

WAS SAINT JOAN OF ARC A PROPHET?

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THE INTRODUCTION to The New American Bible states ‘a prophet is a man who speaks for God and to his own times.’¹ And he speaks because he is inspired. There is another sense of ‘prophecy’, continues the Introduction, which has it that a prophet makes predictions, but that is, strictly speaking, not prophecy. Some who were prophets had this gift, but it is a gift additional to prophecy.

The argument here is that St. Joan of Arc, though not a man, as the above definition seems to presume, was a prophet in both these senses; she was an inspired speaker, particularly to those in power, and she made predictions which were confirmed by the event.

In Joan’s case, this inspiration came through intermediaries. She identified them as St Michael the archangel and the saints Catherine and Margaret. Her English captors questioned her about her voices, suspecting that they might be demonic, which would have automatically brought down the death penalty, since it would have proved she was a witch.

Joan was, understandably, reluctant to discuss her voices with them, and did so only when the voices permitted her to do so. ‘She said she knew her spirits were good because they always helped her...she also admitted that initially she was uncertain that it was indeed Michael; she was afraid; she saw him many times before she knew it was St.Michael.’²

Evidential questions had been put to Joan well before her acquisition by the English. [She had been originally captured by the Burgundians. They sold her to the English for 10.000 francs.] Joan had been experiencing visions and voices from the age of thirteen. Initially, they told her to be a good girl and go

often to church. Over time, it became clear that they were delivering a mission: ‘to take up arms like a man, raise the English siege of Orleans, and see that the Dauphin [the Crown Prince] was crowned King of France. The voices told her that she would be wounded in battle, and that a great victory would be won against the English within seven years.’³

The mission must have seemed to Joan bizarre and terrifying. But her voices became so insistent that she obtained an audience with Robert Beaudricourt, who commanded the king’s forces at Valcouleur. He dismissed her as a joke, as she must have suspected he would. But she had predicted an imminent defeat for the French. When that happened, Beaudricourt sent her to the Dauphin.

She gained an audience with him in March 1429. He disguised himself as a courtier, but she identified him without any trouble. In private audience with him, she showed that she knew his daily personal prayer, which he thought no one knew. She convinced him of her mission, and asked for troops to lead to Orleans.

Charles’ courtiers thought she was mad, so he sent her to a council of theologians for questioning. It cleared her. He gave her troops for Orleans, where they defeated the English. She won another victory against them on the Loire, and Charles was crowned King Charles VII in July 1429.

So within four months, a good deal of Joan’s mission was accomplished. The English were beginning to be rolled back, and Charles was crowned king.

However, the enemy still held Paris and parts of Normandy and Burgundy. So Joan went on campaign again, which led to her cap-

ture at the siege of Compeigne. It is not clear whether Joan engaged in this siege at her voices' command, or whether it was her own military decision.

In the event, her accusers dropped the charge of complicity with the devil, and convicted her of heresy, the ability to see apparitions, and wearing men's clothes. Joan had worn them to make travel easier, especially in the early part of her mission. Her accusers regarded her as a 'cross-dresser'.

Joan mentioned, in her defence, her knowledge of the Dauphin's prayer, which is what had convinced him, but her judges dismissed it. Confirmation of this point by Charles himself would have strengthened her case, but he never sent representations to her trial, nor did he attempt to buy her back from the English.

The highly improbable success of Joan's mission is itself an argument for divine intervention. Throughout her mission, there is evidence of information that could not have come from a natural source. So the case for her being a prophet is a strong one.

There is a question one cannot help asking about her mission. Why did God want the English out of France, and why did He want Charles VII, an unimpressive man, on the throne? One can only speculate about the answer. Joan died in 1431, late in the medieval period. The Middle Ages were passing, and a



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significantly different age was coming. Perhaps it was essential for God's Providential Governance of the world that France be an independent power in the coming years.

The case of Joan of Arc shows that prophecy occurs in the post Biblical world, and by implication, may occur in our world. Though good news in itself, that creates uneasiness. Doesn't it imply that we are going to have to decide who is, and who is not, a genuine prophet? Yes, it does. But we should remember that a cynic is one who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing. Some things are worth paying for. God sees the future and we do not. Surely it is worth taking a patient, though critical, attitude towards apparent prophets.

Joan's life makes the important point that though lay persons cannot be ordained priests, they can be prophets.

NOTES

1. The New American Bible. Catholic Bible Publishers. Wichita. Kansas. 1977-78 Edition. P.11.

2. Rosemary Ellen Guiley. Encyclopaedia of Angels. Facts on File. New York. 1996. P.103.

3. Ibid. p.102.

*'Children say that people are hung
sometimes for speaking the truth.'*

—Joan of Arc.