



SECULAR FRANCISCANS: COMMITTED TO PEACE AND JUSTICE

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BLESSED FRANZ JAGERSTATTER, SECULAR FRANCISCAN, MARTYR

Born on May 20, 1907, Franz was the illegitimate son of two young servants who could not afford to marry. The father supported Franz's mother, but was killed in WWI. Sometime later Franz' mother married a farmer with the name Jagerstatter, who adopted Franz. He grew up in the small Austrian village of St. Radegund.

During his adolescence and early adulthood, Franz was given to wildness and rebelliousness. He was a member of a "gang" who drank heavily and fought with rival gangs from other villages. Franz was a natural leader even then. In some ways his youth resembles that of St. Francis.

He experienced a religious conversion in 1934 while working in the Stienmark iron mines. Franz attended Mass frequently and found himself drawn to deep prayer and reading of scripture. Returning to St. Radegund, the villagers who had known him during his wild days were astonished at his conversion.

In 1936 Franz married a prayerful and devout woman named Franziska. He had three daughters with her, Maria, Aliosa and Rosalia. Soon after his marriage he became a member of the Third Order of St. Francis, and was an active participant in the village parish, working as a church sexton whenever he was not farming the family fields. His daily life included fasting until noon each day, celebrating Eucharist; and although he and his wife were not well to do, he gave generously to the poor. He began to earn a reputation as a fanatic. The villagers who had denounced his wild youth now denounced his conversion to Gospel living. Again you could draw a parallel with the life of Francis.

In 1938, when the German annexation of Austria commenced, Jagerstatter openly opposed the takeover and the ideology of National Socialism, which he described as a "shining train going to hell." And his conscience told him it was impossible for one to be allegiant to the Nazi Party and a faithful Catholic Christian at the same time. Following the annexation, which he was the sole dissenting vote in his village, Franz openly denounced Adolph Hitler and even refused Nazi government cash allotments offered to each family. When a severe hailstorm destroyed most of his crops, he would not accept their emergency subsidies.

Franz was drafted in 1940 and reported for six months training in the motor corps. He returned home vowing to refuse military conscription in the future. He sought advice of family, friends, a priest and a bishop. They all advised him to join the military when called because his family needed him and to refuse meant execution. Against all that advise Franz became a conscientious objector. He said he would rather his children have a father martyred for following Christ than a Nazi for a father.

On March 1, 1943, Franz presented himself to the military and stated that under no circumstances would he fight and kill. He offered to serve as a medical orderly as a work of mercy, but refused to advance the Nazi cause in the war. He was imprisoned in Linz, Austria, before being transferred to Berlin, where he stood trial on July 6, 1943, and was sentenced to death for sedition. The courts never responded to his offer to work as a medic.

On August 9, 1943, a year to the day that St. Edith Stein was gassed at Auschwitz, Franz was taken to Nazi Brandenburg-Havel facility, and at four o'clock in the afternoon, he was beheaded lying on his back facing the guillotine. He had written that he "could change nothing in world affairs" but that at the very least he might "be a sign that not everyone let themselves be carried away with the tides."

REFLECTION

Franz Jagerstatter is a model for all Franciscans, secular and vowed religious, that conscience formed in scripture and strengthened by the sacraments holds sway over orders from earthly kingdoms. Franz wrote from prison, “These few words are being set down here as they come from my mind and my heart. And if I must write them with my hands in chains, I find that much better than if my will were in chains.” Later he wrote, “Just as a man who thinks only of this world does everything possible to make life here easier and better, so must we, too, who believe in the eternal Kingdom, risk everything in order to receive a great reward there. Our struggle is for the eternal Kingdom...we need no rifles or pistols for our battle, but, instead, spiritual weapons—and foremost among them is prayer. For prayer, as St. Clare says, is the shield, which the flaming arrows of the Evil One cannot pierce...”

Fr. Jochmann, the prison chaplain stated, “To the end of his days Franz’ eyes shone with joy and confidence, his face full of peace.” He later told some Austrian nuns, “The military beheaded a great man today. He lived as a saint and has now died a hero. I feel with certainty that this simple man is the only saint that I have ever met in my lifetime.”

A few kilometers north of St. Radegund is the birthplace of Adolph Hitler. Somewhat further on lies Linz, the provincial capital and childhood home of Adolph Eichmann. Is it coincidence which finds these three men native to the same general locality: one, the dictator who terrorized the civilized world and was responsible for the genocide of millions of human beings in extermination camps and wars; one, his willing servant and collaborator in the infamous Final Solution; the third, a simple peasant armed with nothing more than the vision of a shining train and an unshakeable faith in the weapons of the Spirit who chose death rather than play “their crooked game.”

They are all dead now, but it is the peasant whose witness lives on as a source of inspiration to others who find themselves facing situations with even greater potential for evil—including the possible annihilation of the world itself. There are no memorials to Hitler or Eichmann, but the tiny church of St. Radegund, where Franz’s ashes are buried, has become a place of pilgrimage. Once more this August the pilgrims will again make their walk to St. Radegund, because martyrs live, while dictators die.

ACTION

October 26, 2007 in Linz, Austria, the Church will beatify Franz Jagerstatter. This process is not for Franz, who is alive with God and has no need for our recognition, it is for us. We need him as an example of a Secular Franciscan Catholic who we can pray to for guidance in matters of conscience. Hitler was only able to oversee the holocaust because ordinary people, most of whom were Christian, obeyed Hitler rather than God. The witness of Franz Jagerstatter reminds us of our duty of noncooperation with evil, and the crucial role that conscientious objection plays in the lives of the faithful. This is one more indication that peacemaking is no marginal vocation for Catholics, especially Franciscan Catholics.

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, you filled your servant Franz Jagerstatter with a deep love for you, his family and all people. During a time of contempt for God and humankind you bestowed on him unerring discernment and integrity. In faith, he followed his conscience, and said a decisive **NO** to National Socialism and unjust war. Thus he sacrificed his life. We pray that you may glorify your servant Franz, so that many people may be encouraged by him to grow in love for you and all people. May his example shine out in our time, and may you grant all people the strength to stand up for justice, peace and human dignity. For yours is the glory and honor with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.

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