

# Josef Mayr-Nusser

## Martyr for Conscience during World War Two.



18 March 2017 will see the beatification in Bolzano Cathedral, Italy, of Josef Mayr-Nusser. Like the Austrian farmer, Franz Jägerstätter, he was killed as a consequence of his refusal to swear the military oath of loyalty to Hitler when he was forcibly conscripted into the German army. Jägerstätter was beatified in 2007, and now Pope Francis has recognised Josef Mayr-Nusser as another martyr for his Christian faith and conscience.

The fourth of seven children, Josef Mayr-Nusser was born in 1910 into a family of wine-growers near Bolzano in the Austrian Tirol. His father died of cholera in 1915, having been conscripted into the Austro-Hungarian army during the First World War.

The family was German-speaking, and this region only became part of Italy after the First World War. Whilst an older brother became a priest, Josef found work as a cashier in a company in Bolzano.

In his twenties Josef joined a local group of the Catholic Action movement, whose chaplain openly discussed the political situation in Europe where Fascism was gaining ground. Josef went on to become president of the young men's section of Catholic Action in the German-speaking part of the Archdiocese of Trento. He read the works of Frederic Ozanam, became a committed member of the Society St Vincent de Paul in Bolzano, and in 1937 president of his local branch. Much of his spare time he spent visiting and caring for the poor.

He also became passionately interested in St Thomas More, especially in his letters from prison, and the challenge of taking a stand based on conscience. In 1938 Josef wrote: 'To give witness is our only effective weapon today'.

With the accord between Hitler and Mussolini in 1939 most of the German-speaking citizens of South Tirol accepted the option of moving into Germany. Josef Mayr-Nusser by contrast was among those who chose to stay in Italy because he judged Hitler's projects to be completely incompatible with the Gospel. He joined the Andreas Hofer Bund, a Tirolese resistance movement opposed to Fascism and Nazism.

Josef married one of his work colleagues, Hildegard Straub, in 1942, and a year later their son Albert was born.



## Conscription into Hitler's Army

After Italy signed an armistice with the Allies in 1943, German troops occupied northern Italy. As Nazi control in South Tirol advanced, men were conscripted into Hitler's army, despite international conventions forbidding conscription of occupied populations. In September 1944 Josef was enlisted into the SS and taken with other recruits to Könitz in western Prussia for three weeks of training - at the end of which they would be sworn in. At the critical moment on 4 October he told the officer that he could not take the oath of loyalty to Hitler. His faith and conscience would not allow it. To his comrades he explained: 'If no one ever finds the courage to tell them that they don't agree with their Nazi ideology nothing will ever change'.

His superiors and fellow conscripts failed to persuade him to change his mind, so Josef Mayr-Nusser was arrested, imprisoned and transferred to Danzig (Gdansk) to await trial. In prison there he experienced conditions of extreme cold with very little food.

Condemned in January 1945 for undermining military morale, Josef was sentenced to death. He was transported to Dachau, where he was to be shot, but, much weakened by prison starvation, and feverish with dysentery, he died on 24 February at Erlangen, in the cattle wagon taking him there.



On 5 April his wife Hildegard got official notification of his death. Like Franz Jägerstätter's wife Francisca, Hildegard had shared the anguish and sacrifice of her husband's conscientious objection. Arriving for SS training at Könitz, Josef had written to his 'faithful companion' of his torment at the distress his witness and its outcome would cause her, but, he wrote: 'Pray for me that in the hour of testing I may act without fear and hesitation according to the dictates of God and of my conscience'.

The explanation for his courageous act of resistance can be found in an observation he had made about the idolatrous fascist cult of leadership: 'Today we must show the masses that the one leader who alone has the right to complete unlimited authority as our guide is Christ'.

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The beatification of Josef Mayr-Nusser, announced in July 2016, will take place in Bolzano Cathedral on Saturday 18 March 2017. His feast day will be 3 October.

Pax Christi Italy and the Bolzano Centro per la Pace are involved in various events to celebrate the beatification, including:

<http://www.josef-mayr-nusser.it/it>