

**POPE JOAN II** by **Pat Montley**

**SYNOPSIS**

Urged by apparitions of her namesakes Saint Joan and the apocryphal 9<sup>th</sup>-century Pope Joan I, and armed with an infusion of the Life Force, Sister Joan—faster than a speeding angel, more powerful than a prayer, able to leap clerical hierarchies in a single bound—blackmails her way to becoming pope, so she can fight the never ending battle for truth, justice, gender equality, and the American way by transforming the Catholic Church into a liberal democracy and saving the world from overpopulating.

**CAST OF CHARACTERS (4 or 5 females, 1 male)**

Sister Joan—mid-40's. An efficient and creative organizer, champion of the poor and oppressed; a reluctant reformer, but once called, committed to action. She does not wear a habit or veil—which is unfortunate since she has no sense of style or concern for appearance. She wears Birkenstocks with socks.

Saint Joan—19, a coach/cheerleader with radical ideas and French charm

Sister Katherine—late 60's, Sister Joan's aunt; elected leader of America's Catholic nuns; a hopeful, determined liberal

Henry Cardinal Gardner—early 70's, an expert in moral theology, Prefect of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith; a persistent conservative

\*Pope Joan I / Joan Shakespeare, ageless, a practical (i.e., unscrupulous) 9<sup>th</sup>-century pre-cursor of Machiavelli with a sense of humor

**SETTING:**

A 10-month period in 2014. Various locations in the U.S. and the Vatican

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**Act I Scene 1:**

*The present, late night; East Coast city. A chair and small table next to it. On it: a book or two, a water bottle. SISTER JOAN is at prayer. Thich Nhat Hanh's The Energy of Prayer is open against her chest. She prays, nods off, wakes up, nods off. There is a sudden flash of bright, white light, a loud clatter. SAINT JOAN appears in full armor. SISTER JOAN wakes up.*

SISTER JOAN: Oh!

SAINT JOAN: *Bonjour, ma Soeur!* Greetings, Sister Joan.

SISTER JOAN: Omygod, you're—

SAINT JOAN: *(Removing helmet.) C'est moi! (Gesturing to her costume.)* It's over the top, I know. But it gives me cred.

SISTER JOAN: What are you doing here?

SAINT JOAN: You American sisters are in big trouble, *n'est-ce pas?*

SISTER JOAN: The bishops are ticked because we're agitating for the ordination of women. They say we're promoting "radical feminist ideas."

SAINT JOAN: The new "witches." Beware the stake.

SISTER JOAN: So you've come to warn against—

SAINT JOAN: Against giving in and giving up. There is work to be done.

SISTER JOAN: *(To herself.)* Joanie! Stop talking to yourself. *(To SAINT JOAN.)* You're just a brain fart, right? *(SAINT JOAN pinches her.)* Ouch! *(SAINT JOAN pinches her again.)* OUCH! *(SAINT JOAN moves to pinch her again but SISTER JOAN pulls away.)* OK, OK! Have you...done this before?

SAINT JOAN: I was called by Sojourner Truth, Susan B. Anthony, Margaret Sanger, Gloria Steinem—most of the famous American warrior women this side of the Middle Ages. *Et maintenant—tu!*

SISTER JOAN: I'm no Sojourner Truth.

SAINT JOAN: *Mais oui*—you are. You have been a champion of the poor and oppressed for twenty-five years.

SISTER JOAN: I'm not doing any more than—

SAINT JOAN: *Mon amie!*—you have founded a dozen good-Samaritan projects on the East Coast alone: St. Luke's Clinic in Boston, Susanna's Shelter in New York, Casa de la Esperanza in Baltimore....

SISTER JOAN: Were you...sent?

SAINT JOAN: Called. By you.

SISTER JOAN: So you weren't sent by God?

SAINT JOAN: I am going over God's head. Or rather, you are—by calling me. Do you want to talk about that? Having a *petite* crisis, eh?

SISTER JOAN: Well...my, uh, faith is...going through...an adjustment.

SAINT JOAN: What exactly is being tweaked?

SISTER JOAN: My definition of...the divine.

SAINT JOAN: Which is...?

SISTER JOAN: Bigger.

SAINT JOAN: Bigger than the creator-ruler of the universe?

SISTER JOAN: Bigger than the deity-person we have created in our own image and then super-sized.

SAINT JOAN: So not a personal god?

SISTER JOAN: Just now—though I'm still evolving—I'm taken with Einstein's idea that—

SAINT JOAN: —that G equals more than mankind squared?

SISTER JOAN: —that the religion of the future will have to be a cosmic religion, transcending any personal god and avoiding dogma.

SAINT JOAN: *Mon Dieu!* Then why have you stuck with a religion that embraces a personal god and wallows in dogma?

SISTER JOAN: Because I don't think it matters what we believe—only how we behave. And my church supports the behaviors that express my belief: that we must take care of one another.

SAINT JOAN: But don't all religions support that? Why not find a more compatible one? Or free-lance?

SISTER JOAN: Catholic Charities is a huge global relief system already in place. Besides, my sisters sustain me. It's my tribe.

SAINT JOAN: Do you still go to mass?

SISTER JOAN: Of course. It's a celebration of one of the world's greatest social workers.

SAINT JOAN: And you pray?

SISTER JOAN: I send loving kindness to all beings—like the Buddhists.

SAINT JOAN: In my day they would have called all this heresy—and lit the fire.

SISTER JOAN: Happily I live in a more enlightened Church.

SAINT JOAN: *Pas du tout!* The cathedrals of Europe are empty—and the U.S. following suit. The Church is hemorrhaging—and for good reason. It's downright embarrassing, Joan. People are fed up with a pampered, medieval hierarchy out of touch with the modern world, with archaic dogma and the self-righteous claim to infallibility, with a male, celibate clergy telling them how to behave in their bedrooms. Who cares about any of that? There are more pressing problems: Rome fiddles while the world burns! The fiery apocalypse has begun—and humans are responsible. Global warming—fueled by overpopulation!

SISTER JOAN: (*Shaken, eager to help.*) Tell me what to do!

SAINT JOAN: Be an agent of change. Save the Church! Save the world!

SISTER JOAN: How?

SAINT JOAN: We need a new pope.

SISTER JOAN: We have a new pope. And he's—

SAINT JOAN: Cleaning up the Vatican Bank? Discarding some papal pomp? Nagging the capitalists? Jumping onto the environmental bandwagon? *Oui, oui*. But he's merely the voice crying in the wilderness... preparing the way.

SISTER JOAN: The way for—?

SAINT JOAN: The next pope.

SISTER JOAN: But how will any pope solve these problems?

SAINT JOAN: How would you?

SISTER JOAN: Well...maybe start with changing the way the Church is run? Give the people more power?

SAINT JOAN: *C'est bien!* Go on...

SISTER JOAN: Hmm...at the base of most overpopulation is poverty. And...the way out of poverty is... education.

SAINT JOAN: Education and...? (*SISTER JOAN knows the answer, but is reluctant.*) Go ahead, say it—there is no one here but us.

SISTER JOAN: Contraception?

SAINT JOAN: So we are right on mission—for the Education part!

SISTER JOAN: If only we could replicate world-wide the parochial school system that educated millions of American children.

SAINT JOAN: The Church has long tentacles.

SISTER JOAN: You think a pope could get people to have a smaller carbon footprint?

SAINT JOAN: And...fewer feet.

SISTER JOAN: Population control will be a hard sell. The conservatives have had their way in the Church for fifty years.

SAINT JOAN: More like fifteen hundred. (*SISTER JOAN shrugs agreement.*) “Family planning” has a more inviting ring. And anyway, Church teaching just needs to catch up with practice. Over eighty percent of Catholic women in the West already use contraception.

SISTER JOAN: Yeah, but not in Africa and South America.

SAINT JOAN: With development, the third world will follow the first. But there isn't time to

wait! The world population has almost quadrupled in just the last hundred years. Soon—very soon—there won't be enough food or water or clean air. Just think what a progressive pope could achieve.

SISTER JOAN: But where would the money come from to—?

SAINT JOAN: What if the Vatican sold its buildings: St. Peter's, the Papal Palace? Or think what the Museum's artwork alone would bring: the Caravaggio, the DaVinci, the Raphaels. And what if all the cardinals and bishops the world over lived like...well—

SISTER JOAN: Like nuns?

SAINT JOAN: (*Points a "you-got-it!" at her.*) We could use the money to finance massive sex education. Condoms for every community. A Rubber Revolution!

SISTER JOAN: Wait! What are you saying? This is absurd. Now I see why saints are always accused of having their heads in the clouds.

SAINT JOAN: And I'm telling you: the view from the clouds is terrifying. Time is running out. The Church—the World—needs to be saved. And you are just the one to do it.

SISTER JOAN: Me?!

SAINT JOAN: You will be the next pope.

SISTER JOAN: I don't think I'd make a convincing cross-dresser.

SAINT JOAN: *Non, non*, none of that nonsense. Didn't work the last time.

SISTER JOAN: What then?

SAINT JOAN: Start with the red hat. There is precedent for lay cardinals... generally someone who...has given a lifetime of service.

SISTER JOAN: But I'm only forty-f—

SAINT JOAN: And have already given a lifetime of service to the poor.

SISTER JOAN: No more than my sisters.

SAINT JOAN: *C'est pas vrai!*—You are the Queen of Band-Aid Services. You provide the Church with its most effective PR. How could you not qualify?

SISTER JOAN: I'm not good enough.

SAINT JOAN: Your sisters would not agree

SISTER JOAN: I'm critical and impatient and demanding and—

SAINT JOAN: —generous and tireless and determined.

SISTER JOAN: The pope has to be a priest.

SAINT JOAN: (*Waving away this obstacle.*) A simple dispensation....

SISTER JOAN: Why don't you ask Sister Katherine? She's much better qualified.

SAINT JOAN: She's an academic. We want a social worker. People listen to someone with experience in the trenches.

SISTER JOAN: No, no, no. I must be dreaming. Time to wake up! (*Slapping herself.*) Wake up, Joanie! (*Indicating SAINT JOAN.*) This is what I get for eating curried tofu and double chocolate brownies at bedtime. (*Collapses onto her knees in repentance.*) But it was so late and I was so hungry. You see how weak-willed I am. This is all too preposterous. You are not real. Are you?

SAINT JOAN: *Certainement.*

SISTER JOAN: Prove it.

SAINT JOAN: What would you like?

SISTER JOAN: A burning bush would do.

SAINT JOAN: I would rather not...play with fire. But I could give you water. (*Snaps her fingers. Sound of an ear-piercing clap of thunder, a downpour, a flash of lightning.*)

SISTER JOAN: What if it was going to storm anyway?

SAINT JOAN: (*A gimme-a-break look. Then...*) Hand me that water bottle. (*SISTER JOAN hands it to her. SAINT JOAN shakes it, then returns it. SISTER JOAN takes a sip, reacts positively, then takes another sip, smiles approvingly.*) *Château Lafite, 1787.*

SISTER JOAN: Look, this is all very...flattering. But I can't be pope. I mean...I don't have time to be pope. And I don't want to be pope.

SAINT JOAN: Don't be selfish, Sister Joan. You know you live to benefit others.

SISTER JOAN: But I don't feel called to be pope.

SAINT JOAN: (*Indicating herself and the situation.*) What do you think this is?

SISTER JOAN: I respectfully reject your offer: I am unfit for such a mission.

SAINT JOAN: *Au contraire, Ma Soeur.* You will be imbued by the Life Force to be the Superwoman!

SISTER JOAN: The who?

SAINT JOAN: George Bernard Shaw's idea.

SISTER JOAN: The playwright?

SAINT JOAN: And prophet...who, like you, “adjusted” the definition of the divine. He believed the Life Force is an impersonal but creative Will that directs all living things to higher forms. The Superwoman is an advanced human being, a contemplative spirit, who tries to raise all humanity to her level.

SISTER JOAN: Oh, I am so not what you’re looking for.

SAINT JOAN: You are *exactement* what the world needs at this critical crossroads. And it’s good you have no delusions about yourself. This will enable you to accomplish what fuzzy-headed idealists could not. Don’t you see? You have the two criteria: willingness to serve a Higher Force and heroic energy.

SISTER JOAN: (*Sitting back on her heels.*) I’m not feeling very energetic right now.

SAINT JOAN: Embrace your Destiny and your energy will surge. Your free spirit will rise above conventional morality, put on the helmet of urgency, the armor of renewal, and do what is necessary.

SISTER JOAN: What might that be?

SAINT JOAN: We don’t know yet. But I’m sure you will be up to the task.

SISTER JOAN: How can you be sure?

SAINT JOAN: The Life Force has chosen you—to be used for a mighty purpose. (*Formally, Angel Gabriel to Mary.*) Hail, Sister Joan, blessed art thou among women!

SISTER JOAN: (*Jumping up.*) Stop it!

SAINT JOAN: You’ve got the mission. You’ve got the caring heart. (*Beat.*) You’ve got the connections.

SISTER JOAN: What connections could I possibly have?

SAINT JOAN: Ask. Your. Mother.

SISTER JOAN: My mother? What are you talking about? She and Dad haven’t left their farm in Dubuque for twenty years.

SAINT JOAN: Joan, Joan, Joan.... There are stories to be told.

SISTER JOAN: And believe me, I’ve heard them all.

SAINT JOAN: Not. Quite. All.

SISTER JOAN: What do you mean?

SAINT JOAN: Your mother is a woman who understands Destiny. She was once a “free

spirit.”

SISTER JOAN: My mother?

SAINT JOAN: Wasn't always your mother.

SISTER JOAN: Even so. I expect she won't be too keen on my “rising above conventional morality.”

SAINT JOAN: You may be surprised. *(Puts a hand on SISTER JOAN's shoulder, gently pushing her to a kneeling position.)* And now...prepare to receive the Life Force! *(Draws her sword.)*

SISTER JOAN: *(Attempting to shield herself.)* Wait! You can't just...I'm not the one you wa— *(SAINT JOAN touches SISTER JOAN's shoulder with her sword.)* Noooooooooooooo!!

*(There is a sudden flash of bright fireworks. SISTER JOAN collapses. A loud clatter of armor. Blackout. Music: recording of Joan Baez singing “We Shall Overcome” carries over to next scene.)*