

POPE JOAN - legend, history or both?

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Address by Dr. Rick Rickards
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The idea of Pope Joan has fascinated me for many years. So much is known about her but so much is missing. In order to put the story into perspective it is necessary to try and create a historical time line for the 9th century. In those days Europe was more or less, one country. Neither Germany, France, Spain, nor Italy existed as separate nations. There was not yet a French, Spanish or Italian language. Feudalism had not yet started. There was a never ending battle for power between the Emperors and the Popes. The so-called Temporal and Spiritual powers needed each other and came to a series of uneasy truces. The Emperor had to be crowned by a Pope, but the Pope had to be approved by an Emperor before taking office.

Europe was a very dangerous place to live. There were Vikings Norsemen] raiding from the north and Saracens [Arabs] coming up from the south to plunder the various local groups that were always fighting among themselves. Charlemagne [768-814] was King of the Franks, and, on Christmas day in the year 800, Pope Leo III crowned him Emperor of the Romans. Charlemagne was a Christian by convenience. He massacred 4000 Pagan Saxons and built the Holy Roman Empire by the sword. In Charlemagne's day, either you converted to Christianity or you died. It was that simple. The Church gave the king their stamp of approval and allowed him to keep 4 wives.

In 814 Charlemagne died. He was survived by his oldest son, Louis the Pious. King Louis had three sons, Lothair, Charles and Ludwig. One happy family until 833 when they rebelled against their father and deposed him. King Louis the Pious was down but not out. He regained the monarchy and forgave his treacherous sons. An uneasy calm prevailed until 840 when Louis died and the three brothers had their armies fight for the crown. There was great bloodshed but in the end Lothair won the title Holy Roman Emperor in 841. He stayed in power until 854. Then, he divided his empire among his three sons and, at the suggestion of the Pope, went to live in a monastery!

During the 9th century the papacy changed hands frequently. In fact, there were officially 23 Popes! The question is, who was in power between 853 and 855? That is the time Louis 2nd was crowned in Rome and when English John, [or was it Joan?] allegedly occupied the papal throne. It is fascinating to realize that for hundreds of years the Roman Catholic Church believed the story of Pope Joan to be true. These days the Church has abandoned her and now proclaims that the whole story is total fiction. What I intend to do is to outline the arguments pro and con.

The story starts like this. The year was 847 and the place was Rome. Pope Sergius II who nicknamed himself Bocca di Porco, [or "hog's snout"] had just died. Leo the fourth was elected Pope and stayed in office until 853. At that time there was an English monk, John Anglicus, living in Rome. He was skilled in herbal medicine, famed for his intellect and he had a remarkable ability in rhetoric. He had built

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a great following although he had only been in Rome for 3-5 years. He lectured at the Greek school of learning and amazed all-comers with his sagacity and breadth of knowledge. John Anglicus had come to Rome from Greece where he had spent 5 years studying and teaching. It was in Greece that he had lost his constant companion, Cenwulf, a fellow priest. Cenwulf was more conservative in his views than John, he was also a lot more muscular. It was suspected more than once that they were lovers but it was never mentioned until after Cenwulf's death when other monks wanted to take his place! John and Cenwulf always shared a cell together wherever they went. The two had traveled from monastery to monastery across Europe from England. Their friendship started when they had been students together at the abbey of Fulda in Germany, a monastery which still exists to this day.

John was born in Mayence [Mainz] in Germany as one of three children whose father was an English monk and whose mother was the monk's Saxon consort. Such arrangements were not uncommon in the 9th century, and, in fact, throughout the middle ages. The celibacy of priests was loosely enforced in those days and it was vigorously opposed by many of the clergy, as it still is today. Many priests were married, many were not. It was not uncommon for them to have several children regardless.

John was born of a Pagan mother and a Christian priest. He was one of three children and from an early age he had the characteristics of an infant prodigy. John was quick to learn, full of curiosity and skeptical although devout. The biggest problem John had was that he was born a girl and his real name was not John, but Joan! [some say Agnes] In those days nobody taught girls to read and write! What would be the point? Joan's older brother was destined to follow in his father's footsteps and enter the priesthood. He learned to read. He took pity on his clever little sister and thought there was no harm in letting her study Latin with him. He soon found out that he was no match for her! According to one legend a traveling theological scholar stayed for a night as a guest of her Father. He thought he would test the knowledge of the young man who was destined for the priesthood and pose some deep theological questions for him. The older brother was stumped but not Joan. She amazed everyone with her detailed knowledge of scripture and her skillful arguments. When her father, the priest, heard of this he was furious and punished her severely. Joan was warned never to dabble in such unwomanly things again. Her beloved older brother secretly continued to educate her but it was not to be. He became ill and died of a fever after a short illness. Prayers and Holy water were of no effect. Joan was stunned. Her younger brother was told that he was next in line for the seminary but he preferred a military career. Joan realized she now had no chance for further education. The only place to learn was at Fulda Abbey and they only took boys. Her only hope was to assume the role of her younger brother! It was not that hard for Joan, a tom-boy girl, to look like a young monk, especially after putting on robes and adopting the typical tonsure [haircut]. From all reports Joan found it much better, in the 9th century, to be a monk than a girl.

At this point the story blurs - some sources say that Joan was kicked out of Fulda when her secret was discovered, others say that she and her cell mate, whose name was Cenwulf, completed their 7 year studies

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and set off for England with the blessings of the abbot who even gave them a small sum of money. Universities as we know them did not exist at this time and scholars traveled from one monastery to another to study in the libraries.

While in England the young priests caused a stir with their ideas. They both lectured; Cenwulf was doctrinaire, Joan [or John as she was now called] was original and brilliant. During that time England was under attack by the Danes and the amorous couple, for such they were, decided to head for safer places. In their travels they passed through Mainz, and Joan sent her father a barrel of his favorite wine.

They made their way south and finally boarded a boat in Marseilles headed for Greece. This was a country which Joan had read about and always longed to visit. She could read and write the Greek language and was well versed in Pagan literature. She and her partner Cenwulf managed to find a cell to share in Athens with some Greek Orthodox priests who were of the strange opinion that the Pope in Rome was the chief heretic in Christendom! Joan, still disguised a Christian monk, loved all the sights there were to be seen. The Parthenon was of special interest to her. She studied the sciences and lectured in abstract sciences. She could have been considered a reincarnation of Hypatia, the mathematician and astronomer of 5 centuries before e, but nobody had that good a memory. Besides, nobody at that time, except for Cenwulf, knew she was a woman!

The couple stayed in Greece for 5 years and Joan, had become the best known rhetorician in town. One gets the feeling that Cenwulf was hurting because as Joan waxed, he waned. Finally, Cenwulf fell ill. At first it seemed not to be serious, but as time passed he grew weaker and weaker. Nobody knew what was wrong with him and in spite of all the prayers and all the bleedings, Cenwulf died. The effect of this on Joan was devastating. She realized that she could not stay in Greece for long alone now that she lacked the protection of her friend, her companion and her lover. Not only that but in the Greek Church, in order to succeed, you had to grow a beard! Other monks tried desperately to fill Cenwulf's place, insisting they knew all along that John and Cenwulf were male lovers. This didn't appeal to Joan either! She left as soon as possible and although she would have preferred to travel to Constantinople and Palestine, she did not. Out of respect to Cenwulf's original wishes, she went to Rome.

Under the name of John Anglicus, Joan moved freely in religious circles in Rome. She visited the Saxon School, that of the Teutons, the Franks and the Lombards but found them all devoid of challenge. Finally, she entered the school of the Greeks which had connections as far back as Saint Augustine. It was here that she felt at home. She was already well known from the Fulda monastery and because of her many travels. The Greek school offered her a hall for her lectures. As usual, she drew large crowds of learned listeners and she earned for herself the nickname "Prince of the Wise." When Joan first came to Rome she had the chance to see, but not to meet, Pope Sergius II. He was the one who called himself "hog's snout." He was obviously a sick man and after 3 years in the papacy he died. Joan now had the opportunity to observe the methods by which a new pope is picked, although there had often

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been great contention for the post, this time there was very little. Leo was a priest of the order of 4 crowns. It was he who had been made a sub-deacon by Gregory the Fourth and who also served as the Pope's close advisor. Sergius [Hog's Snout] who followed Gregory, had also thought highly of Leo, so his election was what would be called, 1000 years later, a shoo-in. In spite of this Leo was not actually installed for two months because the church thought it would be wise to first get the approval of the Emperor, Lothair. In the meantime the Holy See was vacant. When the word came that the Saracens were getting ready to attack Rome again, the city council decided to authorize the consecration of the new Pope without waiting for the Emperor's approval. The ceremony was performed by 3 bishops. The new pope took the name of Leo the Fourth and proceeded, hurriedly, to build up the defenses of the city. He even had a long iron chain stretched across the Tiber to prevent enemy shipping from approaching. Soon after doing this the pontiff performed a veritable PR department. The story went as follows: a huge cockatrice had been hatched out, in the usual way, with a serpent sitting on a cock's egg. In time the creature turned into a regular dragon measuring 30 feet in length and 2 1/2 feet across! This ungodly cockatrice occupied a cave and was killing people who came too close. The story goes that Pope Leo, unlike Saint George, tackled the beast single-handedly and unarmed. In a loud voice he ordered it to give up the ghost in the name of God! After belching out a huge cloud of flame the dragon obliged the pope and died on the spot. This is the kind of heroism was very helpful for those who lacked faith or, worse still, indulge in the sin of skepticism. Reports say Joan smiled when she heard the story!

Now Leo IV was not a bad pope, as popes go. He raised funds and carried out a lot of rebuilding programs in Rome. He even established an order of nuns within his own house and there were rumors that he got to know most of them in the biblical sense of the word. But, all this was hearsay. After all, a man who could slay a dragon without a sword, could surely have had all the female admirers he could ever wish for without having to consort with nuns!

One day, after Joan's lecture at the school she was approached by a papal nuncio and told to appear before the pope. Leo had heard about her lectures and her unusual nickname "Prince of the Wise." The Pope and the priest spoke for a long time and started what was to become a lasting friendship. Joan refused to be elevated to deacon, bishop or cardinal but she always kept the line of communication open between herself and the Pope. The holy father, Leo, often turned to her for advice and at the same time she was continuing to gain a great following among the learned. The Greek school gave her their largest lecture hall but it was always packed and overflowing.

When Leo died in 853, there were several factions who wanted their candidate on the Papal throne. There was Anastasius, the ambitious librarian, who had been deposed by Leo from the priesthood. There was Father Benedict. There was a physician's son called Nicholas, and there was an extremist group who followed Cenfrith. But the ground swell went up from one end of the holy city to the other "Brother John Anglicus!" - "English John!" It wasn't long before she was elected unanimously.

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Soon she was escorted to the Papal palace by a large crowd and had her feet kissed by one and all!

The Emperor still had to be asked for his approval but this time it was quick in coming. Louis 2nd [Lothair's son] commended the choice. She took the name of John VIIIth

Joan was a very effective pontiff. She appointed many of her rivals to high posts and sent emissaries to straighten out heretical church doctrines which were on the rise in parts of the empire. One particular priest, Adrian, who was the nephew of the late Pope Sergius, had the reputation of being able to work miracles. He was appointed cardinal and soon became her closest advisor. To cut a long story short, Adrian fell in love with Father John and proposed that they form a same sex liaison like David and Jonathan, or Jesus and John. Joan, knowing that Adrian had occasionally strayed with his female acquaintances, went one better. She told him what he really needed was a woman, and then she enlightened him concerning the true nature of her gender. This was a mistake! Not that it interfered with her duties as Pontiff, on the contrary, it made her more sensitive to the problems of the average parishioner. The obvious difficulty was that Joan became pregnant! A novel situation for the holder of the highest ecclesiastic office in all of Christendom.

At first she had plans to retire from public life for a few months and have the child adopted. She thought of having Adrian claim it as his own by some peasant woman. A practice which would be acceptable for a priest in those days. She kept putting off making a decision and found that her robes made it easy to disguise the fact that she was expecting.

Finally, it was Rogation Day and she had to ride a horse which lead a religious procession from St. Peter's to the Lateran. That wasn't a good idea! She went into labor between the Coliseum and St. Clements, and actually gave birth, without a mid-wife, in full view of everybody! This was too much for the faithful. She and the child were killed on the spot, according to one story. Other versions say that she was later stoned by the mob but the child was spared and went on to be a high ranking church official. Joan had occupied the papal throne for 2 years, five months and four days.

So that's the story of Pope Joan. These days many people consider it to be nothing but fiction. A morality play, perhaps, on the wickedness of feminine ambition. The Catholic Encyclopedia calls it the "Fable of Pope Joan" and even learned Protestant divines have written tomes emphatically denying any truth in the story. It has been explained away as the personification of the great whore of Babylon mentioned in Revelation.[Rev 17 etc.] There are other theories. One is that Joan was conjured up by the forces of evil, vomited out of hell by the spells of atheists and heretics. Her son, it was alleged, was spirited away to be the Antichrist for future times. The famous Catholic theologian Father Johann von Dollinger [1799- 1890] is said to have finally demolished the story of Pope Joan in his "Popish Fables of the Middle Ages."

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On the other hand there is a lot of evidence which makes you wonder whether some of the original story may be true. Let's take the idea of having a woman as Pope. The church authorities pooh-poo the idea as absurd, but is it? There was a sect of Gnostics who claimed that Jesus loved Mary Magdalene and originally wanted to give the keys of heaven to her. According to them, she was to have been the first Pope, not St. Peter! During the 12th century there was a heretical sect, the Guglielmites. Their aim was to replace the Papacy, which they found to be corrupt and venal, and to install a series of female popes. They had picked the first one, a nun called Manfreda, and she was to take office in the year 1300. When the Inquisition heard the news they stamped out the heresy and burnt Manfreda and her followers at the stake.

There were various other legends which involved women who wanted to be the Pope. For example, there was the strange tale of the fisherman's wife called "The Flounder in the Sea." It told of a magical fish who granted all her wishes and fulfilled her greed and ambition. The fishwife lived in a hovel and first wanted a bigger home, then a castle; she wanted to be Emperor, and then to be the Pope! Each time her wish is granted. Then she develops hubris and she wants to become God, but the deal is off! She is sent back to her hovel! This story is told in Grimm's Fairy tales but its origin goes way back to ancient times. There's probably some deep moral about the fact that women may wish to be Emperors and Popes and Gods but these offices are reserved for "real" men!

Actually there was a time when women rose to considerable power within the church. Abbesses were the equivalent of priestesses during the 12th century. In many instances they ruled over men. There were also examples of women who disguised themselves as men [like Joan is said to have done] and who rose to the height of Bishop in the church. Their sex was only discovered after their death.

It's all very well denying the story of Pope Joan but some of the facts refuse to go away. In the first place the historical record of the early middle ages is far from complete. Many of the so-called authentic Popes have almost nothing to vouch for their existence. There were times when there were two official popes in office at the same time. At one time there were three! Furthermore, there had been quite an effort made to expunge the record of Pope Joan completely. It is amazing there is anything left to read.

The first historical reference to Joan is to be found in Anastasius, the librarian, who died in 866. His book, "Liber Pontificalis", has the lives of all the popes from St. Peter to Nicholas I in 867. Pope Joan was listed among them. The Irish priest, Marianus Scotus, born in 1028 wrote "The Chronicon," a history of the world from creation till 1082. He spent ten years from 1059 at the abbey of Fulda, where Joan had been a student, then he moved to Mainz, where she had grown up. He wrote "Joanna, a woman, succeeded Leo IV and reigned two years, five months and 4 days. Sigebert of Gembloux wrote in "The Chronographica" which covered from 381 to 1111. "...this John was a woman known only to one of her attendants; she became pregnant and was delivered of a little Pope, whereof some do not number her among the pontiffs." The author, Sigebert, was a Benedictine monk born about 1030. There are many

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others, the best of which is the Roman Catholic historian, Martin of Troppau, who concluded his "History of Popes and Emperors" about 1278. He was a Dominican priest, plus he was papal chaplain and confessor to Clement IVth who was his sponsor for the book. In it he wrote that the pontificate of Leo IVth ended in 853. "After the aforesaid Leo, John, an Englishman by descent, who came from Mainz, held the see two years, five months, and 4 days. And the pontificate was vacant one month. He died in Rome. He, it was asserted, was a woman. And having been in youth taken by her lover to Athens in man's clothes, she made such progress in various sciences that there was nobody equal to her. So that after lecturing on the Trivium, at Rome, she had great masters for her disciples and hearers. And for as much as she was in great esteem in the city, both for her life and her learning, she was unanimously elected pope. But while pope she became pregnant by the person with whom she was intimate. But not knowing the time of her delivery, while going from St. Peter's to the Lateran, being taken in labor, she brought forth a child between the Coliseum and St. Clement's church. And afterwards dying she was, it was said, buried in that place. And because the Lord Pope always turns aside from that way, there are some who are fully persuaded that it was done in detestation of the fact. Nor is she put in the catalogue of the Popes, as well as on account of her female sex, as on account of the foul nature of the transaction." For the next 300 years no chronicle was used so often as Martin's.

An English Benedictine monk, called Higden, who died about 1363 wrote his Polychronicon, a universal history, which listed Pope Joan. This book was a standard Catholic text during the 15th century and more than 100 manuscript copies still exist today. Joan was still a part of history at this time, many visitors to Rome had seen her statue as a marble bust in the cathedral of Siena, along with all the other popes until 1601 when pope Clement VIII had it remodeled into pope Zacharias [741-52]. If the story of Pope Joan is a lie, why was included in the official church guidebook for pilgrims for 300 years?

Mention must be made of the Council of Constance, in 1413, at which, Jan Hus, the Protestant reformer was tried. The Council grilled him on his writing about church doctrine and the records [which still exist] show that he defended himself with eloquence. His trial was long and his judges went to great lengths to reply in detail to all his claims. However, when Hus was asked if he had dared to write that Jesus Christ could govern his church on earth, without a visible chief, by his true disciples, scattered throughout the universe? Hus answered, proudly, that he did. He followed by saying, "Was not the Church without a head and without a ruler during the two years and 5 months that Agnes [a.k.a. Joan] occupied the see of Rome? Nobody replied! This is significant because of the fact there were 4 patriarchs, 28 cardinals, 30 metropolitans, 206 bishops, 18 auditors of the sacred palace, 440 doctors of theology, 27 prothonatories, 123 procurators of the Pope and many other dignitaries present. They could not answer the question because at that time the Church still believed in Joan! The Council promised Hus a safe passage for testifying but decided to burn him at the stake!

Another strange story is the one about the avoidance of the street in Rome along which Joan led the procession during which she gave birth.

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The Via Sacra. It is said that for 500 years [maybe until the present?] no more papal processions were allowed to use it, because of the awful event which had happened there! The excuse is now made that the street was avoided because it was too narrow, but even after it was widened the ban was maintained.

The church was allegedly furious that it had been tricked into letting a woman sit on to the Papal throne and swore that it would never happen again. How could they be sure? By physically examining the nominee before the consecration. Hence we find the ritual of the pierced chair. This strange ritual almost certainly took place for 600 years. The ceremony continued until it was abolished by Pope Pius VI. [1775-99] The marble chair is still extant and can be found in the Rome. It looks like a marble commode or maybe a birthing chair and may well have been used for this at one time. The ritual, so it is said, involves sitting the future pontiff on the pierced chair and examining his bare testimonials from below! If all is well then the cry goes up "Testiculos habet et bene pendent!" He has testicles and they hang well! The deacon then announces "Nos nobis nominus est" The nominee is a man!

This ritual has been described by many visitors to Rome and the church has made many efforts to explain the odd chair but the truth is that it is probably easier to deny than to explain. It is a fact that so far as we can tell it is not being used any more.

A brief word must be made on the subject of Tarot cards. These unusual cards are used by people who believe in fortune telling and have been around since the 13th century. Instead of the current playing cards in clubs, spades, diamonds and hearts, they consist of the same cards in four different suits, namely pentacles, swords, cups and wands. These are called the minor arcana. There is also a major arcana which has 22 picture cards. These deal with unusual subjects such as Death, the Hanging Man, the Juggler and guess who? The Female Pope! All the old Tarot cards have such a picture. There is also a card game which can be played with regular cards which is called Pope Joan.

So, whether we believe it or not, Pope Joan is a part of our culture. She may, or may not have ruled the Roman Catholic Church from 853 till 855 but we can never be absolutely sure. One thing is worth pondering. If she had only practiced celibacy, or understood birth control, she might have gone down in history as a famous man!

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