



Blessed Franz Jägerstätter

**Martyred by the Nazis
An exemplar for our times**

Franz teaches us how to live in our decisive times

All historical data is from the book *In Solitary Witness: The Life and Death of Franz Jägerstätter* by Gordon Zahn.

–Fr. Jordi Rivero.

Franz's youth and marriage

Franz was a young Austrian farmer. In his youth, he was a good student but with a reputation as a wild fellow after being arrested for his involvement in a gang. He wrote after his conversion:

I can say from my own experience how painful life often is when one lives as a halfway Christian: it is more like vegetating than living.

In 1936 he married Franziska, who shared his faith and they had two daughters.

Franz led a life of deep prayer. He became a sexton (caretaker of the parish) and arranged funerals and other ceremonies without charge. Daily, he went to Mass and meditated on the Bible. He could be heard singing to the Lord as he worked in the field. He refused to gossip or use vulgar language. The villagers concluded that he was a fanatic.

Should it be the temptation is ever so strong that you feel you must give in to sin, give some thought then to eternity. For it often happens that a man risks his temporal and eternal happiness for a few seconds of pleasure.

The Nazis come to power

The Nazis developed methods of psychological manipulation using propaganda and fear to create mass psychosis. Many companies supported the Nazis for profit and became the backbone of the Nazi military complex [[here](#)]. Some are still in business today. Pharmaceutical companies like Bayer (creator of Zyklon, used in the gas chambers) [[here](#)] and IBM [[here](#)].

In 1938, Austria voted for the *Anschluss* (annexation to Nazi Germany). The streets of Vienna overflowed with [enthusiastic crowds](#) welcoming Hitler as their Führer. At the direction of Vienna's cardinal, the churches pealed their bells and flew swastikas.¹

¹ https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catholic_bishops_in_Nazi_Germany#CITEREFShirer2011

Franz Jägerstätter was married with three small daughters. Radegund, the village next to his farm, was entirely Catholic, yet he was the only person to vote against annexation. The few who were not captivated by the Nazi ideology voted in favor for fear of a Nazi backlash. They said it was “the prudent thing to do” or “there was really nothing else to do.” Villagers greeted each other on the street with “Heil Hitler!” but Franz refused and publicly declared he would not fight in Hitler’s war.

Franz was deeply grieved that the leaders of the Church in Austria supported the annexation, and some praised the Nazi party for its “many good works.” He wrote:

I believe that what took place in the spring of 1938 was not much different from Good Thursday, nineteen hundred years ago, when the Jewish crowd was given a free choice between an innocent Savior and the criminal Barabbas.

That is the day the Austrian Church allowed itself to be taken prisoner and has been in chains ever since.

*The great fight between life and death has already begun. However, in the midst of it, there are **many who continue to live their lives as if nothing has changed, as if this great and decisive struggle does not concern them.***

The majority of Catholics submitted to the government

That Austria, a country overwhelmingly Catholic, welcomed Hitler shows Satan’s ability to deceive and control. He hides evil under the appearance of high ideals and virtues. Adolf Hitler, for example, used the “common good” and “love for country” as arguments:

It is thus necessary that the individual should finally come to realize that his own ego is of no importance in comparison with the existence of the nation, that the position of the individual is conditioned solely by the interests of the nation as a whole. ~ Adolf Hitler (1938). –Adolf Hitler from Speeches 1933-1938 [\[here\]](#)

Only those who have a **mind transformed in Christ and embrace the Cross** can enter the spiritual battle and win. These are very few.

Franz writes about the Church’s compliance with the Nazis:

*In Germany, **before Hitler came to power, it was once a matter of policy to refuse holy communion to Nazis; and what is the situation today in this greater German Reich?** The answer, of course, is that **many who have become Nazis and have turned their children over to the Nazis for their formation now approach the communion rail with no spiritual misgivings at all.** Have they then—while for more than two years now a horrible human slaughter has been going on—established a new policy that sees all this as something permissible or not to be mentioned? Or **has the teaching authority of the church already made or approved the decision that men may now join a party that is opposed to the church?** **It simply means that there is no longer any likelihood that there will be a bloody persecution of Christians here, for virtually anything the Nazis want or demand, Christians will yield²***

² In Solitary Witness, *The Life and Death of Franz Jägerstätter*, Gordon Zahn, pg 113

How did they get to this?

Franz writes:

*Did Nazism fall from the sky on us? I think we should not waste too many words on this since anyone who has not been sleeping for the last ten years knows perfectly well how and why things have come to be the way they are. **Before [the Nazi takeover], all kinds of sexual immorality, abortion, and contraceptives; pagan ideologies were accepted...***

In the years before the Nazis came to power, Germany fell progressively into paganism and immorality. Cities were awash with prostitution, drugs, and pornography. Germany became home to the world's first homosexual movement, their first magazine, and the first pro-lesbian movie (1931). Franz saw that immorality leads people away from God and blinds their conscience.

The Lord says:

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God – Mt. 5, 8

If we don't see God's ways, we are vulnerable to ideologies and fall for other gods.

The god of this world blinds the understanding so that it does not see the bright light of the Gospel. –2 Cor 4, 2

Many intellectuals denounced Christianity as an “imported” religion; others tried to reinvent Christianity. Renowned Bible scholars of eleven Protestant churches founded the “Institute for the Elimination of Jewish Influence in the German Church³.” In this way, they helped spread the diabolical belief in the superiority of the Aryan race as a superman without God (Cf. Gen 3,5) and paved the way for Nazi antisemitism and the holocaust.

The German bishops strongly opposed the Nazis⁴, but as persecution increased⁵, their efforts weakened.⁶ However, a few heroic voices remained.

It is important to recognize that many Christians went along with the Nazis if we hope to remain faithful under the evil ideologies of our time. A massive apostasy is taking

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Institute_for_the_Study_and_Elimination_of_Jewish_Influence_on_German_Church_Life

⁴ https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catholic_bishops_in_Nazi_Germany

⁵ <https://www.crisismagazine.com/2007/the-priests-of-dachau>

⁶ After the signing of the concordat the papal nuncio exhorted the German bishops to support Hitler's régime.^[62] The bishops told their flocks to try to get along with the Nazi régime.^[63] /1937, Cardinal Faulhaber declared: At a time when the heads of the major nations in the world faced the new Germany with considerable suspicion, the Catholic Church, the greatest moral power on earth, through the Concordat, expressed its confidence in the new German government. This was a deed of immeasurable significance for the reputation of the new government abroad.^[49] <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reichskonkordat> Hitler was Catholic, never officially left the Church & paid the church tax. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion_in_Nazi_Germany SA <https://www.conservapedia.com/Sturmabteilung> Nazi and HOMO https://www.conservapedia.com/Nazi_Germany_and_homosexuality

place. Others remain in the Church but no longer believe. Few will stand like Franz Jagerstatter at the foot of the Cross. Today, the Lord is abandoned again.

A Train to Hell

God, through a dream, shows Franz the consequences of the blindness that is leading people to damnation.

Let me begin by describing an experience I had on a summer night in 1938. At first, I lay awake in my bed until almost midnight, unable to sleep, although I was not sick; I must have fallen asleep anyway. All of a sudden, I saw a beautiful shining railroad train that circled around a mountain. Streams of children—and adults as well—rushed towards the train and could not be held back. I would rather not say how many adults did not join the ride. Then I heard a voice say to me: “This train is going to hell.” ...

At first, this traveling train was something of a riddle to me, but the longer our situation continues, the clearer the meaning of this train becomes for me today. It seems to me that it is a symbol of nothing but National Socialism (the Nazi party), which was then breaking in...

To illustrate his point, he refers to news reports of new gains in Party membership and to the very few adults who did not belong to some Nazi organization or were unwilling to contribute to their collections.

Franz saw only two alternatives:

Participation or contributions to the Nazis must either help or hinder us Catholics in our efforts to gain salvation. If it is useful for winning salvation, then it is a blessing for the whole German people that Nazism, with all its organizations, is so widespread and strong among us—for I believe the German people were never so deeply involved in the works of Christian charity or so ready to contribute as they are today to the Nazis.

*Thus, I believe God has shown me most clearly through this dream, or revelation, and has convinced me in my heart how I must answer the question: should I be a National Socialist—or Catholic? **I would like to call out to everyone who is riding on this train: “jump out before the train reaches its destination, even if it costs your very life!”***

Franz Jagerstatter refuses military service

The Lord and the Blessed Mother guided Franz to see the evil and to have the courage to remain faithful while all around him were mesmerized by Nazi propaganda and failed to disassociate themselves from their policies and programs.

The pressure on Franz to capitulate was enormous. Everyone told him that he could not refuse military service. His wife tried to persuade him, but she stood with him when she saw that he was determined.

Franz went to his parish priest and then to those in neighboring towns, seeking direction about military conscription. He told them about his struggle because his conscience did not allow him to participate in Hitler’s war. No one supported him. A priest accused him of being **self-centered in his religious and political views and not thinking of his duties to his family and**

farm. This caused him great anguish, “how can it be that even the priests tell me to obey the Nazis? Could it be that my resistance is pride? Finally, he went to the bishop but heard the same arguments:

- 1- **You are not responsible for the actions of the secular ruler; you only have to obey.**
- 2- **You have an absolute responsibility toward your family.**

Finally, seeing Franz’s depth of conviction, **the bishop conceded that he could take the path of martyrdom, but only if he knew that he was called to it through an exceptional revelation from above and not for reasons of his own.**

Is it necessary to have “an exceptional revelation from above” before obeying Christ when doing so puts us in danger of death? Is the revelation of the Gospel not enough?

He who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it. (Mt 10:38-39)

Do not be conformed to this world. (Rm 12:2-3)

Not all are called to the martyrdom of blood, but all are called to embrace it if the occasion arrives. It is true that, before any decision, we must pray, but if we are not disposed to suffer and die for Christ, we will not respond. Fear and the desire for self-preservation will lead us to justify and convince ourselves to avoid danger, or we will simply run away like the disciples.

Some say that Franz went out of his way to seek martyrdom, a vocation that is not for all. Franz was not seeking martyrdom; instead, like all the saints, he was ready for anything to be faithful to Christ. Martyrdom was the consequence, and he embraced it. He did not conform to the mindset of the world nor the mindset of Catholics around him.

Before criticizing Franz’s bishop, let us consider his precarious situation. The Nazis persecuted the Church, arrested priests, and closed many Catholic institutions. The important question for us is: What would I do in the same circumstances? This is why we must live daily as victims of love. He who is not ready to suffer in the small daily trials will not resist the big ones. We don’t seek martyrdom, but we embrace it with God’s grace when the moment arrives without waiting for an exceptional revelation.

How is it that a farmer could discern correctly? Jesus praises the Father: *For although you have hidden these things from the wise and the learned, you have revealed them to the childlike.* (Lk: 10,21)

For St. Therese, the childlike are those driven by Christ’s love: *If this love were extinguished, ... the martyrs would have shed their blood no more.*

Franz imprisoned and condemned to death

Franz Jägerstätter’s letter to his parish priest about his refusal to enter military service:

Since no one can dispense me from what I view as the danger to the health of my soul that this gang [the Nazis] presents, I cannot change my decision, which you already know. As it is, it is so hard to come even one step closer to perfection. Is it even conceivable to try in such an outfit?

Christ did not praise Peter for denying Him merely out of fear of men. How often would I probably have to repeat the denial, serving with this outfit? If one were not to do so, he would be almost certain that he would never see his dear ones on earth again. Everyone tells me, of course, that I should not do what I am doing because of the danger of death, but it seems to me that the others who do fight are not completely free of the same danger of death.... I believe it is better to sacrifice one's life right away than to place oneself in the grave danger of committing sin and then dying.

I beg you to remember me at Mass as long as you're permitted to offer a Mass. And from my heart, I'd ask you to pray for me, too, and to forgive me any trouble I may ever have caused you. May God not abandon me in the last hour! God and the Blessed Virgin will surely not abandon my family when I can no longer protect them myself. Things will be very hard for my dear ones. This leave-taking will be most difficult.

Your deeply indebted Sexton greets you from his heart. May God protect you and all other priests.

When called to military duty in February of 1943, Franz refused to comply and was sent to prison. He was married and had three daughters, the eldest not quite six.

Before and during prison, he was constantly reproached for his decision. Especially painful was the accusation that he was abandoning his family. He wrote:

Again and again, people stress the obligation of conscience as they concern my wife and children. Yet I cannot believe that, just because one has a wife and children, he is free to offend God by lying (not to mention all the other things he would be called upon to do). Did not Christ himself say, "he who loves father, mother, or children more than Me is not deserving of my love"?

I may not cooperate in an unjust war. God will certainly take care of my wife and children in such a case.

I would have liked to spare them the pain and sorrow they now suffer for me.

The day before Franz was transferred from the induction center to the Berlin prison, he wrote to his wife about a time he spent with a priest but without revealing to him his intentions.

It would only have led to an argument, for I would not have found any understanding... if one were to speak today of the spirit of penance and detachment, he would not find much understanding for that, either.

He then thanked his wife, knowing her intense suffering and the abuse she was receiving as the villagers rejected her. Some told her that her husband was getting just what he deserved.

Upon reading that his eldest daughter, not yet six, was making sacrifices for him, he wrote: *"They certainly will not be in vain. How could I feel abandoned here when so many are praying for me at home?"*

His lawyer insisted upon Franz to make some concessions to the government. When he resisted, the objections to his decision became more intense and sophisticated:

- You must defend your country and not be a traitor.
- War is survival. Germany's enemies also use immoral means.
- If you do not accept military service knowing that you will be sentenced to death, you are committing suicide.
- Resisting is totally useless.

Then they questioned him based on his faithfulness to the Catholic Church:

■ You are not responsible for the mistakes of your superiors but rather for obeying the government. Do your duty to the nation as the Church tells you and as millions of Catholics, including priests and seminarians, are doing. Some of them are actually engaged in combat.

Franz replied: *they have not been given the grace to see things otherwise*

■ Do you think you know more about the Catholic faith than the bishops?

They challenged him to name a single bishop who, in a pastoral letter or sermon, had called on Catholics not to support the war or to refuse military service. Franz knew of none.

■ "You have no competence to pass judgment on the morality of war. It is a very complex issue..."

■ "Give Caesar what belongs to Caesar..."

Franz replied: *You can't obey if what they command is a sin.* Then he quoted Peter and John's response to the elders at the Temple: "*Judge for yourselves whether it is right before God to obey you instead of obeying Him.*" —Acts 4, 19.

■ By what right can you take a position that is "more Catholic" than that taken by priests and bishops who have the responsibility to make theological judgments?

Franz responded that this is the kind of moral judgment that ultimately has to be made by the individual conscience since the point at issue concerns precisely the distinction between the "things that are Caesar's" and "the things that are God's."

Franz insisted that his decision was based on his Catholic faith and that the Nazi regime was incompatible with the faith, even if the hierarchy did not see it.

His lawyer's last argument:

■ "The Church in Germany will need men like you after the war."

Franz answered: *"I cannot hold Hitler accountable for my actions. I cannot reconcile my conscience with fighting for Hitler."*

The military tribunal argued in Franz's trial that there is a **distinction between supporting a regime and the "defense of the Fatherland."** Finally, in an extraordinary occurrence that the lawyer had never seen, the court gave Franz a guarantee that he would never be called upon to bear arms if he would only withdraw his refusal to serve. But Franz rejected this offer and explained that such an agreement would only complicate matters by adding to an already essentially immoral compromise, the sin of falsehood, by

“seeming” to accept service only as a means of avoiding the death penalty. Later he said to Fr. Furthauer: *“Even if I were to agree now, do you think they would really keep their promise? They would almost certainly send me out to serve in a Straf-legion”* (a military unit reserved for particularly hazardous or even hopeless action, in which there is virtually no chance of survival).

He said to a fellow prisoner:

As a Christian, I prefer to do my fighting with the word of God and not with arms. I love Austria intensely, and I'll absolutely refuse to serve the oppressor of my country. I know that I will be executed, but I prefer to die this way than to do evil to others and die anyway on the battlefield.

Justifications of those unwilling to face the truth

The above arguments show how we can obscure the simple truth with elaborate arguments. When our desire to preserve ourselves in this world (interests, reputation, assets, relationships, and life) is stronger than our love for Christ, the enemy provides us with many arguments to justify ourselves, avoid the Cross and remain convinced that we are good Catholics.

Those who justify themselves feel exposed by those who act with integrity. Darkness hates the light. Franz is accused of being **an extremist, inflexible, stubborn, and mentally unbalanced.** It was said that **his religiosity had led him to ‘fanaticism.’**

Letters from prison:

Franz wrote seventeen letters to his wife, expressing his love for her and their three girls and sharing his spiritual wisdom and intimacy with God.

*I am always troubled by the fear that you **have much to suffer on my account:** forgive me everything if I bring injustice down upon you.*

Dearest wife, today it is seven years since we spoke our vows of love and fidelity before God and the priest, and I believe we have faithfully kept these vows to this day. I also believe that, even though we must now live apart, God will continue to give us the grace to keep them until the end of our lives. When I look back upon all the joy and the many graces that have been mine for these seven years, it seems at times almost to border on the miraculous. If someone were to tell me that there is no God or that God does not love us—and if I were to believe him—I would not be able to explain how all this has come to me. Dearest wife, this is why, no matter how we may dread the future, he who has upheld us and given us joy till now will not abandon us then either. If only we do not forget to give thanks and do not hold ourselves back in our striving for heaven, God will permit our joy to continue on for all eternity.

Though I sit behind prison walls, I still believe I can build further on your love and devotion in the days to come. And, should I have to leave this life, I will still rest easy in my

grave, for you know that I am not here as a criminal. It makes me very happy that you had a Mass for me, for I know you have given special thought to me while participating in it... ***it would not be too much for me if I had to go 100 km on foot to attend a single mass... a man first realizes the true value of our faith in a situation like this. Let us fervently pray that the light of faith will never be extinguished in us...***

He who is not willing to suffer with and for Christ will also not share in his resurrection. And even if the Cross that God (or we ourselves) has laid upon us becomes a little heavy, I will never get as difficult and heavy as the one which Satan loads on his followers, many of whom have already broken under this burden and thrown their lives away.

As soon as dawn begins to break, one can hear the birds singing outside our windows. They seem to know more about freedom and joy, even though they are just irrational animals, than we humans with our gift of intellect, and even though we know what a great reward awaits us after our brief existence on earth. Would we want, then, to worry so much when we have to do without something or worry about those things that are in our hearts when they are going to be rewarded a thousand times in eternity?

Should it be God's will that I do not see you again in this world, let us then hope to meet soon again in heaven. Greet the children once more for me. Tell them often about the Child Jesus and heaven. To all my loved ones: I send you all my sincerest greetings as long as I am still in freedom. Learn to become a family loving one another and forgiving whatever may become. Forgive all those who might cause you hardship, and me, too. Goodbye until we meet again.

In his letters to her, he frequently expressed love, gratitude, and sorrow for causing pain and asked for forgiveness.

Dear wife, forgive me everything by which I have grieved or offended you. For my part, I have forgiven everything. I ask all those in Radegund whom I have ever injured or offended to forgive me too.

Thoughts from his letters to his wife:

We should lose everything dear and valuable on earth rather than commit the slightest offense against God. ...Surely, it must have been hard for our beloved Savior to bring such pain upon his dear mother through her death. Are our pains compared to what these two innocent hearts had to suffer and all for us sinners? If I did not have faith in the mercy of God, who would forgive me all my sins, I could hardly have endured life in a solitary prison so calmly.

I place my whole future in God's hands. He Will certainly make everything turn out for the best for us: ***the important thing is to fear God more than man.***

Do not let a single day go by in vain without putting it to good use for eternity.

I would much prefer it if I could hear the lovely Marian hymns instead of the popular “hits” one usually hears in these cells.

***It is good that men cannot see into the future.** This way, we can take each day just as God sends it to us.*

At a time when the Church still refused to offer Mass for those who committed suicide, Franz understood a vital distinction, likely after observing the mental condition of those who killed themselves in prison and the accusations that his decision was a form of suicide: *One should pass judgment only on the act suicide and never on those who commit it.*

Easter day: ***If we must also experience hard times today, we still should and can rejoice with the church regardless.** For what is there more joyous than the fact that Christ has risen again and has gone before us as victor over death and hell? What can give us Christians greater comfort than the knowledge that we need never again fear death?*

No matter how great our sufferings in this world might become, I believe the poor souls in purgatory would still change places with us in an instant. That is why we help them as much as we can.

*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'll find that much better than if my will were in chains. **Neither person nor chains nor sentence of death can rob a man of the Faith and his own 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. If people took as much trouble to warn men against the serious sins which bring eternal death and thus keep them from such sins as they are taking to warn me against a dishonorable death, I think Satan could count on no more than a meager harvest... we must do everything in our power to strive toward the Eternal Homeland and to preserve a good conscience.*

Why do we give so little thought to eternity? Why is it so hard for us to make sacrifices for heaven? Yes, even though we cannot see it, we are sometimes clearly aware of the presence of an invisible power which makes every conceivable effort to lead a man along the path to ruin. And that is the power of hell. Lucifer knows full well what joys and glories there are in heaven, but since he himself can never return to them, he cannot bear man to know such joy. For this reason, he and his companions use every means to bind our thoughts and desires to this world. The less we think of eternity and of God's love and mercy, the more likely Satan is to win his game. For us men, there are only two possibilities in this world: either we become ever better or ever worse; there is simply no such thing as standing still..⁷

Just as those who believe in National Socialism (Hitler's party) tell themselves that the 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 one of these is prayer.

⁷ There is no neutral ground in the Kingdom. Cf. Lk 11,27 “He is not with Me is against Me”

Franz saw every situation as an opportunity to love Christ

Years after the war, Franz's wife received a letter from a man who had shared prison with him:

I can only assure you that we found a good friend in Franz, who, in the darkest moments, always knew how to find a word of comfort and always managed to give us his last piece of bread from the meager lunches and dinners we ate. His faith in God and justice knows no measure. We saw him immersed in prayer all day, his rosary being his constant companion. He was never afraid to confess his faith openly despite the taunts of the guards and his fellow inmates.

What happened to the rosary? Another ex-prisoner writes his wife:

I have not forgotten your husband, and I will never forget him. He gave me his rosary in prison.

Franz helped convert two men sentenced to death with him to the Catholic faith. He did not go to heaven alone!

It is always possible to save one's own soul and perhaps some others as well by bearing individual witness against evil.

Franz also prayed and suffered for the conversion of the Nazis, believing that, from his prison cell, he could bring many graces to others.

Already there have been SS-men, so I have heard, who have been converted before their death... People are often not as bad as one thinks.

Franz's wife, Franziska, visits him in prison

Franziska was able to visit her husband only once. From the prison waiting room, she looked at the courtyard below and saw as guards pulled her husband, in chains, from the back of a truck so roughly that he fell to the ground. She screamed his name. Hearing her voice, he jumped to his feet and looked wildly about him—as if he thought her voice had come from another world. He had not known that she was coming. She and the parish priest that came with her were taken to a cell where they sat across the table from her husband, who was flanked by guards. His wife had brought him some food but was not permitted to give it to him. Both she and the priest tried to prevail upon him to change his mind, but it was useless. He told her:

I am completely happy: I will not weaken. I am happy that I have come this far. May God accept my life as a penance not only for my sins but for those of others as well.

Then the priest blessed him and assured him that he need not fear that he was committing a sin by following the dictates of his conscience. The visit lasted 20 minutes, and Franziska recalls, “with heavy hearts, we had to take leave of each other.” It was their last time together on this earth.

Last days

The prison chaplain made a three-hour attempt to get Franz to accept the call to military service. In the end, he congratulated Franz on the strength of his moral commitment and told him about **Fr. Reinisch**, a Pallotine priest that had been executed a year earlier for refusing to take the military oath. Hearing about Fr. Reinisch was a great joy and relief for Franz, to know that someone else (a priest, no less) had traveled his same path. **He understood that to discern clearly, a person must not succumb to fear and be willing to die. Franz understood the difference between obedience to the Catholic faith and the position of those in the clergy who are dominated by fear.**

This sentence of death should serve as a warning. For the Lord God will not deal much differently with us if we think we do not have to obey everything He commands us through His Church to believe and to do.

Franz had the grace to forgive

I must not think ill of others who act differently from me. It is much better to pray for everyone than to judge them.

If one does not entertain any thoughts of vengeance against others and can forgive everyone, even when sometimes he is the object of a harsh word, he will have peace in his heart, and what is there in this whole world more beautiful than peace?

Most men make life bitter for themselves by the hardness of their hearts.

He also forgave priests and bishops.

Let us not throw stones at our bishops or priests. They, too, are men like us, made of flesh and bone, and they can weaken. They are probably much more tempted by the evil enemy than the rest of us. Perhaps they have been too ill-prepared to undertake this fight and choose between life and death. ... Perhaps, too, our bishops thought that it would be a short time before everything fell apart and that, with their compliance, they could spare the faithful many agonies and martyrdoms. Unfortunately, things turned out to be quite different: years have passed, and now thousands of people must die in the clutches of error every year. It is not difficult to imagine what heroic decision it would take for our people to repudiate all the mistakes that have been made in recent years. This is why we should not make things more difficult for our spiritual leaders than they already are by making accusations against them.

Let us pray for them so that God lightens the great tasks that still lie ahead.

Closing of His last letter, which was received after his death:

Dearest wife and mother! It was not possible for me to free you from the pain that you must now suffer on my account. How hard it must have been for our dear Savior when, through His sufferings and death, He had to prepare such great sorrow for His mother – and they bore this all out of love for us sinners. I thank our dear Jesus, too, that I am privileged to suffer and die for him. I trust that, in His unending mercy, God has forgiven me everything and will not abandon me in the last hour.... Even now, Jesus will come to me in holy communion and strengthen me for the journey to eternity...

My heartfelt greetings for my dear children. I will surely beg the dear God, if I am permitted to enter heaven soon, that he may set aside a little space in heaven for all of you. In the past week, I have often prayed to the Blessed mother that if it is God's will that I die soon, I may be permitted to celebrate the Feast of the Assumption in heaven... the heart of Jesus, the heart of Mary, and my heart are one, United for time and eternity. Mary, with Child so dear, give us all your blessings.

Testimony of the prison chaplain transmitted to an Austrian nun:

Visiting Austrian nuns, chaplain Jochmann recalled Franz and said: *"I can only congratulate you on this fellow countryman of yours who lived like a saint and died like a hero. I say with certainty that this simple man is the only saint I have ever met in all my life."* Then he shared Franz's last days:

The night before Franz was executed, I visited him and found him completely calm and prepared. Not a word of complaint. On the table in front of him lay a document. I mentioned that just by signing it, he would save his life. Franz smiled and said: *"I cannot and must not swear in favor of a government that is fighting an unjust war."* I then offered to read from the Bible. Franz replied, *"I am completely immersed in inner union with the Lord, and any reading would only interrupt my communication with my God."*

Father Jochmann continued: "I can never forget how Franz's eyes sparkled with such joy and confidence.

The following day, August 9, 1943, Franz received the Eucharist and the last sacraments. I witnessed the calm and collected way Franz walked toward the scaffold.

He had asked the Blessed Mother to be in heaven on the feast of the Assumption, August 15, and the Blessed Mother granted his request.

Franz's testimony is a challenge for Christians today

Our world has also fallen for ideologies that cause moral degeneration. Schools rob children of their innocence, confuse their sexual identity, and doctors mutilate them for life with "transgender surgery." Parents who protest are labeled "domestic terrorists."

Nazism is now viewed as the epitome of evil, but the label is used as a weapon by those who themselves act as Nazis to defame their opponents. They excoriate and silence opponents who do not submit to the dictates of the state and the media. They call Nazis extremists those who believe in the sacredness of human life, in the unchangeable identity of men and women, on the sacredness of marriage as a union between a man and a woman, or on the right of individuals over their medical decisions.

Fear is again causing people to uncritically accept government mandates, thinking they are being protected.

How was Franz able to see clearly and act courageously?

These are the pillars that sustained him:

The Eucharist: While working from dawn to dusk on his farm, Franz still volunteered as custodian of his little village church and participated in daily Holy Mass and adoration.

Daily meditation on the Bible.

Strong family life.

Love for Mary: The Virgin Mary taught him to love from the heart and forgive.

Franz's example of forgiveness and love for the clergy inspired me to think of the Sorrowful Mother at Calvary. She saw that Peter and the others were not there; they abandoned Jesus and her at the most difficult hour. Had she not been the Full of Grace, she would have resented and been angry towards them. In situations like that, relationships are broken; we don't want to have anything to do with the offender. But Mary did not doubt that the authority and mission Jesus had bestowed upon them remained valid. She continues to submit to Peter and propitiates the restoration of the Apostles by gathering with them at the cenacle. Pentecost, not anger, was the answer.

Loving and forgiving is not a weakness but the greatest strength.

Franz's witness confirms why the Lord is forming us in the power of the Cross, asking us to be his little victims of love for these decisive times. From the beginning, Jesus has told us in Love Crucified, "I am making all things new" (Rev 21, 5). "The Lord is challenging us to realize something new, precisely when so many things in the Church are crumbling."⁸

Posthumous Recognition

Franz's witness seemed for decades to be destined to oblivion until he was discovered in 1964 through the publication of the book, *In Solitary Witness, The Life and Death of Franz Jägerstätter* by Gordon Zahn. He writes about Franz:

No witness is lost or wasted. He went to his death convinced that few would ever know or remember what happened to him. As far as he was concerned, that made no difference. It was enough that *he* knew and that *his God* knew—and he gave thanks for the privilege of dying for the faith.

⁸ –Saint Arnoldo Janssen.

At the Second Vatican Council, an English archbishop asked his fellow bishops that Franz's example "inspire our deliberations" on the document that would become "The Pastoral Constitution on the Modern World."

In 1984, forty-one years after his death, the President of Austria issued him a posthumous Award of Honor.

His martyrdom helped raise awareness that Christians cannot cooperate with evil.

At the Second Vatican Council, Archbishop Roberts said that he regarded "as the major scandal of Christianity... that almost every national hierarchy in almost every war has allowed itself to become the moral arm of its own government, even in wars later recognized as palpably unjust."

The 1983 pastoral letter of the US hierarchy stated, "let us break with this tragic past by making a clear and unambiguous affirmation of the right and the obligation of each Christian to obey the voice of his informed conscience before and during a time of war."

On October 26, 2007, Franz Jägerstätter was beatified by pope Benedict XVI. Some five thousand, including cardinals and clergy, looked up as a 30-foot image of Franz was unfurled behind the main altar of the Cathedral of Linz. Franziska, Franz's 94-year-old widow, and their three daughters were on the front pew. The honor was well deserved. The letters that she and Franz exchanged while he was in prison prove her support despite the sacrifices his death brought upon herself and their children.

A testimony of my encounter with Blessed Franz

I discovered Franz Jägerstätter providentially while in seminary. I had the intuition that the Lord put him in my life because the world is heading towards similar times as his, and few are aware of it. I understood that my mission is to proclaim the power of the Cross.

As the first anniversary of Franz's beatification was approaching, I decided to visit his resting place at the hamlet of Radegund, Austria, where he had lived as a farmer, to pray for guidance for our community, Love Crucified, which had been founded that year (March 13, 2008). We arrived on October 7, 2008, and the mailman on a bike led us to the beautiful Bavarian-style chapel. On the exterior wall, there is a large crucifix over his grave. Two ladies arrived and prayed next to us as we prayed. They were [Franziska Jägerstätter](#), Franz's wife, and one of their daughters! I felt that God confirmed my seminary intuition.

Franziska joined her beloved husband at 100 on March 16, 2013.



*Mrs. Jägerstätter, the day of our visit to Franz's tomb, October 7, 2008.
The daughter is not in the picture.*