

Celebrating Women Witnesses

A Project to Rediscover Women Leaders in the Catholic Church

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In scene after scene in Carl Dreyer's classic 1928 silent movie *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, the camera zooms in on an agonized Maria Falconetti whose eyes bulge in confusion and weep with sadness at the machinations of her relentless inquisitors. After rounds of accusations and threats of torture, the suffering Joan reluctantly signs a confession to spare her life. But later, back in her cell, she has a dramatic change of heart and sends for the judges to admit that she has lied. "You still believe you were sent by God?" the wicked Bishop Cauchon demands. With a simple "Yes" Joan seals her own fate, but her courageous decision seems to release her from her fear and bring her peace. Gone are the tears as she sighs with acceptance. She carries herself with dignity and even smiles after receiving Communion. Now those around her are confused, while she remains calm, even peaceful. "Be courageous, Joan. Your last hour approaches," her confessor tells her.

She hardly needed reminding. Courage has always been considered one of Joan of Arc's most important virtues, not only in the last hours before her unfair death, but also as a warrior in battle. Yet perhaps her most courageous act was her insistence on listening to the voices from God that told her what her purpose in life would be, even when they called her to do things

considered impossible for a woman—not to mention a young girl—of her time.

A Story for the Big Screen

Joan's story is a dramatic one, which probably explains why it has captivated playwrights from

Shakespeare to Shaw and more than a few filmmakers, who more often than not have played fast and loose with the facts of her life. Luc Besson's 1999 blockbuster movie *The Messenger* is especially egregious with its suggestion that Joan's motives were vengeful and her voices possibly demonic. Often more accurate are the children's books from which many of us got our first impressions of the short-haired, armor-clad young girl named Joan.

In January of 1412 (some say on Epiphany) Joan was born to a peasant family in Domremy in Champagne, France, a country in the midst of the Hundred Years' War with England as well as a civil war between the houses of Orleans and Burgundy. She also was born into a church torn by schism, with two men claiming the papal throne. The violence and hatred in the world

around her no doubt had an effect on this young girl, who nonetheless lived an ordinary life of tending sheep, needlework and other house-hold chores—until her 12th year. That's when Joan began hearing voices.

At first the messages from the voices were reassuring and instructed young Joan to be good, pray and remain a virgin. But around her 14th birthday she received a much more specific—and political—message. She was to assist Charles VII to regain his crown and drive

JOAN of ARC Sent by God



the English out of France. Later, during her trial, Joan would attribute the voices to St. Margaret of Antioch and St. Catherine of Alexandria (both of whom the church now teaches almost certainly never existed) and to St. Michael the Archangel, but there is evidence she originally attributed them directly to God.

Joan's story is so amazing because she actually pursues such a preposterous directive. Although she is initially laughed at, her gutsiness and self-assured attitude, aided by near-miraculous predictions, eventually earn her a hearing by the Dauphin (the future Charles VII), who, as one story says, was impressed when she recognized him despite a disguise. He also subjected her visions to review by a panel of theologians at Poitiers that found them credible.

Joan was given a sword, a suit of armor, a banner emblazoned with a symbol of the Trinity and the words, "Jesus, Maria"—and command of over 4,000 men. She led the French troops in the liberation of the besieged town of Orleans in 1429, taking an arrow in her own body during that battle (earning her the title of "The Maid of Orleans"), and subsequently led another successful military campaign at Patay. In July of that year, she stood at the side of Charles VII as he was crowned king.

Joan should have quit while she was ahead. The predominantly male court, church and army resented the charismatic young woman, and her luck at military success seemingly had run out. She led a failed attempt to attack Paris and was captured by the Duke of Burgundy, who sold her to their English allies. The king she had helped to regain his crown never intervened to save her.

The English attributed her military successes to witchcraft and turned her over to the church to be tried for heresy, idolatry and witchcraft. With no one on her side, she faced an inquisition of dozens of bishops, judges and theologians who claimed her visions were demonic and who seemed most offended by her wearing of men's clothing. Faced with the threat of death, she signed a confession, but later changed her mind. Her insistence that her voices were from God earned her the sentence of death. The secular authorities burned her at the stake in the marketplace at Rouen (then English territory, now France) on May 30, 1431. According to witnesses, she died gazing at the cross and her last words were "Jesus." After exposing her charred body to the public, she was burned to ashes that were thrown in the Seine. At the

time of her death, she was only 19.

Model for Contemporary Young Women

Although her mythic story has captivated generations and her courage can inspire *all* Catholics, I believe Joan of Arc is an especially appropriate model for young women. Clearly, Joan's age—her youth—is an essential element to her story. Although there have been many young female saints, what is so compelling about Joan is the striking disconnect between what she did and what we normally expect young women to do. Young girls are not supposed to die. They're not supposed to fight in battles. They're not supposed to stand up to kings or talk back to church authorities.

"Our understanding of her must always be enclosed in the envelope of her age and gender. She was young and female," novelist Mary Gordon writes in her "Penguin Lives" biography *Joan of Arc* (Viking, 2000). Those two demographic qualities were not highly prized by the powers-that-be in Joan's time, and, sadly, not much has changed. Women still have less power than men in our world—and especially in our church. Youth is prized for its energy, but rarely for its wisdom. To be young and female is still to have a double whammy of negatives when it comes to having your voice heard and your opinion taken seriously.

"Who do you think you are?" is a question Joan probably heard on more than one occasion. It's also the subtle message that many young Catholic women receive from the church today. When in a group where everyone else is twenty years my senior—whether it's pastors, bishops or even liberal church activists—I've often wondered, "Who am I to take a leadership role?" But how old do young women and men have to be before we claim the church as ours? When younger Catholics talk of not being accepted by "the church," I think we often forget that "the church" is us. And sometimes we take the easy way out when we defer to older generations rather than take responsibility ourselves.

Joan was not only young and female, she was also a peasant and illiterate. Still, none of these "limitations" ever stopped her from following her call, as crazy as it might have seemed to the rest of the world. In fact, she doggedly pursued it as if her eternal life depended on it. She has been described as strong-willed and purposeful, bordering on stubborn. Those qualities are highly prized by independent young women today, and the fact that they are held up in a young woman from our history is encouraging.

But the hierarchical church is hardly known for its love of defiant young women who speak their minds and contradict church authorities. So why did the church make Joan a saint? Her recognition certainly didn't come during her own lifetime; on the contrary, she was killed for sticking to what she believed was right. Twenty years after her death, a retrial requested by Joan's family and convened by Pope Callistus III declared her innocent. But it wasn't until almost 500 years later, in 1931, that she was canonized—some say in an attempt to restore diplomatic relations between the Vatican and France or to fend off modernism by recapturing the public's imagination with a popular symbol of a “loyal daughter of the church.”

Following Her Own Voices

It's more than a little ironic that a woman burned for

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insisting on the primacy of her own experience has been held up as a model of loyalty to the institutional church. It certainly didn't escape the notice of the devil's advocates who argued against her canonization. And it hasn't gone unnoticed by contemporary women who see her as a role model for trusting one's inner voice.

If a young woman today reported that she was hearing voices from God or from long-dead saints, she would most likely be hauled to a therapist and promptly put on medication. But in Joan's time, hearing voices was not a sign of mental illness or instability. Rather, it was considered a way that God communicated with “special” people, including many medieval saints and mystics. The only catch was they also believed that evil spirits spoke through such voices, and it was up to the church to decide whether the source was holy or demonic. In Joan's case, they voted for the latter—no doubt influenced by her military success against their fellow countrymen.

Joan was always absolutely sure that her voices were from God or from heaven. But she also

passionately believed that the Catholic Church was God's representative on earth. Being forced to choose between the two must have caused immense pain and confusion for her. But ultimately, she had to listen to what she considered a power higher than the church—that of God and God's representatives who spoke directly to her. As authors Sara Maitland and Wendy Mulford point out in *Virtuous Magic: Women Saints and Their Meanings*, “The whole issue of self-authorization (supported by whatever means), self-authentication has been a particular maze for *women* in Christianity.”

Now, I've never really heard “voices”—at least not in the dramatic way described in Joan's story. But I have heard the “voice” of God in other ways: as a gut feeling, a nagging intuition, a sense that I need to do something, which just won't go away. Of course, all of us has a responsibility to form our conscience and to discern the will of God in our lives, being careful not to fall into self-delusion. But the life of Joan of Arc provides encouragement to listen to—and follow—the voice of God when it speaks.

It's unlikely that God will give us the task of saving a nation—at least not in the dramatic, single-handed way that Joan did. But often God's directives seem over the top, and they may require us to make difficult changes or sacrifices in our lives. Following our vocational call may not always be easy, and often requires a hefty dose of courage, especially if it is a countercultural call.

Joan of Arc was nothing if not brave. Dressed in armor, carrying her white banner in battle, she is a symbol of courage, charging ahead even when wounded. As a pacifist, I have a little trouble relating to Joan the soldier. But while her arena of the battlefield is not mine, I can admire her courage and integrity to do what God called her to do, despite the naysayers who insisted that “young girls don't do that,” despite the outrageousness of God's request, and despite the loneliness she must have felt when her king and everyone else abandoned her. Ultimately, Joan is a model of diehard integrity. She bravely chose death, a painful fiery one, over the comfort of telling people what they wanted to hear. Instead, this young woman spoke her truth.



Resources:

Besson, Luc. "The Messenger: The Story of Joan of Arc," Columbia Tri-Star, 1999.

Duguay, Christian. "Joan of Arc," 1999.

Dryer, Carl Th. "The Passion of Joan of Arc," Home Vision Entertainment, 1928.

Einhorn, Richard. "Voices of Light," Sony, 1995.

Gordon, Mary. *Joan of Arc: A Penguin Life*, Viking/Penguin Putnam, New York, 2000.

Maitland, Sara and Mulford, Wendy. *Virtuous Magic: Women Saints and Their Meanings*, Continuum, 1998.

McBrien, Richard. *Lives of the Saints*, HarperSanFrancisco, San Francisco, 2001.

Valentine, Mary Hester. *Saints for Contemporary Women*, Thomas More Press, Chicago, 1987.

The feast day for Joan of Arc is celebrated on May 30. Please use the enclosed prayer service in your parish or small faith community on that date or at another appropriate time.

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Prayer Service Honoring Joan of Arc

Celebrate her feast day May 30 or any time you want to remember her

Create an altar with an image of Joan (perhaps taken from a children's book) and a lighted candle. Each person receives a small candle before being seated, in a circle, if possible.

Gathering Song: *Be Not Afraid* (© 1978 Robert J. Duford, SJ and New Dawn Music. # 445 *Today's Missal Music Issue* Published by Oregon Catholic Press)

Welcome: (*presider*) Loving God, we give thanks for this opportunity to gather together and remember your daughter, Joan. Grant us the openness to hear her story with a fresh perspective, and the wisdom to learn from her life and courageous death. We ask this in the name of God, who is both Father and Mother; Jesus, the ultimate model of courage and faithfulness; and the Holy Spirit, who speaks within all of us. Amen.

Reading I (from the transcript of Joan's trial)

"I was 13 when I had a Voice from God for my help and guidance. The first time that I heard this Voice, I was very much frightened; it was mid-day, in the summer, in my father's garden. I had not fasted the day before. I heard this Voice to my right, towards the Church; rarely do I hear it without its being accompanied also by a light. This light comes from the same side as the Voice. Generally it is a great light... If I were in a wood, I could easily hear the Voice which came to me. It seemed to me to come from lips I should reverence. I believe it was sent me from God..."

Response: *What You Hear in the Dark* (© 1975 by Dan Schutte, NALR #264, *Glory and Praise*)

Chorus: What you hear in the dark
You must speak in the light
You are salt for the earth
You are light for the world.

Reading II (Again, from the transcript of Joan's trial. When asked if she will refer herself to the judgment of the church on earth for all she has said or done, she replies:)

"On all that I am asked I will refer to the Church Militant, provided they do not command anything impossible. And I hold as a thing impossible to declare that my actions and my words and all that I have answered on the subject of my visions and revelations I have not done and said by the order of God: this, I will not declare for anything in the world. And that which God made me do, had commanded or shall command, I will not fail to do for any man alive. It would be impossible for me to revoke it. And in case the Church should wish me to do anything contrary to the command which has been given to me of God, I will not consent to it, whatever it may be.

I will defer to God, Whose Commandment I always do. I know well that which is contained in my Case has come to me by the Commandment of God; what I affirm in the Case is, that I have acted by the order of God: it is impossible for me to say otherwise. In case the Church should prescribe the contrary, I should not refer to any one in the world, but to God alone, Whose Commandment I always follow."

Preaching: *A short reflection, preferably by a woman—better yet, a younger woman—on Joan’s life and death, focusing on her youth, her courage, and her insistence on listening to the voice of God.*

Reflection/Sharing: *With soft music playing (perhaps Voices of Light by Richard Einbourn written especially for the movie “The Passion of Joan of Arc”), participants meditate and reflect on one or more of the following questions:*

1. Where do I need to be courageous in my own life?
2. Is God speaking to me? How can I discern the voice of God in my life?
3. How does Joan’s life inspire me?

If possible, some from the group share their responses.

Ritual: *(presider) Fire was the means used by the authorities to snuff out young Joan’s life, but fire can also be a symbol of passion and purification. Just as Joan was a light to the world, let us light our candle as a symbol of our commitment to “be not afraid.”*

(Starting with the candle from the altar, the presider lights his/ her candle, then lights the next person’s, and so on. As the flame is passed, each person says to the next, “May you have the courage to listen to the voice of God.”)

Closing Prayer: *A Litany of St. Joan of Arc*
The response is “Pray for us.”

St. Joan, born a peasant into a war-torn world....
St. Joan, who listened to the voice of God....
St. Joan, who followed the voice of God....
St. Joan, who accepted the mantle of leadership....
St. Joan, victorious in battle....
St. Joan, abandoned by those she trusted....
St. Joan, who spoke her truth, even under pressure....
St. Joan, who put God before man-made institutions....
St. Joan, who died for her integrity....
St. Joan, model for young women....
St. Joan, inspiration for us all....

Closing Song: *Blest Be the Lord* (© 1976 by Dan Schutte and New Dawn Music, #463 in *Today’s Missal Music Issue* Published by Oregon Catholic Press)

Prayer service developed by Heidi Schlumpf who is an associate editor at U.S. Catholic magazine in Chicago. She has a master’s degree in theological studies from Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary in Evanston.

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Name _____

Joan of Arc: Sent by God

1. Fill in the following biographical information about Joan of Arc:

When was she born:

Social status of family:

Where was she born:

How old was she when she died?

Her last word:

2. What was happening on the political front when Joan lived?

What was happening in the Church during the time of Joan's life?

3. Describe some typical chores or duties Joan may have had a child.

4. Why did Joan decide to put on armor and go to war to drive the English out of France?

5. Why was Joan called the "Maid of Orleans"?

6. What happened to Joan after Charles VII was crowned King?

7. What charges were brought against Joan when she was tried by the British?

8. According to the author what were the limitations in Joan's life that could have been obstacles to her answering her call by God?

9. What did medieval people think when people reported hearing “voices”?
10. How long after her death did it take the Church to declare Joan innocent?
11. How long after her death was Joan canonized as a saint in the Church?
12. How was Joan’s call to leadership “countercultural” for her time?
13. Give an example of a young person’s “call by God” that would be counter-cultural today.
14. How does the life of Joan of Arc, especially her conviction to “speak her truth”, have to say to Catholics today?

15. Choose one of the following:

View the movie *Mulan* (Disney Studios, 1999) Write a brief paragraph about what *Mulan* and Joan of Arc have in common.

Use the Internet to find out about Nobel Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi. Write an imaginary conversation between Joan and this woman. First, have Aung San Suu Kyi introduce herself and her cause. Then proceed with the dialogue.