ST JOAN: A QUINCENTENARY CELEBRATION

SIR JOHN MCEWEN

THERE is a passage in Francis Thompson of which Chesterton remarked that it alone proved that Thompson was a great poet because, he said, it contained as many inner meanings as outer ones; that is to say, that not only did it contain meaning after meaning, as in a Chinese box one box opens into another inwards, but at the same time, as from a stone dropped into still water, it gave rise to ever-widening rings of thought spreading outwards to infinity. To read the life of St Joan is to be reminded very forcibly of Chesterton's observation. For never was there life so fraught both with inner significance and with world-wide implications. For the wider sphere it is enough to say that she created a nation; or as Michelet puts it: '*Elle aima tant la France! Et la France, touchée, se mit à s'aimer elle-même.*' The outward-spreading consequences of that single decisive act are still perceptible today. The inner significance of her life is to be found in her unique relationship to God. Here is a mystery indeed! Not as regards the facts. There is no mystery there. We know them all; from her earliest childhood until her death, nothing is hidden. Moreover, what is even more remarkable, all this comes down to us in the form, not of hearsay and legend, but of attested statements, for, as one of her biographers has pointed out, hers is the only story of a human life which comes to us under oath. No, it is not the facts which are in question, but rather what lies behind the facts. We know that from the age of twelve she was accompanied by three Saints—St Michael, St Catherine of Alexandria and St Margaret of Antioch; but of the peculiar significance of those particular three we remain ignorant. She referred to them as her 'Voices', although in fact they were much more than mere voices. They were presences whom she had frequently seen and touched and to whom on at least one occasion she had made her confession.

When they first appeared to her the message that these Saints brought was simple: Be good and God will help you. It is interesting as illustrating the ways of God with man to compare the process of conversion in this case and, let us say, in the case of

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St Paul. In the case of Paul, the highly educated, intellectual adult, already set in his ways, the method is that of the thunderbolt. There is no preparing of the ground, no argument, nothing but a Voice and a flash and from that instant he is a changed man. Doubtless Almighty God could in just such another twinkling of an eye have changed the village girl into a warrior. Such however was not the way that he chose. From the time that she first heard the Voices until she set out on her mission four and a half years elapsed. So much time was he prepared to spend in preparing his chosen instrument for her tremendous task. Joan herself tells us that she was frightened when she heard the Voices for the first time. She was not easily frightened even at that tender age, but it does not require much imagination to realize the effect on a little girl of the 'white shadow' of the Archangel falling upon her that summer afternoon in the garden behind her father's cottage. Nevertheless, as we have seen, the message of the mighty visitant was as unalarming as it could be, in fact of nursery simplicity: Be a good girl. It is true that added to this there was a statement to the effect that in due course she must go to the help of the Dauphin. This was the preliminary sounding, *pianissimo* as it were, of what was to be the main theme of the message which it was to take four years and more to drive home. There is, surely, something infinitely touching about the patience shown by the Powers of Heaven in bringing this child to a full realization of what was to be required of her. The demand in itself was so preposterous. How was she, a child and a girl, to lead armies and to crown a king? Why, she couldn't even ride a horse. Notwithstanding all such commonsense protests, however, her Saints, addressing her as *Jehane la Pucelle*, and sometimes even as *fille de Dieu*, speaking in French in low and sweet voices (*très bien et bellement*), reiterated the statement that it was God's will that she should go, fearing nothing, since they, his Messengers, would be with her to the end.

What else, it may be asked, apart from this command did her Saints tell her? Very little, it would seem. One might have expected that on the strength of her communication with the unseen some element of foretelling the future would have emerged. But there was nothing of the prophet about Joan; she was the most single-minded person imaginable (wherein lay her strength). She never failed to show impatience when anything

intervened between her and the task which, under God, she had to accomplish. When at Poitiers she was asked for a sign that people might believe that she was indeed sent by God she retorted sharply: 'I have not come to Poitiers to show signs or work miracles. Give me men at arms and send me to Orleans and you shall have signs enough.' There were, however, one or two occasions on which certain things were revealed to her. One of those occasions was when she told Robert de Baudricourt on February 14, 1429, that on that very same day the French had been defeated near Orleans. Another occasion was when on the way to the Coronation she said to the Archbishop of Rheims: 'You had better make good use of me for I shall only last a year.' Yet another was when at Orleans she foretold, two weeks before it happened, that she would be wounded. And presumably what she told her judges at Rouen that the English would eventually be driven out of France may also be taken as a prophetic utterance. But by far the most interesting and convincing forecast was when she told the Court during the trial that her Voices had said that she was to be delivered by a great victory. By this we may be sure that both she and those who heard her understood that she was to be released by force of arms. Such a thing, although unlikely, was not impossible after all. It is, in fact, only fair, at least to the memory of the duc d'Alençon, to recall that such an attempt was actually set in motion. Of this of course Joan herself would have known nothing. Right up to the end, maybe, she was relying on the promise which her saints had made. And that it is which attaches a world of meaning to the words she was heard to utter as she died: My Voices have not deceived me. By most writers this has been taken as a general affirmation of her belief in the existence of her heavenly counsellors. But it was surely more than that: it was a revelation at the last of the true nature of the promised victory. It was the final illumination, and incidentally provides a crushing retort to the auto-suggestion theory which holds that her voices were a mental projection of her own thoughts and wishes.

It was on the 30th of May, 1431, that Joan gained this her last and greatest victory, and eighteen years were to pass before the army she had once commanded under the King whom she had crowned drove the English out of Rouen and reoccupied the city. The King thereupon made it known that he was going to order an

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enquiry to be held into the Trial proceedings of 1401 in order to ascertain 'the truth of this said case'. Doubts have often been cast upon Charles' motive in setting on foot this enquiry. It may well be the case that he was primarily more interested in clearing his own name from the taint of association with heresy than in clearing hers from the accusation of heresy itself. It does not greatly matter; whatever may have been the motives which prompted the enquiry, the outcome justified them all. This has been well summed up by a modern French historian:[1] 'Even if it was instituted for a purely political purpose, and to please the King, it irrefutably passed beyond that aim and carried the enquirers themselves further than they suspected. They believed that they had only to solve a question in the legal, or at most in the theological, realm; but in the end they found themselves confronted with a problem on the scale of the Divine.' That is well said, and is moreover the barest truth; for as the interrogation of witnesses proceeded a portrait of awe-inspiring proportions began to be revealed. The witnesses themselves came from every walk of life from tinker to royal duke. There were those who had known her as a child, those who had fought with her, those who had seen her die; those who had but once seen her or heard her voice, and those, like Louis de Conte, her page, or Jean Pasquerel, her confessor, who had been the intimate companions of her daily life. And they all with one accord testified to her goodness, her compassion, her truthfulness, her courage and her love of God. Nor can it be said that all these witnesses were in every case favourably disposed towards her. The King in liberating his country from the invader, and with a wisdom denied to a twentieth-century liberator in a somewhat similar position, had issued an amnesty covering all who had collaborated with the occupying power. So that even those of Joan's judges as were still alive were free to be summoned to take their stand in the witness-box, and a number did so. One would not have expected them, even after twenty-five years, to have admitted that they had committed the appalling crime of condemning, for whatever motive, an innocent girl to death. Nor did they make any such admission. But they showed up as poor creatures, putting the blame on their English masters whenever they could, and betraying in all their answers the guilty conscience which was theirs. One or two admitted, grudgingly,

1 *Vie et Mort de Jeanne D'Arc*, by Regine Pernoud.

that she 'had shown some wisdom in her replies', while another who for his own sake had better be nameless, speaking of Joan's last moments, said: 'I know nothing about her prayers, but she seemed in some distress' (*'elle semblait assez troublée'*).

It is not a subject to dwell upon; it is enough to know that four and a half centuries later, upon a memorable day in the year 1920, reparation was made when in the victorious aftermath of a war greater in extent though not in importance to any that she had known, the Pope, in the presence of the Cardinals and Bishops of France and amid the plaudits of a nation, proclaimed to the city and to the world that henceforward Joan was to be honoured as a Saint of God. The case for rehabilitation opened on November 7, 1455 and in the following year the final pronouncement came from the Papal Tribunal: 'That the previous Trial and Sentence were manifestly tainted with fraud, calumny, injustice, contradiction and error in fact and in law, and that the proceedings were therefore null and valueless'.

It is the quincentenary of this pronouncement which is being celebrated this year. Such active celebrations as there are will, very naturally, take place for the most part in France. But it is an occasion which may well touch the heart and give cause for rejoicing to all Christian people, and certainly to every Catholic. For in St Joan we have the pattern of all the lovely virtues—faith, humility, truth, loyalty and fortitude. She has been called a hard saint, built on altogether too heroic a scale for lesser mortals to follow. And yet it was she who in the heat of battle dismounted and, taking the wounded Englishman's head on her knee, comforted him until he died; it was she who, in pleading as a prisoner to be allowed to hear Mass, said: 'That I may see my Saviour'; it was she who returned the superb reply to those who had questioned the propriety of her standard alone appearing at the coronation at Rheims (a reply which Mark Twain, the most sympathetic of all her biographers, said had a haunting pathos which rendered it untranslatable): *'Il avait été à la peine, c'était bien raison qu'il fut à l'honneur'*; and she it was, lastly, who spoke always of God as her Saviour or her Lord, and only once, and then in her agony, was known to pronounce the Holy Name of Jesus, because—and if it be the reason it is surely calculated to bring us all to our knees—because she did not deem herself worthy to speak it.

And as the mounting furnace
the approaching end proclaims,
for all to hear she calls aloud
thrice on the Name of Names
and enters into Paradise with a great rush of flames.

With the elect of Heaven
henceforth her place shall be,
a standard-bearer in that high
and blessèd company
of those who nearest are to God. My sweet Saint, pray for me.

THE RELIGIOUS ORDERS IN ENGLAND AND WALES[1]

3. *The Active Orders*

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AT first sight it may seem strange to call some orders 'active' and others not. In one sense the contemplative orders are the most active of all: a Cistercian monk who rises at two in the morning, and spends many hours in prayer but as many in hard manual work, could scarcely be called idle. But in the technical sense those orders called 'active' are deliberately concerned with the works of active charity—whether spiritual (as in missionary work) or temporal (as in the care of the sick or in educating children). They, like all religious orders from the very beginning, are concerned with the following of the counsels of the Gospels in an organized life according to rule, but the monastic features of stability and a liturgical structure, as well as the characteristic organization of the friars, are sacrificed in order that their particular active work can be more effectively pursued.

Strictly speaking these orders are not orders at all, since they do

1 The last of three talks given on the Overseas Service of the B.B.C. in October, 1955.

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