

Martin Luther King Junior wrote that “nonviolent resistance”, is “a courageous confrontation of evil by the power of love”. Surely few have been as courageous in that confrontation as Franz Jägerstätter, whose legacy is a peace group echoing in its message of nonviolence **his** deeply held convictions.

Last year last I was asked to write a 2000 word profile on Franz Jägerstätter for the South African magazine *Worldwide*, which is published by the Comboni Missionaries. I write regularly for the magazine, and sometimes the profile subjects I’m asked to write on are very holy religious figures, or remote world leaders.

What impressed me most about THIS man was his ordinariness. Not just ordinariness but the fact that as a lad, he was far from showing signs of saintliness. He was no ‘holier-than-thou’ character with standards to put him beyond the rest of us – beyond **me!**

He had a messy family background, wasn’t outstanding at school, zipped around the village on a motorbike in his teens – not a Hell’s Angel by any means but a youngster who took quite a while to grow into his own skin, his own faith.

His mother wasn’t married to his biological father, who died in the First World War. That probably raised a few eyebrows in 1907. Adopted by the man his mother DID marry – Heinrich Jägerstätter – we might in our modern analytical way ask how that situation affected the ten-year-old.

It is more likely that the increasingly difficult **political** situation made an unremarkable life remarkable. The turmoil of post First World War inflation, acceptance of Austria as a German state, and the rise of the Nazi ideology didn’t pass him by even in his rural village on the Austro-German border. And of course, he ended up working for three years in the alien environment of the industrial region. Little wonder that his faith wavered during that time.

Going back to his village in 1930, he had a relationship with a local girl that resulted in a repeat of history—a child born out of wedlock. But, at the ripe old age of 29, he met and married Franziska, the farmer’s daughter from a neighbouring village. Together they would have their three daughters, they farmed, and Franz became the sexton at the local church. Often he wouldn’t take payment for funerals, seeing it as part of his faith to carry out a burial.

By now a daily Mass attender, he was a man whose faith and political ideas were maturing. **I** see Franz as a man that Jesus might have seen working in the fields or digging a grave and invited to join Him – because he WAS *ostensibly* ordinary, just like Simon Peter; just like Thomas.

But of course - he wasn’t ordinary at all. The Holy Spirit was already working away in him: Franz was the only person in the village to vote against the re-unification of Austria and Germany in a referendum rigged by the Nazis. He remained firmly **against** the Nazis even though fellow Catholics were

convinced to support the regime because it was against the dreaded Bolshevism.

And then there was his refusal to fight in World War II, for which, of course, he was executed on August 9, 1943.

The devout nonviolence of a man such as Franz Jägerstätter was wretchedly outweighed by his fellow countrymen who were too mesmerised by propaganda—or perhaps just too afraid, as we **all** might have been—to say the “No” that **he** refused to back down on.

In the month between sentencing and execution, Franz wrote, “Neither prison nor chains nor sentence of death can rob a man of the Faith and his free will.”

Franz Jägerstätter believed in nonviolence. Not a milksop reaction to the world but a fierce conviction in peace and justice. Pope Francis concurs, writing in his 2017 peace letter that, “violence is not the cure for a broken world”.

What does he mean to me? A man of courage. A man of deep faith. A man whose very ‘ordinariness’ has bequeathed today’s society the very **remarkable** message of nonviolence that reinforces my conviction that even *I* can work for Pax Christi Scotland, for the peace of Christ.

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