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The feast day of Franz Jägerstätter

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The Peace Pulpit

[Editor's Note: Following is the homily Bishop Thomas Gumbleton preached on May 20, the feast day of St. Franz Jägerstätter, in Jägerstätter's hometown of St. Sankt Radegund, Austria. A transcript for the bishops Sunday homily was not available. We offer this a substitute.]

This evening, on the feast day of Blessed Franz Jägerstätter, I am very honored and feel blessed indeed, that you have asked me to celebrate this Eucharist, to be with you on this extraordinary occasion, to be with Franziska, Franz's faithful wife, loving, totally committed spouse, and with Franz's family and of course, with the parish family. It is truly an honor. And I also thank you for asking me to reflect with you and to listen carefully to the readings this evening and to do that in the context of the life of Franz Jägerstätter, to draw from these readings what he obviously drew from them that made him so committed to the way of Jesus, even to the point of death.

But before I reflect on the readings themselves, I thought it might be helpful and worthwhile to speak briefly about the extraordinary way that Franz's witness, his martyrdom (which means witnessing), has spread throughout the world. I know firsthand the way his witness has been so important in the United States, first of all, to me, and I'm sure there are many like me, at a time when our nation, the United States was engaged in a terrible war and what clearly had become an unjust war in Vietnam. It truly was, even from the beginning, unjust according to Catholic theology.

At that time, I began to undergo a rethinking of my whole attitude toward war, what the Vatican Council, in fact, called upon all of us to do, to have a whole new attitude toward war. I began to try to develop that attitude, and I had to go to many places, of course, to the scriptures, first of all; to theology books (Thomas Aquinas, who taught us and whose teaching on the just war was predominant for hundreds of years), go back to that and go to spiritual writers like Thomas Merton in the United States.

One of the most important influences on me was when I read the book by Gordon Zahn, which I'm sure you're familiar with, *In Solitary Witness: The Witness of Franz Jägerstätter*. This helped me through a time of discernment, a time of trying to make what, in some ways, were hard choices, going against the popular opinion. But Franz's story, his witness, influenced me profoundly. Beyond individuals like myself, Franz's witness had tremendous influence in the United States -- one of the most significant things that happened in what was a terrible anti-war period, very divisive in the United States.

One of the most significant things that happened was when a very important member of our defense department, after careful searching of his conscience and his heart, decided to reveal secret documents from within the defense department that destroyed the credibility of the U.S. government and what it had been telling the people in the United States about the war in Vietnam. That man, Daniel Ellsberg, published these documents contrary to the law. He not only destroyed his career, which had been very promising within the government, but he risked jail and because it could even be called an act of treason, risked death.

But at one point, he told me, among the many influences in his life was becoming aware of Franz Jägerstätter and his witness against his government during World War II. That had a tremendous effect in the United States, the revelation of these documents. It helped to change the public attitude very quickly. Another place where I had personal experience of how Franz's influence was so important was within the Conference of the Catholic Bishops of the United States. For the first time in the history of our country, and something very, very unusual, perhaps unique in the world, the Catholic bishops, as a body, publicly condemned a war in which our own country was engaged.

This had never happened before. We as a church had always gone along with what the government said. Young people in our country were even told, "You must obey the government. If you're called to go to war, you must obey. Never question but rather, simply do what you were commanded to do." In 1971, the Catholic bishops issued a resolution that condemned the war in Vietnam, and it would have been the basis for any young person in the United States to say no to that war, especially any Catholic who wanted to follow the leadership of the church.

That resolution would never have come about, I am sure, without the witness of Franz Jägerstätter. His willingness to say no to his government even at the cost of his life had a tremendous influence on the Catholic bishops of the United States. This witness of Franz Jägerstätter has spread throughout the world, but now even as I reflect on that, or share that with you, there may be some of you who are thinking, "Well yes, but Franz was extraordinary. In fact, the church has now declared Franz to be blessed, to be among the communion of saints in heaven. We're ordinary people; we can't be like that." That is always one of the problems in the sense of declaring someone blessed or someone a saint.

Then people think, "Oh, well, we're not saints so it can't be expected of us," but I urge you tonight, as we reflect on the scriptures, to listen deeply, as Franz must have listened to scriptures like this. If we look at the very first lesson tonight from the book of Daniel, we discover something that happened during that time when the Jewish people were in exile and under the domination of the Medes and the Persians. Even though he was a Jewish exile, Daniel had become a very important member of the king's government, and there were others who were jealous of him because Daniel had arisen above the native peoples, so they plotted how they might destroy Daniel's influence, even have him put to death.

As we read in that first lesson, these people who are determined to destroy Daniel: "We are all agreed that the king should issue a decree enforcing the following regulation. Whoever within the next 30 days prays to anyone, god or man, other than to yourself, O King, is to be thrown into the lion's den." And the king went ahead and as the writer indicates accordingly, "signed the document embodying the edict." Daniel was a practicing Jew and he prayed regularly to the one true God so when he heard the document had been signed, he nevertheless, as was his usual practice, retired to his room in his house and there, facing towards Jerusalem, prayed three times each day. He continued to fall on his knees, praying and giving praise to God as he had always done.

What was Daniel doing? He was saying no one comes before God. There is no human power, human authority, which we obey contrary to what God wills, God teaches. God must be supreme in our life. That is the attitude that Daniel acted upon, the conviction that Daniel acted upon. That is reinforced by the letter of St. Paul to the church at Ephesus, which was our reading just a few days ago on the Feast of the Ascension, where Paul, living

at a time when the Roman emperor claimed to be the supreme power, the supreme authority for all people; he was thought of as divine.

So when Paul reflects on the resurrection and the ascension of Jesus ascending to the right hand of God, he describes it in these words, "This you can tell from the strength of His power (God's power) at work in Christ when God used it to raise Jesus from the dead and make him sit at God's right hand in heaven, far above every sovereignty, authority, power or domination, or any other name that can be named, not only in this age, but also in the age to come. God has put all things under his feet, made him as the ruler of everything, the head of the church, which is his own body, the fullness of God who fills the whole creation." Jesus becomes, for us, the visible image of the Sovereign God who is over all, above all, and whom alone we must obey ultimately. If we need to choose, Franz shows us, we must choose God over any civil authority at any time, any place.

That is something that each of us must do. We listen to these words of God, we see the example of Franz, refusing to subject himself to civil authority, his government, when that government wanted him to do something that was against the will of God. God is first and supreme in our lives. How we need to carry this out is something that each of us must determine. It will not always be a case of having to go against a government law, a government rule, a government decree. Sometimes it will simply be trying to face up to criticism from those within our own community, within our church community, and trying to do what is right, be responsive to God's sovereignty and not to any other human authority or human power that might be exercised over us. God is supreme, God alone we must obey. This is what Franz teaches us.

When it comes to how we must follow the way of God, surely the gospel tonight and the whole discourse that we call the Sermon on the Mount must be the values that we make our own, that we live according to. This is what Franz did. I'm sure there were many times he listened to those words of Jesus proclaimed on that hillside in Galilee, "Blessed are the poor," blessed are those who do not try to have more than they need. Blessed are those who have enough but are willing to share." This is what it means to be poor according to the way of Jesus, not to keep on accumulating more and more, but to have enough and to share. "Blessed are the gentle"?those who reach out in compassion, empathy for others. Blessed are the single-hearted, those who are totally sincere and honest, rejecting any hypocrisy, faithful only to God alone.

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for what is right," bringing justice into our world. "Blessed are the peacemakers," blessed are those who reject violence and war and live their lives only in peaceful ways, building up peace, developing peace in their heart, in their spirit in their home, in their neighborhood and ultimately in the world. Franz lived according to these teachings of Jesus. If you go on further into that Sermon on the Mount, you find what is most challenging. "You heard that it was said of old, 'Love your neighbor, hate your enemy,' I say love your enemy. Do good to those who hurt you. Return good for evil." Reject violence, reject war? Reject vengeance? That is what Jesus teaches and even if it is at the cost of our life, we must respond because Jesus is sovereign over us, because Jesus is at God's right hand, the very visible image of the invisible God.

Each of us must reflect on the ways that we live out those values that Jesus proclaimed in that discourse on the hillside in Galilee that we heard proclaimed tonight. We must discover the ways that we will be faithful to these teachings of Jesus and there will be times, probably almost daily, when we are challenged, but if we are committed, as Franz was, to a single-hearted, clear commitment to the way of Jesus, which is the way of God who is supreme in our life, we will try to be the witness to the way of Jesus that Franz was. It's not beyond the capability of any of us; in fact it's exactly what each of us is called to, to follow this way of Jesus.

Sometimes I presume it can cause us to be fearful. Surely Franz must have experienced at the beginning at least, a sense of horror even, at what could happen to him. He knew what was at risk, but he had confidence in God, and the basis for that confidence in God is perhaps proclaimed most clearly in our second lesson tonight from Paul's letter to the church at Rome, because Franz would have known these words and prayed them, and this

could have given him the strength and the determination he needed to go forward. It's what can strengthen us.

Listen carefully. "Nothing can come between us and the love of Christ," and is there anything more important in our lives than the love of Christ, the love of God in our hearts, our connection to God through which we have connection to all those around us? Nothing can come between us and this love of Christ. Even if we are troubled or worried or being persecuted or lacking food or clothes, or being threatened or even attacked, the one thing that is most important in our life cannot be taken away. Nothing, in any of those circumstances, can come between us and the love of Christ. For Paul says, "I am certain of this, neither death nor life nor angel nor prince, nothing that exists, nothing still to come, not any power or height or depth nor any created thing can ever come between us and the love of God made visible in Christ Jesus our lord."

The more we reflect on that reality, as I'm sure Franz must have reflected along those lines many times, nothing could separate him from God in Jesus. No matter what they did, no matter what the consequences, Franz knew that Jesus was always there to be with him and would not only be with him in this life, but forever. Nothing can separate us from the love of God made present to us in Christ Jesus. I urge us, all of us, we must try to deepen our understanding of this truth, our awareness of this truth, and let it be the source of our confidence, even our joyfulness in making God supreme in our life and always, no matter what the cost, following the way of Jesus.

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