

Franz Jaegerstaetter's Refusal

The poet Edna St. Vincent Millay wrote, "I shall die, but that is all I shall do for death." Franz Jaegerstaetter lived those words. Instead of capitulating to the forces of death, he pledged allegiance to the God of life.

On August 8th, 1943, the night before he was beheaded for refusing to fight for Hitler's army, Franz Jaegerstaetter sat in a Berlin prison cell, deep in intimate prayer with God. On a table in front of him lay a piece of paper, promising to serve the Nazis. All he had to do was sign his name and the Nazis would let him live.

It was a simple choice. His guards encouraged him to sign the paper. His parish priest and bishop prayed for him to sign it and save himself. His wife and three little girls begged him to give up his stand against imperial violence so that he could come home.

But no. He had made his choice. He would not fight. He would not kill. He would not support Hitler's war.

He would be faithful to the nonviolent Christ.

And so he sat there, hours before his execution, motionless, deep in prayer, not crying out, not panicking, not overcome with fear. Franz was at peace. He was one with the God of nonviolence.

The chaplain who visited him in prison that night said that his eyes shone with "a joy and a confidence" that the chaplain would never forget. When the chaplain asked Franz to sign the paper, Franz smiled and gently declined. "I am completely bound in inner union with the Lord," he told him. After the execution, the chaplain declared that Franz "lived as a saint and died a hero. I say with certainty that this simple man is the only saint that I have ever met in my lifetime."

Franz's refusal to kill or to be complicit in the systemic killing of the military, his fidelity to Christ, ranks him among the great saints and martyrs of Christianity. He would not kill or support Hitler's war even if everyone in Austria, everyone in Europe, indeed, everyone in the world supported it. Many thought it would be better if Franz compromised, at least for the sake of the children. But Franz possessed, like Jesus, a stubborn devotion to the truth of nonviolence. No compromises, no concessions, no exceptions, no deals with death--and especially for the sake of the children.

Franz was 37 years old when he was beheaded in the Berlin-Brandenburg prison on August 9th, 1943. Born May 20, 1907 in St. Radegund, Franz ran wild as a young man, but then, around the time of his marriage to his wife Franziska, began to take his faith in Jesus seriously. He started to attend daily Mass. He became a person of prayer. In addition to running the family farm, he began work at the local parish church. Though his family was poor, he regularly distributed food to other families.

When Hitler's troops moved into Austria in 1938, Franz was the only person in his hometown of St. Radegund to vote against the *Anschluss*, the union of fascist Germany to Austria. He publicly declared that he would not fight in Hitler's war.

Franz spoke out against Nazi militarism, and specifically criticized the church for supporting the Nazis. In February, 1943, he was called to active duty and despite the urgings of his friends, wife, mother, children, priest and bishop, he refused to join.

On March 1, 1943, he wrote to Franziska, "Today I am going to take the difficult step." His formal refusal to join the Nazi army resulted in immediate imprisonment, eventual trial and execution. In the months before his execution, he was allowed only one visit with his wife. In his letters to her, he constantly thanked her for her love, begged forgiveness for the suffering he caused, and focused on God's love. A few hours before his death, he wrote her:

If I did not have faith in God's mercy, that God would forgive me all my sins, I could scarcely have endured life in a lonely prison with such calm. Moreover, though people charge me with a crime and have condemned me to death as a criminal, I take comfort in the knowledge that not everything which this world considers a crime is a crime in the eyes of God. I have hope that I need not fear the eternal Judge....If a person were to possess all the wisdom of the world and call half the earth their own, they still could not and would not be as happy as one of those who can still call virtually nothing in this world their own except their faith. I would not exchange my lonely cell for the most magnificent royal palace. No matter how great and how beautiful it might be, it will pass away, but God's word remains for eternity....I thank our dear Jesus that I am privileged to suffer and even die for Him. I trust that, in God's unending mercy, God has forgiven me everything and will not abandon me in the last hour....The heart of Jesus, the heart of Mary and my heart are one, united for time and eternity.

Franz had come to Gandhi's conclusion, that non-cooperation with evil is as much a duty as cooperation with good. "As a Christian, I prefer to do my fighting with the Word of God and not with arms," Franz wrote. "We need no rifles or pistols for our battle, but instead spiritual weapons--and the foremost among these is prayer."

"It is still possible for us, even today, to lift ourselves, with God's help, out of the mire in which we are stuck and win eternal happiness--if only we make a sincere effort and bring all our strength to the task," Franz wrote. "It is never too late to save ourselves and perhaps some other soul for Christ."

With his willingness to lay down his life for Christ's reign of peace, Franz fulfilled the Christian vocation of nonviolence. He refused to give into the world's violence. "I definitely prefer to relinquish my rights under the Third Reich and thus make sure of deserving the rights granted under the reign of God," he wrote. "Just as the one 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 reign, risk everything in order to receive a great reward there."

The scene in the cell haunts me. Who among us would have the strength not to sign the paper and be reunited with our spouse and children? Who among us could resist military madness unto death? Who among us is so dedicated to the nonviolent Jesus? The witness of Franz Jaegerstaetter stands as a sign and example for us all. He points the way for a Christian response to violent domination: refuse to fight,

refuse to kill, refuse to be complicit in warmaking, refuse to compromise--and resist the structures of violence with all the nonviolence of your soul.

Indeed, Franz offers a new image of sanctity in our nuclear age: steadfast nonviolence. From now on, saints are those who uphold the radical nonviolence of Jesus, who exude the dangerous holiness that subverts the status quo of institutionalized violence and militarism through the grace of transforming love.

At key moments in my life--praying in the Jesuit novitiate in 1982, working in a New York City homeless shelter in 1984, working in a Salvadoran refugee camp in 1985, living in Guatemala in 1992, sitting in jail in 1994 for a Plowshares disarmament action, I have returned to Franz's life (and Gordon Zahn's excellent biography, *In Solitary Witness*) as a source of strength. Franz teaches me how to follow Jesus in these violent times. His life and death epitomize the good news: no more killing, no more war, no more violence, no more executions, no more just war theory, no more sexism, no more racism, no more destruction of the planet, no more terrorism, no more bombs, no more landmines, no more abortions, no more poverty, no more hunger, no more homelessness, no more fear, no more hatred, no more injustice, no more nuclear weapons.

His parting advice is simple: "Stay at peace, love one another, and be quick to forgive. Let us love our enemies, bless those who curse us, and pray for those who persecute us. For love will conquer and will endure for all eternity. And happy are they who live and die in God's love."

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September, 1997. I set off alone for a one month tour through Europe on my way to Northern Ireland for my sabbatical year. In London, I visited Kingsley Hall, founded by Muriel Lester, where Gandhi stayed for three months in 1931. In Paris, I visited the Cathedral of Sacre Coeur where St. Ignatius and his friends professed their first vows as Jesuits. In Lourdes, I was dunked in the shocking cold waters as I prayed for healing. In Barcelona, I traveled out to Montserrat and Manresa, where St. Ignatius lived in a cave for a year and first experienced the "Spiritual Exercises." In La Verna, I climbed the mountaintop where Francis received the stigmata, shortly before his death. In Assisi, I prayed at the grave of St. Francis and his handmade stone chapel, the Portiuncula.

Then, I boarded a train from Florence to Innsbruck, where I rode several buses, first to Oberndorf, then to Ostermiething, through the countryside and the distant mountains to a remote village.

It was a beautiful, brisk, clear day. I walked the last five miles along country roads passed endless farmland to the tiny Austrian village of St. Radegund on the German border, to the small chapel built in the fifteenth century, where I found a small marker along the outside wall where the ashes of Franz Jaegerstaetter are buried under a bed of flowers and a large crucifix. I knelt and offered a prayer that I could carry on his witness against war. The scripture quote on the wall was from Matthew 16:25. "Whoever wishes to save his life must lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."

Then, I walked another mile through the large white neighborhood houses. I came around a street and saw an elderly Austrian woman standing in a yard of apple and plum trees, picking plums.

"Excuse me, good afternoon," I said. "I'm looking for the home of Mrs. Jaegerstaetter."

She threw down a plum she was eating, wiped her face, walked over to the gate and said with a smile, "I'm Frau Jaegerstaetter!"

Franziska Jaegerstaetter is beautiful, warm, gentle soul. Right from the start it seemed to me that she is as much a saint as her martyred husband. Since his death, she has raised their three girls in this house. He had served as sacristan at the town chapel. When he was arrested and imprisoned, she succeeded him, and continues there today, well into her 80s, almost sixty years later.

She took me down the block to the home of her daughter, Maria and her husband Herman. I presented Franziska with a bottle of wine. She speaks little English, but Maria and Herman translated. I brought greetings from mutual Jesuit friends. Franziska radiates an infectious warmth, joy and loving kindness. She reminded me of Mother Theresa. There is a shyness about her, a humility, but also a great strength, a solid faith, a deep peace. What a great spirit she is!

Maria drove me a few blocks to their old 1874 family home, a large three story white house, where Franz lived and worked. It is now a museum. Maria grew up in this home. She walked me through the house, telling stories about the various rooms, and pointing out the display cabinets in the big main room, containing letters and belongings of Franz. The upstairs' bedrooms look over miles of magnificent farmland.

Afterwards, I walked back into town, visited the chapel again, and sat in silent meditation for a long time, filled with excitement and gratitude to be among these marvelous people. In the late 1970s, when I was deciding to enter the Jesuits, I read a booklet on Franz's heroic life, and felt deeply inspired. His witness encouraged me to take my step. Years later, when proceedings for his canonization began in Vienna, I wrote to the Austrian Cardinal testifying that Franz had inspired me to enter the Jesuits and dedicate my life to the abolition of war.

After I found a room at the local B & B, I joined the family for dinner at Maria's house, along with Erna Putz, a local historian who has dedicated herself to the study of Franz's life. We sat up late drinking beer and wine, listening to Franziska's stories. Franziska brought out her photo albums, and showed me her family pictures. She talked about Franz. I told her how their story influenced my friends and I to demonstrate against war and nuclear weapons. I explained how he had become a symbol to the Catholic peace movement in the United States, and to other great peacemakers, including Thomas Merton, Dorothy Day and Daniel Berrigan.

"Why don't you come and visit us in the United States?" I asked her. "We could take you wherever you want to go, and arrange for you to speak to various peace groups and churches. Why not come and speak to us?"

"Because the wine is not very good," she said with a smile and a twinkle in her eye.

We both laughed. I asked her if she ever imagined all that have happened to her, that Franz would be proposed for canonization, that she would meet the Pope, that she would become an example of faith to many people around the world, that her home would become a national museum, and pilgrims like me would flock from around the world to visit her.

"No, never," she said solemnly. "I thought no one would ever know about Franz. Then, in the early 1960s, Gordon Zahn came along and wrote his book. That started it all.

For decades, I hid Franz's letters under my mattress."

Before walking back to town to the B & B, Franziska announced that we would gather at 7:30 a.m. before I left town for a Mass in the chapel and a prayer at Franz's grave.

The next morning, we stood around the little stone altar in the bitter cold chapel. Franziska vested me, lit the candles, and prepared the altar. Maria read from the Paul's second letter to the Corinthians (4:7-18). I read from John's Gospel, (17:6,11-19). Then we offered prayers, in German and English, for our families and friends, for the church and the world, and for the abolition of war and nuclear weapons. After we received the Eucharist, we walked outside and stood in silence at Franz's grave. We took turns offering a few quiet prayers. Then, Franziska led me over to the small village cemetery, to visit the grave of her 18-year-old niece, who was struck by lightning and died.

That morning in St. Radegund was one of the most moving spiritual and liturgical experiences in my life. It was small, quiet, and powerful. Franziska gave me a bag of fresh fruit from her garden for my journey and said goodbye. Maria and Herman drive me through the mountains to Salzburg.

Only then did I realize that we were above the clouds! For two days, I had been in heaven, surrounded by angels, in the fullness of peace. These days among these holy people were a great blessing. Once again, I learned a great lesson, when we stand up against war and death, we receive the gift of peace and life.