Joan's Trial for Heresy

The English agreed to have Joan tried and executed for heresy (beliefs or acts contrary to Catholic Church teachings). If Joan were convicted of heresy, her voices that said God willed Charles to be the king of France would be found false, which would make Charles’ claim to the throne weak and unsupported.

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The English could then crown their young King Henry VI, monarch of France and finally settle who should inherit the throne weak and unsupported. The English had no other lawful way to get rid of Joan since her only other offense was simply humiliating them in battle.

Joan was tried in a French Catholic Inquisition court, which decided if a person was a heretic and, if so, attempted to bring him or her back to the church. The duke of Bedford, governing English-held France in the name of 9-year-old Henry VI, appointed Bishop Pierre Cauchon to be chief judge at Joan's trial. Although French, Cauchon had served English kings for most of his career.

Cauchon assembled a large group to participate in questioning Joan at her trial. They included another judge from the office of the French Inquisition plus numerous religious experts, church lawyers, and other churchmen who acted as advisers to the two judges. Nearly all were French who sided with the English.

Joan’s trial started in late February 1431 and went on for three months. It mainly consisted of Cauchon and others questioning Joan. She told Cauchon, “You say you are my judge. Consider well what you do, for in truth I am sent by God, and you put yourself in great peril.”

Joan, without anyone helping her, amazed her accusers by outsmarted them in their every attempt to trap her with her own words. She argued, stalled, changed the subject, and used sarcasm. When asked what sign from God she gave Charles at their first meeting, she replied, “Go and ask him.”

After accomplishing little in trying to get Joan to speak against herself, Cauchon and the expert advisers finally drew up a list of 70 charges against her. They accused her of being a witch, enchantress, and false prophet. They accused her of making war, “cruelly thirsting for human blood,” and wearing the clothes of men, all acts of violations against God. Her voices were either imagined or came from “a spirit of evil.”

Joan refused to confess to the charges of heresy, even after being threatened with torture and burning at the stake.

Cauchon declared the trial over and read her sentence of death by fire before a pro-English crowd.

Suddenly, Joan cried out that the voices were indeed not from God and she wanted to submit entirely to the church. A shocked Cauchon read to her a document, listing the charges of heresy against her. She accepted and signed it, thus saving herself from the fire. Cauchon sentenced her to imprisonment for life. The English were enraged that she would not be burned.

Later, she said she took everything back she had just promised the church because the voices told her God was displeased she had betrayed him to save herself from the fire. Cauchon told Joan, “We declare you a relapsed heretic” for making her confession with a “false heart.”

On May 30, 1431, Joan was taken by English soldiers to the marketplace of Rouen. The English were impatient and pressured Bishop Cauchon to hand her over directly to the executioner without first having the civil officials review her conviction and punishment.

Joan was bound to a stake on a platform for all to see and then set afire. As she perished, she cried “Jesus!” many times. Her ashes were thrown into the nearby Seine River. She was 19.

Note: excerpt from “Go Boldly!: Joan of Arc and the Hundred Years War” article from the Constitutional Rights Foundation, Winter 2014