NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Franziska and Franz J?gerst?tter

John Dear | Feb. 6, 2007 On the Road to Peace

Hundreds of thousands of people opposing the war took to the streets last week in Washington and many other places. I was in Los Angeles at the time and joined a march there. Destination: the L.A. Federal Building. There we were addressed by Cindy Sheehan and Ron Kovic, inspiring speakers both.

And on top of that, a delightful surprise -- I ran into my old friend singer Jackson Browne. He and I were arrested on those same federal building steps 18 years ago, and spent a memorable day in jail with more than a hundred other church workers and activists, strategizing our next action and campaign to stop U.S. military aid to El Salvador.

To cap off the weekend, on my return home, I found a card from Austria waiting for me, from 94-year-old Franziska Jägerstätter -- wife of martyred Franz. Her card, full of love and blessings, bore a kind of weight. Suddenly our small steps for peace last weekend fell into proper perspective, which is to say they loomed small.

In 1936, Franziska married Franz, a farmer, who overnight became a devout Catholic and served as the sacristan in their village church in St. Radegund. In 1938, the Nazis rumbled into Austria and it seemed everyone but Franz supported the *Anschluss*. He dared speak openly against Hitler and with only a handful of other Austrians, he refused conscription into the army.

His orders arrived in February 1943, and he held strong despite urgings from his neighbors, priest and bishop. He withstood appeal and casuistry, and arrest followed swiftly. The Nazis imprisoned him in Linz, tried him in Berlin, and on Aug. 9, 1943, took off his head. His story remained unknown but to a handful of people for nearly two decades.

Death, terrible and certain. And early. With what strength did he face it? For starters he had come to the same conclusion as Gandhi, that non-cooperation with evil is as much a duty as cooperation with good. "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. It is never too late to save ourselves and perhaps some other soul for Christ."

And he imbibed the spirit of nonviolence. "As a Christian, I prefer to do my fighting with the Word of God and not with arms," he wrote. "We need no rifles or pistols for our battle, but instead spiritual weapons -- and the foremost among these is prayer."

The night Franz died, a chaplain paid him a visit. Said Franz: "I am completely bound in inner union with the Lord." The chaplain later testified: "Franz lived as a saint and died a hero."

I once made a pilgrimage to St. Radegund. It was in 1997, during my tertianship year, on my way to Northern Ireland. I wanted to pray at Franz's grave. I bore an invitation to the Jägerstätter house, but finding the place posed a problem. I was by myself, and didn't speak German. I trudged through the village for hours, magnificent farmland on all sides, but no landmark or signpost pointed the way. Finally I came upon an elderly lady in her yard eating plums off a tree. "Can you tell me where the Jägerstätters live?" She smiled. "I'm Frau Jägerstätter."

She looks like Georgia O'Keefe, has the sparkling eyes of Mother Teresa, a warm, gentle soul with an infectious joy and loving kindness. She carries herself with humility, a hint of shyness. But beneath lies strength, a solid faith, deep peace, towering Gospel conviction. She stands, to my mind, as much a saint as her martyred husband. After Franz died, she took up his job as sacristan and set about to raise their three girls and keep his memory alive.

She offered words of welcome and showed me around. Our first stop, the old family home, where Franz lived and worked, now a national museum. I ambled through the rooms and gazed upon the displays. I examined Franz's letters and his belongings, while Franziska and one of her daughters offered commentary, bringing Franz alive. During the evening Franziska opened her photo albums and we gathered around, and the family conjured precious memories, warm and worn, story upon story.

I was on sacred ground -- and me with no gift to offer in return, but one. I told Franziska that their story had influenced me long ago to become a priest, had goaded me into activism against nuclear weapons and war And I said Franz has become a kind of icon. The Catholic peace movement holds his memory aloft. His witness has passed into timelessness and come to inspire the likes of Thomas Merton, Dorothy Day and Daniel Berrigan. Franziska glowed. Most of this was news to her.

Did you ever imagine it? I asked. That one day you would meet the pope? That you would inspire the faith of people around the world? That your home would achieve the dignity of a national museum? That pilgrims like me would flock to visit you? That Franz would be proposed for canonization?

Question after question; the poor woman could scarcely keep up. "Never," she answered. The Nazis had dispatched him with German finality. "I thought no one would ever know about him. I hid his letters under my mattress for decades. Then, in the early 1960s, Gordon Zahn learned of him and wrote his book, *In Solitary Witness*, and that started the whole thing."

My last morning there we shared a liturgy in the village chapel. We prayed in German and English for our families and friends, for the church and the world. And we prayed for the abolition of nuclear weapons and war. After Eucharist, we stood in silence by Franz's humble grave.

It lies along the outside wall of the small chapel where he attended daily Mass. Above it stands a typical Austrian crucifix bearing the words of Matthew's Gospel: "Whoever wishes to save his life must lose it, but

whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." It was one of the most moving spiritual and liturgical experiences of my life. As I bid farewell, Franziska pressed into my arms a bag of plums and apples from her yard, and some homemade bread.

Some months ago, the Vatican informed Franziska that its commission had approved Franz's beatification. Now we're all awaiting the official Vatican announcement and the date.

To my mind, this is an astonishing turn of events. In his time, church officials had heaped ridicule upon Franz's insistence that Jesus forbids us to kill. Now this turnabout, a kind of judgment against the "devout" German and Austrian Catholics who cheered the war and fought for Hitler. But more than that, the turnabout is a sign. It's a sign that points to the nature of sanctity, a sign of the *future* of sanctity.

In a world of total war, a world on the brink of destruction, only one kind of sanctity bears fruit -- the one that Jesus embodied and Franz embraced. Daring nonviolence that refuses to kill no matter the pretext. Willingness to die without a trace of retaliation. Divine, universal love for everyone, even the enemy. And public, prophetic, outspoken defiance of patriotic militarism and state violence.

In an insane world, Franz points the way: refuse to fight, refuse to kill, refuse to be complicit in warmaking, refuse to compromise -- and pit your very self against structures of violence with all the nonviolence in your soul.

And therein lies the contrast. I thought of the marchers last week. I wondered how we might ever lay claim to Franz's courage and faith. And a question or two arose: Are we willing to give our lives so literally to the nonviolent Jesus? Are we prepared to enter upon his steadfast resistance to empire? Can we non-cooperate with militarism to such a point as to suffer the disruption of our families, careers and lives? Dare we obey Jesus as radically as blessedly Franz and Franziska? Dare I?

Abolishing war, poverty and nuclear weapons will require the offering of our lives as never before, in complete surrender and divine obedience to God's reign of peace, and civil disobedience to the culture of death. The price is worth the blessing, as the nonviolent lives Franz and Franziska testify. Death may come, but vindication -- and resurrection -- will follow.

John Dear's new book, *Transfiguration* (with a foreword by Archbishop Desmond Tutu) will be published next week from Doubleday. It can be ordered now at
www.amazon.com [1]. For further information, see:
www.fatherjohndear.org [2]

Source URL (retrieved on *03/12/2014 - 09:51*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/road-peace/franziska-and-franz-j%E2%80%B0gerst%E2%80%B0tter

Links:
[1] http://www.amazon.com
[2] http://www.fatherjohndear.org