

Ida Coudenhove. "St. Joan." Translated by Anonymous.* *Saints Are Not Sad: Forty Biographical Portraits*, edited by Frank Sheed. New York: Sheed and Ward, 1949, 257–269. Archive.org.
*Although Sheed's edition does not mention the translator, the translator is known. This essay first appeared in English as: Ida Friederike Coudenhove. "The Saint Who Took the World Seriously," in *The Cloister and the World*, 91–110. Translated by Harriette Eleanor Kennedy. New York: Sheed and Ward, 1935. Archive.org.

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St. Joan

[1412-1431]

IDA COUDENHOVE



GREAT DEAL has been said and written about the "Maid of Orleans." She is more "interesting" than almost any other historical personage-interesting to the historian, to the psychologist, to the politician and to the poet. This personage, so public and yet so mysterious, more fantastic than the heroines of fairytales and sagas, and yet a part of reality; in whom all the brilliance of declining chivalry mingled with the gentle gleam of the eternal pastoral romance, and with the tantalizing and enigmatic phenomena of a new period of thought, this girl Joan draws the glances of men ever and again to herself.

Besides this, there is the interest in the "phenomenon of sainthood," which continues to increase and which is always still, unfortunately, associated with personages whose spiritual life was disguised under a most strange and marvellous material life-with Francis, Elizabeth, Catherine. . . . Nowhere are sainthood and adventure so inseparably woven together as in the extraordinary life of St. Joan. Her grim yet splendid fate, the glitter of her magic triumph and the horror of her tragic failure so obscure this fact from us that it is really difficult for us to discover what her real religious mission is.

But we are coming to understand more and more that the Maid of Orleans has a religious mission to us, to the whole of Christianity, and not only to her own nation-a religious mission and not a political or a romantic one.

Looking at her, our attention is attracted by something new in the well-known visage of sainthood, which we have known and loved for so many other traits.

Can there be such a thing as a "new" characteristic trait in the face of the Christian? Many disillusionments have made <257> us sceptical about it. The unprecedented is ever and again unmasked and found to be nothing but a compound of imitation and memory.

The "new" thing in Joan is not in the strictest sense of the word seen for the first time in her, but it is unusual, and shows itself in her in a striking way. Joan is the saint *who takes the world seriously*, who loves the world, who sacrifices herself for the world. That is her peculiar mission. That is the unprecedented thing in her religious personality, which, just at the present time, draws the Christian's attention to her.

To be sure Francis has long been called "The Saint who loves the Earth." The earth, yes, but not the *world!* He feared the world and fled from it, like any hermit of them all.

It is usual and natural, almost the normal thing with nearly all the saints we know, that they had, in a narrow, exclusive sense, a "religious" task to perform, and that they had to leave the world – *exire de saeculo*, so as to be free and remain free to perform that task. They had to be free for the work of praising God and of contemplation, free to perform works of love for the sick, the poor, prisoners, children; free to preach repentance and the Kingdom of God, to found an Order, a spiritual and religious school of Christian thought and life; free to reform the Church. When we open the life of a saint we expect an account of such works of piety, just as former generations required accounts of miracles and prophecies as the sole proof of sainthood. But Joan breaks through this rule.

She declared herself to be called of God – yes, and how? Solemnly, by voices and visions, like any prophet! But not by any means in order to heal the schism in the Church, the great, threefold schism, worse than the one in Catherine's days; not to show a new way of perfection, not to confute the numerous rebellious heresies of her restless age, not to give counsel, inspired by the Holy Ghost.

She was called, indeed, but to perform a purely earthly, worldly task, to free a people from a condition of unendurable political misery, to set a rightful king on the throne, to expel the enemy – "*bouter dehors les Anglais.*" And she was to do all these things not at all on account of any possible or desired ecclesiastical consequences – not so that, in some way or other, a free, united French nation might conduce to reform – not so that the legitimate king might order the schism to end. No, no, <258> she wasn't thinking about anything of that kind. What she did had no ulterior aim.

She doesn't leave the world because of her mission. Because of it she goes into the world, right into the greatest press, into the most splendid, most dangerous places, into the politico-military sphere, into the court, into the camp, into war!

Can such a thing happen-can there be such a call from God – and if this thing did happen in this one life, what does it signify?

There are two keywords to Joan's mission: "*La grande pitié de la France*" and "*le bon plaisir de Dieu.*"

"The great misery of France"-the endless wars, the foreign rule, the ignominy of the interregnum, the lawlessness resulting therefrom, because the king stood for the rights of the people amid the struggle of contending Powers; the fall of the dynasty, whose last living scion did not even know whether he could validly claim the crown, whether the blood-royal ran in his veins; the disunion of the people, split up between France, England and Burgundy, the arrogance of the conqueror, deeds of violence, revenge, oppression, all over a plundered and despairing land.

These were the things of which the great, armed angel, Messire Saint Michel, told the listening shepherd child under the fairy tree. Was an angelic mission-were crowned, heavenly virgins--needed for this? Did not all Joan's childhood days resound with the news of horrors, did not the messengers and the fugitives assemble in her father's, the village justice's house? Since she was old enough to think, was not the sight of exiles and fugitives, of wounded men, of every kind of victim of the war, normal to her?

But she had to learn to understand how the matter stood. At this point she received her call. She came to know that this distress had its roots in sin. This misery was not just simply "willed by God." In it stood revealed, in lightning flashes of terror, the offended will of God, the transgressed law of the Most High.

The wages of sin are death, distress, "great misery."

For God has not only commanded that men should be baptized and confirmed that they should confess their sins and be present at the Holy Sacrifice, that they should keep the festivals and honour the priest. He has also made laws in accordance with which there should be righteousness, truth and peace among men. He has promised men that His laws, so long as they are kept, will secure order, honour and peace. Men have mocked at His instruction, they have torn down the dykes which His wisdom made, and the floods of wickedness have flowed in, raging and ruthless, and are about to give a new, a frightful aspect to the earth.

Joan sees "evil" behind the misery of her people, and sees that God indeed desires peace between the nations, and order in every nation, but that

men have desires different from God's, and, because of their greed and ambition, out of their wilfulness and arrogance, trample on His will as much as they can. The angel's call tells her nothing but that she, the "daughter of God," has to lead the fight for the Father's will against "evil" in this, its concrete form. And the will of the Father, the high will of God, is, in this case, decidedly and un mistakably to be read, even from the very sin and disorder which here and now oppose it and which are seen to be the great cause of the country's misery.

Shattered law must be restored. the rightful king must be crowned, the foreign invader must be chased back to the country which God had assigned to him, and must leave the French the land of their fathers--peace and justice must rule again, for so it should be.

She, Joan, is the chosen one, for she feels herself responsible, does this little girl in the Lorraine village, for the fate and the sins of the whole people. While nobody else does, while all the others put the blame on each other, she takes the blame on herself for this guilt and misery, goes to God with them, takes her stand before Him, and asks for His command.

There are not only the individual fates of men, who may be saved or lost. There is also the fate of God's will in the world, God's will, which should rule the world. but may be defeated in it. There is a kind of piety, the possessor of which is actuated by a sense of concern for that Will, for its fate, more than by concern for his own fate or that of any man. "This is not fainthearted fear in him. They know quite well, those loving, troubled ones of whom I write, that God "has men in derision" when they refuse His will. They know that He can strike them down with His iron sceptre. But that is pain and tragedy to these pious folk, for they know that God wants His will to be fulfilled through men and not against them, and to be affirmed by their obedient freedom. Their <260> sense of concern for God's will proceeds from an intensity of worship which casts them prostrate before God, Who is the *Lord*, a worship which transmutes itself into a very passion of obedience and service, of passionate sacrifice for the honour of the Father. This their sense of concern proceeds, too, from a painful love for their fellowmen collectively, as nation or Church, from the love that suffers for the guilt of the community as for its own, takes it before God as its own, weeping, regretful, and ready for any penance. That is the way the prophets felt, the most moving books of the Old Testament are full of it. The Son of Man, Who was at once the servant of Jehovah, and the "Lamb" to be sacrificed for His brethren, had it too.

But it takes on a new aspect in Joan, on account of the directness and simplicity of the means by which she would fain impress this worshipped, this painfully loved will of God upon reality. She would do it by means of violence

and fighting, by means of heaven-storming boldness. This is doubly amazing, because we know about the simple piety of her childhood.

Where the earthly, the worldly reality is so dense that one thinks no glimmer of divine light can make its way through, where the opposing powers rise up in all their violence, there lurks the special temptation *to despair of the victory of God's will* ... the temptation to declare certain departments of human life and action--the political, the social, the economic--hopeless, impossible to reform, outcast, devilish, amoral--at any rate, inherently lost and desperate, beyond redemption. They can only be abandoned there on the left hand, a sinister hunting ground for those who find their booty in them. One has to flee from them, to keep one's soul pure. The only way not to be dragged into the world is to renounce it. If one is dragged into it one will, as a part of it, be delivered over to its powers as their booty, and will have to refuse obedience to God, in order to exist ... "and there is none living who has withdrawn his soul, still pure, from their service." ... The disorder of the world is incurable. The world can't be remodelled. To think it can is only to build castles in the air. One can only form and fortify enclaves in it, ruled by special regulations, within which enclaves it is possible to do the will of God. And then one goes on to say, with the logic of the fox who couldn't reach the grapes, that the world is doomed to destruction--that <261> desperate world which isn't worth the trouble of shedding one's blood for in battle. It is better to confine oneself to the fulfilment of the other tasks which are concerned with the imperishable real, "purely religious" sphere.

Did Joan experience this temptation?

Charles Péguy, the poet, who died young (he fell in August, 1914), on whose spiritual legacy the best of France's believing youth live--who is fraternally akin to the Pucelle as Frenchman, peasant, soldier and Christian--has, in his *Mystère de la Charité de Jeanne d'Arc*, incomparably represented her fight with this temptation, and her victory over it by means of love. With more than a poet's clear-sightedness, he places both before the hour in which she was called. The whole volume is made up of a single dramatic conversation between the child Jeannette and Madame Gervaise, the hermit. It is well worth while giving a general idea of its contents.

Joan has fallen into an agony of grief: "the sadness of the Christian, which is the greatest sadness on earth"--into a sadness even unto death for the sins of the world, which stand revealed to her in the sins of her time, of her people--and as her own. For: "*Complice, complice, c'est pire qu'auteur.*" For she who daily hears about the abominations of war and the misery of France, and who takes refuge in pious wishes, in vows for the future, in helpless lamentation, in pharisaical horror at the wicked soldiers, in fruitless prayers, is

she not an accomplice-like everyone else-like her father, mother, brothers, sisters and friends, like the village and the parish, like all whom she would fain love but must despise, for they are all as cowardly and guilty as she is? "*Complice, complice!*"

The pious woman, whom the child has called in in the anguish of her heart, that she may get the right answer to the questions from one consecrated to God, tries to comfort her. She speaks of eternal things, of the mansions in the Father's House, which the soldiers can't plunder; of the Lord's triumphant body, which no sacrilegious hand reaches, in spite of the crimes that are done on earth; of the variety of the earthly things that fall victim to the horrors of war. But Joan is not to be comforted thus. The supernal reality docs not reconcile her to the terrible earthly reality which she sees around her. She wants to offer herself as a sacrifice to God, she would fain devote her childish body to the flames of hell, if this penance of hers could replace the sufferings of France. Madame <262> Cervaise, frightened, blames her presumption. Not even to the Saviour was it given to redeem all. His love broke, powerless, against Judas' sin:

"The Saviour knew it well that all His blood could the beloved Judas not redeem."

It was the discernment of this which extracted from Him His cry of abandonment on the Cross:

"Oh cry, at which the strength of Mary failed and graciously the Father gave Him death."

But Joan heard in the whole long story of the Passion and Death of the Lord only two things: He knew that He would not be able to save all, yet He undertook the task, and: the apostles forsook Him and fled.

"We wouldn't have done that, we French, we Lorrainers, we peasants of our village," she cried. "No, not even the English would have done it. We here, in our village, are great sinners, we do all kinds of things, but we wouldn't have fled. ..." Then she summons up her courage to say humbly: "With the help of God I shouldn't have fled." She hears no more the pious, frightened talk of the nun, admonishing her to be humble. She has attained to the perception of something unexampled. She gazes with longing aspiration down into the valley where the enemy is, and the strange book closes with the broken sentence:

"Orleans, thou in the Loire vale ..."

But we foresee that in her next hour of solitude the archangel will descend from Heaven, to take this child's dauntless heart at its word, to call upon it to do the will of his and her Lord, to undertake the Mission which she cannot fulfil to its completion, which she will yet fulfil until she perishes, for she "will not flee."

She quite understands that the vanity of the world is no reason for retreat from this hazard. Madame Gervaise, who, because of that vanity, has forsaken the world, may do so, but she, Joan, is still in the world. God has placed man in the midst of that vanity, and she is to be tested by it. The will <263> of God will fulfil itself in it, hence it must be taken seriously, with the seriousness due to the will of God. In vain things, for them, for their sake, sin is committed, confusion is wrought, but in them may be found, too, faithfulness, obedience, steadfastness, confirmation, redemption,

Her mission is to try to subject this mighty vanity called "the world" to the will of the Highest. It is not an empty, an apparent test, it is not artificial, meant for a pure exercise in obedience, like the hermit's order to the monk to water the dry stick (and yet the stick began to grow green). It is laid upon her as a task really possible to fulfil, as a slight but real opportunity for her of serving her people and securing their liberty. She is charged to try, not to succeed.

Péguy, in another place, has made it clear in a very fine essay to what a great extent Joan was bidden to carry out her supernatural mission with natural means." It was a supernaturally received mission, but the means for its fulfilment were most natural. They were troops, guns, money, strategy. No twelve legions of angels were promised her. St. Michael was only to advise her, not to fight for her. She is not invulnerable to cut or thrust, or immune from illness or mishap. Like the least of her soldiers, she depends only upon herself and upon the fortune of war, under God's hand. She knows it, too. She has been greatly wronged by being called a fanatic. She is sober, like every true saint; she is, moreover, sober like the real peasant woman she is. There is nothing of romanticism in her behaviour. When excited people ask her for signs and wonders, prophecy or the healing of the sick, she laughingly replies: "Give me soldiers, and I will show you what kind of signs I am sent to show." And she failed not in courage, in prudence or in service. For a time, too, it seemed as if what she had undertaken might be successful, as, in earnest and joyful confidence, she had declared in the hall of the Dukes of Aquitaine, at Poitiers: "*les gens d'armes batailleront et Dieu donnera victoire.*"

She had, too, her hour of triumph, pure and lofty, after so many small but sorrowful cloudings (her first victory, and perhaps not only that, which revealed to her the frightful reality of battle, she wept over "with so many tears

that thereafter she said that she had not known a person had so many tears to shed"). In her most blissful hour, in the holy hour of the coronation, in the lofty cathedral at Rheims, when she <264> could kneel in homage before the crowned and anointed monarch who at last wore the crown of France which she had won for him, there breaks from her overflowing heart the words that so completely reveal her: "*Sire, ainsi s'est accompli le bon plaisir de Dieu.*"

At that time it seemed quite possible, and even imminent, in spite of all the "ifs" and "buts" of political and military luminaries, that after the coronation at Rheims she should march to Paris, take the capital and compel an honourable peace-and that then, as she ardently wished, released from her mission, she should disappear into the quiet of her native village. ... Why had it to be otherwise?

Perhaps it is an essential attribute of Joan as a religious personage that she should perish. There was, perhaps, too, in the life of the Son of God, in the spring of His Galilean fame, a time when it seemed as if the people of Israel would accept His mission, when it seemed as if He might, in another sense than that in which it finally came to pass, lead His human brethren to the Father's feet.

Joan's fate reveals, in its humble and, as it were, hidden mirroring of the Lord's life, what His fate reveals on so immense a scale: how very deeply sunken the world is in wickedness. Her perishing revealed what her victory would perchance have veiled: how great the world's perdition is, how rotten is the whole framework of its vainglorious life, how dangerous is the attack on the powers that manifest themselves in it, how terribly alone is the Christian who dares to attack them, how defencelessly abandoned is the pure, in spite of all ability and courage, who scorns to meet the powers with their own weapons. But the honour of the Lord Whom he serves forbids him to use those weapons.

Thus it is essential to Joan's mission that she should have to do, in the final conflict, with the spiritual tribunal. She has thus pressed forward into the most dangerous power zone of the political, to the zone where it is allied with devious and subservient ecclesiastical ambition. She has pushed forward to the very front line of evil, where it wears the mask of holiness and fights with the stolen and desecrated weapons of religious authority and allurements, spiritual threats and punishments ("for a day will come when he that killeth you will think that he doeth God service"). When it comes to this, only the <265> undeserved death of a righteous man can unmask the corruption.

No "*j'accuse*" of a zealous reformer, no flaming protest of revolt, could so irresistibly drive wickedness in its power and glory from all its defences of phrase and pose, could force it so irresistibly to self-betrayal, as this defenceless death of a child of God, as this blood crying out to Heaven.

By such a death the utter powerlessness of evil is at once revealed in the midst of the eruption of its power, in the midst of the world which is ever and again redeemed by the shedding of the most innocent blood of the gentlest victims.

For here the fight which Joan had engaged in, the fight for the world between God and His adversary. is moved back from the exterior front, where she made her first attack, and concentrated on the narrow ridge of a decision that has to be made within her soul. She has to decide whether or not the power of lying and violence can force her heart to surrender, to deny the Holy Spirit Who was her motive power, to deny her mission. And she conquers as she falls, preferring, with a free will death to adjuration. She conquers, and her pyre, which could not consume her heart, was the symbol of the utter powerlessness of violence to conquer the soul.

She falls, of course, conscious of defeat, of shame, of forsakenness---else were her sacrifice not fully completed, and, with it, the victory which could only be really won at this price. The utter darkness of her destruction is the gravestone which only the angel of the resurrection rolls away-by human reckoning, many years later. In this, too, is mirrored, is shown in parable, the mystery of Good Friday.

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Amid the intensity and the emotion of Joan's human, yet superhuman struggle to stamp the refractory, the lost world with God's will, as with a seal, questions concerning her personal salvation and personal holiness sink into insignificance. Or, rather, Joan sought both of these in unconditional obedience to her mission, so that "questions of method" don't, in her case, arise.

It is quite a remarkable thing that asceticism plays no part in the life of this mediaeval saint, or at least we know nothing of its doing so. Prayer, of course, takes a great part in her life. No Christian life, ordinary or extraordinary, would be conceivable without prayer. Joan prayed a great deal, as a <266> shepherdess with her sheep and as a soldier in the field. She had the Holy Sacrifice celebrated daily in camp, daily she received the Body of the Lord. The withdrawal of the Sacrament was the worst and most malicious torture of her long martyrdom.

But the question of asceticism in the current sense of the Middle Ages, the question of a special way to perfection, a special means to attain it, the question of turning away from the world, of flight from the world, of bodily mortification, does not seem to arise in her life at all. She knows nothing of the great controversy about holy poverty which had occupied the minds of ecclesiastical circles for decades. She knows not religious fear of the things of the world, she loves magnificence and even luxury, fine weapons, clothes, horses, as naturally as she loved her village simplicity and the rigours of the

camp. She does not shrink from accepting joyfully the silver armour and the splendid saddle and harness, she fixes exactly of what material her costly banner is to be made, of what colour it should be, loving it forty times more than her sword." During her examination she replies with simple pride to a question about her horse: "Which? For I had four! She takes title and coat-of-arms, presents and privileges, for her and hers, with a quiet soul. Neither does she shrink from the people's excesses of enthusiasm and reverence, which were all about her as she rode, when she entered the provincial capital. She fears not at all the splendour of the court, the feasts and banquet. She hates only the roughness and noise of the drinking-bout. Her demeanour was, as the esquire Perceval wrote home, "*d'une parfaite élégance.*" She mastered the ceremonial of the court with untroubled grace. She liked knightly play with steed and lance, as well as any youth of her following.

Joan of Arc is a maiden-the maiden-la Pucelle. A task like hers cannot be fulfilled with a divided heart. But her maidenhood is in no wise painful, nun-like, hiding herself from men with veil and enclosure. She is Diana-like, as has been said of Catherine of Siena, who adopted a similar attitude, so unmistakable in its sheer unapproachability, in its consecrated inviolability, that man appeared no more in the guise of an enemy or a danger, but as a comrade, a friend and a brother. All witnesses are unanimous as to the cordiality, the ingenuousness, the graceful freedom of her "fraternal" attitude towards soldiers and knights. Her faithfulness to the king is unexceptionable, utter, passionate. The thought that any of <267> these relations with men could signify a spiritual danger never appears even in the distance.

Joan leaves her father and mother to carry out the Divine command. She leaves them secretly, against their will. But it is not the fundamental renunciation of his family made by the monk. It is a painful measure, forced upon her by circumstances. She is always yearning for her parents: the childish, painful, sweet dream of returning to the arms of her forgiving parents, to her forsaken flock, to her spindle by the fireside, charms her in the midst of her camp life, before the walls of beleaguered towns, more than all her triumphs.

Her attitude towards her own "peculiarities" is important, if we would understand her attitude to the world, and she has been badly misunderstood by the poets and expositors of later days. The Maid of Orleans is neither an Amazon nor a manwoman, neither an adventuress nor a fanatic. She is not an "emancipated" woman, who rushes arbitrarily and "with amazing energy" over the bounds of her position and sex. She is but a brave, obedient child, lost for the sake of a great love-nay of two: the love of God and the love of her people." But she is constantly aware that in all her amazing adventure, she is "on leave"

--separated for a while, for the space of her unexampled mission, from her "real," her own, her proper life, which she is to recommence when everything has been successfully surmounted....

Perhaps what strikes us the most in that wonderful, helmeted being is the unstudied humility of her humanity, her simple contentment with the ordinary concerning which she admits: "it's what I'm used to"; her serene moderation in the face of the extraordinary things, unprecedented in her days, through which she lived, because she had to-from obedience, not from choice.

Thus, trait by trait, she takes form before us. We see her unvarying and unquestioned humanity, her stern passion for the fulfilment of God's will, her great compassion for the "great misery" of the people – that people which sees no way of escape, either by cessation of its misery or by flight from it. We see the boundless courage with which Joan comes forward and shoulders the burden, her obedience, her moderation, the capacity she showed in her heroic undertaking. We see the unarmed meekness with which she endures and stands fast – a meekness in which there is neither defiance nor yielding, and <268> the pure courage with which she admits that the hazard has gone against her, but never doubts the righteousness of the way she has taken, and remains devoid of bitterness. We see her confidence, even in destruction, that all is well.

And in and above all that, we see her Christian way of taking the world seriously, which she does even to the extent of acknowledging the necessity for her own death in the words: "That is the way of the world." But she thinks it worth while to die through that world and for it, for in it the holy, the beloved will of God is making ready the way for its fulfilment.

Such is the Maid, as at last she emerges from behind the romantic mask of misunderstanding poesy, from behind the political prejudice of a merely national cult, from behind the exaggerated simplicity of the sly, Shavian psychology: a saint, a unique religious figure. And in spite of the unrepeatable nature of her mission, do we not find in that figure, the characteristic traits of the Christian of to-day, of the Christian of tomorrow as we would have him be, for that work in the world which is our heritage and our hope? <269>

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“The Saint Who Took the World Seriously,”
in *The Cloister and the World*, 1935, p. 109.

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