

The collected writings of Franz Jagerstatter

John Dear | Jun. 23, 2009 On the Road to Peace



A few weeks ago, Orbis Books published *Franz Jagerstatter: Letters and Writings from*

Prison, the first complete collection of his writings in English. Through his intimate letters and powerful reflections on faith, church and death, we enter the mind of a contemporary saint and martyr. And we learn a thing or two about growing in sanctity and how we might resist war and practice Christ's peace.

On August 9, 1943, for refusing to take "the military oath of unconditional obedience to Hitler," Franz Jagerstatter was beheaded. A year and a half ago, he was beatified during a Mass in Linz, Austria, with his children present along with his dear widow Franziska, now 96.

For decades Jagerstatter's story languished. Then Gordon Zahn uncovered the story. Zahn's book *In Solitary Witness* came out in 1964. It included excerpts from some of Jagerstatter's letters and prison essays. But now, in this volume, edited by Erna Putz with commentary by Robert Krieg, we have all that Jagerstatter wrote.

Most of his last writings, in particular, were written clandestinely and in chains, to be delivered to Franziska after his execution. Franziska keeps the originals at their home in St. Radegund, Austria, where Franz is buried.

Krieg writes that Franz "was not only a martyr and a saint but also a prophet, in the biblical sense."

He exhibited many of the personal traits of the Old Testament prophets such as Elijah, Amos and Jeremiah. For example, he felt an exceptional intimacy with God. He sensed a divine call. He attained an insightful analysis of the cultural, political, religious and social dynamics of his day -- an analysis that generated his predictions about life after the war. He was acutely aware of human sinfulness and divine compassion. And he was ready to suffer and die for the sake of his personal integrity and his vocation.

Jim Forest, in his introduction writes, that "Franz Jagerstatter was one of the least likely persons to question the justifications of war being announced daily by those in charge or to say no to the demands of his government. What did he know ...? How could so unimportant a person dare to have such important convictions?"

Finally, we know the answers. Franz's writings reveal a person struggling with the ordinariness of life amid extraordinary times -- the extraordinariness heightened by the demands of the Gospel. More, his writings reveal

a man committed to God's peace even as the church regarded Franz as wayward and complied with Hitler's wars.

Franz reflects his culture and times, from his German Austrian character to his pre-Vatican II theology and spirituality, some of it a bit musty by our standards. But he seeks God with fierce devotion and accepts the political consequences of his faith, which boils down to this: he withholds his cooperation from the warmaking state and offers his life for God's reign of peace. Alleluia!

"I would not exchange my small, dirty cell for a king's palace if I was required to give up even a small part of my faith," he writes. "Disciples of Jesus must learn to perceive the suffering of their master as unavoidable and to apprehend the religion of Jesus as the religion of the cross." The cross that invariable comes after a life of nonviolent resistance.

Resistance was Franz's context, and he had few options. Most citizens acquiesced and served the Nazi regime. Bishops and priests, quite in lock-step, offered no contrary word. But Franz was plagued by a holy dream—it entailed a crowded train going to hell, the masses plunging toward war. And from the dream's energy he forged a path against the grain. He defied the Reich come what may.

He defied the Reich because the first Christians defied Caesar. "Shouldn't we become even greater saints than the first Christians?" he asks at one point. Yet, he notes, "we are much more obedient to the state than they would be." It's a message very much lost today in our own cultural jumble, our warmaking nation. Who's even aware today that the first Christians were nonviolent?

As the war worsens, he agonizes over the church's complicity. He suffers over the failed leadership of most bishops and priests and struggles mightily not to condemn them, rather to pray for them, forgive them, yet stay the course. And he finds the path a razor's edge -- forgiveness on one hand and prophetic utterances on the other. The church, he insisted, must follow Jesus, never the warmaking state. Otherwise, what's the point?

I read of his anguish and my own heart resonates. So many American priests silent about war, poverty, global warming, nuclear weapons, many blessing the warmaking state. Franz would have regarded them compassionately, but he would have insisted that we put the Gospel into practice.

One cannot read Franz and not come against the question of family responsibility. Franz was a devoted husband and father. He loved Franziska and his four daughters, yet still resisted war and went to his death. We presume that if you love your family, you take no risks. But here is a contradictory lesson. Love for home is connected to love for God. The more we love God, the more our love extends, beyond family ties, to the whole human race, even those foisted on us as enemies.

Franz had made his priorities clear. He wrote from prison: "Our bond with God must be stronger than our love of our family and relatives." A few days before his death he wrote: "You surely know that we must love God more than we love our family, and that we must be ready to let go of everything that we love on this earth and that is dear to us rather than to offend God in the least." He wrote this to console his family! Today, sixty five years later, they agree. I think they agree because Franz was wildly in love with Franziska; their love seemed right out of the movies. His love conquered any doubts.

Franziska reveals this in a letter to the priest who had visited Franz just before his death. "I have lost a dear husband and a good father to my children, but I can also assure you that our marriage was one of the happiest in our parish -- many people envied us. But the good Lord intended otherwise, and has loosed that loving bond. I already look forward to meeting again in heaven, where no war can ever divide us again."

His attitude, so foreign to us, sprang from his advances in what he called "self-improvement." Self-improvement -- a term before its time. It brings to mind the spate of 1970s self-help books. To him it meant an honest awareness of sin, deliberate repentance, and then the necessary work to change your life. "When faith lacks an awareness of sin, no true repentance can come about and there can be no resolve to improve oneself," he writes. Franz was quite serious about improving himself. I always presumed his conversion happened miraculously once he met Franziska; I didn't know that he kept at it. He worked on changing himself so that he would more and more resemble the loving Jesus.

I was reminded of Jungian scholar Robert Johnson's description of our journey through life. As children we are "unconsciously conscious." Then we spend most of our lives, lost in the culture, "consciously unconscious." Only a few wake up and strive with every breath to become "consciously conscious." Franz did that, becoming fully awake to life and God, even to understanding how wise it is to give his life in opposition to the culture of death.

It is no surprise that death occupies his thoughts, but not morbidly, rather after the fashion of a detached Buddhist. "Many people would give a great deal if they could lengthen their lives, though not in order to become more perfect but simply in order to live longer," he observes.

And he urges us to prepare for our own deaths. "We should prepare ourselves when we are approaching the table of the Lord as we would if we were preparing ourselves for death." Go to Eucharist as if you are about to die, as if you are about to meet God, he suggests. Let our encounter with God at the Eucharist be, among other things, holy training in preparing for death. Our perspective in relation to eternity will become clearer, our volition to serve will become stronger. "My loved ones," he wrote to his family, "let us be ready to die."

"We must go courageously on the way of suffering, whether we begin sooner or later," he concludes. "They may build many beautiful streets today, but they cannot change the way to heaven. This way will always remain rugged and rocky."

Franz Jagerstatter: Letters and Writings from Prison is a major event. Here is an authentic Christian life -- and martyr's death -- given to us from God to inspire our own discipleship, to make clear the political implications.

"Discipleship to Christ requires heroism," Franz wrote. Another German Christian of the era said something similar. Grace isn't cheap, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote. But Bonhoeffer succumbed to temptation and embroiled himself in a plan to assassinate Hitler. Franz's witness is therefore the purer. He shows the way to the inner reserve needed to resist nonviolently according to the example of Jesus and to the very end.

I urge readers to study this important collection. Let Franz inspire you to go the extra mile in your Gospel journey. Though the world is a mess, we are blessed to have such a guide.

View photographs and learn more about Franz Jagerstatter at www.franzprayforus.org

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This week, John Dear will lead a weekend workshop on the Sermon on the Mount at Loyola Univ. in Chicago on June 26-27. To register, contact, www.asrenewal.org, or email, aluther@luc.edu. He will also speak at the Pax Christi National Assembly in Chicago, July 17-19; see www.paxchristiusa.org. St. Anthony Messenger's Press recently published John Dear On Peace, by Patricia Normile. John's two new books are *A Persistent Peace* (Loyola Press) and *Put Down Your Sword*, (Eerdmans). For information on his books or to invite him to speak at your church or school, see: www.johndear.org.

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