A Story of Remarkable Faith

In 1943 Franz Jägerstätter, an Austrian peasant farmer, was executed for refusing to fight in Hitler's army. A devout Catholic, Franz believed he could not be faithful to Jesus and fight for the Nazis.

This Pax Christi workshop explores Franz's story, his witness, and what he can teach us about the Christian vocation to peacemaking.

Display the following quotation:

“If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality.” (Archbishop Desmond Tutu)

Discuss: What does this mean? Why do you think the Archbishop said this? Do you agree? How does it encourage us to behave? What difficulties are there if we try to act this way? Have you ever been the mouse in this situation? Or the elephant? How does it feel? Who in the world today could be the players in this scenario?

Activity: To Fight or Not to Fight?

Label two sides of the room Fight and Don't Fight. The young people are then asked to make each decision as if they are the main character in this story. They can change their minds after each additional part of the story is told. Regularly ask people to share the reason for their decision.

1. Your country has just become involved in a global conflict, a world war, and you have been called up to fight in the army. Do you fight or not fight…?

2. The government has introduced conscription, making it a legal requirement to fight if called up…

3. You are a married man with three young children…

4. You are the principal breadwinner of the family and as such your family rely on you to provide for them…

5. You are Austrian and this is 1943 so the army you have been called up to serve in is Hitler’s army…

6. Under Hitler the punishment for refusing to fight is that you will be beheaded…

7. You are a Catholic Christian and as such you are convinced that you cannot faithfully follow Jesus and fight in Hitler’s unjust war…

8. You go to your priest for advice and he tells you that it is your duty to fight for your country…

9. You go to consult the local bishop and he agrees with the priest. He also tells you that it is not your place to judge whether the war is just. It is your role to obey those who have authority over you…

10. You go to talk with your mother. She tells you that you must fight as it is your duty to look after your wife and her grandchildren…

11. Finally it is decision day and you have one last conversation with your wife before finally making your mind up. She tells you that she supports you unfailingly. She knows the decision is an impossible one but you must follow your conscience…

Do you fight or do you refuse to fight?

This was the decision that Franz Jägerstätter faced. He refused to fight and in 1943 was executed for refusing to obey military orders. This could easily be a sad end to a tragic tale. But it is not quite the end of the story...
In October 2007 Franz Jägerstätter was recognised as a martyr and beatified by the Catholic Church. A hero for peace.

Think … What can we learn from the life of Blessed Franz Jägerstätter about how Christians are called to work for peace?

They brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” They answered, “The emperor’s.” Then he said to them, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”
Matthew 22: 19-21

Where a law is enacted contrary to reason, or to the eternal law, or to some ordinance of God, obedience is unlawful, lest, while obeying man, we become disobedient to God.
Libertas Praestantissimum, 1888

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.
Franz Jägerstätter, letter from prison, 1943

Think … How does the life of Franz Jägerstätter challenge you?
Would you have made the same decision?
Would people have understood if he had decided to fight?
Franz decided not to fight because he was a Christian. What things that Jesus says may have helped him make up his mind?
How do the three quotations below challenge us to live as Christians?

Take Action

Bl. Franz Jägerstätter shows us that sometimes in order to obey God we have to disobey people who hold power, authority, and influence over us…

… are there times when you are called to be disobedient in order to stand up for what is right and just?

Bl. Franz Jägerstätter was willing to accept the severe consequences of his disobedience…

… are there times today when work for peace can see you facing negative consequences? How do we respond to these?

Bl. Franz Jägerstätter found courage through the faithful support of his family…

… how can you support other peacemakers in your local community, around the country, and throughout the world?

Additional resources to support this workshop are available, alongside other Pax Christi youth work resources, on the education pages of our website: www.paxchristi.org.uk