

FOLLOWING CHRIST IN A RADICAL WAY: CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTION AND THE STORY OF FRANZ JÄGERSTÄTTER

As teachers, we know that the most powerful way to educate is through example. Pope Paul VI constantly reiterated this conviction with his words: “People do not listen to teachers; they listen to witnesses.” In this sense, we need to present true witnesses to show that obedience to the Gospel may mean disobedience to the state and its wars. For high school students, it would be inspiring to learn about some saints of the early church, who refused to go into the military and were killed for staying true to their faith. These early church saints show how Christian pacifism was the prevailing view as the church began. It is also important to teach students the key developments concerning war and peace in the church’s history, broadly centered on key elements.

- First, the nonviolence of the first Christians.
- Second, the emergence of the teaching that there can be “just wars.”
- Third, the embrace of “holy wars” at times in church history.
- Fourth, the rise of allegiance to the modern nation-state and the willingness by many (not all) Catholics to support its wars.
- Fifth, the call of the Second Vatican Council for “a fresh new appraisal of war,” which yielded renewed support for conscientious objectors as well as sharp criticisms of modern military violence (such as Paul VI boldly reflecting on U.S. actions at Hiroshima as “a butchery of untold magnitude).
- Sixth, the creation in the 1960’s of groups such as the Catholic Peace Fellowship to protest the Vietnam war and, more broadly, take up the tradition—both radical and Catholic—to oppose the violence of the nation-state as a source of hope for peace.
- Seventh, the release of documents such as the 1983 pastoral letter, *The Challenge of Peace* from the U.S. Catholic bishops that affirm the need for conscientious objection in the contemporary era.

All of these developments make now, more than ever, the time to teach about war and peace in the Catholic tradition. The urgency of these questions today is, in fact, part of the story of the re-emergence of the Catholic Peace Fellowship to support conscientious objection as well as work on related issues in the Catholic peace tradition. And so it is that CPF turns to one of the most inspiring heroes of that tradition, a lay Austrian Catholic man named Franz Jägerstätter who was beheaded for refusing to serve in the military, as our patron and guide in our work. He remained true to his Catholicism even as all around him—including church leaders in Austria and Germany—rallied for the war effort. We hope he will someday be named a

saint, but for now his example, his witness, can help teach young people—like your students—how conscientious objection is linked to the Catholic faith. As the centerpiece of a series of lessons plans for high school students, **the story of Franz Jägerstätter** can inspire and be for students a true sign of peace.

The Story of Franz Jägerstätter

Franz Jägerstätter was killed by the Nazis on August 9, 1943 for refusing to enlist in the military. From the very beginning, Franz contended that the war was being waged by “bad men” playing a “crooked game.” Very simply, Franz concluded that “I cannot play the game. The game is a lie.” How he came to this conclusion, and what happened to him when he stuck to this conclusion, are the compelling elements of a story that, for high school students, can have a tremendous impact.

Franz Jägerstätter was born in 1907 in the small Austrian village of St. Radegund. There he was raised in poverty and came to age as a young man known for wild and rebellious lifestyle. He was even said to have fathered a child out of wedlock. Eventually, he married a saintly woman named Franziska and had three daughters, Maria, Aloisia, and Rosalia. This great woman spurred in Franz a renewed devotion to his Catholic faith. Franz came to be an active part of his parish and admired the courageous sermons of one priest in particular, Fr. Karobath. The Christian life became not just something for Sundays. When, in 1938, the German Anschluss, or annexation, of Austria commenced, Franz increasingly saw a choice between holding to his Catholic faith and supporting “the Fatherland.” In 1940, he was drafted and reported for about 6 months of service. After this, he returned to St. Radegund vowing disobedience to future military conscription letters. He sought the advice of friends, went to his priest, and even met with and received advice from the bishop. He was told by each that, because of his state in life as a married man, he should not risk death and thus should serve. Further, he should not continue to feel guilty for possibly aiding the Nazi cause, since moral responsibility for their commands resided with them, not with him or other soldiers following orders.

Against almost all of the advice he received, Franz became a conscientious objector. In his compelling reasons for his decision are found key truths of the Catholic peace tradition. Franz’s writings revealed that he asked himself these simple questions:

- “What Catholic can dare to say that these raids which Germany has carried out in several countries, and is still carrying out, constitute a just and holy war?”
- “Who dares to assert that among the German people in this war only one person bears the responsibility, and why then did so many millions of Germans have to give their ‘Yes’ or ‘No’?”
- “Can one be reproached today for lacking patriotism? Do we still even have a mother country in this world?”
- “If the Church stays silent in the face of what is happening, what difference would it make if no church were ever opened again?”

In these statements, and in the others Franz makes during this time (see our links to articles on Jägerstätter), the content of Catholic conscientious objection emerges. His firm and simple faith that “I believe God asks me to live by my conscience” led him to the fateful day, March 1, 1943, when he presented himself to the military and told them directly and definitively that he would not fight. He offered to serve as a medical orderly as a work of mercy, but he could not fight nor advance the cause of the war. He was held for two months in jail at Linz, then transferred to Berlin-Tegel and stood trial on July 6, 1943. He was sentenced to die for sedition. The court never responded to his offer to do charity as a medic. On August 9, 1943, Franz was taken to the Brandenburg/Havel facility and there, at 4 pm, he was beheaded. A priest who had met with him shortly before his execution noted his calmness and readiness to die. Franz knew, as he had written, that he “could change nothing in world affairs” but that at the least—or the most—he might “be a sign that not everyone let themselves be carried away with the tide.” The priest, after visiting with Franz that last day, would later say that Jägerstätter was the only sure saint he had met in his life.

Lesson Plan Ideas

“FRANK’S DECISION”

◆ BEFORE students learn the full story of Franz, and that he was opposed to the Nazis (which will arouse natural sympathies with him), we suggest simply telling the outline of his story, without saying where he was from or which side of the war his country was fighting on. Then ask for journal/discussion responses as to what the students think he should do when drafted. Again—**and here’s the key**—tell the story as if he *could be a U.S.* soldier in WWII. You could highlight these points about “Frank”:

- Frank is a country boy who grew up a bit rugged, got a motorcycle and partied a lot, married his sweetheart and had three kids
 - He gets involved in his local parish, serving as the sacristan
- WWII is beginning and his town joins the national cause to support the troops and help protect the world from tyranny
 - Frank, like all the other young men, gets drafted
- He thinks maybe patriotism is not compatible with his Catholic faith and that the government and military are full of crooks and liars anyway
- Frank thinks about filing as a conscientious objector
- He goes to his local priest to discuss the matter
- Franz meets with and receives the advice of his bishop about what he should do
- Each of these church leaders, along with every single one of his friends and family, urge him to report for duty and join the country’s war effort
- He knows that there would be a massive penalty for this, and that he’s got three kids and a wife on the farm to take care of, and that most seem to think the nation’s cause is worth fighting for

Start the journaling and/or discussion about “Frank’s” decision. As a teacher, of course, what you are going for here is a response that he would not be doing anything really wrong by serving (especially since it is WWII, let the students persist for a moment in the assumption that Frank’s cause is worthy, even important to “save” the world.) After you get a good discussion going, then bring home the truth: “Frank” really was “Franz” and his conscientious objection would keep him from fighting for the Nazis. Thus, his possible refusal to serve goes, in the students eyes, from an easily-dismissed point of view to a courageous and laudable and even heroic action. The point to be made is not that the U.S. “cause” and Nazi “cause” in

WWII were the same—of course they were not. Rather, the point is our assumption our instinctual bias as U.S. Americans toward presuming that 1) service in the military is, at a basic level, good and worthy of support; 2) the fact that a “cause” has broad popular support (e.g., fighting communism) translates for us into a respectability for that cause; and 3) dismissing the government as “crooks” or a war as “a lie” does not necessarily demand heroic action, especially when it could come at a cost to self or family. These and other points can provide an interesting impetus to studying the life and death of Franz Jägerstätter.

CHALKBOARD NOTES: the “teachable moments of Jägerstätter’s life

To teach ABOUT the life of Franz Jägerstätter, a number of resource articles are available. Below are a few good articles, and others may be found on the web. If your students have access to the Internet, you could assign them research on material found on the web about Jägerstätter. In terms of class notes, as you tell the story, here are some important bullet points to highlight that will help students distill the “point” of the lesson:

- Franz saw a conflict between obedience to God and obedience to the state.
- Franz saw his Christianity and membership in the church as a *way of life*, as his primary identity.
- He believed that it is never okay to do something evil, even if it would be easier.
- Franz saw Christ’s life—radical commitment to the kingdom of God, crucifixion by the world, resurrection by the Father, new life in the Spirit—as being continually played out in history.
- True love involves sacrifice. Maybe not usually martyrdom, but giving one’s life and love to others for the sake of Christ’s mission.

Here are links to articles on Jägerstätter:

<http://c3.hu/~bocs/jager-a.htm>

<http://elvis.rowan.edu/~kilroy/JEK/08/09.html>

<http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bio/224.html>

<http://www.justpeace.org/advent98-3.htm>

BECOMING A CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTOR AND IDEA FOR STAGING A MOCK DRAFT BOARD HEARING

As a teaching tool, as well as an aid to some young persons considering CO status, you can present the process and requirements for becoming a CO. A good idea might be to read in class or assign for homework the article “Catholics and Conscientious Objection: Responding to a Military Draft” in the Catholic Peace Fellowship journal *The Sign of Peace* (Ordinary Time 2002). The when teaching the subject, remember that a CO application can only be made when a draft is active again and when your name has been called. The registration, which takes place with the 18th birthday has no formal way to register as a CO. All that happens is that a card is sent via the mail that is filled out as registration for the draft. However, many CO’s have written in the margins of this registration card why they cannot support war. Others have not filled out the card, and thus not registered at all, though legally this could jeopardize eligibility for some government programs, like student loans. To learn more in depth at how the draft would operate if re-instated, click on one of the links below. An especially good resource is the site of the American Friends Service Committee, though this Quaker apostolate does not speak to the Catholic perspective, their on-line magazine “Youth and Militarism” would be a great (and free) subscription for your students.

The Selective Service System Documentation Form for Conscientious Objectors includes the following questions:

1. Describe your beliefs which are the reasons for your claiming conscientious objection to combatant military training and service or to all military training and service.
2. Describe how and when you acquired these beliefs.
3. Explain what most clearly shows that your beliefs are deeply held. You may wish to include a description of how your beliefs affect the way you live.

A good lesson plan would be to ask students to do the worksheet for homework. They could either do it for themselves, or as if they were Franz Jägerstätter, using what they learn about Catholic teachings to inform their answers. Also, there is a great, interactive website with a “Quiz” on Conscientious Objection that students can do at <http://www.mcc.org/ask-a-vet/quiz/>

As an exciting follow up, you could organize the students into a MOCK DRAFT REVIEW BOARD (this board, as the article on the draft states, is the military's decision-making body on whether someone qualifies for CO status. The context could be a current conflict the country is preparing to enter and you could assign roles, including but not limited to the following:

APPLICANTS: various draftees presenting their worksheet and case for being a CO

WITNESSES: for example, priests who have to attest that the applicant is in line with Catholic teaching and thus has a religious basis for their claim

REVIEW BOARD MEMBERS: including military officers who question the applicants as to the value of their claim

Other key links on youth becoming CO's

<http://www.afsc.org/youthmil/choices/draft.htm>

http://www.nisbco.org/What_Do_I.htm