NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://www.ncronline.org)

The mind, heart and spirit of Jägerstätter

Tom Roberts | Aug. 12, 2009

Book, DVD illuminate life of farmer executed for refusing to serve in Nazi army

FRANZ JÄGERSTÄTTER: LETTERS AND WRITINGS FROM PRISON
Edited by Erna Putz, translated with commentary by Robert A. Krieg
Published by Orbis Books, $25

One of the more daunting realizations one can have about the life of Franz Jägerstätter, the Austrian farmer who was executed in 1943 for refusing to join the Nazi cause, is that his beatification in October 2007 was not only a recognition of his heroic act but also an affirmation by the church of his thinking about war and the Christian response to a state?s unjust demands.

This collection of his writings, largely exchanges with his wife, Franziska, as well as essays from the time of his imprisonment, is significant because it is the most complete representation to date of Jägerstätter?s deep spirituality and of his rationale for refusing to serve.

As such it rounds out the improbable story of this lone dissenter in his small village who would have remained unknown to history had it not been for research in the 1960s by the late Gordon Zahn, one of the founders of Pax Christi USA, who discovered a reference to Jägerstätter in the appendix of a biography of a priest who had resisted the Nazis.

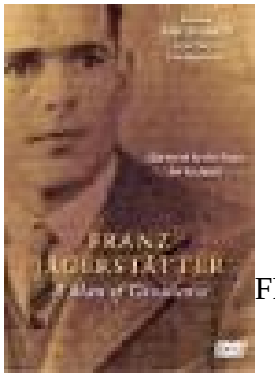
Jägerstätter?s reading of scripture and the Catholic faith led him to conclude that the Nazis were conducting an unjust war and that he could not participate, a conclusion for which he could find no affirmation at the time from church authorities.

That is not to say that his views were singular in all of Austria. In fact he would certainly have heard of the anti-Nazi writings of the bishop of Linz, a city a few hours from Jägerstätter?s farm village, as pointed out in a valuable introduction by longtime peace activist Jim Forest. In 1933, the bishop, Johannes Maria Gföllner, condemned Nazism as ?spiritually sick with materialistic racial delusions, un-Christian nationalism, a nationalistic view of religion, with what is quite simply sham Christianity.? Linz had a new, more moderate bishop by 1941.

Jägerstätter, however, would also have been aware that Austria?s hierarchy had advocated that citizens vote in favor of Anschluss, or the takeover of Austria by the Germans, with the cardinal at the time signing a declaration to that effect. The words ?Heil Hitler!? were above his signature.

Jägerstätter would also have known of priests who were speaking out against the Nazis and paying with imprisonment or their lives. What made Jägerstätter?s act so extraordinary was the fact that he was an ordinary farmer, the father of three daughters by his wife and a fourth by another woman before he was married. That the church would ultimately hold him in high esteem by his church for taking such an insistent stance, even though his bishop and pastor provided rationale for taking a less controversial path, seems a significant endorsement in

this era for the primacy of individual conscience.



FRANZ JÄGERSTÄTTER: A MAN OF CONSCIENCE

Directed and produced by Jason A. Schmidt and Ron Schmidt, S.J. December 2nd Productions/Hope Media Productions, $14.95

As both the book of his writings and a new DVD, ?Franz Jägerstätter: A Man of Conscience,? make clear, Jägerstätter was not acting out of a pacifist position. In fact, he answered an initial call to military training before returning home. His refusal came upon being recalled to service. And even during his imprisonment, he attempted to escape execution by applying for the medical corps three times, but was turned down.

So his reaction was to what he deemed irrational and unnecessary violence, and in that he presents both a model and challenge for today. His letters and essays are full of his internal discussions about the duty of the Christian citizen and to what lengths one might go to accommodate the wishes of the state.

The book sets up the extensive exchanges and essays with two pieces. The introduction by Forest presents the complex and sometimes desperate context within which Jägerstätter deliberated and made his decision. The texts were translated by theologian Robert A. Krieg of the University of Notre Dame, who provides an overview of the material: a total of 128 letters, 74 by Franz and 54 by Franziska, and a collection of essays that lay out ?the ideas that undergirded his opposition to National Socialism, the Third Reich, and the war.?

The 24-minute video covers much of the same biographical material but includes a range of voices that are welcome contemporary interpreters of Jägerstätter?s life. It is wanting as a piece of visual material because there are only still photographs of the principal figure. Much of his struggle, of course, was interior and contained in his writing, a process impossible to photograph.

Martin Sheen narrates the work and reads from Jägerstätter?s writings, all of which occurs around interviews with Jägerstätter family members, including daughters and a granddaughter and, most moving, with Franziska, now 96. She had to undergo her own ordeal, being left behind in the village with small children and facing neighbors? accusations that it was her influence that led Franz to such extremes of faith and conviction.

Theirs was a story of deep love and affection as well as martyrdom and sacrifice, and one can detect a sense of dignity and vindication even now as she recalls the circumstances of those years.

Tom Roberts is NCR *editor at large. His e-mail address is* troberts@ncronline.org.

Source URL (retrieved on *2016-05-31 07:06*): http://www.ncronline.org/books/2012/09/mind-heart-and-spirit-j%E2%80%B0gerst%E2%80%B0tter