

# IN LIGHT OF ETERNITY: FRANZ JÄGERSTÄTTER, MARTYR

BY THE STAFF OF THE CATHOLIC PEACE FELLOWSHIP

*Zwei Dinge bedenke, woher, wohin  
Dan hat dein Leben den rechten Sinn.*

Consider two things: from where, to where  
Then your life will have its true meaning.

- FRANZ JÄGERSTÄTTER

**F**ranz Jägerstätter was born in 1907 in the small Austrian village of St. Radegund. There he was raised in poverty, a peasant dependent on the land for life. Though he was given to wildness and rebelliousness in his youth (he may have fathered a child during this early time of his life), he came to marry a prayerful and devout woman named Franziska in 1936 and with her had three daughters: Maria, Aliosia, and Rosalia. Jägerstätter soon became a member of the Third Order of Saint Francis and an active participant in the village parish, working as a church sexton whenever he was not farming the family fields.

In 1938, when the German *Anschluss*, or annexation, of Austria commenced, Jägerstätter openly opposed the German takeover and the ideology of National Socialism. Jägerstätter described National Socialism as a train “going to hell” and his conscience told him that it was impossible for one to be allegiant to the Nazi Party and a faithful Catholic at the same time. If there had been an organized military effort to defend Austria from Nazi invasion, Jägerstätter may well have fought to defend his beloved homeland. But there was no such effort. More importantly, Jägerstätter began to see that even though dealing with the Third Reich was inevitable, *cooperation* was not. Following the *Anschluss*, Jägerstätter openly denounced Adolf Hitler and even refused Nazi government cash allotments offered to each family. When a severe hailstorm destroyed most of his crops, he would not accept their emergency subsidies. From the very beginning of the war, he contended that it was being waged by “bad men”

playing a “crooked game.” Quite simply, he concluded, “I cannot play the game. The game is a lie.”

Jägerstätter was drafted in 1940 and reported for approximately six months of training. After this, he returned to St. Radegund vowing disobedience to future military conscription letters. He sought the advice of family, friends, a priest and a bishop. He was advised that, because of his state in life as a husband and father, he should not risk being executed and, therefore, he should join the military. He also was told that he should not feel guilty aiding the Nazi cause since moral responsibility for commands resided with Nazi officers and not with him or other soldiers following orders. Against almost all of the advice he received, Jägerstätter became a conscientious objector. He explained his faith, saying, “I believe God asks me to live by my conscience.” Elaborating on the nature of martyrdom, he wrote, “There are probably many Catholics who think they would be suffering and dying for the faith only if they had to suffer punishment for



refusing to renounce the Catholic Church. But I believe that everyone who is ready to suffer and die rather than offend God by even the slightest venial sin also suffers for his faith.” Finally, Jägerstätter felt that refusing to cooperate with the Nazis was the best thing he could do for his family. He would rather his children have a father martyred for following Christ than a Nazi for a father.

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**O**n March 1, 1943, Jägerstätter presented himself to the military and stated directly and definitively that he would not fight. He offered to serve as a medical orderly as a work of mercy, but refused to advance the Nazi cause in the war. Jägerstätter was imprisoned for two months in Linz, Austria, before being transferred to Berlin-Tegel in Germany, where he stood trial on July 6, 1943, and was sentenced to death for sedition. The courts never responded to his offer to work as a medic. On August 9, 1943, Jägerstätter was taken to the Nazi's Brandenburg-Havel facility, and at four o'clock in the afternoon he was beheaded. A priest who had met with him shortly before the execution noted his calmness and readiness to die. Jägerstätter knew, as he had written, that he "could change nothing in world affairs" but that at the very least—or the very most—he might "be a sign that not everyone let themselves be carried away with the tide." The priest would later say that Franz Jägerstätter was the only sure saint he had met in his life.

The Diocese of Linz has recently concluded its investigation into the martyrdom of Franz Jägerstätter and has translated into Italian and forwarded to the Vatican several hundred pages of text concerning Jägerstätter's cause for canonization, including Jägerstätter's own letters and writings. A decision on the canonical status of his cause will be made in the autumn and once a decision is made a summary report will be published. Eventually, the Congregation for Beatification will vote on the matter.

**H**ow is it that a man like Franz Jägerstätter arrived at the decision he did? As Gordon Zahn indicates, Jägerstätter's witness was in many ways a solitary one, not supported by those around him. However, if we examine Jägerstätter's words and actions closely we can see that even as he faced execution, Jägerstätter did not consider himself alone. Jägerstätter read and prayed over Scripture and the lives of the saints, and his conscience was shaped and



Jägerstätter on his motorcycle, the first in St. Radegund.

was a fleeting moment in comparison to the eternal city of God and that as a citizen of that city he was called to die as a prophetic witness to its power. Jägerstätter's conscience called him to die for his faith in Christ before killing in an unjust war, for as



The church in St. Radegund: the site of Jägerstätter's grave and where he served as sexton.

he writes, "it is impossible for dishonesty to lead to perfection." Jägerstätter went to his death joyfully in the company of those to whom he referred in his letters—Mary, the martyrs of the Church, Paul, Augustine, Jerome, Clare, Catherine Emmerich and the entire communion of saints—for he believed "happy are those who live and die in God's love." He hoped that his blood would be united with Christ's as an act of expiation, and as an offering on behalf of the world. Jägerstätter chose death so that the people of God might see the life that Christ offers all of us in the eternal homeland of the kingdom of God.

# EXCERPTS FROM THE PRISON STATEMENT OF FRANZ JÄGERSTÄTTER

THESE FEW WORDS are being set down here as they come from my mind and my heart. And if I must write them with my hands in chains, I find that much better than if my will were in chains. Neither prison nor chains nor sentence of death can rob a man of the Faith and his free will. God gives so much strength that it is possible to bear any suffering, a strength far stronger than all the might of the world. The power of God cannot be overcome. . .

I CAN EASILY SEE that anyone who refuses to acknowledge the Nazi Folk Community and also is unwilling to comply with all the demands of its leaders will thereby forfeit the rights and privileges offered by that nation. But it is not much different with God: he who does not wish to acknowledge the community of saints or who does not obey all the commandments set forth by Him and His Church and who is not ready to undergo sacrifices and to fight for His Kingdom either—such a one also loses every claim and every right under that Kingdom. . .

NOW ANYONE WHO IS ABLE TO FIGHT FOR BOTH KINGDOMS and stay in good standing in both communities (that is, the community of saints and the Nazi Folk Community) and who is able to obey every command of the Third Reich—such a man, in my opinion, would have to be a great magician. I for one cannot do so. And I definitely prefer to relinquish my rights under the Third Reich and thus make sure of deserving the rights granted under the Kingdom of God. It is certainly unfortunate that one cannot spare his family this sorrow. But the sorrows of this world are short-lived and soon pass away. And this sorrow is not at all comparable to those that Jesus was not able to spare His dear Mother in His suffering and death.

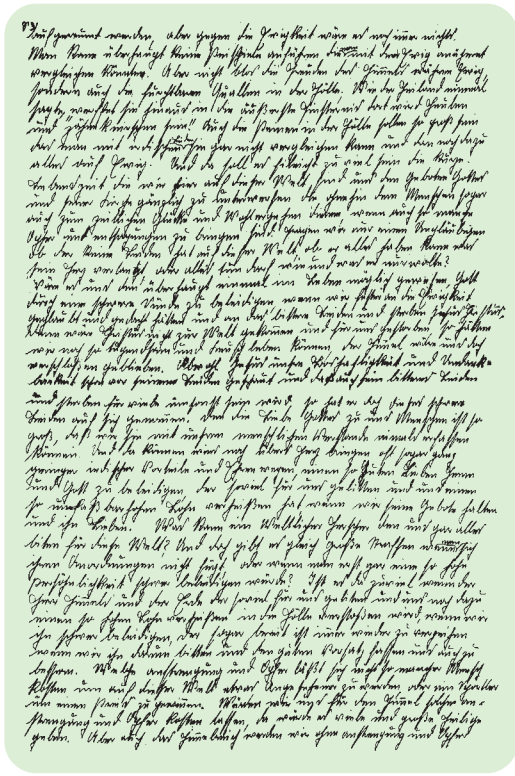
IS, THEN, THE KINGDOM OF GOD of such slight value that it is not worth some sacrifice, that we place every little thing of this world ahead of eternal treasures? . . . So

unimaginably great are these joys that God has prepared for us in His kingdom—and the greatest of all is that these joys will last forever. I believe we would almost go out of our minds with joy if someone were to tell us that we could be sure that in a few days all these joys of heaven would be ours on earth and would last for a billion years. Yet what are a billion years in comparison to eternity? Not as much as a half a second compared with an entire day. . .

THEREFORE, JUST AS THE MAN 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 Kingdom, risk everything in order to receive a great reward there. Just as those who believe in National Socialism tell themselves that their struggle is for survival, so must we, too, convince ourselves that our struggle is for the eternal Kingdom. But with this difference: we need no rifles or pistols for our battle, but, instead, spiritual weapons—and the foremost among these is prayer. For prayer, as St. Clare says, is the shield which the flaming arrows of the Evil One cannot

pierce. . . Through prayer we constantly implore new grace from God, since without God's help and grace it would be impossible for us to preserve the Faith and be true to His commandments.

THE TRUE CHRISTIAN is to be recognized more in his works and deeds than in his speech. The surest mark of all is found in deeds showing love of neighbor. To do unto one's neighbor what one would desire for himself is more than merely not doing to others what one would not want done to himself. Let us love our enemies, bless those who curse us, 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.



Franz Jägerstätter's handwritten prison notes