

The Man Who Chose To See

A Layman Picks Up The Cross of His Primary Vocation- to Be a Follower of Jesus, not Simply an Admirer of Jesus.

By Rev. Emmanuel Charles McCarthy

Courtesy of Rev. McCarthy

The life of Franz Jägerstätter was the ordinary life of an Austrian farmer in the village of St. Radekund. He was a devout Catholic, a daily communicant who prayed the rosary while doing farm chores. Sexton of his parish church, he was married and had three children. But, on August 9, 1943 Franz Jägerstätter's life became other than ordinary, when he was legally killed by the German Military for refusing to kill for the German Military.

At the hour of his death few people knew him and no one who did know him supported him in his refusal to engage in homicide for the Führer. Legions of Christians of all ranks told him to do his duty and go to war like the other Christian laymen. His bishop, pastor and spiritual advisors endeavored to persuade him that his conscientious objection was a wrong and futile course, even possibly sinful and contrary to Church teaching. He was looked upon as the embarrassing, if not mentally unstable, polar opposite of the heroic Aryan warrior. However, with a courage that, even on an exclusively human plane, was noble, heart-rending and eminently inspiring, he gently stood firm and said, "No," to joining the German military. So it can be said with certitude, that when the blade of the guillotine fell at Brandenburg Prison near Berlin at 4 p.m. on August 9, 1943, Franz Jägerstätter was totally alone, almost totally unknown and destined to be totally forgotten.

However, as a manifestation of how the mystery and power of God's loving plan for the redemption of all people through Jesus Christ inexorably advances through history, on October 26, AD 2007 throughout the world millions of people stopped, thought about and were touched by this man. People may disagree among themselves about historical details of his life but no one with the slightest degree of spiritual sensitivity will doubt that the finger of God was operative here—and operative not just for the salvation

of Franz Jägerstätter but also for the good of the Church and through the Church for the good of all people. For on October 26, 2007, the Catholic Church formally Beatified Franz Jägerstätter as a martyr of the Christian faith. His Beatification will close forever for all Catholics, and hopefully for all Christians, any thought that their Christian vocation includes obeying the laws of a nation or the orders of an agent of a state if what is required to obey is doing that which is not in conformity with the Will of God as revealed by Jesus, the Word (Logos) of God "made flesh." The Beatification of this "destined to be forgotten" man will be the incarnational and liturgical underlining in blood-red of one of the most ignored tenets of Gospel morality and one of the most ignored text of the Catechism of the Catholic Church (§2242), a text that owes its inclusion directly to Franz Jagerstatter's fidelity to his Baptismal vocation to be first and foremost a follower of Jesus and not just someone who reveres Him:

The citizen is obliged in conscience not to follow the directions of civil authorities when they are contrary to the demands of the moral order; the fundamental rights of persons or the Gospel. Refusing obedience to civil authorities, when their demands are contrary to those of an upright conscience, finds its justification in the distinction between serving God and serving the political community. "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (Mt 22:21). "We must obey God rather than man" (Ac 5:29).

The story of how a simple man, a "nobody" by the standards of the "somebodies" of this world, went from being a criminal who was executed by his government for declining to partake in a nation's war, to being a person who was officially discussed at the Second Vatican Council, to being a figure known at every point of the compass, to being a person Beatified by the Catholic Church deserves the attention of everyone who struggles to understand how humanity can be extricated from this valley of tragedy and tears in which human life

is ensnared. Franz Jägerstätter's witness should be especially pondered by those who believe that fidelity to the Word (Logos) of God as revealed in Jesus is "not enough" to make an essential difference in the human situation, and by those who believe that Christianity must proclaim a "realistic gospel" of evil renamed, rationalized and accepted as good, if it is to be effective in this world. So, here in this article I hope to make visible the prophetic purpose and meaning of his life and death, of His fidelity to that vocation to which all other vocations are subject. I hope to illuminate the salvific communication from God for which he was the chosen instrument—the chosen instrument who nevertheless had to choose to see and to act.

Years ago I viewed a public service advertisement on television, which I suspect many others have seen. It was produced by a rehabilitation group for alcoholics. Its intention was to open the eyes of people whose families had become dysfunctional because they were denying a fact that was self-evident to the whole world, namely, that someone in the family was an alcoholic and that the unwillingness on the part of the alcoholic and his family to acknowledge this was gravely distorting, indeed ravaging, domestic life.

In the ad a family is relaxing in its living room. The father reclines in an easy chair perusing the newspaper. The mother sits on the couch sewing. A little girl watches TV. All of a sudden an elephant enters the living room and begins to upset things with almost every move. By the time the ad concludes, the family's world has been turned upside-down. The father's easy chair is tipped over, he is sprawled on the floor, his glasses are broken but he continues to try to read the newspaper. The mother lies on the couch underneath a busted lamp struggling to re-thread a needle and the little girl peeks around the elephant in order to watch a now crushed television set. Yet, in spite of this shattering breakdown in community life, no one is willing to acknowledge and speak the plain truth: "There is an elephant in the room and it is ruining everything."

All continue to remain oblivious to the obvious. Like people myopically concerned with making the beds correctly in a burning house, everyone's attention is entirely absorbed by incidental tasks, which would be proper and right except for one terrible self-evident truth: there is an elephant in the room. The obstinate ignoring of this fact transforms these otherwise acceptable activities into destructive, death-dealing pseudo-escape routes from truth and reality. Said spiritually, good loses its goodness when it is permitted to become the agency by which evil is left unnamed, and hence allowed to engulf an ever greater area of life.

It is not exaggeration to assert that the greatest scandal and distortion of Christianity—Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, Evangelical—over the last 1,700 years has been its enormous participation in and justifications of homicidal violence and enmity as consistent with following the Nonviolent Jesus of the Gospels and His Way of Nonviolent Love of friends and enemies. Yet, it is a scandal and a distortion that almost no Christian or Church will publicly admit exists. Decade after decade, century after century for 1,700 years the Churches' ecclesiastical structures, sacramental systems and theological faculties have been figuratively handed to the local nationalisms, ethnocentrism and militarisms for support of the evil of war. The amount of Church approved misery and cruelty that

Christians have wreaked upon each other, as well as upon non-Christians, is beyond human computation or comprehension. But somehow, generation after generation, a leadership arises in the various Churches and a laity is nurtured through the various Churches that do not perceive the spiritual, theological or moral preposterousness of receiving Holy Communion at a pre-battle Eucharist at 9 a.m., in preparation for savaging human beings, including fellow Christians, at 11 a.m.

Regardless of how blatant the inconsistency has become between the reality of war and Jesus and His teachings, few Christians, since the time of Constantine, have stood up and said, "There is an elephantine evil, a monstrous untruth operating in the Churches and it is ruining everything." Consider this verbatim excerpt, as recorded in an on-site documentary film, of a Marine Sergeant instructing his trainees:

Sergeant: *What is a mine? A mine is no more or less than an explosive or chemical substance that is designed or made to destroy and kill the enemy. You want to rip out his eyeballs. You want to tear apart his love machine. You want to destroy him, privates. You don't want nothin' left of him. You want to send him home in a trash bag to his mommy.*

Trainees in unison scream: *Yeah! Yeah!*

This is not abnormal talk in the world of military training and war. The normal in that world, all over the world, is the intentional nurturing of human beings into states of unempathetic cruelty and false conscience. Military training is a conversion process but it is not a conversion process that has as its goal "putting on the mind of Christ." It is rather a nurturing process that has as its end getting human beings to put on a mind that is as far removed from the mind of Christ as heaven is from hell. If as General Sherman says "War is hell"—and it is—it is hell because military training has hardwired hellish myths, attitudes, beliefs, values and behavior patterns into recruits that make them able and willing to spread hell on earth.



The grave of Franz Jägerstätter.



St. Radegund's parish church built in 1422

that “There is an elephant in the room and it is ruining everything,” by dogmatically maintaining that there is “no real problem to consider here.”

Franz Jägerstätter’s schooling ended when he was fourteen. He could not articulate a formal theology of Gospel nonviolence nor could he articulate a formal just war theology. How could he possibly be expected to, when even today most Christians are taught little or nothing—or outright falsehoods—about both? Yet after two periods of military training, he permanently turned away from the only war and military operation he ever encountered; one which had the enthusiastic endorsement of his fellow Austrian and German Christians. He made this decision on the basis that participation would be a betrayal of his Lord and could seriously jeopardize his eternal destiny.

While prelates of distinction and theologians of renown were ceaselessly and publicly intoning, “Heil Hitler,” Jägerstätter was literally saying, “Pfui Hitler.” While self-designated Christian “realists” were expounding their theories on why it was necessary to cooperate with evil in order to save the Church and the world, Jägerstätter was observing:

Are we Christians today perhaps wiser than Christ Himself? Does anyone really think that this massive blood-letting can possibly save European Christianity from defeat—or bring it to a new flowering? Did our good Saviour, whom we should always try to imitate, go forth with His apostles against the heathens as German Christians are doing today?

While sophisticated religious propagandists for the government and military were telling people that St. Paul teaches in Romans 13, that Christians are “to obey authorities,” Jägerstätter was responding “but only to the extent that they do not order anything evil, for we must obey God rather than men.” In short almost alone among the lay Christians of Austria and Germany, he pointed out that there was an elephant in the Church!

The actual movements of mind and heart that empowered Franz Jägerstätter to see the obvious can never be known with certainty this side of eternity. As would be expected, his consciousness and conscience evolved as the crisis intensified and as the imperative to choose became more pressing. While there is hearsay and circumstantial evidence of various degrees of credibility concerning his internal religious development, as well as much sheer speculation, he in fact left only a few letters and reflections. However, from these we can garner glimpses of what was going on inside of him during his *via dolorosa* and of where he had arrived by its end. For example, in his formal prison statement, composed shortly before he was to be legally murdered, he wrote:

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.

As the mother of a Marine convicted of killing civilians in Iraq said to the press after the scapegoat conviction of her son: “I gave them a good boy and they gave me back a murderer.” Yet, Christian Churches—minus a tiny number of denominations who believe that Jesus cannot be followed by engaging in human slaughter—have for 1700 years, right up to this very hour, been blind to the blatant contradiction between the way of war and the Way of Jesus, as well as, blind to the enormity of the wickedness that is unleashed by proclaiming that these are morally compatible or complementary options. Concomitantly, and this is hard to say but the historical record is available for all to view, Church leaders have been nonchalant, if not universally indifferent, to the gutting that is done to individual souls and to the Church by participation in and justification of this flagrantly un-Christ-like conversion process known as military training—and the inevitable and anti-Gospel consequences that necessarily ensue from it.

Why Churches—leaders and members—resolutely refuse to look at and acknowledge the Himalayan discordance between what Jesus taught about violence and enmity and what they are chronically teaching and justifying about violence and enmity in His name is an enigma demanding investigation. How is it humanly possible for Christians and the Churches to miss the horrendous implications of the historical fact of our time that Christians in the German military, believing they were acting in conformity with the will of God as revealed by Jesus, murder, exactly one year to the day apart, a nun who is now a Saint and a layman who is now Beatified? St Edith Stein was murdered by Christians at Auschwitz on August 9, 1942; Bl. Franz Jägerstätter was murdered by Christians in Berlin on August 9, 1943! And worst still, there were millions of Christians in Germany who would have done exactly the same thing in good Christian conscience in 1942 and 1943. Seen from the perspective of social pathology, it appears to be a process whereby a group and its leaders persuade themselves, contrary to overwhelming evidence, to believe what they know is not the truth. It is a people convincing itself by contorted and tortuous methods of rationalization that the heinous is the Christ-like—or at least not incompatible with the Way of Jesus. It is individuals with group support and leadership encouragement telling each other that there is nothing to be seen—factually, morally and spiritually—when they know very well there is something unbearably distressing to be seen factually, morally and spiritually. It is the alcoholic and his or her family tenaciously avoiding the unwanted truth

He concludes this prison statement with these most soul-revealing words:

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.

All Austrians and Germans, of course, would have heard the same Gospel that Jägerstätter heard, but it seems from what his neighbors report that he read it and re-read it, pondered it and prayed over it as few of them did. Via this grace-saturated search for the truth of God and God's Will through Jesus, culturally manufactured Gospel-blinders dropped from his eyes. The elephant of evil became so visible that he was compelled to speak the truth he saw and, if necessary, follow Jesus to a criminal's death for acting on it. He simply could not continue to make-believe that he didn't know what he did know.

Franz Jägerstätter, then, is not only a Christian martyr, he is also a chosen prophet of the The Holy One, Blessed be He. The Hebrew prophets are not fortune tellers nor are they persons who simply speak their own minds and conjectures. They explicitly speak the universally applicable Word (Logos) of God to concrete situations. By God's grace they vividly see what others profess not to see, namely, rebellion against God in the here and now. The authentic prophet warns of the inevitable and disastrous outcome that will result, if present choice patterns remain unaltered. He puts on notice those who have been given eyes to see and minds to understand, that it is now absolutely necessary to use those eyes and minds to see, name and turn from an evil, which is being marketed in pseudo-Divine packaging. In short, prophets in the Biblical sense are the ones sent by God to try to open the eyes of the minds and the hearts of a people who adamantly refuse to look and see that "There is an elephant in the room and it is ruining everything."

For Israel, the Church or the world, the consequence for dismissing a prophet is devastation beyond all calculation, where the prayer of people becomes "Lord, let the mountains fall on us." The fruit of heeding a prophet, however, is life in a fullness that cannot be conceived beforehand.

The critical question then is this: Is Franz Jägerstätter a true prophet or is he a false prophet? Is he a communicator of God's Will, Way and warning to the Churches and to the world, or is he a deluded instrument of a religious mirage? The method of discerning this matter would be to prayerfully ponder three particulars: First, Franz Jägerstätter's life, e.g., by reading Gordon Zahn's famous book about him, *In Solitary Witness*, or via the film about him entitled *The Refusal*; Second, the realities of military training and war; Third, the Jesus of the Gospels and the Way He taught His disciples to follow. It might also be helpful in this day and age of well-paid and highly funded, professional religious propagandists to take with eternal life and death seriousness what the Biblical scholar, the late Rev. John L. McKenzie, presents as criteria by which one distinguishes the true from the false prophet:

The false prophet may be sincere, but, he is nonetheless false. Because he lacks the prophetic insight into the moral

will of Yahweh and the reality of sin, the false prophet sees no evil where it is...(H)e has no conception of the sweeping and rigorous justice with which Yahweh governs. He speaks less than the truth and perverts sound religious belief to merely national and personal good.

For my part, I accept Jägerstätter as authentically prophetic. Like the prophet John the Baptist he is legally beheaded for not giving evil a religious license to masquerade as good. But, is he a prophet only to the village of St. Radegund or to Austria during World War II? Or, is God speaking today to the entire Church—Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, Evangelical—and to the world through Franz Jägerstätter? From the eyes of God's *anawim*—the brutalized and ruined victims of the present-day Masters of the World—are there military and political phenomena currently taking place that are every bit as monstrously heinous as anything which Franz Jägerstätter refused to be conscripted into, every bit as anti-Gospel as anything which he spoke against out of fidelity to Jesus and His Way?

The elephant of justified, saving Christian homicidal violence and enmity entered the Christianity about the Fourth Century. Since then it has become a permanent fixture in almost all the Churches—First World, Second World, Third World and Fourth World. It is equally true that despite its incongruous, cruel and polluting presence within the Churches of Christianity, it remains all but morally invisible to Christian eyes clouded by the nurtured deceits of nationalisms, ethnocentrism, militarism and the delusions of power, prestige and prerogative—all camouflaged in religious verbiage and display. Franz Jägerstätter's witness and martyrdom are then a graceful, continuing prophetic communication from God to all of Christianity, and indeed to the world. His is a transparently clear witness and prophetic communication, to each Christian and to each Church—and to humanity—to simply say, "No," to that which is not in conformity with the Will and Way of God as revealed by Jesus. This communication is as urgently needed today as it was in Germany in 1943.

However, before Christians of all ranks will be able to accept that communication they will, like Blessed Franz Jägerstätter, have to first choose to see. They will have to choose to see that the death-dealing elephant of so-called justified redemptive violence and enmity in the Church, has ruined and is ruining almost everything which, the Father through Jesus and His Church, wants to do for all His infinitely loved sons and daughters. In short they will have to take their primary vocation in life—to be a follower of Jesus and not just an admirer of Jesus—as their primary vocation.



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