



Saint Joan of Arc: A Brief Biography

During the Hundred Years' War, the English invaded Normandy. After some decisive victories, the English forced the French king, Charles VI, to agree that after his death an English king would rule over France. The son of the French king refused to accept this treaty and declared himself King Charles VII. He had the loyalty of much of France, though the people who lived in Burgundy for the most part still sided with the English. However, Charles's army was not strong, and he was not an inspiring leader. Help came unexpectedly from a sixteen-year-old countrywoman named Joan (1412–1431).

Joan was intelligent and religious, spending much of her time in prayer. Probably in answer to her prayers, she heard the voices of several saints, including the archangel Michael. The saints told her to go to the new king of France and to have him crowned in the cathedral of Rheims; in this way, the French people would be united. Joan went to an army camp near her home and succeeded in convincing an officer that although she was a teenager without political experience, she was talking sense. He gave her a bodyguard of knights to take her safely to the king. Discouraged by the odds against him, Charles gave Joan armor and a horse, and put her in charge of a unit of soldiers. When she arrived at Orléans, Joan led her troops amazingly well, and they drove off the English who were attacking the city.

Joan's success seemed so impossible that the French soldiers were sure she was sent from heaven, while the English, equally impressed, said she was a witch working with the power of the devil. Meanwhile, Joan succeeded in persuading Charles to come to Rheims with her. His coronation was the sign to the people that Charles was really king of France. A short time after the crowning, Joan was betrayed by a group of Burgundians who captured her and turned her over to the English. At a local inquisition

composed of a French bishop and his court—all of them on the side of the English—she was condemned as a witch. At nineteen years of age, Joan suffered the fate of witches; she was burned at the stake.

The execution of Joan brought new courage to the French king and his people. After twenty years, they drove out the English. In 1456, the pope reviewed Joan's trial and declared her innocent of all charges. She was canonized a saint in 1920 and declared patron saint of France.

