

## Three women kidnapped by the extreme Right

*William Smith*

THE FACT THAT A GIVEN DEVOTION IS 'POPULAR' does not indicate anything about its political orientation in either the Church or the wider world. But in France, some popular Catholic devotions have been interpreted and promoted by right-wing groups to further their own cause, and this exercise is closely tied to particular ideas about gender.

### *God, the natural order and tradition*

Unlike the UK, France has experienced, over the last twenty years, the vociferous and durable presence of both the political and religious extreme Right. Supporters of the extreme Right political parties are from many backgrounds: hard-line anti-Europeans, monarchists, anti-Republicans who hanker after the authoritarian Vichy regime, supporters of French Algeria who have still not come to terms with what they consider to be the betrayal of Algeria by the French government under de Gaulle, traditionalist or Lefebvrist Catholics, and the Catholic Counter Reformation of Georges de Nantes. For integrist Catholics, the political extreme Right is attractive because it reflects what they seek in their religious life: strong, inflexible hierarchy and unchanging authority – concepts which they wish to harness in order to restore (if it ever existed) a society based on three pillars: God, the natural order and tradition. For them, one of the major destabilizing factors in contemporary French life has been the emancipation of women.

All is grist to the mill: St Paul's first letter to the Corinthians was quoted in the parish bulletin of the integrist church of St Nicolas-du-Chardonnet in Paris (January 1990), reminding women of their role: '... the head of every man is Christ, the head of a woman is her husband ... for man was not made from woman but woman from man. Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man.'

The natural order is invoked to sustain the difference between male and female: woman's role is to be a wife and mother, to procreate and to educate her children – to fulfil her biological destiny. Jean-Marie Le Pen, President of the French National Front, evokes tradition in

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virtually every speech: he regularly cites Mary and Joan of Arc as icons for modern woman and his ideal society is the pre-Revolutionary one with its perceived sense of hierarchy, male domination, harmony and order, all of which are threatened by the rise of feminism which is considered to be responsible for modern decadence, the decline of the family and the widespread recourse to contraception and abortion.

***Mary: an upper middle-class French housewife?***

Catholic and Orthodox Christianity have made of Mary, the mother of Jesus, a figure of immense veneration and an exemplar for Christians. She is the 'Virgin Mother', the 'Mother of God', 'Ever Virgin', 'Immaculate', 'assumed into heaven'. In addition she has achieved immense cultural importance: in feasts, devotional services, in pilgrimages to marian shrines such as Lourdes, Medjugorje and Fatima. She is a ubiquitous theme in the arts: there are countless paintings of the Mother and Child, the Coronation of the Virgin, the Annunciation, the Visit with Elizabeth, Mary at the foot of the Cross. However, by the nineteenth century, the Catholic Church, in honouring Mary, had come to celebrate a particular and rather narrow vision of goodness, a femininity of idealized virtue, of chastity, humility, gentleness. It was as if the Church had been unable to cope with femininity: woman was Eve, temptress and whore, and only Mary, pure virgin and perfect mother, had escaped the curse of Eve. Over the course of the last two centuries of marian piety, the hymns to Mary, for example, characterize the world as dark and evil, society as hostile, and humans, particularly women, as steeped in sin and oppressed by enemies who hate the goodness and piety represented by Mary and the Church.

Le Pen presses Mary into service as a symbol of female commitment to resist what he sees as the decadence of contemporary France, a decadence characterized for him by feminism, abortion, contraception and promiscuity. Mary becomes the champion and exemplar of the French wife and mother under threat in her traditional role. Similarly, for integrist Lefebvrist Catholics, Mary will emerge 'victorious over disloyalty, vice and materialism', she will 'crush the head of the serpent'; she is the only one capable of 'overcoming the forces of evil united under the direction of those secret societies which dominate our lives today, degrading the human person . . . destroying the family'.<sup>1</sup> Mary is made the model of the traditionalist conception of woman's role, the paradigm of the wife and mother in a world which is seen to be torn apart by a Manichaean conflict between good and evil.

Little is known of Mary. She appears infrequently in the Gospels<sup>2</sup> but she is depicted by Luke as the prototypical Christian disciple: she is the believer who submits herself unreservedly to God's will. She is the first example of those extolled in the Beatitudes: 'Blessed are you poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God.' She is the champion of the poor against the wealthy, of the humble against the powerful. Biblical scholars<sup>3</sup> are generally agreed that the hymn of Mary, the Magnificat, was not composed by her but rather by Luke himself who drew on many Old Testament sources (e.g. 1 Sam 2) to compose what he saw as the defining statement of Christianity, described even by Charles Maurras, the agnostic leader of the ultra-Catholic right-wing *Action Française* movement during the first half of the twentieth century, as 'the most revolutionary in history':

He has shown the power of his arm,  
 he has routed the proud of heart.  
 He has pulled down princes from their thrones  
 and exalted the lowly.  
 The hungry he has filled with good things,  
 the rich sent empty away.

(Lk 1:51-53)

The Right also falls into the trap of attributing to Mary the qualities of a caricature of a 'Jewish mother': inexhaustibly emotionally generous, forever consoling and rewarding her children, devoting herself entirely to their emotional and material well-being; the immensely well-meaning but ultimately damaging figure in her children's lives, who by denying them autonomy, denies them also maturity.

This is the mother of the 'Holy Family model', the housewife and mother confined to the home, extolled by the Right, and modelled on the French nineteenth-century middle classes. The figure depicted in Luke's Gospel is quite different: this was a woman who spent the last three years of Jesus' life wandering the roads of Galilee with him and who, when he died, was homeless and had to be entrusted to the care of one of his disciples. It is a woman who gave her twelve-year-old son such autonomy that he disappeared for thirty-six hours on the way home from Jerusalem (Lk 2:41-50) before she realized he was missing and, when she was reunited with him, accepted his explanation without question: 'Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be busy with my Father's affairs?' (Lk 2:49).<sup>4</sup> The Right's virulent attacks against single mothers (as subversive of 'family values') appear

totally to miss the point that Mary, as a teenage girl, was asked to bear a child of whom her intended husband Joseph was not the progenitor. Two thousand years on, Christians perceive this acceptance – ‘Let what you said be done to me’ (Lk 1:38) – as the supreme example of obedience to the will of God. At the time, however, the perception was not the same: adulterous women and single mothers were roundly condemned in ancient Jewish society. By being obedient to God’s will, Mary laid herself open to the censure of her own society, a censure which the political and religious Right is only too ready to heap on the heads of contemporary French single mothers.

To take such a universally iconic figure as Mary and make her a protagonist in a right-wing political and religious campaign in French society is not only absurdly reductionist but is also knowingly and wilfully to deform the mainstream Catholic view of Mary as it has evolved since Vatican II.

### ***Joan of Arc: warrior saint and Europhobe***

Luc Besson’s film *Jeanne d’Arc*, which appeared in the UK in March 2000, was the thirty-first film to have been made about her, the first having appeared in 1900. Her legend has had immense power to create myth: peasant girl comes out of nowhere directed by the voices of saints to lead the French armies in the fifteenth-century wars against the English and the Burgundians. She lifts the siege of Orleans in 1429, defeats the English in battle, has Charles VII crowned in Reims, is captured in 1430 by the Burgundians, is sold to the English, betrayed by the French and burnt alive in Rouen in 1431 as a witch and persistent heretic. She was rehabilitated in 1450, beatified in 1909 and canonized in 1920 – the only Catholic saint to have been burnt as a heretic.

### ***The historical reality***

According to a recent book by Roger Caratini,<sup>5</sup> the historical reality was quite different: her military career lasted only seventeen months; there was no siege of Orleans and the Dauphin sent her there as part of a food convoy, not as head of an army; she encouraged the city’s defenders to attack a few English outposts and after these brief skirmishes (in which she played no significant part) she became a sort of mascot for Charles VII’s demoralized forces. After Charles was crowned, she urged him to march on Paris (which was pro-English) and the French army was totally routed; finally she was involved in a brief and unsuccessful guerrilla campaign with a small band of followers which ended with her capture. Her military role, therefore, seems to

have been totally exaggerated, although she undoubtedly exercised some political influence which was not always positive.

The many and often conflicting myths about her began to be elaborated in France soon after her rehabilitation. During the sixteenth century she comes to be perceived as a divine miracle sent to save the kingdom of France and the Valois dynasty. By the seventeenth century she has, ironically, become a Catholic martyr. The Revolution banishes her as a symbol and supporter of monarchical feudalism. When the monarchy is restored in France in 1815, she becomes an icon of popular and monarchical patriotism and, by the late nineteenth century, *La Pucelle*, the Maid of Orleans, has been hijacked by two opposing factions within the Third Republic: for the largely Catholic Right, she is the symbol of an ultra-Catholic and traditionalist France; for the predominantly Radical Socialist government of the time, in need of potent symbols to buttress nationhood and Republicanism after the loss of Alsace and Lorraine to Germany in 1870, she is a French nationalist who was betrayed by her king. Her beatification and canonization may well have been strongly influenced by French government pressure on the Vatican to create a symbolic figure who would serve their political ends. For the Vatican, it could have been seen as an opportunity to conciliate to some extent a series of anticlerical governments. This hypothesis cannot be verified from Vatican sources because Joan of Arc's 'file' is a closed one which cannot be accessed.

### *Le Pen and Joan of Arc*

Joan was pressed into service during the Second World War by the Vichy regime whose propaganda broadcasts referred constantly to her as a victim of Anglo-Saxon perfidy, an innocent cruelly put to death by the treacherous English who were also blamed for France's defeat in 1940 and for the attack on the French fleet at Mers-El-Kebir. In September 2000, Catherine Mégret, the extreme right-wing mayor of Vitrolles, was the latest French politician to attempt to capitalize on the Joan of Arc legend when she turned up for her trial on charges of racism dressed in sackcloth ready to be burned at the stake.

It is however Jean-Marie Le Pen who most systematically exploits and distorts the Joan of Arc story. She is the model on which he builds to reinforce his own ideological position of exclusion, nationalism and hierarchy of race. Joan is the object of a National Front rally or pilgrimage which occurs every year around 1 May, where tribute is paid to her as one who symbolizes resistance to foreign invasion and the preservation of national independence at the cost of her own life. She is

the emblematic figure who encapsulates the ideology of the National Front: France for the French; the defence of France against foreign invasion (by which he means North African immigration), European integration and the plots which he claims are being fomented against France by an international Jewish financial conspiracy. Le Pen's speeches on these occasions invariably celebrate her virginity (about which there is no evidence), her purity of intention and the pathos of her martyrdom. But she is also depicted, both in the speeches and by the young woman selected every year to dress up in chain mail and ride on horseback to represent her, as an essentially androgynous figure where the perceived male characteristics of strength and combativity predominate. This allows Le Pen to depict himself as her successor in contemporary France.

The 1998 speech, delivered in the Place de l'Opéra in Paris after the homage to the Joan of Arc statue in the Rue de Rivoli, followed the unvarying pattern: invocation of Joan followed by a supposed parallel with contemporary France:

... a young girl rooted both in the land and in heaven, given as her mission in times of adversity to save a France in danger, because of violence and betrayal, of being absorbed into a foreign entity and thus of losing her sovereignty, her independence, her language, her identity. But is it possible to compare the great predators of the fifteenth century, Isabeau of Bavaria, Bedford, Cauchon with the manikins who run the European Union? Or the infamous Treaty of Troyes with the unspeakable Treaty of Maastricht?

What was it all about almost six hundred years ago? It was about handing over France to the King of England with the connivance of the University of Paris, the Church of France and the plotters amongst the nobility. What is it all about today? It is about losing the unity, the independence and inalienable sovereignty of France in a so-called European entity, the geographical and political boundaries of which are unknown, with the complicity of those whose sacred mission it is to defend France.<sup>6</sup>

As well as being conscripted into opposition to the single European currency, Joan is made a champion of Lefebvrist Catholicism by Le Pen because she would have opposed 'the obliteration and adulteration of religious dogmas'. Joan lived in a time of political and religious confusion and, for Le Pen, her century parallels the present one where, according to him, the post-Vatican II Church has allowed itself to be led into error and has done nothing to prevent the spread of Islam in France.

The French hierarchy is accused of cowardice and pusillanimity and compared to Bishop Cauchon who condemned Joan to death.

It is clear that, over succeeding generations, the story of Joan of Arc has been cynically distorted by French politicians to serve their own ends and Jean-Marie Le Pen is the most blatant and persistent culprit. The figure which they have created has nothing to do with historical reality nor with the martyrdom of a teenage girl, put to death for repeated heresy – a heresy which seems to have consisted to a large extent in the fact that she wore man's clothes, a characteristic of many contemporary French women which irritates Le Pen, who inveighs against unisex clothing as destructive of femininity . . .

***Thérèse of Lisieux: a model of female subservience?***

Thérèse is the object of particular devotion by the integrist Catholic Counter Reformation movement led by Fr Georges de Nantes. De Nantes was suspended *a divinis* by his local bishop (of Troyes) in 1966 and thus banned from saying mass or exercising any other function within the Catholic Church because of his repeated, virulent criticism of the reforms enacted by the Second Vatican Council. He has ignored this ban and attracted some two hundred 'Phalangists' (as they refer to themselves), women and men, to his community houses at Saint Parres-lès-Vaudes (Aude) and has also founded a house in Quebec. De Nantes is a prolific writer and his monthly bulletin entitled *The Catholic Counter Reformation in the XXth Century (CCR)* has a circulation of more than 13,000 copies (it is published both in English and French). His movement has, as we shall see, all the characteristics of a sect and has been designated as such by the French civil authorities, who have denied the CCR the taxation concessions normally attributed to religious organizations. The Bishop of Troyes condemned the CCR (August 1996) as an anti-Semitic sect of the extreme Right and de Nantes' own writings bear this out: he considers the French Revolution of 1789 to be the incarnation of original sin; he was a supporter of French Algeria and of the use of torture there by French troops: he adulates Salazar and Franco and frequently writes articles extolling Pétain and Vichy. He even has a good word to say for Hitler and the Third Reich: 'You must not forget that Hitler's Germany sought to rid the world of the Bolshevik scourge (and also of the other scourge which I think it wiser not to name, but you can guess which one I mean), and which is all too visible today as it returns in force to dominate the world alongside Bolshevism' (*CCR* no 105, May 1976).

What, then, are the qualities which de Nantes perceives in St Thérèse's life which may provide support for his ideas and his movement? His writings on Thérèse were summarized in a thirty-four-page article in *CCR* (no 301, September 1997) by a member of his Phalangist community, Mother Godelieve of the Eucharist, who refers to de Nantes throughout the article as 'Our Father' when she cites him directly.

### *Thérèse's life*

Thérèse was born in 1873 into a middle-class family strongly tinged with Jansenism in north-eastern France. In Catholic circles at that time (when the Third Republic was creating a secular state in which the Church would no longer have a privileged position), there was a strong sense of being besieged by what was termed 'the world', that is to say, everything which was not Church, by a society which was born of the Revolution, hence of sin, and which denied God. Thérèse's mother died when she was four and her father ensured that the child grew up in an atmosphere of rigid piety. Once inside the Carmelite monastery which she entered aged fifteen with special permission from the Vatican, she demonstrated the characteristics of docility and self-abnegation which had been inculcated into her in her early childhood. Writing of her prioress, she says, 'The good God allowed her, without her knowing, to be very severe; I could never meet her without kissing the ground' (*CCR* no 301, p 11). De Nantes' quoted comment on this action is illuminating when we see how he behaves within his Phalangist community: 'There are words of gold! exclaims our Father' (*CCR* no 301, p 22). Three years before her death, she composed and acted the main part in a dramatic production within the Carmel entitled 'The Mission of Joan of Arc'. The timing of this production was very significant. Pope Leo XIII introduced the beatification cause for Joan of Arc on 27 January 1894 and this play was produced just six days beforehand. The author of the article draws a parallel between the two saints:

he [de Nantes] was very impressed to discover in Theresa of Lisieux a reincarnation, as it were, of Joan. He does not hesitate to assert that God wanted it so at the very period when the great forces of Antichrist were being mobilised for the final battle against France and against the Church . . . Saint Theresa transposes the lamentable state of France, once occupied by the English, divided and rebellious to her king and the Pope, into the current life of her day. In Theresa's day, France was



under the control of a Masonic and persecuting Republic. (CCR no 301, p 22)

So Thérèse of Lisieux, alongside Joan of Arc, is pressed into service to support an extreme right-wing monarchist agenda and to serve as a role model for female members of de Nantes' sect.

The word sect is used advisedly because the Phalangist communities, unlike genuine religious communities which strive to foster the personal growth of their members, share characteristics with those sects which have come to light recently in North America, Guyana and Switzerland where the outcome has been suicide. The characteristics which these groups share with de Nantes' Phalangist communities are the following:

- A sect is usually dominated by an all-powerful guru seen as the uniquely inspired prophet and saviour whose teachings and writings alone are true. No other authority is tolerated.
- The sect has all the truth. It presents itself as having a new message of salvation for all the world. This gives a total meaning to its members' lives and an intense motivation to proselytize and recruit.
- For those in the sect, society is divided into the good and the bad, the saved and the damned. Strong walls of fear are created, making it difficult to question anything. They are cut off from family, friends and all other social institutions.
- Members are obliged to sacrifice their personal conscience, freedom and critical capacity to the group.
- Anguished, fragile, lonely people are attracted and seduced into the group. The togetherness, security and powerful goals of the group transmit a good feeling and relieve the anguish and pain of loneliness, worthlessness, meaninglessness and lack of direction. This makes it almost impossible to leave without going through even greater anguish and the apparent risk of emptiness, loneliness and inner death.<sup>7</sup>

These characteristics all apply to the CCR, and Thérèse's history as interpreted by de Nantes lends authority to his rule: for example, she cut herself off from her sister who was also a Carmelite nun: 'it is better that I do without you because we are not at home now' (CCR no 301, p 11).

Children, as young as seven years old, are sent by their parents to summer camps run by the CCR where they are indoctrinated. Intimidation and guilt are two of the means used to shape future Phalangists. A girl aged twelve who had attended three such camps

spoke of her experiences: 'The camp begins with an examination of conscience, we are told we are all liars. We make a list of damning sins which we would never have thought of . . . Clothes were judged to be indecent if they were a bit tight or a bit short. I used to cry at some of the readings because they were unhealthy.' Another girl aged fourteen has been prevented from seeing her father, 'her satanic progenitor', by the sect which manipulates the mother and the grandmother who are totally under the influence of de Nantes. Nor are young Phalangists allowed to marry without the permission of the leader:

I cannot conceive of a young Phalangist getting married without telling me, asking my view, getting my permission. A young woman comes to me and begs me to find her a husband, she goes round the young men of the CCR. She says that she despises them all, she doesn't want any of them. That takes me aback; a young woman like that, I can't be bothered with her. Young women today are crazy with arrogance.<sup>8</sup>

Georges de Nantes is an extreme case of abusive, patriarchal authority. His religion has little to do with Christianity; it is a perversion of Catholicism intended to serve an extreme right-wing political agenda where women have no role other than to obey orders and serve.

The writings of Thérèse, taken as a whole rather than distorted through the selective quotations of de Nantes, totally contradict his message. Her spirituality, as elaborated in *The story of a soul*, is rooted in the ordinary, in the untidiness of everyday life. Holiness, she says, is for everyone. It is not the preserve of a narrow group like Phalangists. When she writes of women, it is in terms diametrically opposed to those of de Nantes and, prophetically, she voices the hurt which many women in the Church are feeling today.

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## NOTES

- 1 *Fideliter* (publication of the Fraternité Sacerdotale de Saint Pie X, July–August 1987). Quoted in C. Lesselier and F. Venner, *L'extrême droite et les femmes* (Paris: Editions Golias, 1997), p 64.
- 2 There are only twenty-one references to her in the whole of the New Testament.
- 3 Cf B. P. Robinson, 'Musings on the Magnificat', *Priests and People* vol 1, no 8 (December–January 1987–8), pp 332–335.
- 4 In the view of many biblical scholars, this is an episode which is most unlikely to have taken place. Luke uses the narrative device of summing up in the first chapter of his Gospel the major themes of his subsequent account of the life of Jesus. The whole thrust of his narrative is the notion of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, to crucifixion and resurrection. This invented childhood journey to Jerusalem prefigures the journey he would make in his public ministry.
- 5 Roger Caratini, *Jeanne d'Arc* (Paris: Editions de l'Archipel, 1999).
- 6 Reported in *National Hebdo* (7–13 May 1998, no 720) under the title 'From Joan of Arc to the *Front National*: a mystique of freedom'.
- 7 Characteristics formulated by Jean Vanier, 'Know them by their fruits', *The Tablet* (15 March 1997), pp 346–347.
- 8 Quoted in *Golias* 27 and 28 (Autumn 1991), pp 145–149.