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JOAN OF ARC: A REFORMER BEFORE THE REFORMATION

by NIGEL JOHNSTONE

WE are accustomed to talk of Wycliffe and Hus and others as Reformers before the Reformation, but what place in that honourable company can be given to Joan of Arc? Even if in her day she was condemned on charges of heresy, as they were, the Roman Catholic Church has had second thoughts about her, and has in more recent times canonized her—an honour which Wycliffe and Hus are not likely to receive in the foreseeable future. The following article by the Minister of Conisbay in Caithness presents St. Joan in what for many of our readers will be a new light.

JOAN OF ARC, the peasant girl of Domrémy in the province of Lorraine and deliverer of the French people from the domination of the English, was burned at the stake in the market place of Rouen on Wednesday, 30th May, 1431. In front of the stake was a board with the words of the charge painted on it: "Jehanne who called herself La Pucelle, liar, pernicious, deceiver of the people, sorceress, superstitious, blasphemer of God, presumptuous, disbeliever in the faith of Jesus Christ, boastful, idolatrous, cruel, dissolute, invoker of devils, apostate, schismatic, and heretic."¹ At her trial, conducted by Pierre Cauchon, Bishop of Beauvais, a formidable list of accusations was brought against her; but as the trial proceeded, two salient accusations asserted themselves, and in neither case was there any possible question as to Joan's guilt. The first was her insistence on wearing men's clothes. This was a matter on which Joan's shrewd commonsense and native modesty dictated the course to be followed; for, as her peculiar vocation was to follow a soldier's life, to live and fight among soldiers, and to be a leader of soldiers, it was obviously wise for her to adopt the dress of her calling. There was never any doubt as to her guilt in this respect; but Joan made doubly sure of her condemnation by stubbornly refusing to abandon men's clothes, even though kindly women in her prison entreated her to do so.

¹ V. Sackville West, *Saint Joan of Arc*, pp. 367 f.

The second salient point at the trial was Joan's account of her Voices. She was only twelve when, as she told her judges,

God sent a voice to guide me. At first I was very much frightened. The voice came towards the hour of noon, in summer, in my father's garden. I had fasted the preceding day. I heard the voice on my right hand, in the direction of the church. I seldom hear it without seeing a light. That light always appears on the side from which I hear the voice.²

Thereafter, for the space of five years, similar visions appeared to her by day and by night; and she heard voices warning her that she had been specially chosen to restore the kingdom of France, and to aid and protect Charles the Dauphin. We may, if we choose, be completely sceptical, like the prosecuting judges and witnesses at the trial, regarding these voices and visions: but we cannot deny the extraordinary career of this obscure peasant girl, who, with little knowledge of the world beyond Domrémy and none at all of the conduct of war, was able to persuade the Dauphin of her mission, rally his troops in face of the victorious enemy, and, by a series of striking victories, put fresh heart into the French people, so that, after her death, they drove the English out of France. It was the fact of the voices, and Joan's unwavering loyalty to the saints who visited and spoke to her, that made her excommunication and condemnation inevitable. Obviously the Bishop of Beauvais and his subordinates could do little with a nineteen-year-old girl, who claimed to have had direct communication with God and His saints, and so distinguished between the church triumphant in heaven and the church militant on earth that her obedience to the former led her into disobedience to the latter. Obviously, in view of her obscure origin and her remarkable achievements in defeating the English and having her Dauphin crowned king at Rheims, she must be pronounced to be a saint herself or a devil, a sorceress, a heretic. There was indeed only one choice before the court. If the prisoner continued to set the judgment of her voices, i.e. her own private source of revelation, above the judgment of God's representative on earth, then she was violating a major law of the church and must suffer the penalty. She had appealed more than once to be taken before the Pope himself, yet she made it quite clear that, for all her veneration for His Holiness, God alone would remain her authority in the last resort.

In this simple reliance upon God, and unquestioning loyalty and

² *Ibid.*, p. 58.

obedience to her voices as sent by God, as also in her common-sense decision to wear men's clothes for the accomplishment of her mission, Joan revealed an independence of mind and judgment, which places her in the ranks of the Reformers before the Reformation. The fact that she insisted on putting God first, before Pope, cardinals, archbishops, bishops and other clergy, sets her in the spiritual succession of John Hus, Jerome of Prague, and the great Doctor Martin himself. It was barely sixteen years since John Hus had bravely endured death by burning at Constance, and there were many circumstances in his trial and death that were later repeated in the burning of Joan at Rouen. They were both charged with heresy and blasphemy, and both were repeatedly urged to recant. Perhaps Hus showed himself the stronger and more mature Christian, for he gave his body to the flames without recanting a single word of the truth, which he had believed and taught; and at the place of execution, where they set a devil's cap on his head, he cried aloud, "Lord Jesus Christ, gladly and in humility I will bear this shameful and cruel death for the sake of Thy holy gospel. Forgive my enemies."³ Joan, however, after a year of imprisonment and almost daily interrogation by her judges, broke down utterly as the dreadful sentence of her excommunication was being read by the Bishop of Beauvais. "For these reasons we declare you excommunicate and heretical, and pronounce that you shall be abandoned to secular justice, as a limb of Satan severed from the church . . ."⁴ Four days later she withdrew her recantation, saying that God sent her His pity of the betrayal to which she had consented, and that her voices told her that she had done very wrong. She died with the name of Jesus upon her lips.

In view of this spiritual affinity between Joan of Arc and John Hus, it is interesting to read the virulent letter in which Joan denounces the Hussites.

Of late the unmistakable voice of the common people as well as the voice of God [she wrote], have brought to my ears, to me, to Joan the Maid, the knowledge of this: that from being Christian heretics, you have become blind heathens and Saracens; that you have abolished true belief and all upbuilding of the servant of God; that you are elaborating a doctrine of disgusting superstition; that you are defending it with blood and fire; that by means of fear and outrage you allow it to spread abroad with power; that you over-

³ Roubiczek and Kalmer, *Warrior of God*, p. 242.

⁴ V. Sackville West, *op. cit.*, p. 353.

throw the holy images ; that you bring ruin and desolation upon holy buildings. . . . I, Joan the Maid, would have long since visited you with my avenging arm, if the war with the English had not kept me always here. But if I do not hear soon of your reform, of your return to the bosom of the church, I shall perhaps leave the English and turn against you, in order to eradicate your awful superstition with the sharp-edged sword, and take from you either your heresy or your life. If you return now towards the light which still shines, if you return to the bosom of the catholic faith, send me your messengers and I shall tell you what you have to do. . . .⁵

It is a curious letter coming from one who was herself so shortly to be branded as a Saracen, accused and convicted of heresy, and burned as a witch. It shows unmistakably that Joan was passionately attached to the church of her fathers, the church which had its centre at Rome and whose head was the Pope. She was vehemently opposed to all that she had heard of the warfare, which the Hussites, since the death of their beloved pastor at Constance, had been carrying on. Their smashing of images, their denunciation of the worship of saints and their relics, the murder of Roman Catholic priests—all these, far-off warnings of the greater movement that was to develop a century later, were blows at the church in which Joan had been nurtured, and of which she believed herself to be a loyal and devoted daughter.

Yet even in her defence of the Catholic Church, Joan is linked with Hus and Wyclif on the one hand, and with Luther and Calvin on the other. One thing all the Reformers had in common was love and devotion for the holy mother church. It was not disruption they desired, but reformation ; and if the Roman curia had been willing to purge the abuses of the church to cleanse it from corruption, to remodel its teaching on the basis of Holy Scripture, and to restore it as the body of Christ, there might have been no disastrous split accompanying the Reformation. That Hus was as loyal to the church as was Joan herself is clearly shown in a letter, which he wrote to the college of cardinals. "I write with the humble submission and respect that is due to your commands, reverend Fathers in Christ," he says ; "you who are clothed with an apostolical character, who shine as great lights to enlighten the nation, and who are elevated to power in order to efface the sins of the world, to snatch souls from the snares of Satan, and to succour those who suffer in Christ's name. . . . The evils that

⁵ *Procès de condamnation et de réhabilitation de Jeanne d'Arc*, par Jules Quicherat. For the English translation of this letter I am indebted to Miss E. J. S. Sinclair, teacher of French at Wick High School.

overwhelm me date from the time that a portion of the church withdrew their obedience from Gregory XII. I then recommended with success, in my sermons before the barons, princes, clergy, and people, their adhesion to the college of cardinals for the union of my holy mother church."⁶ Luther, too, the principal architect of the Reformation and of the breakaway from Rome, was for long exceedingly loth to take any step that would mar the unity of the church. In his letter "To the most blessed father, Leo X, pontifex maximus," he writes: "Holy Father, the worst of reports are in circulation about my own self. . . . I am made out to be one who is undermining the authority and power of the keys and the supreme bishop. Consequently I have been called heretic, apostate, infidel, and 600 other ignominious names."⁷ He then protests, as a loyal son to his father, against the universal preaching of indulgences, the scandal such preaching causes, and the shame brought upon the church and the Supreme Pontiff. At the same time he briefly and inadequately explains the 95 theses, which he nailed to the church door at Wittenberg, as calling in question the doctrines of the preachers and inviting them to debate. "I am sending these all too inadequate explanations of my theses, Holy Father, in order that I may be the safer by having your approval as my defence, and your shadow as a protection. By these means, all who so desire will understand that I am simply seeking to maintain the authority of the church and only wanting to add to the respect for the keys."⁸

With all their deep love and devotion to the church, however, the Reformers desired to put first things first; and they recognized that the first place belongs not to the church nor yet to the Pope, but to God alone. This was the stand that Isaiah took centuries before, when, speaking as God's mouthpiece, he declared, "I am the LORD, and there is none else, there is no God beside Me" (Isa. 45: 5). Joan of Arc insisted again and again that she ought to obey God rather than men, even when that meant being disobedient to God's representatives in the church. "Let all my words and deeds be sent to Rome," she pleaded, "to our Holy Father the Pope, to whom, after God, I will refer myself. As to what I have said and done, I have done it through God."⁹ John

⁶ Émile de Bonnechose, *Letters of John Hus*, trans. by Campbell Mackenzie, p. 15.

⁷ *Reformation Writings of Martin Luther*, trans. by Bertram Lee Woolf, vol. 1, p. 62.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

⁹ V. Sackville West, *op. cit.*, p. 353.

Hus quotes St. Augustine, saying, "If my earthly presence commands that which you ought not to do, despise this power and fear a higher one. Consider the different degrees of human power. Do you obey the under officer, if the proconsul orders the contrary? And if the proconsul orders you to do one thing, and the emperor another, would you attempt to disobey the latter for the former? If the emperor commands you to do that which is prohibited by God, despise the emperor and obey God. We ought, then, to resist the power of the devil or of men, when they suggest anything against God; and in doing so, we resist not, but obey even God's commands."¹⁰

The tragedy of the church before the Reformation was that, like the Jewish church in the time of our Lord, she had "laid aside the commandment of God and held instead the tradition of men" (Mark 7: 8). In the course of many generations God had become obscured by layer upon layer of tradition, while every kind of evil was rampant in the courts of the church and in the houses of the clergy. So great was the evil that only the voice of the Son of God, speaking through His chosen servants, John Hus, Joan the Maid, Martin Luther, and a host of others, could avail to awake the dead. It was inevitable that they should speak against the Pope and denounce the clergy, that they should assert the right of private judgment and the liberty of the individual conscience in all matters concerning the soul and God; for it was to confer upon us the liberty of the sons of God that Christ came, and we have the apostolic injunction to "stand fast in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free" (Gal. 5: 1). The first Christian martyr died in freedom, because he saw that which was hidden from the eyes of the official church; and when new light was given to John Hus, when supernatural vision, strength, and courage were supplied to the peasant girl of Domrémy, the official church summoned all its energies to stem the gathering tide and set its face like a flint against all reform. But though she branded as heretics those who propagated the new ideas of renaissance and reformation, though she destroyed those who fell into her power, the church was not able to restrain the tide that was coming in with the Holy Spirit. As Luther said to John Staupitz, "Enough for me is Jesus Christ, my sweet Saviour and atoning Lord, to whose praise I shall sing as long as I live."¹¹ In this affirmation of faith is the spirit of the Reformation.

Conisbay, by Wick.

¹⁰ *Letters of John Hus*, p. 26.

¹¹ *Reformation Writings*, p. 60.