

Two Chivalrous Defenders of Saint Joan of Arc: Georges Bernanos and Hilaire Belloc

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--Epigraphs--

“But the world's heart is always beating. That heart is childhood. Were it not for the sweet scandal of childhood, avarice and cunning would have dried up the world in a century or so....The marvel is that once, and perhaps only once in the history of the world, Childhood stood before a regular tribunal; but the marvel above all others is that this tribunal should have been a tribunal of the Church.” (Georges Bernanos, *Sanctity Will Out*, (New York: Sheed & Ward 1947), pp. 6, 10—my emphasis added—a text first published in French in 1929, and then again, by Plon, in 1934, and entitled *Jeanne relapse et sainte*)

“Some say that...her father [John of Arc], no longer believing evil of her desire to ride [with unknown armed men to Chinon and then to meet the “uncrowned King of France,” Charles VII], but wishing to keep her at home, promised her in marriage. We do not know. But she was claimed as affianced, and cleared herself in the Bishop's court at Toul [in Lorraine], a long day's ride away. If others had promised her, she [at sixteen years] had not consented. She had vowed herself to God....The command [i.e., from her “summoning Heralds from beatitude” (21)—her insistent “celestial voices”—“Saint Catherine and Saint Margaret” (21)] controlled her, and by the end of the year [1428 A.D.], go [to Chinon] she must. She longed 'as a woman to be delivered'. She bade no farewells to father or mother or to the young companions....Nor did she ever again see the smoke rising from her own roof, Domrémy and the woods of home.” (Hilaire Belloc, *Joan of Arc* (London: Cassell & Company, LTD., 1929), pp. 25, 26—my emphasis added)

“There was at court [with Charles VII at Chinon] in those days a high young noble of the [Valois] Blood Royal, fair, very brave and perpetually in battle riding to arms, the Duke of Alençon....[“Five years before,” he had been captured by the English after a rout and defeat;] but when he was offered his freedom if he would renounce his allegiance and swear to the Plantagenet [English] cause, he would not, but preferred the heavy burden of his ransom. For which loyalty his name was loved by all, and already by the Maid, though she had not seen him. He had not been in the hall on that first night when Joan had come, for he had been all day up-river in the marshes shooting quail....[But soon in person] Alençon heard her speaking and from that day believed she was of God. And from that day too they were fast friends in arms, understanding each the other...Alençon believed, and the Faith in his handsome eyes remained. For he held to battle and knew the nature of war and of victory, how it is of the soul.

And now [at Poitiers] it was **necessary** that [for the Doubters and for those more pusillanimous Ecclesiastics and Cunning Negotiating Diplomats, some of whom were “**hyenas laughing at lions,**” (41)] **trial should be made of Joan's claim and her sayings and her mission; for men must be guarded against fraud....**[Thus,] it must be **known**, for the honour of the Crown and for its very safety, **whether these powers** [of Joan] **were of Heaven or of Hell.** For the men of those days...knew well the strength of God and His Saints and also of the Prince of Darkness.” (Hilaire Belloc, *Joan of Arc* (London: Cassell & Company, LTD., 1929), pp. 37-38, 40, 41-42—my emphasis added)

“The world shall be judged by children. **The spirit of childhood shall judge the world....**The Saint [Thérèse of Lisieux] whose festival it is this day will not mind my speaking as a child. For I [as an Agnostic] am but **a child grown old and burdened with inexperience**, and you [Catholics] haven't much to fear from me. Fear those who are to come, who shall judge you. **Fear the innocence of children, for they are also** *enfants terribles*. **Your only way out is to become children yourselves, to rediscover the heart of childhood....**You will have to build it [Christendom] all up again.You will have to build it up **under the eyes of children. Become as children yourselves....**She [“Saint Thérèse of Lisieux”] preached the spirit of Childhood.The spirit of Childhood is capable of both good and evil. **It is not the spirit of resignation to injustice.** Nor must you [Christians] make of it the spirit of revolt, for it would sweep you off the earth....**The Saint of Lisieux**, whose prodigious career **is sufficient token in itself of the tragic urgency of the message entrusted to her, asks you to become as children.**The purpose of God is impenetrable, as you [Christians] say.Yet I cannot help feeling that this is your last chance. **Your last chance—and ours.**Are you capable of rejuvenating our world or not?....**Christians, you must become children again, that we may become children too....**Because you do not live your faith, your faith has ceased to be a living thing. It has become abstract—bodyless. **Perhaps we shall find that THE DISINCARNATION OF THE WORD OF GOD is the real cause of all our misfortune....****Joan of Arc was but a girl-saint**, yet she put the Paris Doctors of Divinity in a tight spot [at her protracted Trial in Rouen, Normandy in 1431] **Why not let the Christ-Child have His Say?....**Get back to childhood, it's not so dangerous....**Become as little children—there lies your refuge.”** (Georges Bernanos, *A Diary of My Times* (New York:The Macmillan Company, 1938), pp. 196, 202-203, 205, 207, 208—italics in the original; my bold emphasis added—the original French title was *Les Grands cimetières sous la lune* (1938)—literally to be translated as *The Great Cemeteries under the Moon*)

“**No rite can dispense us from loving.** Our Church is the Church of the Saints. Nowhere else could one even imagine **the adventure**—an adventure so human!—**of a little heroine** [of 19 or 20] who one day passed quietly from the stake of the Inquisition to Paradise, under the nose of a hundred and fifty theologians.” (Georges Bernanos, *Sanctity Will Out*, p. 55—italics in the original; my bold emphasis added)

“**For sanctity is an adventure; it is indeed the only adventure.** Those who have once realized this have found **the heart of the Catholic faith**; they have felt in their mortal flesh [the fear of death] the shuddering of another terror than the terror of death: **the shudder of supernatural hope.** Our Church is the Church of the Saints. (Georges Bernanos, *Sanctity Will Out*, p. 52—italics

in the original; my bold emphasis added)

A newly begun “Thirty Years’ War”

Five years before the beginning of World War I, Joan of Arc was Beatified by Pope Saint Pius X. (It was on 18 April 1909 in Paris.) A little more than a decade later, and after the devastating 1914-1918 War, she was Canonized by Pope Benedict XV. On that 16 May 1920 in Rome, it was also still a difficult and embittering time, only just a year after the vengeful Treaties of Versailles and Trianon, and but a little less than two years after the deceitfully precarious (and soon-to-be-abused) Armistice of 11 November 1918. The flower of many nations had perished in that War, and we are still trying to assimilate the full range and depth of its consequences, the dismemberment and fragmentation of so many Empires and the sad continuation of a newly begun “Thirty Years’ War” in Europe (1914-1945).

A contrivance of Providence

Captain Charles Péguy, the French poet, was himself killed in combat early in that War, on 5 September 1914, while leading his unit in the momentous First Battle of the Marne, and he was buried there at Villeroi, to the northeast of Paris. Five years earlier, after the Beatification of “the Maid of Orleans,” Péguy had published, also in 1909, his own incantatory verse rhythms in his extended poem (a three-act drama), entitled *The Mystery of the Charity of Joan of Arc* (*Mystère de la Charité de Jeanne d'Arc*). The 1914-1918 War was also the decisive experience in the life of Georges Bernanos (1888-1948), as many of his friends and biographers have confirmed.¹ For, he had come out of it, “not changed but deepened, not cynical but disillusioned” inasmuch as “he had seen [as a decorated corporal] the worst that men could do to each other on the field of battle—and behind.”²

During the War, in 1917, Bernanos took a short leave from combat, so that, on 11 May 1917, he could be now sacramentally wed. His beloved wife was, remarkably, a gracious young woman from Rouen in Normandy, and named “Jeanne d'Arc.” She was herself, moreover, a descendant of Joan of Arc, for her mother, Mme. Talbert d'Arc, was “directly descended from a brother of Jeanne d'Arc.”³ Before the War, Bernanos had met his future wife while living in Rouen as a journalist and editor. As his biographer has winsomely said: “To have met and fallen in love with a descendant of Jeanne d'Arc, and bearing the name of Jeanne d'Arc, in the place where Jeanne had been burnt at the stake, was among the neater contrivances of Providence.”⁴

Bernanos and Belloc witness to St Joan

In 1929, Bernanos, like half-French Hilaire Belloc in that same year, was to publish a short and deeply moving book on Saint Joan of Arc, which was later published in English in 1947—just after World War II—under the title *Sanctity Will Out*.⁵ (Bernanos had, already in 1929, come affectionately and

1 Robert Speaight, *Georges Bernanos: A Study of the Man and the Writer* (New York: Liveright, 1974), p. 52—first published in Great Britain in 1973, by Collins & Harvill Press.

2 *Ibid.*

3 *Ibid.*, p. 51.

4 *Ibid.*

5 Georges Bernanos, *Sanctity Will Out* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1947). Page references to this text will be henceforth in

profoundly under the influence of **another young French saint**, Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, who had written and enacted plays **within** the Carmel about her cherished Joan of Arc, and was herself Beatified and Canonized by Pope Pius XI a few years after St. Joan: on 23 April 1923 and then on 17 May 1925.)

Belloc's chivalric tale

Hilaire Belloc's own published 1929 book, entitled *Joan of Arc*,⁶ was dedicated to his beloved daughter, Elizabeth, and his vivid narrative reads like a nourishing Chivalric Tale of the Catholic Faith, as we may soon further come to see. For both robust men had a chivalrous heart prompt to protect the vulnerable women and the little children who are at risk or even in grave peril. For, such an ethos is at the root of the Code of Chivalry: that **the more defenseless someone is, the more that one calls out for our defense**. That is, in its fuller sense, to defend the "*Parvuli Christi*"—the Little Ones of Christ. For, the Lord Himself had said: "*Sinite parvulos ad me venire*"—"Let the Little Ones come to Me."

Bernanos' 1929 book in French (published in English only in 1947) focuses on Joan's ecclesiastical trial and protracted interrogations at Rouen in Normandy, and on her death there on 30 May 1431; and his book presupposes a larger knowledge of her earlier supernatural inspirations and preparatory journeys and adventures in combat, also of her having earlier led the timid and hesitant Dauphin himself, Charles VII, to the place of his Coronation in Reims Cathedral on 17 July 1429.

It is therefore fitting to consider first the way Hilaire Belloc introduces and concludes his own short book, for it makes us think of a novel of Léon Bloy (d. 3 November 1917), too, an intense and passionate author whom George Bernanos avidly read during, and for some time after, World War I.⁷

Bloy's influence

When we consider, for example, the first words and, then, the concluding words of Léon Bloy's powerful 1897 novel, *The Woman Who Was Poor* (*La Femme pauvre*),⁸ we are immediately stunned and in wonder as to what could have possibly happened in the book to have effected such a transformation. For the novel is divided, moreover, into only two parts: "Flotsam of the Shadows" and "Flotsam of the Light." The **first** words of the novel—spoken by one of the minor characters on the first Sunday of Advent, and "on the very humble threshold of the Lazarist Missionaries' chapel" in Paris—are: "**This**

parentheses in the main body of the essay above—also to be the case for the below-cited Belloc book on Joan of Arc.

6 Hilaire Belloc, *Joan of Arc* (London: Cassell & Company LTD., 1929).

7 Robert Speaight, *Georges Bernanos*, pp. 57, 61, and 67. "From Vernonnet he [Bernanos] wrote to Dom Bese with a vehemence encouraged, no doubt, by a reading of Léon Bloy...and literally weeping with rage, for **Bloy's anger was as contagious, and disproportionate, as his style**. The future would be disputed between anarchy and order." (57) Moreover: "Rather significantly, Bernanos placed as epigraph to this quotation from Péguy, an indication that as the influence of [Charles] Maurras receded, that of Péguy and Bloy was beginning to make itself felt....Péguy had died on the battlefield of the Marne—an astonishing fulfillment of his destiny—but in another sense **he was more alive than ever**." (61—my emphasis added) Likewise: "Bernanos pays tribute to those whom he called his 'masters':...[to include] **Léon Bloy, [who was] too prodigal of his anger for one who was so prodigal of his love**." (67—my emphasis added)

8 Léon Bloy, *The Woman Who Was Poor* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1939).

place stinks of God.”⁹

After this shocking impudence and blasphemy, we may consider the unexpected **final** words of Bloy's novel: words from the heart of spiritual childhood, and coming from the still young deep heart of “Clotilde [who] is now forty-eight...but she is more beautiful than before, and makes the beholder think of a column of prayers....[and] from time to time [she] comes and **instills** into the soul of the painter [Lazare Druide] a little of her own peace”:

*“There is only one unhappiness [only one final sorrow, dolor],” she said, the last time she saw him, “and that is—**NOT TO BE ONE OF THE SAINTS.**”¹⁰*

A heart unconsumed

Let us analogously contrast the way Hilaire Belloc begins and concludes his own narrative on Joan of Arc, affectionately dedicated to his own young-young daughter. We may also thereby come to wonder what he will soon say to nourish us further in those alluring “in between” pages. His beginning, I believe, sets a stern, yet manly and chivalrous tone:

*Five hundred years ago, and more, there was in France an old mad King [i.e., Charles VI “of the family of Valois” (11)] whose wife was a German harlot [Isabeau of Bavaria], **mocking him**. All in his realm was **distracted; for when kingship is weak the powerful oppress and destroy**. And among the miseries of the time was this: that the kingdom was **riven by rivals**. (11—my emphasis added)*

She asked for a Cross

Belloc's book ends with the following words about the young Joan at the end of her mortal life, **and still fearful of fire**:

*She asked for a Cross..., which she kissed and put into the bosom of her white robe....She asked also for a Crucifix from the Church at hand, and this was found and given her....The torch was [then] set to the faggots, and in the midst of the smoke [in the Rouen marketplace] they heard her proclaiming firmly that indeed her Mission was of God, and they heard her praying to the Saints; till, in a very little while, a loud voice came from the midst of the burning, the Holy Name JESUS, called so loudly that every man heard it to the very ends of the Square. And after that there was silence, and no sound but the crackling of the fire. Order was [then] given for the embers to be pulled apart so that all might see that she was dead. But lest her relics should be worshipped [reverenced and honored], men were bidden bear her ashes to the river Seine which ran nearby. So they **threw** into the river **the ashes** of that Maiden, **and her heart, which the fire had not consumed**. (127-128—my bold emphasis added; the Holy Name is capitalized in the original)*

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 3—my emphasis added. This scene is said to take place “in 1879” and the words uttered were “belched forth” (3) by a minor figure (“old Isidore Chapuis”), and explicitly called by the novel's Narrator, words of “impudence” (3).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 352, 355, and 356—italics and bold emphasis in the original, except for the word “**instills**,” my own emphasis.

The stuff of Saints

A fitting counterpointing comment on these lines from the heart of Hilaire Belloc is to be found in a later 1947 essay by Georges Bernanos, entitled “Our Friends the Saints,” written in Algeria shortly before his own death on 5 July 1948:

*The House of God is a house of men, not of supermen. Christians aren't supermen, saints still less so, since they are the most human of human beings. Saints are not sublime, they have no need of the sublime; it is rather the sublime that needs them. Saints are not heroes in the [Stoic] manner of Plutarch's heroes. A hero gives the illusion of surpassing humanity. The saint doesn't surpass it, he assumes it, he strives to realize it in the best possible way. Do you see the difference? He strives to approach as nearly as possible his model, Jesus Christ; that is, to come as close to Him who was perfect man, with a simplicity so perfect that in reassuring others He disconcerts the hero, for Christ did not die only for heroes—He died for cowards too. When his [Christian] friends forget Him, His enemies do not. You know that the [Neo-Pagan, German] Nazis ceaselessly opposed to the Holy Agony of Christ in the Garden of Olives the joyous death of many young Hitlerian heroes. Christ, on the other hand, wished to open up to His martyrs the glorious opportunity of a death without fear; but He also wanted to precede each of us in the darkness of mortal agony. The man with a firm and fearless hand can at the last moment look for support on His shoulder, while the man with a trembling hand can be sure of finding His trembling hand. [So, too, with Joan of Arc in her final adventure of “supernatural hope,” in her trembling youthfulness still amidst that final fear of filial reverence and her humility of hope, deep “espérance”.]*¹¹

The chief miracle of the Incarnation

The Passion of Joan of Arc was heightened by her own anticipations, especially her acutely fearful anticipation of burning in the flames—and, on top of that, the cumulative fatigue she endured for months in the sordid prison (with her coarse and prurient jailors) and because of her protracted inquisitions by the Church Tribunal from early January 1431 until her death on 30 May. Hilaire Belloc, twelve years before Bernanos' comparable sensitivity and discernment, presented the following insights in 1935, writing to Katharine Asquith from Palestine and specifically from the Garden of Gethsemane:

There are now left alive 2 or 3 very old old trees—the tiny leaf of one of which you shall duly receive. Do not despise it, for it is a material link with the most sacred place of the earth: the place where God Himself suffered. The Agony in the Garden is the core and height of the Passion. The near anticipation of a dreadful thing is the acme of its effect: when the falling of a blow is morally certain, the last awaiting of it is the master trial. The sequel is more exhausted; and that is why all who know the significance of Christendom should revere—even beyond the rock of the Cross or the Holy Sepulchre itself, or the Altar of the Assumption in Nazareth or the grotto of Bethlehem—Olivet. “Dieu même a craint la Mort.” This is great poetry and therefore, justly interpreted, sound truth: sound theology. Not that God Himself can suffer, but that God was so intensely, so intimately Man in the Incarnation, that the memories and experience of Divinity and Humanity are united therein: and through it, the worst pain of the creature is known, by actual experience of our own kind, by the Creator.... The miracle

¹¹ Georges Bernanos, *The Last Essays of Georges Bernanos* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968), pp. 240-241. This Reprint was first published in English in 1955, by the Henry Regnery Company of Chicago, Illinois. The final essay, “Our Friends the Saints” (written in Algeria, in 1947) will be found on pages 219-247.

whereby such an enormity [*Death and its anticipations*] coming upon immortal souls does not breed despair, is the chief miracle of the Incarnation—and to work that miracle, the Incarnate—with what supreme energy—accepted our pain, almost refused it, but accepted it; and it was greater than any pain of ours: physically beyond endurance and in the spirit a descent into Hell. Nowhere is there meaning in prayer as at Gethsemane. Upon such a foundation, perhaps, the soul that prays shall lift into fulfillment and recovery. It is, that garden and its shrine, the very centre of man's world. That is Olivet, dear Katharine...surrounded today with all the turpitude that man can fall into, all the baseness and betrayal that man when he revels in hypocrisy can attain. It has survived every other attack, the alternate neglect and assault of those twenty hundred years, and the light shines unchanged over it.¹²

A Ninth Beatitude

Bernanos and Belloc had many temperamental similarities, although Belloc was more reticent and implicit about the deepest mysteries and intimacies of life. And, yet, in his humility (and fear of presumption), he often graciously disclosed his fear of not making it home. Not even to see his little goddaughter again, Little Rose. Thus, he could have a heart—and a chivalrous heart—for those who also suffered such fears and moments of temptation—even the temptation of despair—also like Joan of Arc. Bernanos, however—eighteen years younger than the comparably spirited Belloc (1870-1953)—could **more easily** understand and **express** her radiant, and innocently trusting, spiritual childhood. How fitting that Saint Joan of Arc had such magnanimous and humble and chivalrous defenders.

As Georges Bernanos' grateful Little Curé of Ambricourt said, in Chapter 2 of his 1936 book, *The Diary of a Country Priest*: “**Blessed be he who has saved a child's heart from despair.**”

Bernanos' Little Priest of Ambricourt also said, this time to the initially troubled, but finally peaceful Countess: “Madame, May the hour of mercy not strike in vain” and “May you not be found finally standing impenitent under the eyes of mercy.” “For, Madame, Hell is not to love anymore.”

May these examples of sanctity, or near sanctity—these channels of Grace—help us, too, to be again with our beloved ones, and finally to make it home.

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12 A.N. Wilson, *Hilaire Belloc: A Biography* (New York: Atheneum, 1984), pp. 338-339—italics in the original. This Letter from Hilaire Belloc to Katharine Asquith, “who was perhaps his closest confidante in religious matters” (338) was dated 3 May 1935. The Letter should be read in its entirety, or at least the lengthy passage on pages 338-339. Despite Wilson's often gratuitous depreciations, even base mockeries, in his biography of Hilaire Belloc, he says something reverent and inspiring, though still incomplete, after generously quoting this Letter of 3 May 1935: “It is worth quoting this letter so full, because there is so much of Belloc here, and so much of him which he normally kept carefully concealed [sic]. It shows more nakedly than anything he ever wrote, how close the very thought of Death brought him to Despair; and how the one thing [sic] that could rescue him from despair was the Passion of his Savior. (339) (It will be noted that Wilson does not even mention Belloc's trust in the Blessed Mother and his deep and tender love for her. We therefore ought to look at our Belloc's religious poetry, too, *pace* Wilson.) Hilaire Belloc was to die on the Feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, on 16 July 1953—after having had a fall into the hearth of his own home. With a fire likely in that hearth, too.