

August 9

The Man Who Chose to See

(REV.) EMMANUEL CHARLES MCCARTHY

The following is the homily delivered at the close of the Forty Day Fast for the Truth of Gospel Nonviolence at St. Radegund's Church, St. Radegund, Austria, August 9, 1993.

The life of Franz Jägerstätter was a simple life. An Austrian peasant from the village of St. Radegund, he was a devout Catholic, a daily communicant who prayed the rosary while doing farm chores. Sexton of his parish church, he married and had three children. On August 9, 1943, fifty years ago today, Franz Jägerstätter was killed by the German Military for refusing to kill for the German Military.

At the hour of his death few people knew him and no one who knew him supported him in his refusal to kill for the Führer. Legions of Christians told him to do his duty and go to war like the other men. His bishop, pastor and spiritual advisors endeavored to persuade him that his conscientious objection was a wrong and futile course. So it can be said with certitude, that when the blade of the guillotine fell at Brandenburg Prison in Berlin at 4 p.m. on August 9, 1943, Franz Jägerstätter was totally alone, almost totally unknown and destined to be totally forgotten.

However, as a manifestation of how the mystery and power of God's plan of redemption in Jesus Christ unconquerably advances in history, today on August 9, 1993, throughout the world millions of people will stop, think about and be touched by the witness of this man. They may disagree among themselves about historical details of his life but no one will doubt that the finger of God was operative here—and operative not just for the salvation of Franz Jägerstätter but also for the good of the Church and through the Church for the good of all people.

The story of how Franz Jägerstätter went from being a criminal murdered by a government for de-

clining to partake in a state's war, to being a person discussed at the Second Vatican Council, to being a figure known at every point of the compass deserves to be pondered by those who believe that simple fidelity to the Word of God revealed in Jesus is not enough, as well as, by those who believe that Christianity must proclaim a "realistic gospel" of compromise with evil if it is to be effective in this world. But



Blessed Franz Jägerstätter
Christian Martyr
Killed August 9, 1943, by the German Military
for refusing to kill for the German Military.

on this Fiftieth Anniversary, I do not want to focus on the story of Franz Jägerstätter after his death. Instead I wish to raise to visibility the prophetic purpose and meaning of his life and death. I desire to

illuminate the salvific communication from God for which he was the chosen instrument.

A few years ago I viewed a public service advertisement on a television. Produced by an alcoholic rehabilitation group, it was intended to awaken people whose families had become dysfunctional because they were denying a self-evident fact, namely that someone in the family was an alcoholic and the unwillingness to acknowledge it was distorting, indeed ravaging, domestic life.

In the ad a family is relaxing in its living room. The father reclines in an easy chair perusing the newspaper. The mother sits on the couch sewing. A little girl watches TV. All of a sudden an elephant enters the living room and begins to upset things with almost every move. By the time the ad concludes, the family's world has been turned upside-down. The father's easy chair is tipped over, he is sprawled on the floor, his glasses are broken but he continues to try to read the newspaper. The mother lies on the couch underneath a busted lamp struggling to re-thread a needle and the little girl peeks around the elephant in order to watch a now crushed television set. However, in spite of this shattering breakdown in community life, no one is capable of speaking the plain truth: "There is an elephant in the room and it is ruining everything."

All continue to ignore the obvious. Like people myopically concerned with properly rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic, everyone's attention is entirely absorbed by incidental tasks which would be proper and right except for one terrible fact: there is an elephant in the room. This fact transforms these otherwise acceptable activities into dead-end escape routes from truth and reality. Said spiritually, good loses its goodness when it is permitted to become the agency by which evil is left unnamed and hence is allowed to engulf an ever greater area of life.

It is not exaggeration to assert that the greatest scandal and distortion of Christianity—Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant—for the last 1,700 years has been its enormous participation in and justifications of homicidal violence as consistent with the following of Jesus and His Way. Yet, it is a scandal and a distortion that almost no Christian or Church will publicly admit exists. Decade after decade, century after

century for 1,700 years the Churches' ecclesiastical structures, sacramental systems and theological faculties have been handed over to nationalisms, ethnicisms and militarisms for supporting the evil of war. The astronomical amounts of "Jesus approved" misery and cruelty that Christians have wreaked upon each other, as well as upon non-Christians, are beyond human computation or comprehension. But somehow, generation after generation, a leadership arises in the Churches and a laity is nurtured through the Churches that does not perceive the ecclesiological, spiritual or theological problem, with receiving Holy Communion at a pre-battle Eucharist at 9 a.m., in preparation for savaging another human being at 11 a.m.

Regardless of how blatant the inconsistency has become between the reality of war and Jesus' teachings, few Christians have stood up and said, "There is an elephant in the Church and it is ruining everything." Consider this verbatim excerpt, as recorded in an on-site documentary film, of a Marine Sergeant instructing his trainees:

Sergeant: What is a mine? A mine is no more or less than an explosive or chemical substance that is designed or made to destroy and kill the enemy. You want to rip out his eyeballs. You want to tear apart his lung machine. You want to destroy him, privates. You don't want nothin' left of him. You want to send him home in a trash bag to his mommy.

Trainees in unison scream: Yeah! Yeah!

This is not abnormal talk in the world of military training. The normal in that world, all over the world, is vulgarity and un-Christ-likeness in the extreme. Yet leadership and laity of all the Christian Churches—minus a tiny number of denominations who believe that Jesus cannot be followed by engaging in human slaughter—have to date been blind to the contradiction and have been indifferent to the gutting that is being done to individual souls and to the Church by participation in this flagrantly un-Christ-like activity.

Why Churches—leadership and laity—resolutely refuse to look at the Himalayan discordance between what Jesus taught and what they are chronically justifying in His name is an enigma demanding investigation. Seen from the perspective of social psychology,

it appears to be a process whereby a group persuades itself, contrary to overwhelming evidence, to believe what it knows is not the truth. It is a people convincing itself by tragic rationalizations that black is white, that the heinous is Christ-like, e.g., “We do not know for certain what Jesus would have done with an atom bomb or machine gun since he did not live in our time and never spoke directly to the complex issues raised by these modern weapons.” It is individuals with group encouragement telling each other that there is nothing to be seen, morally and spiritually, when they know very well there is something unbearably distressing to be seen morally and spiritually. It is the alcoholic and his or her family dogmatically denying there is any real problem to be faced, tenaciously avoiding the unwanted truth: “There is an elephant in the room and it is ruining everything.”

Franz Jägerstätter’s schooling ended when he was fourteen. He could not articulate a formal theology of Christian nonviolence nor could he articulate a formal just war theology. How could he possibly be expected to, when even today most Christians are taught little or nothing about either? Yet after two periods of military training, he permanently turned away from the only war and military operation he ever encountered; one which had the enthusiastic endorsement of his fellow Austrian and German Christians. He made this decision on the basis that participation would be a betrayal of his Lord and could seriously jeopardize his eternal destiny.

While prelates of distinction and theologians of renown were ceaselessly repeating, “Heil Hitler,” Jägerstätter was literally saying, “Pfui Hitler.” While self-designated Christian realists were expounding their theories on why it was necessary to cooperate with evil in order to save the Church, Jägerstätter was observing:

Are we Christians today perhaps wiser than Christ Himself? Does anyone really think that this massive bloodletting can possibly save European Christianity from defeat—or bring it to a new flowering? Did our good Saviour, whom we should always try to imitate, go forth with His apostles against the heathens as German Christians are doing today?

While sophisticated religious propagandists for the government and military were telling people that

St. Paul teaches in ROMANS 13, that Christians are “to obey authorities,” Jägerstätter was responding “but only to the extent that they do not order anything evil, for we must obey God rather than men.” In short almost alone among the Christians of Austria and Germany, he pointed out that there was an elephant in the Church!

The actual movements of mind and heart that empowered Franz Jägerstätter to see the obvious can never be known with certainty this side of eternity. As would be expected, his consciousness and conscience evolved as the crisis intensified and as the imperative to choose became more pressing. While there is hearsay and circumstantial evidence of various degrees of credibility concerning his internal religious development, as well as much sheer speculation, he in fact left only a few letters and reflections. However, from these we can catch a glimpse of what was going on inside of him and of where he had arrived by the end of his *via dolorosa*. For example, in his prison statement, composed shortly before he was to die, he wrote:

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.

He concludes this prison statement with these most soul-revealing words:

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.

All Austrians, of course, would have heard the same Gospel that Jägerstätter heard but it seems from what his neighbors report that he read it and re-read it, pondered it and prayed over it as none of them did (he was occasionally referred to as a religious fanatic). By this grace-saturated process, the culturally created blinders dropped from his eyes and the elephant of evil became so visible that he was compelled to speak the truth and follow Jesus to a criminal’s death, if necessary, rather than continue

to make believe that the diabolical was compatible with the Way of Divinity Incarnate.

Franz Jägerstätter then is not just a martyr for the faith, he is also a chosen prophet of the true God. The Hebrew prophets are not people with witch-like visions who predict the future, nor are they persons who simply speak their own minds and dreams. They explicitly speak the Word of God to concrete situations. By God's grace they vividly see the rebellion against this Word in the here and now and therefore realize the inevitable and disastrous outcome if present choice patterns remain unaltered. They warn those who have eyes but will not perceive, who have ears but will not hear, who have minds but will not understand that it is an absolute necessity to see, name and turn away from an evil that is being marketed in pseudo-divine packaging. In short, they are the ones sent by God to declare to those who adamantly refuse to look, "There is an elephant in the room and it is ruining everything."

For Israel, the Church or the world, the consequence for dismissing a prophet is cataclysm beyond imagination, where the prayer of people becomes "Lord, let the mountains fall on us." The fruit, however, of heeding the prophet is life in a fullness that cannot be conceived beforehand.

The critical question then is this: Is Franz Jägerstätter a true prophet or is he a false prophet? The only method of discerning this matter would be to prayerfully ponder three things: Jägerstätter's life, e.g., in Gordon Zahn's book, *In Solitary Witness*, the reality of military activity and the Gospel of Jesus. It might also be helpful to reflect on what the biblical scholar, the late Rev. John L. McKenzie, presents

as the criteria by which one distinguishes the true from the false prophet:

The false prophet may be sincere, but he is nonetheless false. Because he lacks the prophetic insight into the moral will of Yahweh and the reality of sin, the false prophet sees no evil where it is... (H)e has no conception of the sweeping and rigorous justice with which Yahweh governs. He speaks less than the truth and perverts sound religious belief to merely national and personal good.

For my part, I accept Jägerstätter as authentic. Like the prophet John the Baptist, he is beheaded for not giving evil a license to masquerade as good. But, is he a prophet only to the village of St. Radegund or to Austria during World War II? Or, is God speaking to the entire Church—Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant—through Franz Jägerstätter?

It is incontestable that the elephant of homicidal violence has become permanently lodged in the Houses of God—First World, Second World, Third World and Fourth World. It is equally incontrovertible that despite its monstrous, incongruous, crude and polluting presence within the Churches of Christianity, it remains all but invisible to eyes clouded by the deceits of nationalisms, ethnicisms, militarisms or the delusions of power, prestige and prerogative. Franz Jägerstätter's witness and martyrdom are then a continuing prophetic communication from God to all of Christianity because over the last fifty years leadership and laity have chosen to embrace the self-deceptions and denial of the last 1700 years rather than face the Truth and see by His Light that there is an elephant in the Church and it is ruining everything.