

Joan of Arc

Joan of Arc was born in 1412 in the village of Domremy in North Eastern France. Her parents were peasants, and Joan never attended school. Like all children of the working classes in those days, she helped with chores from an early age. She was deeply religious and spent hours praying in the church.

From a young age she claimed to hear the voices of St Michael (the Archangel) and two saints, St. Catherine and St. Margaret.

When Joan was born, England and France had been at war for about 100 years. The details of the war are extremely confusing, but the relevant part is that they were, at that time, fighting over who should be King of France.

The English had won lands in North Western France. Henry V was King of England and Charles VI was King of France. All French Kings were crowned in Reims, a city in the Northern part of France controlled by the English. After the English won the land they signed a treaty with France. The agreement was that Charles could remain King of France, but that when he died, Henry would rule. Unfortunately Charles and Henry both died within a very short time of each other. Charles had a son, (also named Charles, later known as Charles VII). Henry also had a son (later known as Henry VI) whom the English claimed should be King of France due to the agreement between the two countries. When his father died, Charles, at that time known as the Dauphin, quickly claimed the throne for himself. The French people refused to accept that he was King until he had been crowned in Reims. The English were determined that would never happen, and started trying to take even more French land. The Duke of Burgundy, a French Duke, was helping the English. He wanted to eventually take the crown for himself, or at least gain more land. With no King in charge, the French were losing and it looked fairly certain that they would eventually control all of France.

Into this stepped Joan. The voices, which until then had given her only general guidance, began telling her she must save France from the English. She was instructed to go to the leader of the French Army, telling him she could lead France to victory and have Charles crowned. She was seventeen years old at the time.

With the help of a local baron, she found her way to Charles. She managed to persuade him that she truly heard voices, and that God would help her get him crowned. Although it is unclear why Charles believed her, legend has it she told him things that only he could have known. Charles was convinced that Joan and the voices were genuine, and he agreed to give her a small army. He also gave her a suit of white armor and a sword.

The English had recently captured Orleans, a city about 80 miles from Paris. This is where Joan started her mission. She led her small army against the English, and was wounded. Her men, seeing her bravery and determination to fight on, were inspired. They retook the city of Orleans for France. Joan became known as the maid of Orleans. The French rallied behind Joan and supported her. With their help she won several more battles. The English were losing ground quickly, and Reims once again belonged to the French.

Charles could now be crowned King of France. Joan and her Army escorted him to the cathedral in Reims, where he was crowned, in July 1429. Once he was crowned Charles decided that he ought to negotiate with the English and the Duke of Burgundy. Joan and her voices, however, had different ideas. She was determined to fight on and rid France of the English forever.

Joan continued to fight but began to lose battles. She was captured by the troops of the Duke of Burgundy in 1430, at the Battle of Compeigne. The Duke sold her to the English. The English could not admit that a teenage girl had beaten them in battle. They needed to prove that she had used trickery, sorcery and witchcraft to do it. She was imprisoned in a dungeon and tortured. The English wanted her to admit that she had lied about the voices. They also wanted her to agree to remove the men's clothing, which they said was against the Churches ruling. Joan refused and remained in prison.

Charles no longer had any interest in Joan, she had given him what he wanted, the French crown. Now she was just a nuisance and an obstacle to him negotiating with the English. He made no attempt to rescue her or buy her back from the English. Joan remained in prison, growing weaker and more tired daily.

She finally agreed to remove the soldiers clothing and signed a statement that she had been wrong. In return she was supposed to be allowed to visit the church. The English had lied. Remember that she could neither read nor write. She probably had no idea what it was that she was admitting to. She again insisted that the voices had been real, and put her soldiers clothing back on. They now had the proof they needed to have her tried and convicted of heresy and witchcraft. She was tried, convicted and sentenced to death. Because she was found guilty of being a witch, she was to be executed by fire. She was 19 years old.

On May 30, 1431 she was burned at the stake. Charles did nothing to save her, and neither did the French people, who only shortly before had claimed she was a heroine. After her death Charles decided that it wasn't a good idea for people to believe she had been a witch or heretic. That would mean that he had been wrongfully crowned. He set about having her name cleared.

Thirty years after her death the Pope claimed she had been wrongly accused and that she was not guilty of any crime against the Church or God. She was eventually canonized in 1920, becoming St Joan. The church never stated whether or not her visions and the voices she heard were real. She was made a Saint because she was convinced that God had ordered her to do what she did, and she followed those orders. Her absolute faith in God and obedience of what she believed were His instructions are what made her a saint.

This primary source is a letter from Joan of Arc (referred to as the "Maid" in this letter) to the King of England at the time, Henry VI, regarding his invasion of France:

JESUS, MARY

King of England, render account to the King of Heaven of your royal blood. Return the keys of all the good cities which you have seized, to the Maid. She is sent by God to reclaim the royal blood, and is fully prepared to make peace, if you will give her satisfaction; that is, you must render justice, and pay back all that you have taken. King of England, if you do not do these things, I am the commander of the military; and in whatever place I shall find your men in France, I will make them flee the country, whether they wish to or not; and if they will not obey, the Maid will have them all killed. She comes sent by the King of Heaven, body for body, to take you out of France, and the Maid promises and certifies to you that if you do not leave France she and her troops will raise a mighty outcry as has not been heard in France in a thousand years. And believe that the King of Heaven has sent her so much power that you will not be able to harm her or her brave army.

To you, archers, noble companions in arms, and all people who are before Orleans, I say to you in God's name, go home to your own country; if you do not do so, beware of the Maid, and of the damages you will suffer. Do not attempt to remain, for you have no rights in France from God, the King of Heaven, and the Son of the Virgin Mary. It is Charles, the rightful heir, to whom God has given France, who will shortly enter Paris in a grand company. If you do not believe the news written of God and the Maid, then in whatever place we may find you, we will soon see who has the better right, God or you.

William de la Pole, Count of Suffolk, Sir John Talbot, and Thomas, Lord Scales, lieutenants of the Duke of Bedford, who calls himself regent of the King of France for the King of England, make a response, if you wish to make peace over the city of Orleans! If you do not do so, you will always recall the damages which will attend you. Duke of Bedford, who call yourself regent of France for the King of England, the Maid asks you not to make her destroy you. If you do not render her satisfaction, she and the French will perform the greatest feat ever done in the name of Christianity.

Done on the Tuesday of Holy Week (March 22, 1429). HEAR THE WORDS OF GOD AND THE MAID.