

Saint Joan the Two-Headed Llama
Tom Howard

This testimony is not part of the official record utilized in the beatification and subsequent canonization of Saint Joan nor was it released to the advocatus diaboli, the devil's advocate. Due to the youthfulness of the witness, the length of time between the events and the recording of the testimony, and the lack of collaborative witness accounts, it has been deemed of limited and dubious value. Saint Joan died in 1945 and yet served her little parish for the twenty years afterwards, truly a miracle by any definition.

Pope Mark Zebralius II, Papal Archives, Vatican
City, 1965, Permanently Sealed

Retrieved by Omar the All-Seeing under the
Religious Freedom of Information Act, 1990.

My name is Jose Arguedas, and I am a dock worker in Puerto Callamos, Peru. I am originally from San Joye de Uzuna, a small mountain village not far from here. Families in our little town worked from sunup to sundown to grow what little they could while keeping a watchful eye on their herds of llamas and alpacas. Our town had no school or running water, but like all good Christian towns it had a chapel. The village was too poor and too small to afford a full-time priest so we shared a traveling clergyman and were blessed with the teachings and wisdom of Sister Joan, a nun from America who lived in our village. She had a small room off the chapel and was a teacher, healer, friend, and eventually the savior of our village. Sister Joan taught religious lessons, helped us through mumps and measles, and watched over her flock between Father Anthony's irregular visits. She spoke Spanish better than my grandfather and was the first

to offer help where it was needed. Everyone in our little village was very proud of our nun in residence, even if she looked...unusual.

The good sister was called Sister Joan the Two-Headed Llama outside our village, but any grandmother in town would have slapped one of us if we'd said it. But it was true, Sister Joan had two llama heads. Instead of one regular human head, she had two average-sized animal heads. Two graceful necks held furry faces with the dark coloring of a fine llama. Her eyelashes were long by human standards, and everyone wondered – silently, of course – if she would spit if she was startled or angry. Fortunately, Sister Joan had never been seen to be either. She obviously had two separate brains with two functional voice boxes. Her right head was pious and pleasant, and apparently the dominant one. Her left head, however, had been heard to swear unexpectedly on rare occasions when she spoke.

Like Paulo with his peg leg or Maria with the birthmark on her face shaped like a giant hand, we didn't notice that Sister Joan didn't look like the rest of us. She was just someone who helped the midwife with Maria's sixth child or said a few words over my grandpapa Ferdinand when he passed away. If one of the women threw her husband out for the night for drinking too much, Sister Joan always had a blanket and an admonition for him in the chapel. No one could remember exactly when Sister Joan had arrived, or why she left America, but she was an important member of our community.

Life was hard but mostly uneventful in San Joye...until the arrival of Generalissimo Franco and his men. Like everyone in the sleepy village, my father the mayor did not pay close attention to the political unrest in the lowlands of the surrounding countries, and he and the village were surprised when the generalissimo and his rowdy men rode their horses up the rough wagon road into town. My papa was even more surprised when the fat man commandeered our house in the

name of “public safety.” My father was only the mayor because he had the largest house, the most llamas, and the most sons – eight, of which I was the youngest. The strangers’ big guns and confident swaggers got them the food and services they demanded.

My father, after quickly moving us into my aunt’s house, took me and my mother to Sister Joan for guidance. As he entered the chapel, he called out for her, and we were not surprised to find her, broom in hand, sweeping the stairs to the second-story bell tower. He genuflected before the cross and – when she joined us – rapidly told her the recent troubles in the town.

Sister Joan’s more pious head spoke quickly as if cutting off the head that swore. “Dom Pedro,” she said with her warm and gentle voice. “This is alarming. Have they harmed anyone?” When he shook his head, she continued. “Then perhaps they are like summer ticks on one of your animals, and they will drop off when bloated.”

Father wrung his hat. “You know our village has not much blood in the best of times, Sister. They must go. We have no police. What will we do? They are former military men, a dozen at least.”

Sister Joan’s heads looked sympathetic. “Send word to the authorities,” she advised, “and wait to see what God would have us do.”

I heard her left head snort and it looked at the right head sharply. Father bowed and thanked her, hoping aloud that the bossy man and his entourage would soon see how poor the village was and leave. Mother and I exchanged worried glances. What could we do? We had no guns, no way to get to the authorities quickly – even if they would come to our remote village.

In the passing days, it was obvious that the greedy generalissimo was settling in for a long stay. Rumors ran rampant about the uncouth manners of the soldiers – some housed with locals

expected to feed and take care of them, although they did nothing besides drink and shoot things outside our former home.

I was drafted, along with my brothers still living at home, into being an occasional errand boy and unpaid servant. I was frightened by the things I heard and saw. When I told my father, we visited the chapel again. “They are bottomless ticks, Sister,” he complained.

My mother was more strident. “And we fear for the daughters in the village, Sister Joan. Already these men look at the women like they are pots of honey. Is there nothing the Church can do?”

Both heads of Sister Joan looked anxious. Obviously, the generalissimo was not interested in a brief visit. Most likely he was running from a failed coup attempt and had determined San Joye was ripe for the picking.

Sister Joan dusted off her robes and nodded. “I will visit the general and remind him of his Christian duties.”

Both my parents looked as alarmed as I felt. “But, Sister,” said my father. “They have many guns and obviously no love for the Church.”

“And you are only one person,” said my mother. “We will send to Matarani for real soldiers to help us.”

“Do that,” agreed the sister. “But I would still like to meet this man.” She smiled at them. “Go now and let me visit our bloated tick.”

As we hurried out the chapel door, I heard arguing behind us.

The next day, I was mopping the generalissimo’s office – my father’s former den – when Sister Joan made her dramatic appearance. The big man, obviously amused to be speaking to a mutant woman with two llama heads in a town surrounded by pens of llamas, smiled and wiped

his brow with a dirty handkerchief. Sister Joan – the symbol of dignity and propriety – stood patiently, waiting for the appraising stares of the sweaty general and his men to end. She knew they'd joke about her possible parentage, but she wasn't there to react to ridicule – she was determining how much trouble San Joye de Uzuna was in.

“You wanted to see me, Sister?” he asked, chomping a cheap cigar and saying her title as if it was a dirty word.

“Yes, General,” she said calmly, although if you knew the signs, you could see her left head was glowering silently. “I'd like to invite you to Sunday mass at the chapel.”

He sat back in his chair, causing it to complain loudly, and laughed long and deep. His men joined him with insincere familiarity. “Thank you, Sister Llama,” he said. “My men and I were just debating on what to do with the chapel now that we have liberated your village from the aggressors. This rat hole of a house is too small for a man of my position, don't you think?”

“What aggressors?” she asked. “The chapel belongs to the Church, not to the town. And where would the people go for solace and guidance?”

He laughed again. “Well, to me, of course.” Unbelievably he stared openly at Sister Joan's attire, obviously wondering how much of her was llama beneath her robes. “I think you've given them enough solace for a while, Sister. Tell me, were you always a bride of the Church?”

“No,” she said. “We...I was trained as a pharmacist.”

“In America?” he asked, licking his lips. “From a rich family?”

“I have no family except the Church, General.” She changed the subject. “You've been here long enough to know our village has very little to spare. Perhaps if you and your men are willing to help the villagers in the fields—”

The angry generalissimo jumped to his feet, his face red. He placed his hands dangerously on the pair of pistols that hung on his hips. “Do we look like farmers to you, Sister?” he bellowed.

“No, sir. The Church doesn’t allow me to tell you what you look like.” She spun around, gathered her black skirts, and departed before the fat man could react. I received a beating for the bucket of water I “accidentally” tipped over his polished boots as he started after her. And I had to polish the boots again.

That night at the secret meeting held in the chapel, I had to stand the entire time because my back was too sore to lean back against a pew.

There were almost as many of us at that meeting as there had been at Sunday service. My mother had the forethought to remind everyone to bring blankets to cover the windows, and Sister Joan lit a few candles. Fortunately, Generalissimo Franco and his men had discovered Senor Blanco’s mash barrels full and fermenting in a small canyon nearby and were currently liberating them by the tankard.

My father and other members of the village had had enough, but Sister Joan tried her best to calm everyone. “We cannot become animals like them,” she insisted. “This too shall pass.”

“Not before they eat all our food,” said one of my older brothers. “And leave us to starve this winter. Already they have killed three of my llamas for sport. When I complained, they said it was either the llamas or me.”

“I have a big knife,” said Senor Blanco, personally offended that they were drinking his beer. “Pitchforks, shovels, stones. We’ll wait until they’re all passed out and kill the bastards!”

A cheer threatened to spread through the room, and Sister Joan quickly motioned for caution and silence. “They leave armed watchers who aren’t drinking to guard the ones who are.

General Franco is smart. He won't hesitate to kill every man, woman, and child in San Joye if he feels he's threatened."

As Sister Joan talked, her silent left head stared at me across the room. I grew increasingly uncomfortable, but the sister pointed at the pew she was standing near and nodded. The right head of Sister Joan was gradually convincing the rest of the village to wait. They had sent word to the church and the authorities. We just had to hold out until help arrived.

Grumbling, our families slipped out in small groups, disappointed that bloodshed – especially someone else's – had not been the result of the meeting. I said good-night to Sister Joan and passed the pew she had been standing near. When her back was turned to hug my mother, I picked up the small bottle sitting there.

"What is it?" asked one of my brothers when we got home. The small glass vial was clearly etched with skull and crossbones.

"It's a gift from Sister Joan to Generalissimo Porko," I said, and we smiled for the first time since our "protectors" had arrived.

It would have worked had I been able to get the entire bottle of poison into his tea the next day. Jorge, the largest of the guards, came early to pick up the tray before I had time to empty all Sister Joan's gift into the teacup. Only one of my brothers, carefully keeping a lookout at the end of the hall, prevented me from getting caught red-handed. As it was, Jorge gave me a long look as I busily mopped around the table holding the tray.

I've seen men drunk, and I've seen men near to death with the fever, but I've never seen anyone afflicted like the generalissimo. He sang, he took off his clothes, he shot out the windows in his office. He cried, he laughed, he screamed at wind-up cockroaches living inside his head. Three of the guards had to sit on him to get the knife away when he tried to cut them out.

Then, he got really sick. Everywhere. He messed himself and the floors and walls. Three chamber pots couldn't hold everything that came out of that man. But the bastard survived.

With swollen pig eyes and a blanket over his clammy rolls of fat, he ordered the servants locked upstairs. Sister Joan had been right – he was smart. And vindictive. It didn't take Jorge long to remember he'd seen me by the tea tray, and the generalissimo ordered me searched. I'm not smart; I still had the half-empty bottle on me.

I wasn't frightened when the intended murder victim – still coughing up bile and staying within sprinting distance of the chamber pot – ordered me shot by a firing squad at dusk. I was angry that I'd failed my family and my village. I was ten years old, sentencing me to death was as unbelievable as giving me a train ticket to the moon.

I was tied, kicked, and thrown into a befouled corner where the generalissimo could keep an eye on me. My despair worsened when Sister Joan forced her way through the guards and stood before the angry officer.

“What happened here?” she demanded. Before he could answer or order her thrown out, she noticed me. “What have you done to that child?”

He pulled the vial out of a drawer and placed it between his pistols on his desk. “He tried to poison me.”

She approached, ignoring the armed men in the room, and carefully picked up the bottle. Even stoppered, she identified the faint acidic smell. “That's Lysergsäure-diethylamid, a powerful hallucinogenic called LSD,” she said. “Where did you get it?”

The big man's voice was deadly cold. “The question is where did he get it?”

We all saw the quick look that passed between the two llama heads. Sister Joan on the right looked at her suddenly sheepish sister. Sister Joan placed the vial back on the desk and stood tall. “I confess. I did it. I forced the boy to poison you.”

Generalissimo Franco stood, his anger giving him renewed energy. “You lie, Sister! I know your religion prevents you from killing anyone. Even someone like me. You’d say anything to save this boy and the villagers who concocted this poison.”

Suddenly, he picked up one of his pistols and offered it to her. She took it in her right hand, looking confused.

“Go ahead, Sister,” he said. “Shoot me. Kill the spawn of Satan himself. Go ahead, it’s loaded.”

She grimaced and he sneered. “See? Even to defend yourself, you can’t kill me or you’ll go straight to hell.” He picked up the remaining pistol and pointed it at her. “Your stinking vows make you weak.”

Sister Joan opened her mouth to speak, but the generalissimo abruptly pulled the trigger, sending the bullet through her mouth and out the back of her head. I screamed in horror and fought pointlessly against my ropes. The guards, some of them splattered with brains and blood, stood frozen in shock. Several crossed themselves, not sure Sister Joan’s deity was as powerless as their leader insisted.

I watched as the generalissimo slowly realized what he had done. Sister Joan’s head flopped over – one of them anyway – and blood splashed freely onto the floor. I was crying.

But Sister Joan didn’t fall. She took one step to steady herself and reached with her left hand for the gun still clutched in her right. She brought it up slowly and fired one perfect shot between the generalissimo’s bulging eyes.

“Actually, General,” she said as he fell forward backward into his chair, “only one of us took vows.”

She turned the gun on the nearest guard. “You! Untie the boy. The rest of you put down your guns and get out.”

Afterwards was a blur. I used my former bindings to apply a tourniquet to Sister Joan’s neck and sent one of my brothers for the midwife to see what she could do. We buried the head of Sister Joan the day after the soldiers limped out of town after keeping their weapons, horses, and boots. We never saw them again. The remaining Sister Joan, looking awkward with only one head and a bandaged stump, gave a wonderful memorial service although, as I recall, it was a bit more colorful than we were used to.

THE END