

Homily for Franz Jagerstatter Memorial Service

This was delivered as the homily on 9 August 2018 in the Crypt Chapel of Westminster Cathedral London by Ray Towey for the Franz Jagerstatter Memorial Service arranged by Pax Christi

The story is simple, a peasant farmer in Austria is conscripted to fight for Hitler, refuses claiming being a Catholic and being a soldier in Hitler's army is incompatible so they kill him to preserve military morale. In 1943 German military morale was in serious jeopardy. The battle of Stalingrad had been lost.

The German state needed men at the eastern front. Franz was isolated in the Church, in the village, in his country. To his knowledge then no-one had taken a stand like this. I use the word peasant farmer purposefully not so often used now about Franz, to us it has negative connotations but the Gospel writer is clear about what is a negative:

I thank you Father Lord of heaven and earth because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned and have revealed them to children. (Luke ch10: 21)

This Gospel passage is uneasy reading because ever since I entered formal education I have strived to be someone who is both wise and learned. To the Gospel writer that comfortable self-image or illusion was an obstacle that Franz did not have.

In 1982 I returned from 2 years in a mission hospital in Nigeria. The overwhelming experience of working as a doctor in Africa is watching helplessly the premature death of scores from diseases easily preventable by a little money or curable by modest means.

This remains the global injustice of our time, so the injustice of the Falklands invasion at that time was minor in comparison and I could see no need for further human sacrifice. There was enough premature death in the world, more than enough in Africa alone.

And so, the armada travelled to the South Atlantic to right the wrong bringing with it a military hospital well equipped and I thought why not just make a small detour and share a few drugs from the pharmacy, a few bottles from the blood bank, Nigeria is close by to the east. We won't delay you long, but don't forget Sierra Leone, Ghana, we have friends there too, and what harm if we do delay you long?

Even a child could see the need but the wise and learned had other plans.

There was worse to come. The cruise missiles in Greenham Common were an essential counter to the SS20s of the Soviets and the Pershing 2s in Europe would give us the

superiority we needed to keep our Christian culture safe and the Church at the highest level then was ambiguous.

What was this doctrine of nuclear deterrence, a necessary modern moral relativism for the Church or a new heresy, is that too strong a word and who was for the burning? Everyone? and so we asked, where do we stand and we made a stand and not like Franz, alone, but we were few. Like Dorothy Day we had the nerve to call ourselves Catholic and thereby Catholic Peace Action. We were non-violent but did not keep the law and counted jail time as a duty or was it a spiritual pride in the new indulgences? were we the orthodox or the heterodox? Time would tell.

We added our small voice to others in and out of the Church. We shared with a few of our own bishops but at the time like Franz were not affirmed and learnt how to be strangers in our communities, our Church and country which we loved. But let me not forget Bishop Gumbleton from Detroit and Pax Christi who wrote us a good character witness letter for our bad disobedient behaviour which we copied for the court, usually to no avail, so unlike Franz we were not alone but we were few.

Fr. Daniel Berrigan has a reflection on Franz written some years before Franz's beatification:

*"As for Franz he will not go away, he will not go away from the Church that sent him on his way alone.
His way, which should have been the way of the Church.
So he lingers half unwelcome....."*

After the war Franz's name was added to the memorial in his parish cemetery of those who had died for Austria but it was secretly erased. For some in his village his name was most unwelcome.

In his own diocese of Linz 40 priests were sent to concentration camps and 11 died. In the Archdiocese of Vienna which was twice the size of Linz 9 priests were sent to concentration camps and 1 died. There was resistance in the Church to the Nazi regime but it was thin and patchy. One of his parish priests had been banned from the parish by the regime for delivering an anti-Nazi sermon and even he advised him accept the conscription, he saw his bishop who advised the same.

When the wise and learned advised him to fight for Hitler was he choosing the way of suicide? This was his terrible deep spiritual anguish.

When he was transferred to the Berlin prison he met with the prison chaplain who related to him the case of an Austrian priest Fr.Reinisch who had refused to take the oath to Hitler and was executed a year before. Fr.Reinisch had been conscripted to the medical corps but still refused the oath stating that he opposed the Nazi world view which had resulted in murder, the elimination of the mentally disabled, forced sterilisation, the illegal annexation of Austria.

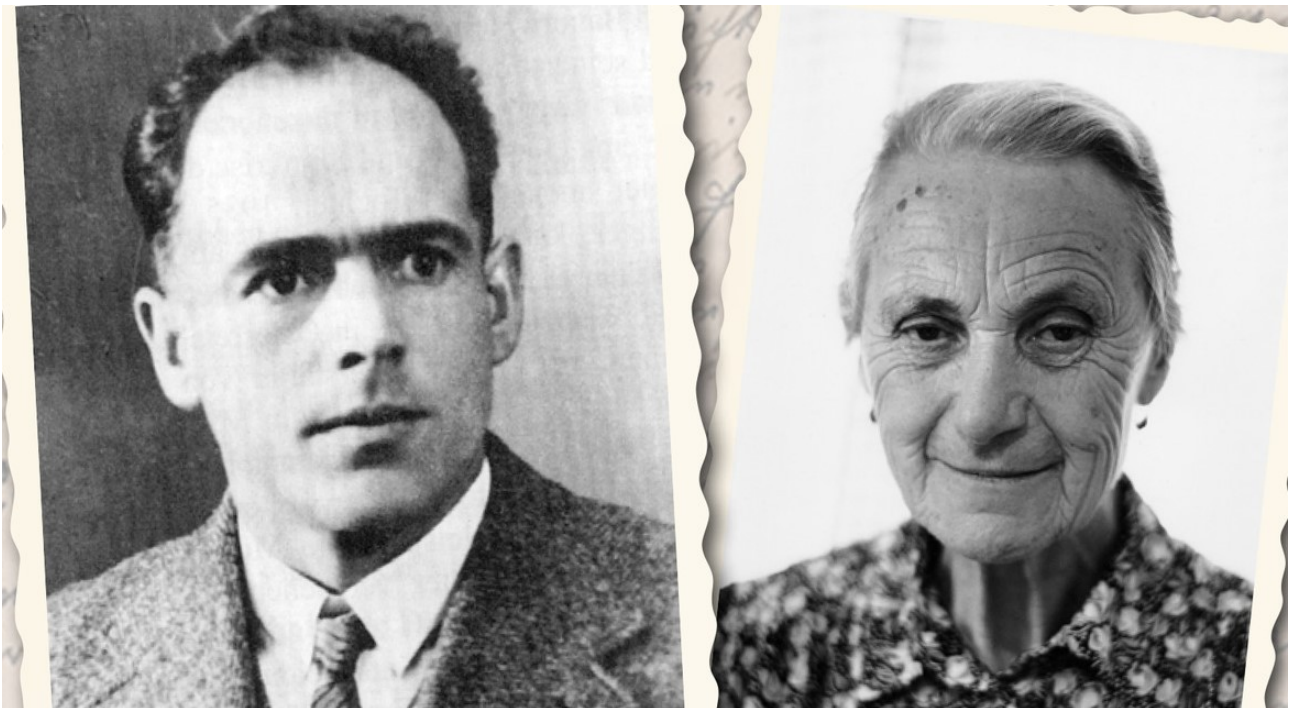
The chaplain relates that Franz breathed a sigh of relief and was greatly encouraged and said, "I can't be on the wrong path after all, if even a priest has decided the same and has gone to his death for it then it's all right for me to do it too."

I think this was the first time he had heard of anyone refusing conscription for Christian reasons and it suggests that even at this late stage he was still in need of more support that his stand was correct and not a suicide.

After the war the search for justice began but there were to be dispensations, if you had the secrets of the V1 and V2 rockets there was an amnesty. The learned and the wise needed you, and a new and comfortable life in the West or the East guaranteed. These wonderful Nazi indiscriminate weapons of terror had their uses. The V1 became cruise missiles and the V2 ballistic missiles, just add a nuclear warhead when required.

And so... Coventry, Hamburg, Dresden, Hiroshima, Nagasaki....we know who won the battles but who won the values?

In 1941 while doing his military service after his second call up Franz writes, "Ybbs is a beautiful town.. there's quite a large mental asylum here, which used to be full of patients but now probably even the mad have become sane, because there are no longer very many of them in the asylum. My dear wife there must be some truth in what you told me once about what's happening to these people.



Franz and Franziska Jagerstatter

In May 1943 Franziska writes to Franz of the sudden death of a disabled child who had been put in a home for the disabled. Hundreds of thousands of disabled children, psychiatric patients, mentally disabled adults, Downs syndrome children were killed during the war. Bishop von Galen of Munster was a vociferous opponent of this Action T4 euthanasia programme and was placed under virtual house arrest in 1941.

In Europe these days Downs syndrome is becoming a rarity. For them we have developed our own final solution.

And what of us? The state may not need us in uniform but it still needs our obedience or is it just our silence?

But now it will never be so hard because we have Franz. Thank you, Franz from the bottom of my heart for making my small journey clearer, less lonely, more loyal, more forgiving and with no place for bitterness.