

JOAN OF ARC - SAINT OR WITCH?

It is sometimes stated that on the 30th of May 1431 the Catholic Church condemned Joan of Arc as a Witch, and on the 16th of May 1920 declared her to be a saint. The conclusion is then drawn that Church judgements can be very unreliable.

But the history of Joan of Arc does not support the basis for this conclusion.

Joan lived during the 'Hundred Years War' between England and France and, by the time Joan became involved, all northern France had fallen into English hands. A further large area, controlled by the Duke of Burgundy, had revolted against the authority of the French king, thereby commencing a civil war.

The Burgundians made a pact with the English and fought on their side. A skilful propaganda campaign was launched, alleging that Charles, heir apparent to the French crown, was illegitimate and therefore had no right to the throne. Many people became confused by the conflicting claims and tended towards neutrality. A number of towns were unwilling to resist what appeared to be the winning side. French morale was very low, and the end of France as a distinct monarchy and nation was threatened.

Rheims Cathedral, the traditional site for coronations, had been captured by the English, so preventing Charles being invested. This had a further demoralising effect on the ordinary people as many felt that Charles was not fully a king until he had been crowned.

As Joan grew into her teens she developed a deep spiritual and mystical life of prayer. She claimed that the 'voices' of saints were instructing her to raise the siege of Orleans, capture Rheims and have Charles crowned as king. They also instructed her to dress as a man while carrying out this work.

Joan left home in early 1428 and, following a Church trial at Poitiers which cleared her of any suspicion of witchcraft or heresy, animated Charles and the French troops with the belief that God wished them to be victorious and would help them. Joan did not take command of the army but, with Joan providing inspiring personal leadership in key places at crucial times, the French won surprising victories leading to Charles being crowned in Rheims Cathedral in July 1429.

Although Joan said that her mission was now completed, she continued to take part in the fighting and was captured in May 1430.

The English-Burgundian forces did not deny Joan's superhuman powers, but ascribed them to the Devil. So the English commanders arranged for bishop Cauchon, who was more interested in politics than in religion, to establish a court to prove that Joan was a Witch. Cauchon was zealously pro-English and chose Assessors (Jury-men) who were either biased, timid or both. As the trial proceeded he found it necessary to falsify evidence, increasingly terrorise the Assessors, misquote Joan's defence in a report to Paris University, and refuse to grant Joan's repeated demand to be tried by the Pope or an unbiased Church Council.

In this fraudulent Court, Cauchon found Joan 'guilty' and the English prepared for her execution. When at the last moment Joan, out of fear, signed a document promising to obey 'The Church', she was given a lighter sentence, and ordered to dress as a woman, which she did.

The English commanders were furious. It was essential for them to have 'The Church' condemn Joan for witchcraft so that they could execute her and be able to claim that Charles owed his coronation to the power of the Devil. They hoped that her execution as a Witch would provide a blow to the confidence of the French troops and cure the fear and fatalism of the English.

One night, Joan's clothes were removed, and in the morning she had to dress in male attire. Cauchon rushed to her cell and sentenced her for 'disobeying The Church', thereby providing the English with the excuse that they needed to burn her as a heretic and a Witch.

Rouen was captured by the French in 1449, and the Pope ordered an investigation into the trial. In 1456 Cauchon's sentence was declared null and void. The inquiry was not asked to make a judgement on Joan's holiness, and it was not until more than 400 years later that an upsurge in public opinion asked for this. The request was granted, and after careful consideration Joan was canonised as a saint (ie declared to be in heaven) in 1920.

Many false ideas about mediaeval France and the Catholic Church have been spread by G.B. Shaw's play 'St Joan', first performed in 1923. It is unfortunate that those who view or study the play tend to accept it as being basically true history.

Shaw, who was anti-religious and anti-Catholic, used his play to propagate his views on religion, politics, nationalism, feminism, miracles and human psychology. To achieve this objective he had to so greatly change the story of Joan's trial that the play became historically utterly unreliable.

The Church Court at Poitiers, bishops, priests, the king, the aristocracy and the ordinary people all accepted that it was sensible for a teenaged girl fighting in the army to wear male clothing. It was only Cauchon and Shaw who portrayed her male dress as being against Catholic teaching.

Joan did not act as a 'Protestant', as Shaw alleged. She did refuse to obey 'The Church' as represented by Cauchon, but was very loyal to The Church as represented by the Pope and the rest of the bishops. Cauchon over a period of months failed to trick Joan into making even once heretical statement.

Shaw depicted Joan as a pioneer of nationalism, yet this was well developed in several countries before her time.

Having uncritically accepted Shaw's depiction of Joan, many today have come to think of her as a fighter for women's civil rights and even as a 'feminist'. But history does not support this view. Joan took up her mission unwillingly and did not encourage other girls to join the army. Nor did she demand higher positions for women in Church and State. If by 'feminism' is meant the right of women to be as promiscuous and unfaithful as are some men, then Joan's life-style of prayer and strict adherence to Catholic moral principles was diametrically opposed to this form of 'feminism'. She raised the dignity of women in the eyes of many men of her day by her chaste and dynamic manner of living.

The Church did not make a mistake in 1429. It could be said that Joan was not tried by The Church at all, but by a small hostile clique misusing a church Court for their political purposes.

This article is based on the publication: ST JOAN OF ARC.

Published by: The ChurchinHistory Information Centre

<http://www.churchinhistory.org/>

Version: 12th June 2006