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Holy Disobedience

As the Austrian peasant farmer Franz Jägerstätter made his way to the military barracks in Enns on 1st March 1943 to report for duty, he could be sure he was going to his death. Not for him the fighting chance of the battlefield but instead he was setting out on a path that would lead to imprisonment, trial, and execution. Franz Jägerstätter, convinced that one could not be faithful to Jesus and fight for the Nazis, was to announce his refusal to serve.

FRANZ JÄGERSTÄTTER was born in St Radegund, Austria, on 20th May 1907 where he lived, but for three years working in Bavarian iron mines, all his life. He was a wild and colourful youth which included fathering an illegitimate child, Hildegard, introducing the first motorbike to the village, and a number of years where he abandoned his faith. Franz married Franziska in 1936 and, after a honeymoon pilgrimage to Rome, they settled down to life on the family farm in St Radegund. The couple had three children. It was after marriage that Franz began to take religion more seriously; Franziska said of this, “we helped one another to go forward in faith”. How vital that faith was to be when together they rejected the evil of National Socialism.

Franz had already been called-up to the military twice and completed initial training but it was after he returned home after his second call-up that he decided that he would not serve again.

People thought him mad. His fellow villagers urged him to reconsider, his Parish Priest advised that it was his duty to fight for his country, and his local Bishop told him firmly that it was not for him to judge a war just or unjust – his duty was merely to obey. His mother too, stressing that fighting was the only chance he had to continue to provide for his wife and children,

urged Franz to change his mind. Yet, with the steadfast support of Franziska, Franz refused to side with evil and on 9th August 1943 was beheaded in Brandenburg prison for refusing to obey military orders.

Which all might seem to be a tragic end to a difficult story; indeed things got considerably more difficult for Franziska in the years immediately after her husband's death. Already facing coping with the family farm and raising three children alone she was unable to access the farming subsidies and privileges which were controlled by the Nazis and only available to compliant farmers.



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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... 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... 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.

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The struggles continued after the war as local officials discriminated against those who had opposed Hitler and the pension allocated to widows and orphans was denied her. Unlike the widows of soldiers, Franziska received no sympathy from fellow Austrians but was shunned and even blamed for encouraging the religiosity which led to his conscientious objection.

Yet this was not the end. Through all of this Franziska carefully, lovingly, kept her husband's memory alive. His story gradually became more widely known, not least through the publication in 1964 of Gordon Zahn's book 'In Solitary Witness', until eventually, in October 2007, the church confirmed what many had long been sure of and beatified Franz Jägerstätter as a martyr and a hero for peace. Franziska, then 94, surrounded by her children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, took a major part in the ceremony in Linz Cathedral.

As a hero for peace there is a huge amount that the life and witness of Franz Jägerstätter can teach us about the demands of Christian peacemaking. Three of these lessons in particular continue to challenge and inspire me and it is these I will focus on.

Firstly the Christian peacemaker must be disobedient. Not recklessly, nor of course in every situation, but when the situation requires it you must be prepared to stand up and refuse to be complicit in injustice.

This means that we cannot stand idly by while billions are frittered away on weapons of war while cuts attack schools and hospitals. We must not remain silent while our government builds nuclear weapons while the poor and vulnerable are neglected. We must have no part in any

discrimination – on grounds of sex and sexuality, gender identity, race, religion, or ethnicity – as it means treating our brothers and sisters as something less than fully human. As our banks invest in war technologies we move our custom, as our schools set up cadet corps we promote peace education, as Israel builds settlements on Palestinian land we tell the story of the Palestinian struggle for justice.

And as we reject violence in all of its forms, refusing the trappings of glory, prestige, and power which society finds richly seductive, we say yes to Christ.



The second lesson is connected to this. If our following Christ means that we must be disobedient then this comes at some cost. Whilst we are unlikely to face the severity of sanction which Bl. Franz faced, to stand up to our family, friends, teachers, religious superiors, local or national government, and say 'I will have no part in this injustice' is unlikely to be an act free from consequences, anything from loss of esteem to incarceration. Today there are many people working for peace whose civil disobedience sees them spending time in prison.

Lastly we turn to the figure of Franziska. Franz's remarkable act of resistance was not a solitary one but a joint one with the love and support of his wife. How important that support must have been when everybody else thought him mad and tried to change his mind. The consequences of his decision were the more extreme but for Franziska too, the decision was not without the certainty that life for her would be a struggle. Seven happy years of marriage were to be followed by decades of widowhood with a struggle to raise her family alone, run the farm in the face of considerable obstacles, and as the subject of gossip and misunderstanding. Her role in this story is one of resistance too.

How many times was Franz tempted to compromise for the sake of his family and his young children, to save his wife from suffering, to spare himself? It would have been entirely understandable if he had submitted to the pressure and joined the army. Many did. The encouragement, love, and steadfast support of Franziska was crucial in his keeping true to his conscience as they faced this terror together.

I am convinced that it is still best that I speak the truth, even if it costs me my life. For you will not find it written in any of the commandments of God or of the Church that a man is obliged under pain of sin to take an oath committing him to obey whatever might be commanded of him by a secular ruler.

Work for peace can feel a futile thing. Despite our best efforts governments continue to go to war, nations continue to build bigger and more destructive weapons, people continue to be shot, stabbed, or beaten in our streets, and families continue to be torn apart by violence. It is easy to get downcast. In the first days after I started working with Pax Christi a letter arrived in our office from someone withdrawing their support from the organisation as we had 'wholly failed to bring about world peace'. We all have days like that. Franziska gave to her husband the support, encouragement, and prayers that were crucial to persistence when all seems hopeless. It is this we must learn from her.

2013 marks seventy years since Franz's great act of resistance and his execution. On 4 March this year we also celebrated Franziska's 100th birthday. Later the same month Franziska died peacefully surrounded by her family in St Radegund, reunited at last with her beloved husband.

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About Pax Christi



Pax Christi is the international Catholic movement for peace. Our vision is a world where people can live in peace, without fear of violence in any form. Pax Christi believes in peace based on justice; a world where human rights are respected, basic needs are met, and people feel safe and valued in their communities. Our work encompasses campaigning and advocacy, offering solidarity with peacemakers around the world, and peace education.

We facilitate workshops, retreats, and training for young people in schools and universities. Full details of our youth work can be found in the education section of our website www.paxchristi.org.uk or on twitter @PaxChristiYouth

A youth workshop exploring the witness of Bl. Franz Jägerstätter is available for download
<http://bit.ly/11NcQ5X>