

LET US NOW PRAISE GORDON ZAHN

BY MICHAEL GALLAGHER

A recent *New Yorker* cartoon depicts Billy Graham's son (*Coeur de Lion* come again to slay the infidel) explaining to an immensely relieved president of the United States that "The meek shall inherit the earth" was in fact a mistranslation and Bush replying, "Golly gee, I always thought it didn't make a heck of a lot of sense."

Christianity itself, as it happens, doesn't make a heck of a lot of sense, or any sense at all for that matter, if this world is all there is, something Paul took note of when he wrote that if Christ be not risen, then we who believe in Christ are the most wretched of men.

Every once in a while, the Catholic Church, for centuries now on quite cozy terms with Caesar, giving him not only his due but a seemingly unlimited line of credit, finds herself (that Holy Spirit, what a pain in the ass!) obliged to speak up and acknowledge, however reluctantly, one of the more unreasonable demands of Jesus, who, great guy though he is, makes quite a few unreasonable demands.

Such a moment came in the course of the Second Vatican Council when the bishops took up Schema 13, "The Church in the Modern World," and found themselves confronting one of His most unreasonable: "Love your enemies." For a key aspect of Schema 13 was the question of war.

Advocates of peace (and how unfortunate that one has to single them out as such when all Christians should be advocates of peace)

mounted an intense lobbying effort in Rome (Dorothy Day among them, fasting with seventeen other women) to urge the bishops to break with the previous sixteen centuries and take an unequivocal stand against war, whose horrors had increased exponentially in the first half of the 20th century.

The sad truth was that the Church had not exactly distinguished herself in the cause of peace for quite a while, not in fact since that fateful day when Constantine replaced the pagan eagle with the cross of Christ on the standards of his legions. Since then bishops, and popes too, have, at best, temporized, looking aside in pious consternation when the specter of war arose, and, at worst, gave bellicose approbation, an especially egregious example of which occurred in 1917, when Baltimore's Cardinal Gibbons urged young Catholic men to demonstrate their patriotism by enlisting in the last and bloodiest and most manifestly unjust of the dynastic struggles that had convulsed Europe for centuries.

Whatever the gain for Christianity, Constantinianism has exacted a heavy price. For politicians, secular and ecclesiastic, have ever after done their best to diminish faith in the risen Christ to a modest creed that knows its place and never, never gets in the way—especially in the way of waging war.

Now in Rome in 1965, some sixteen centuries after Constantine, and two World Wars after Gibbons's betrayal of the gospel, ecclesiastic politicians were at work once more. Some American bishops were advocating a change in the Just War theory. In order to make it "acceptable" in the nuclear age, they wanted to drop that troublesome distinction between combatants and non-combatants, a stumbling

block to the free and untrammelled use of nuclear weapons, which, of course, was the only way to stem the tide of Communism. (Yes, Jesus *had* said something about the Gates of Hell not prevailing against his Church, but that was a long time ago.) The proposed change, furthermore, would come with a bonus: it would give retroactive sanction to the horrors perpetrated at Hamburg, Dresden, Tokyo, Hiroshima, and Nagasaki.

The most prominent of the gung ho faction was Cardinal Francis Spellman of New York, who a year or two later would pose for a picture in Vietnam sitting behind a machine gun, his pudgy fingers on its stock and a quote from Stephen Decatur on his lips: "My country, right or wrong."

So you can see what Dorothy Day and her friends were up against.

But then, to use an entirely inappropriate metaphor, a knight in shining armor came galloping onto the scene to champion the cause of peace. Who was he? A mild-mannered sociologist from the University of Massachusetts named Gordon Zahn.

Zahn was in England in 1965 doing research when an old friend, Richard Carbray, an advisor to the maverick Jesuit archbishop Thomas Roberts, contacted him. Not coincidentally, Zahn's current research was quite pertinent to Schema 13. He was interviewing former World War II Royal Air Force chaplains about their pastoral approach, which, it turned out, had been to assure Catholic airmen that, no matter where they dropped their bombs, God was on their side, taking care, however, to admonish them to keep their flies buttoned in town except when they had to relieve themselves and that in one

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way only. (His findings would be published in 1966 as *The Military Chaplaincy*.)

In 1963, moreover, Zahn, then a professor at Loyola Chicago, had published *German Catholics and Hitler's Wars*, a *cause célèbre* in Catholic circles, so much so that it led to his departure from Loyola. Coming out at time when many of the German bishops prominent in the Hitler era were departing to their eternal reward to the accompaniment of glowing temporal encomia, invariably depicting them as ardent foes of Hitler, Zahn's book came as a rude shock, delivering as it did a thorough-going indictment of the German hierarchy. "In World War II," Zahn wrote, "the leading spokesmen of the Catholic Church in Germany did become channels of Nazi control over their followers, whether by their general exhortations to loyal obedience to legitimate authority, or by their even more direct efforts to rally those followers to the defense of *Volk*, *Vaterland*, and *Heimat* [native place] as a Christian duty."¹ The indictment was all the more devastating for its quietly reasonable tone and the wealth of evidence—the bishops' own wartime statements—that Zahn adduced in support.

Then in 1964 Zahn had published a fitting companion piece, *In Solitary Witness*, the story of Franz Jägerstätter, an Austrian peasant, the father of three young daughters, who was beheaded by the Nazis for refusing to participate in Hitler's wars. Zahn had learned about Jägerstätter while researching *German Catholics and Hitler's Wars*, but no one had written much about him.

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judgment on the morality of Hitler's wars. Jägerstätter, a quite ordinary person did make the correct judgment, and, as the scholastics would put it, *contra factum non stat elatio*.

Archbishop Roberts invited Zahn to a conference being held at Oxford between Council sessions at which Roberts himself and Abbot Cuthbert Butler, an English Benedictine, were to speak. Butler was the chairman of the committee of 150 bishops who dealt with the peace and war aspect of Schema 13, and the Oxford conference marked the beginning of a correspondence between Butler and Zahn in which Zahn detailed his reservations about the draft in its current form.

The draft, he told Butler, was clear enough in forbidding a citizen

to participate in an unjust war, but this was gutted by an insistence that the presumption had to be in favor of the war's being just, which was, in effect, to sanction the way the Church had always behaved even when the war in question was waged by a government as godless as Hitler's.

Later in 1965, Zahn spent an eventful week in Rome. He gave a talk on Jägerstätter, he addressed the English hierarchy on the topic of war, and he wrote a speech for Butler, which, translated into Latin by Carbray, the abbot delivered to the Council.

"Gordon's talk [to the English bishops] turned some of them around completely," said Eileen Egan, a friend of Dorothy Day and one of the women fasting with her. "A woman journalist I knew came away with tears in her eyes. She said that she had never expected to see such a day."

Whatever the effect of Zahn's eloquence, and not to discount the variety of ways open to the Holy Spirit, the undeniable fact is that Schema 13 gave a ringing endorsement to conscientious objection and, far from dropping the distinction between combatants and non-combatants, declared any attack upon population centers with weapons of mass destruction a "crime against God and man himself" which "merits unequivocal and unhesitating condemnation." (*Gaudium et spes*, n. 80).

So there we had it. Though all this was merely a clarification of the Just War theory and stopped short of condemning modern war altogether or the possession of nuclear weapons *in se*, its powerful rheto-

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ric went far beyond anything the Church had brought to bear on war up to then. Nor could it be dismissed as the excessive zeal of pacifists like Dorothy Day and the Berrigans. This was the straight stuff, an expression of Catholic orthodoxy approved by the bishops of the world meeting in a solemn Church council.²

The respectful attention accorded Gordon Zahn by an English hierarchy well aware of the moral complexity involved (unlike Cardinal Spellman, not a few of them had had bombs dropped on them) has a certain irony to it, one that evokes Jesus' rueful observation that a prophet is not without honor except in his own country among his own people. For Gordon Zahn has never succeeded in getting the attention of his episcopal countrymen and hasn't to this day, at the end of his life, received the recognition that he deserves. Nor has the Catholic press given him the praise due him, as churchy in its own way as the bishops it makes bold to take to task from time to time. For both groups, and for almost all American theologians as well, the issue of women's ordination, to take but one example, is much more a hot-button item than war, even if the latter's horrific consequences could overwhelm us any day now and put an end to our nice seminars and symposiums and our trays of fresh Danish.

Zahn himself, I'm afraid, has to share the blame for being so solitary a witness. He's not a "liberal" Catholic, you see, and he's not a "conservative" Catholic. He's just a Catholic, with no ready-made cheering section, and it was as "just a Catho-

lic" that he's been capable of annoying people on the left as well as on the right, not hesitating, for example, to take the revered Catholic Worker movement to task for what he saw as a sometimes ambivalent attitude towards abortion (lest its feminists take offense). And though he admires the legacy of the Berrigans, he has serious reservations about the effectiveness of their form of non-violent resistance. For Zahn, the key has always been education, and in the years after the Council he worked tirelessly to promote conscientious objection as a choice and

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to make Franz Jägerstätter's witness more widely known, especially among young Catholics.

It was as "just a Catholic" that Zahn, born in 1918 in Milwaukee (like the Berrigans, he had an Irish father and a German mother, although he took the name of his stepfather when his widowed mother married again), declared himself a conscientious objector when his draft number came up in 1944. He had no college education at the time, having gone to work right out

of high school, nor did he have the support of any priest or bishop. But he knew his faith, and he decided that war was incompatible with the gospel.

In the work camp to which he was assigned, he met for the first time Catholics who thought as he did, though they were dismayed at what they took to be the simplicity of his rejection of war and converted him to a more sophisticated and nuanced rejection, a conversion that really wasn't necessary and was, in any event, short lived.

He did see the value of a college education, however, and when he was finally released in 1946, he and a fellow pacifist named Richard Leonard, who became a lifelong friend decided to go to college themselves. They applied to three, two of them Franciscan, describing themselves as pacifists. The Franciscan colleges promptly rejected them, the well known sentiments of the order's founder cutting no ice, it seemed, but the third, St. John's, a Benedictine school in Collegeville, Minnesota, not only accepted them, but gave them full scholarships. (Perhaps St. John's was

motivated by the destruction of Monte Cassino by the American Air Force three years before.) Their presence at St. John's eventually caused an uproar, however. There were complaints from veterans and, more significantly, former chaplains on the faculty, so much so that the abbot suggested that they take a year off and return with their scholarships intact. When they offered to pay their own way, another uproar ensued. The faculty group who

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supported them, much like the true mother in the judgment of Solomon, gave way lest the community be torn apart. So it was that St. John's turned away a future recipient of its Pax Christi Award, though in those heady days of victory no one was thinking in terms of peace awards. Fortunately, St. Thomas, a small diocesan college in St. Paul, Minnesota, had no qualms about taking pacifist money, and Zahn and Leonard enrolled there.

Their year at St. John's brought them one great benefit, however. Their favorite professor, Eugene McCarthy, went to Washington as a senator, and he got them jobs that enabled them to pursue their graduate studies at Catholic University, Zahn working in the senator's office.

After they got their doctorates, Zahn joined the faculty of Loyola University in Chicago, and Leonard, who would marry and raise a family, began a thirty-year teaching career at LaSalle. Zahn, however, remained single and devoted himself to research.

It sounds like a quiet life, but, as indicated, it wasn't. A prominent German prelate, Cardinal Bea, later a hero of Vatican II but in this case very much a child of Vatican I, was shocked by *German Catholics and Hitler's Wars*. He asked the president of Loyola to persuade Zahn to withdraw the book, which he had spent seven years researching and writing, on the grounds that it would give aid and comfort to the enemies of the Church. When Zahn, who had tenure at Loyola, refused, Bea was able to put pressure on Zahn's publisher, the German-based Herder & Herder, to withdraw the book. Fortunately for the Church, Frank Sheed, the founder of Sheed & Ward, a man who together with his wife, Masie Ward, was the most devout of Catholics, decided that

Zahn's *j'accuse* was a book that had to be published, and Sheed & Ward did so.

After the book's critical success, the University of Massachusetts made Zahn a fine offer, a nine thousand dollar raise and a class load that left plenty of time for research. It was an offer most of us couldn't refuse, but Zahn was willing to do so if Loyola would only meet it halfway. Not surprisingly, Loyola didn't, glad to have this thorn plucked from its side. An elite student organization (of which Peter Steinfels was a member) wanted to give Zahn its Teacher-of-the-Year award, but the president of Loyola gave them to understand that they would do no such thing.

As important as his contribution to Vatican II was and as significant as his books on the German bishops and the RAF chaplains were, I think it will be for his life of Jägerstätter, *In Solitary Witness*, that Gordon Zahn will be most fondly remembered. Most fondly and perhaps most uneasily. Were it not for Zahn, the world would never have heard of Franz Jägerstätter, and Jägerstätter is a figure as disturbing as he is important.

Mother Teresa will, no doubt, be canonized long before Jägerstätter, but this, as I see it, indicates why Jägerstätter is the more significant figure. Mother Teresa, though she does challenge us as all saints must, is nevertheless a saint with whom we can be comfortable. We can't be comfortable with Jägerstätter, not even more than a half century after his death.

We can emulate Mother Teresa without threatening the powers and principalities, but if we emulate Jägerstätter, we must run the risk that he did. And someday we, as Americans, might have to consider doing so. Many American Catho-

lics, in fact, would disagree sharply with me, temporizer that I am too, and say not "someday" but *now*. My friend the Dominican Sister Ardeth Platte and her companions, Sisters Carol Gilbert and Jackie Platte, who are now awaiting sentencing in federal court in Denver for obstructing national defense and other high crimes and misdemeanors in the course of pouring their blood on a missile silo, are much too kind to be critical of fellow Catholics like me, but their example speaks for itself.

In any event, Gordon Zahn, the dean of American Catholic pacifists, has labored through the heat of the day in the service of the Catholic Church. Because of him, we, as American Catholics, are on much less easy terms with the world around us than we otherwise might have been. Whether we blame him or praise him for this is now up to us.

¹ Regarding obedience to legitimate authorities, just last March Bishop Edmund O'Brien of the Military Ordinate trotted out this same argument (furnished him, apparently, by Fr. Richard John Neuhaus, a latter-day Decaturan in the Spellman tradition) to comfort any chaplain who felt a bit queasy about ignoring the pope's condemnation of the invasion of Iraq. Of course most chaplains are made of sterner stuff.

² But, as Professor Berra observed, it ain't over until it's over. Some twenty years after Vatican II, the devout William F. Buckley, Jr. scrupled not to give over an entire issue of his *National Review* to Michael Novak, like Neuhaus, a prominent, and indefatigable, Decaturan, to allow him to argue for the morality of direct attack on civilians, provided, of course, that they were Communist civilians.