

Review of In Solitary Witness

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Summary: Summary: Sees Franz Jagerstatter as a saint and martyr for conscientious objection and primacy of conscience. Capsules his life story. Keywords: saints, non-violence (DDLW #827).

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IN SOLITARY WITNESS: The Life and Death of Franz Jagerstatter, by Gordon Zahn. Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 278 pages: \$5.95. Reviewed by DOROTHY DAY

“It is all God’s doing,” St. Therese, the Little Flower, pointed out in her autobiography. “When God wants a saint, He makes one.” Of course the person in question has to give assent. I wondered how many there are who have been “called to be saints” and have refused because the price was too great?

Of course I do not presume to anticipate in speaking of Franz Jagerstatter as a saint, and it will be noted that I use the word with a small “s”. The head of a seminary in France once told his seminarians, “I pray you all become saints, but not canonized ones, because that is too expensive a process.”

I don’t know that I agree with that after reading this fascinating study of Gordon Zahn’s. We need such saints today, to be held up for public veneration, raised to the altars so that we ask their intercession with God in these times of terror, with the threat of nuclear war hanging over us, and no speaking out as yet by the second Vatican Council against it.

The book reads like a mystery story. I mean the kind of a mystery story that Josephine Tey wrote when she had her detective from his sickbed untangle a historical mystery as to who murdered the young princess in the tower. It is as engrossing as all that, and I speak this way of it, with enthusiasm, because we all know Gordon Zahn as a sociologist and we all are familiar with the theses that are often published by sociologists as books and how few there are which make for inspirational reading. Zahn’s book is thoroughly researched, painstakingly accurate and wholly dedicated to finding the truth about this man Franz and how he came to do what he did, lay down his life because he refused service in Hitler’s armies, against all in his village, even his beloved wife, against all the clergy, against all the Bishops, even, one might say, against the Pope himself. His conscience came first. He was a conscientious objector; a lone conscientious objector; for all he knew there were no others in the entire world who were

making this witness. He stood utterly alone, and met his death for following his conscience. When confronted with that harrowing question, “Why doesn’t the Church take such a stand as yours, why don’t the Cardinals, the Bishops, the parish priests take such a stand?” he could only reply, “They did not have the grace.” And today, on the Vigil of the Ascension, I read in St. Paul’s Epistle to the Ephesians: **“Brothers, to everyone of us is given grace according to the measure of the giving of Christ,”** and he goes on to talk of the different vocations. Franz’s vocation was to be a solitary witness, to point to the world the personal responsibility of each one of us. He was told, “Do this” and he refused. Eichmann, who “only followed orders” and his leader, Hitler, spent their childhood thirty kilometers away. From this small speck on the world’s surface three men arose who made their mark on world history. Let us hope that the good Franz did will stand out for the world to see and hear of, just as the satanic work of the other two will never be forgotten. St. Radegund, where Franz was born, may well become a place of pilgrimage and the county seat, Graunau-am-Inn will be forgotten. Three men with their roots in the same soil: Hitler, Eichmann, and Franz Jagerstatter. Hitler, the latter-day Caesar; Eichmann, his willing and perhaps all too eager servant; and finally Jagerstatter, the rebel-peasant who rejected the Fuhrer and refused his orders.

If St. Radegund does become a place of pilgrimage it will be thanks to this book of Gordon Zahn, who has not allowed the story of Franz to be forgotten. He too was called to perform a task, and we can be deeply grateful to him for also being a witness, and in a way a solitary witness.

Franz was born on May 20, 1907, in St. Radegund, a small village in Upper Austria. His natural father was killed in World War 1 and when his mother married her child was adopted by her husband. He was wild in his youth, and the villagers always remembered the young Franz, or the early Franz before he went through a conversion which took place before his marriage in 1936 to a girl from a neighboring village and which led him to go to Rome on their honeymoon. After his religious awakening, he became sexton of the village Church in addition to his work as a farmer. He had three daughters, the oldest of whom was not quite six when he was called to active duty and refused. He was imprisoned, tried and beheaded on August 9, 1943.

Zahn interviewed not only his childhood friends, other villagers, the parish priests past and present, but his wife and children. Jagerstatter is remembered kindly, lovingly, but the villagers did not give any significant approval to his actions. He is remembered best for his wild days when he loved to bowl, dance and fight, and was the first to bring a motorcycle to the community. “Always ready for a fight . . . had his weaknesses as everyone else does.” And this meant the fathering of a child which did not lead to marriage. There is still a mystery about this aspect of his youth. The gang warfare of the villagers was quite as horrifying as it is in our days. Gang weapons included “heavy chains, thick leather thongs filled with sand and edged with knife blades, etc.” According to his companions he was an “accomplished and enthusiastic fighter,” and one battle led to his arrest

and imprisonment for a few days. There was also a temporary but enforced exile from the community, perhaps in relation to some affair over a girl, during which he was banished to the iron mines of the Steiermark area.

Zahn's book ends with Franz's own writings, commentaries and letters, in which the man shines forth, and because I wish to quote extensively from these, as well as from Zahn's analysis of "The Martyr as Rebel: a Sociological Summary," which I regard as of prime importance in our day, this review will be continued in the July-August issue. I want too, to discuss further a comment of Gordon Zahn's in speaking of Franz's writings: "From time to time, he would argue a point in the framework of an almost puritanical sex morality." Much can be said for the creativity of such an attitude, what it had to do with his clarity of vision and strength to withstand the world in his "solitary witness".

(To be continued in July-Aug. issue: DDLW #829)