

DAY ONE

LISTENING TO MYSTICAL VOICES

“When we reflect that her century was the brutalest, the wickedest, the rottenest in history since the darkest ages, we are lost in wonder at the miracle of such a product from such a soil. The contrast between her and her century is the contrast between day and night. She was truthful when lying was the common speech of men; she was honest when honesty was become a lost virtue; she was a keeper of promises when the keeping of a promise was expected of no one;...she was steadfast when stability was unknown, and honorable in an age which had forgotten what honor was; she was a rock of convictions in a time when men believed nothing and scoffed at all things; she was unfailingly true in an age that was false to the core....

“She was perhaps the only entirely unselfish person whose name has a place in profane history.”

—Mark Twain¹

INTRODUCING OUR RETREAT THEME

Mark Twain was quite enamored of Joan of Arc and spent twelve years researching his book about her. He starts out trying to distance her from her age—yet ends up distancing her from us by such effusive praise.

Actually, what came out in the nullification trial, when the court took the time to gather witnesses from her family, village and comrades-in-arms, was that she was very ordinary, “except for her notable piety.”² Her *willingness* was particularly remembered:

She went often and *willingly* to church and holy places.... She *willingly* took care of the animals of her father’s house.... She confessed herself *willingly*.... She worked *willingly* and took care of many responsibilities, spun, did housework, went to help with harvests, and when it was time, sometimes, she watched over the animals while spinning.³

What started to set Joan apart was the peculiar experience she had of hearing voices, starting in adolescence—some biographies say as early as age twelve. Hearing voices no one else heard confused her, but in the end she decided to act on what they told her. She didn’t always understand the things they were saying or why they were saying them to her. She may have gotten some things wrong, but she kept trying to hear them and discern what God wanted of her.

What began in mystical experience turned into one year of military victories and one year as a political prisoner—her entire adult life.

In the end, she died a martyr’s death, wanting to keep her eyes focused on a cross, calling out the name of Jesus. She persevered in faith, steadfast unto death. She was like the Old Testament prophets that the author of the Letter to the Hebrews describes: They “through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions...won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight” and ended up tortured, mocked, in chains and imprisoned and finally killed (11:33, 35–37).

But because of their inspiring faith and because they now surround us like “so great a cloud of witnesses,” great spirits like Joan encourage us to “lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is before us, looking to Jesus...” (12:1–2).

OPENING PRAYER

Dear God,
our friend Joan of Arc
was once a child to whom
you sent your angels and saints.
Help us to listen
to all the angels and saints you send us,
especially those disguised as
our fellow companions in faith.
Amen.

RETREAT SESSION ONE

“My Voices *did* come from God and everything I have done was by God’s order.”

—Joan of Arc⁴

It all began for Joan in 1424 with hearing voices.

One summer day in her father’s garden, she heard a mysterious voice, which was accompanied by a bright light. “At first I was very much frightened,” she said later. “The voice came toward the hour of noon. 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. The light always appears on the side from which I hear the voice.”⁵

Joan came to identify this voice as belonging to Saint Michael the Archangel, the one who drove Lucifer out of heaven. The warrior

angel, he is usually depicted with a flaming sword. *Michael* (Mi-ka-‘El) means “Who is like to God?” in Hebrew. (The other archangels have similar names, *Gabriel* means “strength of God” and *Raphael*, “God heals.”) Michael is mentioned three times in the Old Testament, particularly in the book of Daniel (10:13–21; 12:1), where he is the defender of the Israelites and the head of a heavenly army that defends the weak and oppressed.

In the New Testament book of Revelation, Michael battles the dragon who tried to snatch the child born of the “woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars” (12:1). Then

...war broke out in heaven; Michael and his angels fought against the dragon. The dragon and his angels fought back, but they were defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. The great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him. (12:7–9)

Because of Saint Michael, the devil knows his time on earth is short (see 12:12).

For this reason, a booklet about the Saint Michael Shrine on the Gargano in Italy says, “Christians consider the Archangel Saint Michael as the most powerful defender of God’s people.”⁶

Joan later came to identify the other saints she heard as Saint Catherine (most likely Saint Catherine of Alexandria, patron of young girls and of a nearby parish at Maxy-sur-Meuse) and Saint Margaret (most likely Saint Margaret of Antioch, whose statue is still in Joan’s home parish church at Domrémy).⁷ (Catherine and Margaret were eliminated from the church’s calendar in 1969 for three reasons: (1) So little information exists about them; (2) only some 125 saints among the thousands canonized have feast days;

and (3) the church was trying to make its calendar more global by rotating off some European and older saints. That same reform axed Saints Christopher and Barbara.)

The Archangel Michael's, however, remains solidly as a September feast, although Michaelmas (September 29) now includes the other archangels. Whenever people see themselves as facing evil and needing to battle against injustice, Michael has been invoked. After Masses in the 1950s, in particular, the church called upon Saint Michael to help defeat Communism.⁸ The same was probably true in the fifteenth century as the French found themselves in a brutal occupation by the English where pillage, rape and killing of civilians were common.

It was, in fact, Saint Michael who appeared to Joan first. "It was St. Michael whom I saw before my eyes, and he was not alone but was well accompanied by angels of heaven.... I saw them with the eyes of my body as well as I see you," she told one of her interrogators, Jean Beaupère, a canon of Rouen. She added, "and when they left me I wept and wished that they would have taken me with them."⁹

Joan more often heard these saints than saw them. Even though she claims to have seen them sometimes, she could not describe their appearance. In fact, she was amused when asked if they had hair. When asked if Saint Margaret spoke English, she responded: "How should she speak English, since she is not of the English party?"¹⁰ (By that time the languages of France and England were distinct from each other.¹¹) Another time she told Friar Pierre Sequin, described as a specialist in holy Scripture, that her voices spoke better than he did, a reference to the fact that Sequin had a thick accent as he came from Limoges.¹²

"Filled with both fear and elation she told no one of this supernatural experience, not her village priest to whom she often

confessed, not even her parents.”¹³ It came out later, especially at her trial. The whole charge of witchcraft turned on whether these voices were heaven-sent or from the devil, whether she summoned demons to help her. The English were at a loss to explain otherwise how she could have beaten them.

MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE

“Hearing voices no one else can hear isn’t a good sign, even in the wizarding world,” Ron Weasley warns Harry in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*. (In the movie it’s Hermione Granger who stops on the central staircase of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry to express this truism, with the moving portraits behind her concurring.)¹⁴ Hearing voices can be a sign of mental illness—or the form mystical experience takes. Mystical experience is communication with God.

The word *mystic* comes from the Greek *mystikos* or *mystos*, which means “mysteries.” “Broadly speaking, all Christians are mystics. We believe that by faith we are initiated into the mysteries of Christ’s death and resurrection.”¹⁵ In fact, the church today has tried to reincorporate that sense of the mysteries by bringing back the mystagogia for the newly baptized in the period after Easter, a time to bring them more deeply into the heart of the Christian teachings, its “mysteries.”

Usually being a mystic is a solitary experience. Mystics are set apart by direct knowledge of God or spiritual truth. Mystics are in touch with the supernatural, without the aid of the senses or logic.

C.G. Jung’s study of human nature, which developed into the personality types of the Myers-Briggs indicator, suggests that people are innately either *sensates* (who depend more on the information they get from their senses) or *intuitive* (who trust more their own

instincts and mental constructs). But mystics ratchet intuition up a notch. They claim direct knowledge of God, spiritual truth or ultimate reality—and have no idea how to explain what they know. They just *know*.

MENTAL ILLNESS?

Because of the unexplainable nature of their insights, some mystics can seem deluded or mentally ill. New research has discovered that religious experience is processed in a particular part of the brain.¹⁶ Surprising as it seems, there is a biological basis for religious experience. But that part of the brain is dangerously close to parts that do control sanity, which is why many mentally ill people first “get religion.”

Saint Paul, describing his own religious experience, says, “For if we are beside ourselves [sometimes *insane* is used for the Greek *exestemen*], it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you” (2 Corinthians 5:13). He goes on to talk about a man he knew who “heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat” and boasts of going “on to visions and revelations of the Lord” (2 Corinthians 12:4, 1).

Did Joan suffer from a mental illness? Were her voices the result of that illness? Many mental illnesses begin in adolescence, about the age Joan started hearing her voices.

Historian Karen Armstrong is known today for her scholarly books like *A History of God: The 4,000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam* and *Holy War: The Crusades and Their Impact on Today's World*. But in the early 1970s as a struggling graduate student in England, she suffered from hallucinations. It turned out that she suffered from temporal lobe epilepsy. The doctor who finally diagnosed her commented, “[I]t's interesting that you were once a

nun. People with temporal lobe epilepsy are often religious!”¹⁷ For Joan, however, there is little evidence that she had physical seizures, “fits” or “staring spells” or “zoned out” for periods of time. If so, nobody seems to have noticed.

Another illness, schizophrenia, can be similarly pinpointed to a nearby part of the brain. Schizophrenics often have visual, auditory and other sensory hallucinations. Joan testified that she had not only seen and heard Saint Catherine and Saint Margaret but also had embraced them, kissed their feet and noted that they smelled good. Schizophrenics may believe they are powerful or on a mission, or they may fixate on certain ideas. Certainly, Joan claimed she was on a mission from God and was preoccupied with trying to give the French back a French king. Nonetheless, Joan could concentrate well on details such as military strategy. She was very self-possessed, aware of her identity and role. She showed none of the bizarre behavior and incomprehensible speech that often accompanies schizophrenia.¹⁸

It also doesn't seem that she suffered from bipolar disorder (which used to be called manic depression); she wasn't moody, and her ability to think was not impaired.

Were Joan's voices real or not? This will be debated for a long time to come. Teenagers, especially girls, are often intensely emotional—even when they aren't mentally ill—and *intense* definitely describes Joan. Her visions were accompanied by a flurry of emotions: special and important, on the one hand, and isolated and depressed, on the other. Above all, she was confused and struggling to make sense of it all—for about a quarter of her short life—before taking action. What I know is that she believed her voices were real. Since their “fruits,” if you will, changed the course of history and freed an oppressed people, I, for one, will stick with

the judgment that Joan heard something heaven-sent and was sane enough to figure out how to turn her visions into reality.

HARNESSING MYSTICAL EXPERIENCES

I usually have my feet anchored on the ground, but I've had two mystical experiences, both involving family members who had just died. My seventy-eight-year-old grandmother, who suffered from breast cancer that had turned into bone cancer, had been in a coma for three weeks. We all knew she was going to die, but I, living three hundred miles away, knew the exact moment she went home to God. I telephoned my mother; she didn't know that Nana had died yet, but then quickly confirmed it. But I had known—I had felt Nan's quick kiss as she left us.

More than twenty years later, my aunt Mary died of lung cancer diagnosed only three days earlier, and her husband, six children, their spouses and I were struggling to plan her funeral liturgy. After three hours of debating, we selected the readings and some hymns, but couldn't move to the intercessions. We were just going to let the celebrant worry about that. But that night, I heard Mary call me out of a deep sleep. I went to the door of the B&B guest room where I was staying, and saw no one there. But the voice I had heard had definitely been hers—she often used to wake me and I knew it well. She said nothing but my name, but I instantly knew that what she wanted was for me to write the intercessions for the Mass, using my talent as a writer to help pull her grieving family together. I felt inspired in the writing the next morning, and the intercessions did help. Her voice, like my grandmother's presence, had been gentle—like their spirits.

Both of my experiences involved members of my family, but I believe firmly in the communion of saints. Why wouldn't Saint

Michael, Saint Catherine and Saint Margaret help us if they could?

Can mystical experiences be useful? Young people always struggle to discern a career path and make some basic life choices. In midlife we reevaluate those choices and may change direction. As we age, our experiences of God need to be examined, and we should make room in our hearts for a bigger God. Joan teaches us not to ignore the deepest yearnings of our hearts, the things we know and desire but maybe cannot express. Those mystical insights that we all have need to be acknowledged and harnessed to make better prudential judgments.

FOR REFLECTION

1. When have you experienced God? Do you find God most often in prayer, at Mass or a religious service, at sunrise or sunset, while staring at the ocean or the sky, confronted with a lovely landscape or city vista, while looking through a telescope or microscope, when you look at religious art? Where else?
2. Have you had any answers in prayer that you cannot understand, that you still don't understand perhaps years later? Have you ever had a mystical experience, an experience involving someone who has died, a foreknowledge of something that will happen? How did you react?
3. Which saints would you most want to hear from?
4. Would Saint Michael be a good patron for these times when terrorism means everyone is at risk?
5. Is God trying to tell you something, but you have put up barriers to tune out the message?

CLOSING PRAYER

“God,
if today I hear your voice,
harden not my heart.”¹⁹
Open my eyes
and my heart
to see you and hear you.
May I really listen to all you are telling me today.
Let us see the many ways
you are working in our world,
in my world.
Let me feel your constant presence
and the warmth of your love.
Amen.