"Joan, are you in a state of grace?"
Joan of Arc and Late Medieval Catechesis

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Joan of Arc's self-transformation from an illiterate peasant girl to "the Maid of Orleans" has long captured the popular imagination. Joan attributed her dramatic change to God who had urged her to don male clothing and save the kingdom of France. Ultimately her willingness to act upon this seemingly impossible task and bring it largely to fruition marked both her rise and fall on the historical stage. After her triumph in Orleans, she soon found herself a captive of the English and on trial in an English church court, fighting this time not for her king but for her personal beliefs.

Throughout her testimony, she frequently credited her "voices" for shaping and guiding her religious convictions, thereby adding to her extraordinary and, from the perspective of the assessors at the trial, suspect character. Yet Joan and others who testified later at her rehabilitation trial also presented a more ordinary picture of a young girl who learned the Ave Maria, Credo, and Pater Noster at her mother's knee, attended mass in her parish church, and fulfilled her Lenten obligation. In this regard, her religious education mirrored that of medieval laity in general.1

1 There are three extant copies of the original Latin transcription of the French minute of the trial proceedings (known as manuscripts A, B, and C). In addition, there is a document in the municipal archives of
My essay will view this point of contact between the ordinary and extraordinary in Joan's life story through the lens of late medieval catechesis. Although the institutional church of Joan's day lacked a consistent system of lay instruction, it was by no means indifferent to the use of catechesis, despite the claims of later Protestant reformers. In fact, recent research reveals that medieval clerics pursued a variety of measures over the centuries to provide the fundamentals of the faith to the laity. The IV Lateran Council of 1215 marks the most significant and far-reaching of these efforts. Prompted by both a renewed sense of the Church's pastoral mission and the growing threat of heresy, the council required bishops to ensure that the laity received basic religious instruction in the vernacular in their parishes. It also issued a series of decrees requiring all adult Christians to attend Sunday mass in their parish church and to receive the sacraments of the Eucharist and penance at least once a year from their "own" priest. Henceforth, fulfillment of these duties was considered to be a litmus test for orthodoxy, as Joan herself was well aware.

According to some scholars, the impact of IV Lateran was nothing short of revolutionary because it placed parish


3 Scott, 67.
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Bishops responded to the council's call to action by issuing instructions for their priests on how to be good pastors; scholars and theologians wrote manuals for the same purpose. Equally significant, they also wrote books "for the sake of the simple folk." Joan of Arc's contemporary and ultimately one of her supporters, Jean Gerson (1363-1429), loomed large in this landscape. In the early fifteenth century, he produced a series of vernacular catechetical pamphlets designed to remedy what he saw to be a widespread crisis "so dangerous to souls:" clerical and lay ignorance of basic religious knowledge, which he equated in particular with the Ave Maria, Credo, Pater Noster, and Ten Commandments. Even if most medieval people, including Joan, were illiterate and thus could not read these and similar texts, the production of these manuals reflects an intensifying desire within church circles to teach the laity what to believe and how to act as "good" Catholics.

Against this backdrop, Joan of Arc was born and raised in the village of Domrémy in the diocese of Toul. Unfortunately, the paucity of fifteenth-century diocesan sources from the region makes it difficult to determine if and how the late medieval catechetical movement shaped local religious practice. One thing is certain, however: Joan certainly did not think her religious instruction was lacking. Responding to the charge that she had been taught magic and sorcery as a child, she defiantly proclaimed, "she had

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learned her Faith and been well taught and instructed as a good child should be.\textsuperscript{6} Her friends and acquaintances from Domrémy who testified at the rehabilitation trial described Joan in nearly identical terms. Concerning her upbringing and religious practices, one witness after another remembered Joan as being "well raised," "good," and "sufficiently" instructed in the Catholic faith just like other girls her age.\textsuperscript{7}

But what exactly was she taught and by whom? And was her religious instruction really no different from that of her contemporaries as she and others insisted? Joan provides only a few explicit clues to these questions in her testimony. In the first session, when asked her age, "*[s]he answered that she was nineteen or thereabouts. She also said that her mother taught her the \textit{Pater Noster}, \textit{Ave Marie}, and \textit{Credo}; and that no one else save her mother taught her her faith."\textsuperscript{8} Here she cast herself and her mother in roles long associated with the ideal of Christian motherhood. Yet the next day, she revealed that when she was thirteen her religious education took an extraordinary turn.

\textit{Asked whether she had not received the Body of Our Lord at other feasts than Easter, She answered: Go to the next question. And she said that, from the age of thirteen she received revelation from Our Lord by a voice which taught her how to behave. . . . Questioned as to what teaching this voice gave her as to the salvation of her soul, She answered that it taught her how to behave. And it said to her that she ought to go often to church.}\textsuperscript{9}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{6} Scott, 133.
\item \textsuperscript{7} Duparc, 241, 246, 248.
\item \textsuperscript{8} Scott, 65.
\item \textsuperscript{9} Ibid., 67.
\end{itemize}
Later in her testimony Joan further specified that the voice, which she identified here as the voice of Saint Michael, offered her "good counsel, comfort and sound doctrine," including the proclamation that she was a "good child, and that God would help her."10

The rehabilitation trial records also reflect the mixture of ordinary and extraordinary in Joan's religious formation. As one of her godfathers Jean Morel testified, she knew her articles of faith, Pater Noster, and Ave Maria, and went to church often.11 Other witnesses chose to highlight Joan's frequent church attendance as well, adding that she especially liked to attend mass in the parish church.12 On the one hand, they presented these details in support of their portrait of Joan as a good Catholic similar to other young girls. On the other hand, several people revealed that some of her fellow villagers mocked her for what they regarded as excessive displays of piety, including her fondness for church.13 Their testimony thus illuminates a bridge between Joan's inner spiritual life and her outward actions, between what Joan said her voice instructed her to do and what she actually did—that is "to go often to church."

Joan's actions in this regard were certainly not the only visible manifestation of her piety; the villagers of Domrémy also described her visits to the nearby church of Notre-Dame de Bermont, almsgiving, and frequent confession, among other practices. With that said, scholars have not fully considered the impact of the liturgy of the mass, especially the parish mass, on her religiosity. For example, in his study of the importance of confession in Joan's life, Henry Ansgar Kelly concludes that confession

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10 Ibid., 120-21.
11 Duparc, 241.
12 Ibid., 251, 257.
13 Ibid., 241, 263, 265, 275.
"must have been the chief way in which she acquired her knowledge of Church doctrine and spiritual formation, apart from the teachings and maxims of maternal instruction and sermons and homilies in Church."¹⁴ Although I agree with Kelly's statement, it overlooks the parish mass as an equal if not more prominent influence. Unlike confession and preaching, it was essential to the ordinary rhythm of village religious life. Furthermore, as I have already noted, Joan herself linked her religious instruction with attendance at mass. Admittedly for her this seems to have meant more than weekly worship.¹⁵ Nonetheless, because it bound the laity together as a community of believers week after week, the Sunday parish mass must be considered in any attempt to expose the roots of Joan's religious identity.

Virginia Reinburg's work on prayer in late medieval and Reformation France allows us to paint an evocative picture of parish worship at the time.¹⁶ Imagine for a moment Joan as a young girl standing at the door of her parish church in Domrémy. It is early in the morning on Sunday, and the church bell is ringing to signal that the main or "high" parish mass is about to begin. Many of her neighbors are already inside and have congregated in the nave, which is faintly illuminated by the candles on the main altar. As Joan enters, she makes the sign of the cross and gazes for a moment at the decorations adorning the

¹⁵ Duparc, 251.
church walls. At the very minimum these adornments consisted of a crucifix and a statue of the Virgin Mary, to which Joan was especially drawn according to the testimony of a local priest.\textsuperscript{17} As was the case in most medieval parish churches, there are no benches so Joan arranges herself on the floor where she will remain except at certain points in the liturgy requiring her to kneel or stand. The priest, by contrast, stands near the altar, where he performs most of the mass in Latin with his back turned to Joan and the rest of the assembly.

Even if the elevation of the consecrated host marked the climax of the mass for the laity, it was supported by a series of rites that shaped lay experience in distinctive ways. Among the defining features of the parish mass were the vernacular prayers and announcements known as the \textit{prône}. At its heart was a series of petitions, which the celebrant typically read aloud in French during the offertory service. Most often, he began with an intention ("Let us pray . . ."), followed by a specific prayer or demand. The fact that the priest recited the prayers in French while facing the congregation, a rare combination in the Catholic mass, lent the ceremony special significance for the laity. The priest would then make announcements about general parish business, ranging from upcoming events to the names of parishioners who had been subject to ecclesiastical censure. For their part, aside from their role as listeners, the laity was invited to participate in a variety of other ways, such as by praying silently after each intention or reciting the \textit{Pater} and \textit{Ave Maria} collectively after the priest had concluded the petitions.

So what does this have to do with Joan? Probably quite a lot, as L. Carolus-Barré suggested nearly fifty years ago

\textsuperscript{17} Duparc, 295.
based on his analysis of the following exchange in the trial records: "Asked if she knew whether she were in the grace of God, She answered: If I am not, may God put me there; if I am, may He keep me there." Certainly her composure in the face of such a loaded question was extraordinary; the content of her answer was not, however, for it echoed a prayer found in countless prône formulas. Although the prône was a centuries-old practice, during Joan's lifetime reformers like Gerson explicitly emphasized its importance as a forum for elemental lay instruction. Consequently, a traditional component of the liturgy assumed enhanced significance, a trend that accelerated over the next century. Therefore, if we want to understand what Joan and other girls her age knew and understood about the Catholic faith, the prône is a good place to start.

I have yet to uncover any extant prônes from the diocese of Toul in the late Middle Ages, but a published collection of medieval prône formulas reveals that their basic content remained relatively consistent across time and place. It thus seems likely that what Joan heard in her parish prône was very similar to what is included in formulas surviving from other regions of France. The collection includes three French formulas dating from the first half of the fifteenth century, all compiled for use in Paris. The fact that two of the three formulas were bound with short vernacular works on confession and the Ten Commandments points to the prône's broader catechetical

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function at the time. More telling still, one of the volumes is attributed to none other than Gerson and concludes with this note: "This treatise was compiled by the venerable seigneur Jean Gerson . . . And he sent it to the bishop of Paris in order that he ensures that it is announced by the curés in all of the parish churches in his bishopric on all Sundays and feast days of the year in place of a sermon."20

Gerson’s instructions suggest that in his quest to remedy lay ignorance, he did not expect parish priests to preach formally, but he did expect them to announce the prône. As he himself was well aware, although popular preaching was widely available in late medieval France, by and large it was an urban affair dominated by the mendicants and other orders. Even in rural areas, access to visiting mendicants or preachers from local convents eliminated both the need and expectation for preaching during church services.21 In its stead was the prône, whose repetitious, simple, and oral format was ideal for conveying basic knowledge to an uneducated audience.

When viewed in general terms, the formulas suggest that the power of the prône stemmed from both its content and the communal context of its delivery. "Let us pray to God for all the things for which our holy mother Church customarily prays," one formula begins. These "things" joined all Christians in a common quest for salvation while at the same time reminding them of the social hierarchy in which they were bound. At its apex were the Church and its ministers, followed by the king, the nobility, and special groups of people, such as pilgrims and benefactors of the parish. After praying for each in succession, parishioners

20 Molin, 391.
continued with prayers for the lay orders, including the inhabitants of the parish, and for those in a state of mortal sin or sickness, of grace or tribulation. The closing petitions linked the living to the dead with prayers for the deceased and all the souls in Purgatory.

Despite their emphasis on the existing social hierarchy, the formulas convey an overriding sense of the necessity of God's grace in all human endeavors. No one was exempt from this dependency, regardless of his or her status. From one petition to the next, parishioners ask God to grant the recipients of their prayers the grace needed to conform to their respective roles and, in doing so, to gain the joy of paradise. Within this context, the pope and his cardinals are bound to govern the church in God's honor; priests are bound to instruct and administer the sacraments to the laity; merchants and laborers are bound to work loyally and justly; pilgrims are bound to fulfill their vows; and the list continues. The range of actions asked of God in these prayers is striking—keep, give, protect, deliver, guide—as is their frequent coupling with the phrase "by his grace." Even the most vulnerable members of society, such as widows and orphans, who seemingly owed God nothing, required his intervention for the benefit and comfort of their souls. The prayers thereby project profound certainty in God's power and readiness to bestow peace, prosperity, and unity in this world and salvation in the next.

In emphasizing the links between the divine and human realms, the formulas echo Joan's testimony in significant ways. During her trial she repeatedly affirmed her allegiance to the Catholic faith and its institutions, as poignantly displayed in her professed desire to confess and go to mass. At the same time, she portrayed God as the ultimate source and judge of her actions. In her mind, there was no conflict between these two allegiances, for all
things stemmed from God and shared a common purpose: salvation. For her assessors, however, there was a clear line between the Church Militant and Church Triumphant, a point of difference that helped to set the stage for Joan's demise.\footnote{In her contribution to this session ("Who Killed Joan of Arc?"), Larissa Juliet Taylor rejects the argument that the Church Militant, as embodied in the trial and its assessors, was responsible for Joan's death. As she noted, given the confusion wrought by the only recently resolved papal schism, the meaning of the phrase was probably unclear not only to Joan, but also to the assessors themselves. Furthermore, many would-be assessors challenged the validity of the proceedings, and fled or were exiled as a result. What then should one make of the assessors' increasingly strong emphasis on the Church Militant and the need for Joan to bow to it? At the very least, the assessors sought to add more weight to their demands by placing them under the umbrella of the Church Militant, no matter how farcical this connection in reality may have been. For her part, Joan took this line of questioning very seriously and did not falter from her view that the Church Militant and Church Triumphant were one. Perhaps this helps to explain why, as revealed during the first inquiry of the trial of rehabilitation (1449), after the urging of Master Jean Delafontaine and others, Joan agreed to submit to the Church Militant, which they associated specifically with the pope and the Holy Council.} What they interpreted as Joan's obstinacy on this front may very well have been a reflection, at least in part, of the message she had imbibed week after week during the \textit{prône}.

Early in the trial proceedings, Joan set the tone for her subsequent testimony. After being pressed to tell the truth, she replied, "You may well ask me such things that as to some I shall tell the truth, as to others, not. She said further: If you are well informed about me, you would wish that I were out of your hands. I have done nothing save by revelation."\footnote{Scott, 66.} In the next session, Joan was bolder still in attributing her actions to God, proclaiming "that she came
from God, and ought not to be here; [and saying] that they should remit her into the hands of God, from Whom she came.\textsuperscript{24} God did more than guide her actions, though; in doing so he also guided her towards what she reveals to be her singular goal: salvation. As she stated several times, above all else, she asked her voices for the salvation of her soul and to bring her to Paradise, much in the same way that parishioners throughout France did every Sunday during the prône.\textsuperscript{25}

This dimension of her faith comes to the fore in her discussion of grace, as Carolus-Barré first noted so many years ago. Here she insisted that if she were not in the grace of God she could do nothing and would be "the most miserable person in the world. She said also that if she were in mortal sin, the voice would not come to her."\textsuperscript{26} In juxtaposing a state of grace and a state of mortal sin, Joan used language found in all three prône formulas. As one proclaims, "Let us pray for all those who are in a state of grace, that God may keep them there until the end," and for those in a state of mortal sin, "that God may get them out of that state speedily and quickly."\textsuperscript{27} Although Catholic theologians insisted forgiveness for mortal sin could only be gained through sacramental confession, this prayer implies that God directed the process. Joan revealed a similar mindset by insisting that her revelations, and in the end her salvation, depended upon God. Only he could determine her worthiness and keep her in a state of grace. I do not mean to imply that either Joan or prône formulas in general belittled the importance of confession and its essential agent, the priest. Yet both cast God as the ultimate

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 71.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 69, 86, 112, 124.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 73-74.
\textsuperscript{27} Molin, 389.
force investing the Church and the Christian people with grace. Thus from Joan's point of view, since her voices told her that she would be saved and the voices were from God, she believed her salvation was assured "as firmly as if she were already there."  

Joan's interrogators lost much of their power of intimidation in the face of such self-assurance. They were well aware of this quandary and, in response, clearly defined the difference between the Church Triumphant and the Church Militant, arguing that no matter how great God's glory, Joan was bound to obey his Church on earth: "she was told that there is the Church Triumphant, where are God, the saints, and the souls that are saved; and there is the Church Militant, that is to say our Holy Father the Pope . . . the cardinals, the prelates of the Church, and the clergy, and all the good Catholic Christians." They thus cast the Church in terms very close to those found in prône formulas, beginning with the pope and ending with lay Christians.

What these definitions failed to do, however, which Joan recognized immediately despite her ignorance of the terms themselves, is acknowledge the interdependency between the two. As portrayed in prône formulas, the priest and congregation were bound together in the here and now through the liturgy of the mass, particularly as they prayed together for their salvation, for the welfare of the Church.

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28 Scott, 113.
29 As Professor Jim Brink aptly noted during his commentary on my paper, Joan's self-confidence and steadiness during the trial of condemnation likely stemmed, at least in part, from her earlier experience in Poitiers, where she had been examined for approximately three weeks in 1429 by various doctors, masters, and counselors of King Charles VII to determine the validity of her calling.
30 Scott, 122.
and her people, for the fulfillment of their obligations to God and society. Perhaps subconscious memories of these prayers informed Joan's response to her assessors' insistence that she submit to their authority: "I refer in this to Our Lord Who sent me, to Our Lady and to all the blessed saints in heaven. And it is her opinion that the Church and Our Lord are one; and that they ought not to make difficulties seeing that they are one."\textsuperscript{31} When her interrogators demanded her submission once again, Joan's answer was unequivocal: "she is well aware that our Holy Father the Pope of Rome, the bishops, and other ecclesiastical persons exist to protect the Christian Faith and to punish those who fall away from it. But for herself and her deeds, she will only submit them to the Church in heaven, that is to say to God, the Virgin Mary, and the saints in heaven. And she firmly believes that she has not failed in the Christian Faith."\textsuperscript{32}

In placing her fate in God's hands, Joan exposed her absolute faith in his ability to direct her life on earth and guide her to heaven. Nothing was beyond his power, as she had learned from her voices and from the weekly liturgy of the \textit{prône}. This is not to say that one can draw a definitive line between the two; Joan's religiosity is far too complex and the available sources far too limited for such a conclusion. I would like to suggest, however, that the one clear intersection between her individuality and the liturgy—her discussion of grace—is a tangible marker of a more subtle influence, which, when combined with her intense spiritual life, created a unique personality. This may sound like a contradiction, but it is one that I think is reflected in the \textit{prône} formulas themselves. Their very context

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 132.
emphasized the necessity of the institutional church, of sacerdotal authority, of the laity's dependence upon both for salvation. Yet at the same time, in casting God in such powerful and majestic tones and investing him with the ability "by his grace" to remedy personal, social, and spiritual ills, the prône sowed the seeds for individual religious identity.