery, on May 28 she retracted all her statements in the cemetery and insisted that all she had said during the trial was true. She chose to die and still be able to say, "My voices come from God." On May 29, 1431, Joan was unanimously condemned to death by 37 judges. Then Bishop Cauchon judged her a lapsed heretic and turned her over to the civil forces for execution. Although she had been excommunicated from the Church and Sacraments by Cauchon, inconsistently he let her receive sacramental absolution and the Body of Christ on the morning of her execution. On May 30 Joan was illegally - without civil condemnation -- burnt at the stake. Because the English had built a highly combustible fire and a high platform, the executioner could not get to Joan

and provide the usual mercies in such an execution; he could not strangle her. Witnesses heard her invoke Jesus seven times until her horrible death. An English soldier who detested Joan reportedly had a conversion experience as she died and he saw a white dove emerge from her and take flight toward French territory. (Refer to the highly acclaimed book of Régine Pernoud, *Joan of Arc --- Her Story*, New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1999, p. 136.)

From her mother and pastors Joan learned well the lesson of love, for God and neighbor. By God's grace she **always loved** the people she encountered, thinking of their physical and spiritual welfare, protecting soldiers and helping the wounded, even wounded enemy soldiers, exhorting the soldiers in her company to fast and pray and receive the sacraments, continuing to love and defend King Charles after he played her false, loving those who disagreed with her and who disbelieved her visions and voices, even loving the members of the court who mercilessly cross-examined her and eventually condemned her - exhorting them to be just, loving her prison guards, loving Bishop Cauchon and urging him to be reconciled with God, urging the priest who accompanied her to the scaffold to leave before the fire was lit so he would not suffer hurt. Countless are the testimonies of her steadfast and loving concern for others. *La pucelle* chose to let her God have His way in all she said and did and in all her choices.

Her Vindication. Nineteen years after her death a fresh trial began and on July 7, 1456, Joan was vindicated when an appellate court constituted by Pope Calixtus III reversed the previous trial and condemnation. The court judged her testimony had been misrepresented, and the truth of her confessions and the many justifying circumstances had been discounted. The court found her actions were worthy of admiration. Over 500 years later, Joan was canonized on April 6, 1919 by Pope Benedict XV. *La pucelle* was canonized a virgin. No doubt it would have been too sensitive to canonize her a martyr at the hands of the Catholic clergy who were under the control of the English government. Indeed she was martyred because she was *la pucelle* who by her *spiritual virginity* chose to be completely available to her Divine Master and His communications (charisms) to her. Praise God for this holy virgin!

Lessons for Us Today from St. Joan ... and from Her Judges. First and foremost, we learn the value of **LOVE**. Following Jesus, Joan endlessly chose ways to love everyone, even those who disagreed with her charismatic experiences and those who relentlessly attacked and persecuted her and voted for her burning at the stake. We learn the role of **TRUTH** in our lives, for Joan remained committed to the truths she had been taught, spoke the truth, and lovingly called others to the truth. We learn who has the **INITIATIVE**, because Joan after her conversion experience at age 13 had no doubt that God had the initiative in her life, and continually she let God have the initiative. She knew how to let God be God! In a sense this was her **FAITH** in the Divine Persons, for she surrendered herself completely into Their Hands, putting herself totally at the disposal of the Divine Persons. She persevered in her faith in these Persons till death. By this spiritual virginity only God could have her inner spirit. By her physical virginity only God could have her body. From Joan we learn the need for authentic **DISCERNMENT** of charisms. From Joan we learn the role of **FIDELITY**. Like her we should be faithful to God's call regardless of the support we get. We should not deny or minimize or shelve our charismatic experiences. Like Joan we by our fidelity to God are commissioned to live and act according to our personal and communal and charismatic experiences of God. Unlike Joan during her short life, we today are commissioned by Pope Paul VI and Pope John Paul II, and by many Bishops worldwide, to share with others the charismatic dimension/aspect of the Church established by Jesus. From Joan we learn the role of Divine **POWER** in our lives, for Joan clearly had fearless courage to pursue and carry out the commands of God in spite of the obstacles and dangers. We too must face the fact that we cannot live a Christian and Charismatic life and do God's will by our own generosity and power, but only by reliance on Divine Power provided by Holy Spirit.

Even in the 15th century, many Bishops, Franciscans, Dominicans, Benedictine Abbots, diocesan clergy, theologians and laypersons were not open to the charismatic dimension of the Catholic Church. Very few recognized Joan's charismatic experiences. As an undercover charismatic, Joan can encourage and confirm charismatics today in their Spirit-led mission to the Church and the world. Like Joan who loved all who disagreed with her charismatic experiences and who yet explained her experiences to them the best she could, charismatics today should love and intercede for all who oppose or ignore the charismatic element of the Catholic Church and the charismatic gifts of the Spirit. And charismatics today, even though they may not be learned theologians, should rely on the Holy Spirit as they are led to humbly and wisely explain and exercise their charismatic gifts and

experiences.

Like St. Joan charismatics should be willing to submit their private revelations and charismatic gifts to the discernment of the Church. If the Church tells them not to publicize or promote their charismatic gifts to others, they should obey. Church authorities should encourage and help people to carefully discern the real source of their assumed spiritual experiences and charismatic gifts. However Church authorities should realize they cannot forbid God to give Divine grace, Divine power or Divine charisms to His people, nor should Church authorities require people to deny their personal experiences from God that they have prudently tested. The Church authorities at Joan's trial were not in the Catholic tradition in their demands on her to deny her experiences -- experiences she did not initiate, experiences she by testing did discern to be from God, experiences they could not prove to be demonic if they had tested the fruit.

St. Joan of Arc, please intercede that the Church and all her members come to embrace the charismatic dimension of the Church during this Jubilee Year and the 21st Century. Spirit of the Living God, fall fresh on us!



Go up one level

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