

Review of *In Solitary Witness* (cont.)

By Dorothy Day

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Summary: Continues to give details of Franz Jagerstatter's resistance to the Nazi regime. Admires his solitary, almost unnoticed, witness. See him as a beacon for conscientious objectors in the Vietnam era. (DDLW #829).

IN SOLITARY WITNESS. The life and death of Franz Jagerstatter, by Gordon Zahn. Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 383 Madison Avenue, New York, N.Y., \$5.95. Reviewed by DOROTHY DAY.

(Continued from Last Issue) [Link to Part I](#)

“There is no hiding the fact that it is much harder to be a Christian today than when it was in the first centuries, and there is every reason to predict that it will be even more difficult in the near future. When it becomes the ‘sacred duty’ of a man to commit sin, the Christian no longer knows how he should live. There remains nothing else for him to do but bear individual witness – alone. And where such witness is, there is the Kingdom of God.”

It is these words of Reinhold Schneider which Gordon Zahn uses when he humbly dedicates this book to the memory of Franz Jagerstatter “and to all the others who, like him, stood alone and said ‘No’—many of whose stories have been completely lost to history, at least as it is kept and written by men.”

The facts of Franz’ life are these: He was born May 20, 1907 in St. Radegund, a little village in upper Austria. His daily life was like that of most Austrian peasants. In nineteen thirty-six he married a girl from a nearby village and she is credited with changing him from “a beloved, lusty youth,” “an accomplished and enthusiastic fighter” into a strongly religious man. But his wife today denies this and said his religious awakening came about gradually around the time of his marriage. They went to Rome on their honeymoon.

She had met him at a dance at Ach where she herself had been working as a waitress. Later in addition to running the family farm, Franz became sexton of the parish church. When Hitler’s troops moved into Austria in 1938, Jagerstatter was the only man in the village to vote against the **Anschluss**. Before this he has served his military training and had not been interested in politics nor was he involved in any political organization. After Hitler’s occupation he refused to contribute in any way to Hitler’s collections or to receive any benefits. It was necessary, he said, to disassociate oneself from the Nazi Folk Community and make no contributions to it. “Anyone who wishes to practice Christian Charity in his deeds can manage to provide the poor with something for their sustenance without Winter Relief Collection or the Peoples’ Welfare fund.” He renounced all claims to the official Family Assistance Program under which he would have been entitled to cash allotments for his children and after a disaster to the crops,

he refused the emergency cash subsidies offered the farmers by the government. He was alone in his refusal.

The family, Gordon Zahn pointed out, was living at a level described as being near the point of poverty, nevertheless he distributed foodstuffs to the poor. These facts might indicate a level of production geared to the minimal needs of subsistence and an avoidance of higher levels of farm production.

Franz remained openly anti-Nazi and refused to fight in Hitler's war. He was finally called in February, 1943 and was imprisoned first at Linz, then at Berlin. After a military trial he was beheaded August 9, 1943. He was cremated, his ashes cared for by friends and after the war buried in the churchyard of St. Radegund, and his name included in the list of those who died in the war.

Gordon Zahn makes an interesting comparison between St. Thomas More and his witness and that of the humble peasant, the "great man" and the "little man," and the comparison, he says may perhaps enhance rather than diminish the significance of the latter's sacrifice. "For the very fact that none would notice or be likely to be affected by what he did serves to reduce the issue to the individual and his conscience in silent and inner confrontation with God. Certainly this is what it meant to Franz Jagerstatter himself. That same confrontation existed for St. Thomas More, but to the extent to which he knew that others would take account of what he did, he was not alone. As far as the St. Radegund peasant knew, the choice he made would pass unnoticed by the world and would completely fade from human memory with the passing of the handful of people who had known him personally."

We owe a great debt of gratitude to Gordon Zahn for undertaking so exhaustive a study of this modern martyr.

How did Franz Jagerstatter get that way? The few simple facts that we know are that his religious awakening came about because of a retreat. He had lived of course in the simple religious atmosphere of the Austrian village, where all were Catholic, and close to the church where he was sexton, which meant daily contact with the Holy Eucharist. He was poor, he led a life of hard work. He read Scriptures and the Lives of the Saints, (which included St. Thomas More and the Cure of Ars, who was what one would call today a "draft dodger".)

There was no chance at all of his affecting the policies of the State, or influencing the lives of others as far as he knew. Another little saint of today, who died ten years before Franz was born, was of a bourgeois background but equally little and unimportant, St. Therese of Lisieux, coming from a small town in France, born of a father who was a watchmaker and a mother who was a lacemaker.

No one encouraged Franz in his act of disobedience to the orders of the state. Everyone argued against what he was doing, even the most sympathetic of priests, who could only see his resistance as futile, and even bad for the institutionalized Church.

But to two priests today, Gordon Zahn writes, must go the credit of keeping

Franz's memory alive today. The dean of St. Margarethe's Church in Bruhl, Germany, Heinrich Kreuzberg, who had been prison chaplain in Berlin, and Fr. Josef Karobath, pastor of the parish church of St. Radegund. And the greatest consolation Franz received while he awaited his execution in prison was the news that Fr. Franz Reinisch, a priest of the Pallotine order of Austria, also had been executed for refusal to take the military oath requiring that he swear unconditional obedience to the person of Hitler.

"Even while I was telling him of this," Fr. Kreuzberg writes, "his eyes lit up and after a deep sigh as if a heavy burden had fallen from his soul he joyously declared, 'But this is what I have always told myself, that I cannot be following a false path. If a priest made such a decision and went to his death, then I may do so too.'"

To me it is very consoling that Franz Jagerstatter had in addition to Christ in the bread and wine of the Eucharist, also knowledge of Christ in one of His priests today who had taken the same stand and so was in a way accompanying him those last hard days.

I still do not feel that I am through with this review of Gordon Zahn's book until I have quoted at length from Franz's few writings, in the future issue of the **Catholic Worker**.

Let us pray that Gordon's book, which contains these writings in its appendix, will reach all the young men who are questioning their stand today in the face of conscription for the war which is going on in Vietnam right now. These essays, **On Irresponsibility, Is there anything the individual can still do? Is there still a God? War or Revolution? On Dangerous Weapons**. And last but not least, **The Prison Statement**, surely must be reprinted in the pages of **The Catholic Worker** as far as we will be permitted by the publisher.

If the most famous words of the little Saint Therese were "I will spend my heaven doing good upon earth," let us hope that these desires also animate Franz Jagerstatter today in this time of our utmost need, utmost danger. Standing before the face of God as he does, may he intercede for us all, and pray that the hearts of young men will be filled with the courage he showed, and the conviction which enabled him to take his solitary stand, and give his "solitary witness."