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Joan, l'Agent Provocateur

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Thomas D. Hughson, S.J.



Charpentier, Ste Catherine de Fierbois

We have listened to a brief masterpiece of spiritual theology. When have hearers or readers been led into the life of a saint by a more intriguing first paragraph? Fr. George Tavard's "The Spirituality of Saint Joan" conveys the unconventional, luminous quality in this saint whose life was anything but banal. With the sure, deft strokes of an artist, Fr. Tavard has sketched Joan of Arc's

vibrant heroism and most human commitment to God.

From her birth in Domremy to her death outside Rouen, from exultant victory at Orléans to the coronation of Charles VII at Rheims, Fr. Tavard omits no facet of her existence. Not her family, not her prayer, not her love for France, not her suffering, not her vindication. Spirituality was not an element, a part, a single feature of her life. Spirituality was the whole particularity of her life seen from its center—communion with God, Christ, the saints and angels. Spirituality was the core which irradiated, illuminated, and guided her spectacular deeds. It sent her on behalf of a French people beleaguered by the Hundred Years' War yet divided in reaction to the English incursion.

“Go, go!” the voices urged Joan. And hasten she did, to raise the siege at Orléans, to rally dispirited troops around the cause of liberating their land, to see the dauphin crowned at Rheims. Her canonization in 1920 put the Church’s official seal on the link between her spirituality and the specifics of her mission. Was it a religious mission? God did not send Joan to nurse the sick or to teach children their catechism. God formed her into a sacred militant, dedicated to a political goal, which was the just sovereignty of Charles VII as successor to the line of Clovis, first Christian king of France. Joan saw Christ, Fr. Tavard mentioned, as Lord of all kings. Charles VII became his agent and representative in service of the people of France. It is worth noting that Joan’s mission was not committed to the exaggerated position that popes succeeded Peter as repositories of all temporal and spiritual power. She did not exceed her people or the Church, however, in clarity on the difference between the purposes of church and state. She accepted without known regret—as the new king’s solemn acceptance of a duty in service of the Church’s mission—to use the sword of temporal power to repress heresy. Nonetheless, the ultimate beneficiaries of a just sovereignty within that defective understanding would be people like Joan’s family and neighbors in Domremy. Her divinely appointed mission was military in order to be political. The effect of securing legitimate rule was justice in the land, riddance of invaders, and eventual but not permanent peace.

The indissolubility of spirituality and mission means, of course, that we can attribute to God her intervention to promote French liberty under a rightful sovereign. The scope of her task lay in the temporal order of society. Are we to think because her effect was not within the ambit of Word and Sacrament that she thereby departed from the Church’s own mission? Did she not exemplify, rather, the active concern for social reality latterly at the heart of Catholic social teaching? Did she not have a spirituality and mission directed to building up the kingdom of God in temporal dimensions of liberty and justice? Has excessive secularization removed from our minds what Joan and Thomas Jefferson alike knew—that justice and liberty in this world is also a divine purpose?

“The Kingdom of Paradise” was Joan’s phrase for the provenance of the light and voices she experienced. Yet, 565 years ago, an ecclesiastical court at Rouen indicted her for, Fr. Tavard recounts, “heretical rebellion against the Church.” The unhappy bishop of Beauvais, Pierre Cauchon, handed her over for burning. She was nineteen and died calling on the name of Jesus. Sometime later, Cauchon, while a barber was trimming his beard, tipped back in his chair and died. The court split the Church into a heavenly Church triumphant and an earthly Church militant. God ruled the former; his vicar, the Pope, aided by the Holy Spirit, apparently had the

latter as domain. Joan responded, and Vatican II teaches, that Christ's Church was not so divided. Her fidelity to God and to conscience in this belief met, though, with the severest judgment. The subsequent voiding of the court's procedures and nullification of the verdict do not remove the original scandal. Authority not only was abused but was exercised within arrangements permitting easy abuse, and on behalf of Catholic truth about the Church! Raymond E. Brown remarks that Matthew's Gospel counteracted a tendency for the Church to "become a self-sufficient entity, ruling (in the name of Christ, to be sure) by its own authority, its own teaching, and its own commandments." The court at Rouen seems to have surpassed itself in just that tendency. Joan expressed indignation at the injustice visited upon her under ecclesiastical authority. But her charity had been universal, reaching to the English through demands for their peaceful exit before armed combat commenced. Also, in response to the court, her charity took the more strenuous path of not hating her ecclesiastical tormentors. Joan practiced the gospel God had formed her in and did not curse the Churchmen for their manifest treachery, deceit, and use of authority to vilify a holy woman. Her forgiving charity was a weighty precedent when Charles VII, Fr. Tavad notes, decreed an amnesty for her guilty judges and for other crimes performed by Burgundians during the years of war. This charity of Joan's toward the Church may be one of her most provocative challenges to us.

Fr. Tavad concludes with a proposal that the paradox of Joan lies in the eyes of beholders unable to grasp the unique simplicity of her fidelity to God. He remarks, too, that she does not sit comfortably in any of the well-known schools of spirituality. Reversing matters, we can ask about her influence on others, whether she might be the origin of a current of spirituality. I do not know the details of the history of her influence, though the tradition of French reverence for her is clear. Might she become an influence upon us in the way she has been upon poets François Villon and Charles Péguy, Saints Thérèse of the Child Jesus and Elizabeth of the Trinity? How might she be an *agent provocateur* of God's reign in our midst?

So many aspects of her spirituality remain inimitable and incommunicable; her singular mission cannot be duplicated or shared. Still, she gave heroic witness to communion with God. To what about God or the gospel does Joan *la Pucelle* continue to witness? Whatever the answer, it is first of all important to acknowledge the value of the question. The lives of saints have not yet become the theological topic Karl Rahner thought they deserved to be. George Tavad's work on Joan of Arc brings her into the realm of theology, if that might be considered a happy fate. He extends to Joan's words and deeds the kind of respect Rahner had for writings

by the saints and mystics. Their writings, said Rahner, are "wiser and more experienced than the wisdom of the learned." In them we find, he continued, "an original assimilation of God's revelation...a creative prototype in accord with historical circumstances, and by way of example...a new gift by God's Spirit of the ancient Christianity to a new age."² Might not Joan's personal dedication as a member of the laity and her witness to God's activity on behalf of temporal justice and a free society speak to postconciliar Catholic laity? Might she be paired with a later English witness to liberty under the just sovereignty of law, St. Thomas More, as singular yet exemplary lay witnesses to God's care for justice in society?

Notes

- ¹ Raymond Edward Brown, *The Churches the Apostles Left Behind* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 138.
- ² Karl Rahner, *The Dynamic Element in the Church* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1964), 85-86.