

Love your neighbor
as
yourself

Jesus



I want to
accustom
all the
inhabitants
...to look on me
as their brother

*Bl. Charles de
Foucauld*

May 2021

Dear Friends in Jesus Christ,

I pray you are well! I wanted to write a brief newsletter to touch base with you and not only update you on how things are going in Biloxi, but to share something that is special to me.

We seem to be on the down slope of the pandemic in the United States, and it has been an often difficult, bizarre situation. I was somehow able to avoid the virus, even though I had to show up at the hospital every day. Places are nearly back to normal in Mississippi, and vaccinations are slowing down.



My perception is that, due to many aspects of our lives having been disrupted by this virus, we will not know for some time just how much things will be changed in the coming years. A world cannot go through the strain of a pandemic and snap back to normality overnight, and I'm praying that things will smoothly right themselves over the coming months and years, and not violently collapse or rebound. Yet, it is a reminder that our ultimate goal is not of this world, and this is not our lasting home. It also reminds me of the motto and symbol of the Carthusian religious order – “Stat crux dum volvitur orbis”: “The Cross is steady while the world turns”. Though life changes and the world goes through its tragedies and triumphs, the Cross and all it represents is a constant, unwavering touchpoint.

I also think that we all received a pretty rigorous immersion in moral decision making during the pandemic. It was a reminder that much of life, and many of our choices, lie in a gray area. Guidelines are provided, but each of us has to discern how we can live out our daily lives within these guidelines in a way that is healthy and feasible. This is often challenging, but we must do our best.

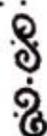
Turning now to what I wish to share with you, May 30 is the feast day of St. Joan of Arc. In her honor, I wrote an article (along with some video links) about what I believe is the best hagiography (biographical presentation of a saint) of the last 100 years. This hagiography is not a written work, but a silent film and an accompanying musical composition. It is one of my favorite works of art, and I hope you benefit from it as much as I have.

Be assured of my prayers for you, please pray for me, as well.

Matthew

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Prayers are needed and appreciated!
(no postal fee required)

In 1928, the French silent film *The Passion of Joan of Arc* was released. It was based on the actual trial records of her martyrdom, and starred Renée Falconetti as St. Joan. The critics at the time declared it a masterpiece, but it was a commercial failure. Tragedy then haunted the film and its actress through the ensuing decades.



Today, many film historians and critics declare Renée

Falconetti's performance as one of the finest pieces of film acting ever. *The Passion* was only her second film performance, and it would be her last. Known as a stage actress, she was cast by director Carl Dreyer because he "felt there was something in her which could be brought out; something she could give, something, therefore, I could take. For behind the make-up, behind the pose and that ravishing modern appearance, there was something. There was a soul behind that façade." The stunning actress consented to having her hair cut and appear without makeup for the role, and the filming process was rumored to be excruciating both mentally and physically.

The result of the suffering and effort is an incredible, silent portrayal of a saint. Within a year of release, a fire destroyed the only negative of the original cut. Dreyer made an alternate version out of secondary scraps of footage, but that original negative was also lost in a fire the next year. In the years to come, only varying cuts of this secondary version were thought to exist, and the consensus was that the original masterpiece was lost forever. Yet, in 1981, an original copy was found in the janitor's closet of a Norwegian mental hospital, and this is the version that can be seen today.



Renée Falconetti, like the film she is known for, also suffered greatly in her later years. She continued stage acting, but fled to South America during World War 2. She had suffered from mental illness throughout her life, gained weight, and died in 1946 from a self-imposed, possibly suicidal diet. She was 54.

In the 1980s, the soundtrack composer Richard Einhorn saw a photo from the film and was transfixed by its power. He decided to write a soundtrack called *Voices of Light* to accompany the silent film using Scripture, the writings of medieval female mystics, and the text of the trial document itself as lyrics. He combined Gregorian chant, the very bells that St. Joan would have heard in the church near her home, and an orchestra and choir. He also enlisted the talents of various soloists and the acclaimed female medieval singers Anonymous 4. All of the text is in the original Latin and old French.

In my opinion, these two works are some of the finest artistic achievements in the area of hagiography – the telling of the life of a saint. When listened to with full attention, translated lyrics at hand, the soundtrack is at times overwhelming in its power to draw forth and proclaim the depths of the lyrics. Combined with the film, it achieves another level altogether. It is not an easy, comfortable film to watch, but it is monumental. The lyrics can be found at <https://sites.nd.edu/smndactivitiescalendar/libretto-and-translation-of-the-cantata-voices-of-light/>, but let us look at one scene from the film where St. Joan of Arc is being interrogated by the clergy. Briefly, St. Joan believed she received visions that told her to drive the English invaders out of France. She rallied the armies and royalty, and achieved great military success. When she was captured, she was threatened with torture (but not harmed), and the local clergy, allied with the English, handed her over to the secular government to be burned as a heretic. Through

the centuries, the injustice of her treatment at the hands of local clergy was recognized by Rome, and she was canonized as a saint in 1909. Remarkably, the written record of her trial still exists.

In the scene below, Joan is being interrogated by the clergy. The lyrics that the women are singing refer to an ancient prophecy of Merlin that was long thought to be attributed to Joan's mission. The men are singing the lines from Deuteronomy that declare that women shall not dress in men's clothing, as one of the flimsy charges the clergy brought against her is that she dresses as a man in the field (which she did both for utility and to help prevent sexual assault.) It will give you a taste of the film and soundtrack's style, and is only a few minutes long (click the link or photo to open the scene in YouTube):

https://youtu.be/C4_KDf4xhU8



Ex nemore canuto puella eliminabitur ut medelae curam adhibeat.

Out of an oak forest a girl will be sent forth to bring healing.
(Ancient prophecy of Merlin thought to refer to Joan of Arc's mission.)

Non induetur mulier veste virili, nec vir utetur veste feminea: abominabilis enim apud Deum est qui facit haec.

A woman shall not wear the clothes of a man, nor a man the clothes of a woman, for abominable in the eyes of God are those who do so. (Deuteronomy 22:5)

Finally, I made a short video illustrating a remarkable way that Richard Einhorn bookends his soundtrack with the title "La Pucelle" – The Maid. This was Joan's title for herself, and is the "nickname" that she still carries to this day. You can click the link or photo below to see the video on YouTube, and I hope that, if this article appeals to you, you might give these works a deeper look. I'm certainly grateful that I did. May St. Joan intercede for us, and may we all pray for the repose of the soul of Renée Falconetti.

<https://youtu.be/iXzo6EAnD40>

