

Our Faith: Something Worth Fighting For

Among my favorite quotes from books and movies is that of Samwise, the friend of Frodo in "Lord of the Rings." As Frodo is dejected with the difficulty of pressing on with the hard journey, Samwise reminds him that there are indeed things worth fighting for. How true this is, especially in the face of evil. The challenge for us as Christians is to persevere as a sign in the world to point others to what is right and good. As Jesus says in our Gospel this week, like the apostles we are sent out. We are to not be afraid for God is with us, but are to "speak in the light" and what we hear whispered we are to proclaim on the rooftops.

Recently I read an article that discussed the life of Franz Jagerstatter, a man who chose death over pledging loyalty to Hitler. (Below is taken from an article by Samuel Warde, published in December of 2019):

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"Neither prison nor chains nor sentence of death can rob a man of the Faith and his free will," Franz Jägerstätter once wrote. And while he did ultimately endure prison, chains, and death, he never lost his free will.

Austrian farmer and holy man Franz Jägerstätter, saw the evils of the Nazi regime both before and during World War II. But he did something that relatively few had the courage to do: resist.

Time and again, he refused to swear loyalty to Hitler and join the German armed forces, instead insisting that his Catholic faith and personal moral code wouldn't allow him to participate in such evils.

Even when threatened with death, he stood firm. And when that death eventually came, Franz Jägerstätter cemented a legacy that remains inspiring to this day.

Franz Jägerstätter was born in the small village of St. Radegund, Austria in 1907.

Young Franz had a reputation for being a bit wild, bolstered by the fact that he fathered a daughter, Hildegard Auer, out of wedlock in 1933. The leader of a local motorcycle gang, he was arrested with other members in 1934 for a street brawl.

But on Holy Thursday in 1936, he married Franziska Schwaninger, an extremely devout Christian woman. This marriage proved to be a turning point in Jägerstätter's life as he began making his way as a farmer and miner.

The two began praying together and Jägerstätter began studying the Bible, taking a particular interest in the lives of the saints. Jägerstätter later wrote that the Bible became the couple's guide for everyday life, saying "We helped one another go forward in faith."

Upon first hearing of it, Franz Jägerstätter immediately rejected Anschluss, the Nazi annexation of Austria in March 1938. With no desire to join the Nazi bureaucracy in any way, he rejected the position of mayor of St. Radegund that he was offered later that month.

Additionally, he was the only person in the village to speak out against Anschluss when his town voted on the matter in April. However, the town's authorities suppressed his vote and announced the matter's "unanimous" approval.

Despite his resistance, Jägerstätter was drafted into the Wehrmacht in June 1940 and trained for a few months but soon received a deferment. He was conscripted again in October, at which time he completed his training.

Meanwhile, in December 1940, he joined the Third Order of Saint Francis and worked in the local parish church. Then he received yet another deferment in April 1941 under an exemption for working farmers.

At this time, Jägerstätter only began further examining the morality of Nazism in light of Hitler's suppression of the Church and reports regarding the Nazi euthanasia program known as Aktion T4.

This 1940 program saw the Nazis euthanize some 300,000 people, namely the mentally disabled, including children. Franz Jägerstätter would not stand for it.

Jägerstätter was called up again for military service in the Wehrmacht on February 23, 1943 and he reported to military officials in Enns, Austria on March 1.

However, he refused to take an oath of loyalty to Adolf Hitler, stating his objections to serving in the military on moral grounds. Jägerstätter was immediately arrested and transported to a holding cell in Linz, where he remained until May 4, 1943, at which time he was transferred to the Berlin-Tegel prison to await trial.

A priest from his village visited him while he was in jail and tried to talk him into serving. But he could not be convinced. And when word reached him that Austrian priest Franz Reinisch had been executed for refusing to take Hitler's loyalty oath, Jägerstätter was determined to likewise hold firm to his defiance.

Jägerstätter was subsequently court-martialed and sentenced to death at the Reichskriegsgericht in Berlin-Charlottenburg on July 6, 1943.

According to an excerpt from his court-martial hearing, Jägerstätter informed military officials "that, due to his religious views, he refused to perform military service with a weapon, that he would be acting against his religious conscience were he to fight for the Nazi State...that he could not be both a Nazi and a Catholic."

He added “that there were some things in which one must obey God more than men; due to the commandment ‘Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself, ’he said he could not fight with a weapon. However, he was willing to serve as a military paramedic.”

After his trial, Jägerstätter was transferred to Brandenburg-Görden Prison on August 9, 1943 and was executed by guillotine later that afternoon. After the war, his ashes were buried at the local cemetery in St. Radegund.

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I mentioned him in a homily several years ago, but I couldn’t help but think about him as I read through this week’s Gospel that continues the call of the disciples. Jesus is sending them; and it’s a reminder we too are sent. We go forth from Mass to proclaim to others what happens at Mass, and what our faith is about.

This can be scary in our world today. We live often counter-cultural. But I think the best way to do this is to remember a few things.

One: God is with us. As Jesus promises in the Gospel, we are never alone.

Second: we should remember we have one another too. We can rely on our fellow Christians for support and counsel and prayer as we evangelize.

Third: We need to be patient. Sometimes people will be hostile to our message. But rather than give into anger or frustration through giving up or becoming aggressive, we can instead pray for (or with) the person, and look for opportunities to discuss our faith. The “law of gradualism” as my moral theology professor put it: namely gradually bringing someone to the faith by not giving up.

And lastly, we need to remember our final destination is heaven, and we should want to bring people there. So many out there never learn the faith because there is no one to teach it to them; they never learn about God, or moral law at home or from culture; they may have a view of the Catholic faith given to them from culture or the media, not the truth. Its up to us to help people think more deeply about the faith and what it teaches.

I remember also seeing a photo of thousands of people doing a Nazi salute; one man had his hands folded and was not saluting. The “meme” circled that man and said “be this guy.”

Our Gospel is so timely this week because I think now more than ever, we can be afraid to take a risk, to talk to people about what we believe, or give up on the world. Now more than ever though the Church needs disciples. Let us learn from Blessed Franz Jagerstatter and be not afraid to stand up for what is right, pointing the way to Christ.

God bless,

Fr. Paul