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Dear Friend of Saint Joseph Abbey,

AUGUST 1943. In Berlin's Tegel Military Prison, a man condemned to death clumsily writes the following lines: "Even if I write with chained hands, it is better than having my will chained. Sometimes God shows Himself by giving His strength to those who love Him and do not put earthly things above eternal realities. Neither prison, nor chains, nor even death, can separate one from the love of God, or rob him of his faith and free will. God's power is invincible." This "martyr of conscience" was beatified by the Church on October 27, 2007, with his 94-year-old wife in attendance.

Franz Jägerstätter was born on May 20, 1907, the illegitimate child of Rosalia Huber, in St. Radegund, a village in Upper Austria very near the German border. He was baptized the following day and raised in poverty by his grandmother. In 1917, his mother married a farmer, Heinrich Jägerstätter, and Franz was made legitimate—he would inherit his stepfather's farm. He was a bright boy who liked to read, learned to play the zither, and acted in St. Radegund's Passion Play, which every year drew an audience of tens of thousands. Franz was not without flaws and quarreled easily. At 20, he went to earn his living as a miner. The young man found himself in a materialistic environment hostile to the Church which brought about a religious crisis for him. He stopped going to Mass for a short while but soon returned to the practice of his faith; yet it was probably deficient, and did not stop him from falling into grave sin. In August 1933, Franz became the father of an illegitimate daughter, whom he would take care of until his death. Nevertheless, he soon resolved to lead a responsible life.

A turning point

Franz was loved and appreciated in the village for his willingness to always be of help. On April 9, 1936, he married Franziska Schwaninger, a waitress, born in 1913. The newlyweds joined a pilgrimage group and honeymooned in Rome. Franziska, a devout Christian who received Communion frequently and observed First Fridays, was a young woman full of charm and humor. Franz had found the pearl of great price. He would later write to his wife: "I would never have imagined that marriage could be something so beautiful." Led by Franziska's example, he also began to receive Communion frequently. This was the turning point of his spiritual life.

In 1933, Hitler came to power in Germany and relations with Austria immediately became strained. Bishop Gföllner, of the diocese of Linz in which St. Radegund was situated, declared in that year that Catholic doctrine was incompatible with National Socialism (Nazism). Franz held to that principle—no compromise with neopaganism. On April 10, 1938, he voted "no" in the referendum organized by the Nazis in Austria following its forced annexation by Germany (the "Anschluss"). He was the only one in his village who dared to do so. On June 17, 1940, Jägerstätter was called to active military duty in Braunau, Hitler's birthplace. However, he was exempted from service on the intervention of his town's authorities, because he had three young daughters, the third of whom had just been born. But in October he was recalled to Enns to join the mountain light infantry. On December 8 he was received into the Third Order of Saint Francis to which his wife also belonged. In April 1941, Franz managed, again thanks to authorities from his town, to return home. He would enjoy two months of relative peace, but throughout this time he and his wife lived in fearful anticipation of a letter from the Wehrmacht.

Franz did not at all refuse in principle to bear arms. He accepted the teaching of the Church, today expressed in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: "Public authorities, in this case (if the conditions of 'just war' are met) have the right and duty to impose on citizens the obligations necessary for national defense. Those who are sworn to serve their country in the armed forces are servants of the security and freedom of nations. If they carry out their duty honorably, they truly contribute to the common good of the nation and the maintenance of peace" (no. 2310). Nevertheless in April 1941 Franz decided not to comply with a new call to serve in the army of the Third

Reich. He was convinced, after long and careful thought, that in doing so he would be sinning by taking direct part in an unjust war.

In St. Radegund's parish, Franz was advised to be more flexible. However, he refused any collaboration with the regime and any financial support to the Nazis, the only political party. In contrast, he gladly helped to support the despoiled Church and gave to the poor secretly, to avoid going through the official charitable organizations. From then on he attended Mass daily. Franz had become a sacristan in 1940 and took his duties seriously. He discreetly advised the priest to speak more often about the sufferings of purgatory, to encourage the parishioners to seek perfection and do penance—advice that would be taken. As for himself, he did penance, fasted, and redoubled his prayers. It was above all from Holy Communion that he drew his strength. Asked “Can we still do anything?”, Franz replied, “We often hear, ‘Nothing can be done; to say anything is to uselessly expose oneself to prison and death. One can hardly singlehandedly change the destiny of the world’... But to save oneself, and maybe also win other souls for Christ, I believe that it is never too late, as long as we are living in this world.”

Faced with contradiction

Franz' decision to avoid a second call to serve in the armed forces brought him a considerable amount of criticism from those around him. His mother pointed out the tragic consequences that would threaten him and his family. Father Joseph Karobath, his parish priest, tried to put his mind at ease by maintaining that he could participate in the war without sin, because there was no alternative. But the priest would later say, “Franz always refuted me by quoting Scripture to me: *Let us not do evil to bring about good* (Rom. 3:8).” In May 1942, Jägerstätter wrote, “Is it today all the same to wage a just or unjust war? Is anything worse than to have to kill and rob men who are defending their country, solely to help an anti-Christian power win and establish an empire without God?” Franz did not believe in the “crusade against Bolshevism,” the slogan used to justify the June 1941 offensive against Russia. He was aware that “Communism is intrinsically evil,” as Pius XI taught in 1937 (encyclical *Divini Redemptoris*), but he also knew that a good end does not justify immoral means. And the means Hitler used in Russia violated the principles of humanity and respect for civilian populations.

Franz consulted his bishop, Bishop Joseph Fliesser, who – according to his own testimony – tried to convince him to obey the call to arms: it was beyond the ability of a simple citizen to determine whether the war was just, and Franz's first responsibility was to his family.

This answer did not satisfy Jägerstätter, who suspected that the bishop had taken him for a Nazi provocateur. Furthermore, seeing how many of his acquaintances had died fighting on the Russian front, Franz noted that it was scarcely less dangerous to refuse to serve than to be drafted to fight on the Eastern front. “I believe that if God asks us to die for our faith, it is not something too difficult, considering the thousands of young men who, in these difficult years of war, were forced to give their lives for Nazism.”

God is served first

In our day, the issue of conscientious objection is primarily raised when people are ordered to apply homicidal laws that authorize abortion or euthanasia. In his encyclical *Evangelium vitae* of March 25, 1995, Pope John Paul II gave instruction on this subject: “Abortion and euthanasia are thus crimes which no human law can claim to legitimize. There is no obligation in conscience to obey such laws; instead there is a grave and clear obligation to oppose them by conscientious objection. From the very beginnings of the Church, the apostolic preaching reminded Christians of their duty to obey legitimately constituted public authorities (cf. Rom. 13:1-7; 1 Pet. 2:13-14), but at the same time it firmly warned that *we must obey God rather than men*” (Acts 5:29)” (no. 73).

In February 1943, Hitler's propaganda minister Goebbels declared “Total War.” At that point, reservists too were drafted. Jägerstätter received the dreaded summons. In acknowledging receipt, he remarked, “I have just signed my death warrant.” His mother begged him not to be stubborn, but his wife had given up trying to change his mind. Summoned to present himself at the barracks in Enns on February 25, Franz wrote to Father Karobath, by then in exile: “I must inform you that you may be losing one of your parishioners... Since no one can give me a dispensation for doing something that endangers my eternal salvation, I can in no way change the decision that you are aware of.” At that point, the priest understood and approved of his friend's position.

At first, Franz did not go to the barracks—his plan was to hide in the forest. Then, realizing that his flight could result in reprisals against his family, he presented himself at Enns on March 1. On the 2nd he announced to the recruitment officer that he refused to bear arms because of his opposition to the principles of National Socialism. The same day he wrote his wife a letter full of love in which he explained to her the reasons for his decision. It ends with these words: “May God grant you all that you desire, as long as it does not endanger your eternal salvation... If God does not permit me to see you again here below, I hope we will soon be

reunited in Heaven.” He asked Franziska to send him a booklet on the Virgin MARY’s apparitions in Fatima.

Franz was taken to the military prison in Linz. There he was visited by Father Baldinger who invited him to accept the call to serve. The priest maintained that bearing arms did not imply belonging to the Nazi regime—it was only an act of civil obedience which did not bind the conscience. But Franz held to his decision, weighed a thousand times before God—he could not take the oath of unconditional obedience to Hitler that was required of every soldier. After the war Father Baldinger testified to Jägerstätter’s perfect mental health and his gentleness—there was none of the fanatic in him. Besides, Franz often said, “I trust in God. If He wants me to act otherwise, He will let me know.”

In the heart of man

It was to obey God and save his soul that Jägerstätter followed the judgment of his conscience. “In the depths of his conscience,” the Second Vatican Council teaches, “man detects a law which he does not impose upon himself, but which holds him to obedience. Always summoning him to love good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience when necessary speaks to his heart: do this, shun that. For man has in his heart a law written by God; to obey it is the very dignity of man; according to it he will be judged” (*Gaudium et spes*, no. 16). “Conscience,” wrote Saint Bonaventure, “is like God’s herald and messenger; it does not command things on its own authority, but commands them as coming from God’s authority, like a herald when he proclaims the edict of the king. This is why conscience compels obedience.”

Nevertheless, “Conscience is not an independent and exclusive capacity to decide what is good and what is evil.” On the contrary, “The dignity of this rational forum and the authority of its voice and judgments derive from the truth about moral good and evil, which it is called to listen to and to express. This truth is indicated by the ‘divine law’, the universal and objective norm of morality” (John Paul II, Encyclical *Veritatis splendor*, 1995, no. 60). Thus, “Moral conscience does not close man within an insurmountable and impenetrable solitude, but opens him to the call, to the voice of God” (*ibid.*, no. 58).

The Second Vatican Council teaches, “In the formation of their consciences, the Christian faithful ought carefully to attend to the sacred and certain doctrine of the Church. For the Church is, by the will of Christ, the teacher of the truth. It is her duty to give utterance to, and authoritatively to teach, that truth which is Christ Himself, and also to declare and confirm by her authority those principles of the moral

order which have their origins in human nature itself” (*Dignitatis humanae*, no. 14).

He was not alone

At the beginning of May, Franz was transferred to Tegel Military Prison near Berlin. He realized that he was not the only one to have refused to serve in the military, that many others had performed heroic acts of resistance against Nazism. He helped many of them convert and to accept their imminent death. He learned with joy that some S.S. had converted before their death. The chaplain Heinrich Kreutzberg, who had already assisted two hundred Catholics condemned to death, showed him affection and respect. In prison, Franz, who had always been a conscientious and competent farmer, revealed his tenderness for his family and his concern for their farm. On March 12, 1943, he wrote to his wife: “It will soon be time to sow the oats. When you have any questions about the farm, write to me so that I can help you with my advice. God knows that I would much rather help you in person.” He tactfully advised his stepfather: “Don’t make my family work too hard, but leave them a little time to meditate and pray.”

Nevertheless, Jägerstätter experienced moments of trial, most of all fearing that his family would be persecuted because of him. He rejoiced in his wife’s Christian acceptance of the trials she was enduring. On March 7, Franziska wrote to him: “My dearest husband, ... may the Will of God be done, even if it is very painful! ... Your three little girls are always clammering for you and are offering their Lenten sacrifices for your return.” On April 9, Franz wrote to his wife, on the occasion of their seventh anniversary: “When I think back on all the graces I have received over these seven years, it sometimes seems miraculous to me... That is why, even if we fear the future, we can be certain that He Who has sustained and spoiled us so will not abandon us. If we are able to thank Him and continue our efforts toward perfection, God will grant us eternal joy.... If I must leave this life, I will rest in peace in my grave because you know that I am not a criminal.”

The intimate notes Jägerstätter jotted down during his last days demonstrate his interior strength and freedom: “They are always trying to weaken my resolution through the fact that I am married and have children. But does the fact of having a wife and children change an evil act into a good one? Or does an action become good or evil simply because thousands of Catholics do it? What use is it to ask God for the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, if one must in any case practice blind obedience? What use is it to have received intelligence and free will from God if, as they

claim, it is not for us to discern if this war Germany is waging is just or unjust ? ”

Before the trial, Franz' lawyer, Feldmann, who wanted to do everything possible to save his client, arranged for the prisoner to meet his judges in private. They urged him “not to force them to condemn him to death,” by agreeing to serve in a medical unit. But Franz declined the offer, because it would have forced him to take the oath of unconditional obedience, which he would not do at any cost. The sentence of the military tribunal in Berlin, dated July 6, 1943, states that his refusal to serve in the armed forces is a crime punishable according to the laws of the Reich, the alleged reasons of conscience being inadmissible and the plaintiff not being deemed mentally ill. Franz was condemned to death.

“I would have liked so much”

On July 12, Franziska was allowed to see her husband. The twenty-minute meeting took place in the presence of the substitute parish priest in St. Radegund, Father Fürthauer. This pusillanimous priest endeavored in vain to convince the prisoner to submit to the authorities to save his life. On August 8, 1943, Franz was transferred to the prison in Brandenburg. He was told that he had been condemned to death and that the sentence would be carried out the next day. The same day Franz wrote to his family : “I would have liked so much to have spared you all this suffering that you have had to endure because of me. But you know what Christ said : *He who loves father or mother, his wife or his children more*

than me, is not worthy of me (cf. Mt. 10 :37).” In his farewell letter, written a few hours before his execution, he added, “I thank our Lord for having been able to suffer and even die for Him... May God deign to accept the offering of my life as a sacrifice not only for the expiation of my sins, but also those of others.” And he urged his family not to harbor angry or vengeful thoughts against anyone : “As long as a man is alive, it is our duty to help him through our love to walk on the path to Heaven.”

At 4 P.M., August 9th, Franz Jägerstätter was beheaded. That evening, Father Jochmann, the prison chaplain, said to the Austrian nuns who had a clinic in Brandenburg : “I can only congratulate you for having such a countryman, who lived as a Saint and died as a hero. I am certain that this simple man is the only Saint I have been privileged to meet in my life.” Jägerstätter's body was cremated by order of the authorities. The cremation urn would be buried after the war in the St. Radegund cemetery.

Father Kreutzberg, who knew Franz in his last days, wondered later : “Where did this simple man's strength of character come from ? His letters show how he lived the great truths of his Catholic faith : God, sin, death, judgment, eternity, Heaven and Hell—these truths that he had received during Sunday homilies at his parish. In particular, the thought of eternity and the joys of Heaven were for him a great help and a precious consolation in his sufferings and his painful farewell to his family.”

On November 1, 2007, Cardinal Schönborn, the archbishop of Vienna, stated, “What is fascinating about Jägerstätter is the clear-sightedness of a martyr who, better than many academics of his day, was able to discern the incompatibility between National Socialism and the Christian faith. It would, however, be a terrible mistake to think that by beatifying Jägerstätter, all those who performed military service are condemned. Jägerstätter himself never judged others, but simply obeyed his conscience until the end.”

Blessed Franz Jägerstätter, pray that we might follow the voice of our conscience, guided by Our Mother the Holy Church, without allowing ourselves to be stopped by any human consideration.

Dom Antoine Marie
o.n.b.

P. S. This monthly letter is free of charge. We gratefully accept the addresses of other persons who may enjoy receiving it. – Also available free of charge are: tract about the divinity of Jesus Christ; tract about the Truths of the Catholic Religion; scapular of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, with explanatory notice; the promises of the Sacred Heart; the mysteries of the Rosary.

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