Franz Jägerstätter was born on May 20, 1907 in St. Radegund (Upper Austria). He was executed on August 9, 1943 in Brandenburg-Havel. Of profession he was a farmer and served as a sacristan at the local church.

In summer 1940, Franz Jägerstätter was drafted into military service for the first time. He was enlisted on June 17. Just a few days later, he was able to return to his farm due to an intervention by the authorities of his home town. From October 1940 until April 1941, he served in the Wehrmacht, but not in combat duty at the front. He was released again, but decided this time not to comply with further conscription. On March 1, 1943, he declared his refusal.

He asked several times to be transferred to the military ambulance service. He did not want to kill other people in order to help Hitler’s Germany gain control of the whole world. His deep rejection of armed military service was rooted in his strong faith; he paid for this with his life. He was beheaded on August 9, 1943, at 4pm/Brandenburg/Havel.

He was beatified on October 26th, 2007, in Linz, Austria.

Introduction

In 1985, a former prisoner accompanied a group of young people through the former concentration camp of Mauthausen. He was a warm-hearted, charming person with no thoughts of hatred or revenge. By the end of the tour, at the bottom of the so-called ‘death stairs’, where prisoners were thrown to death, we were all devastated. How was this possible, here, in our native country? This caused us to ask the question: what kind of values do we have, if such a thing as this can happen? We did not ask about God, but we asked about humanity.

On the very same day, I was asked to speak about the preliminary results of my investigations into Franz Jägerstätter. Anna Hackl (born Langthaler) talked about her family who rescued and concealed two refugees from the concentration camp. From the example of Franz and Franziska Jägerstätter, and from the example of the Langthaler family,
who also risked their lives, we gained a new perspective. Looking at these people raised our spirits. They gave us back our faith in humanity.

All of them received their orientation and strength from their Christian faith. This faith was trustworthy because it guided their conscience and helped them to put justice and love before fear and propaganda. Scripture reading and prayer must be of value because these people were—in such extreme situations—sustained by it.

In some parts of the world and in periods during the last century, Christian faith only meant ‘resistance’. Those who resisted paid the price: ‘martyrdom’—because Christian faith and political action could not be separated.

In 1943, a Catholic farmer from Upper Austria, Franz Jägerstätter, refused war service in Hitler’s army. He asked not only his contemporaries about the political responsibility of Christians, but also his Church.

In 1980, the Archbishop of Vienna, Christoph Schönborn, called Franz Jägerstätter a martyr. He said that Jägerstätter’s writings from the prison, due to their simple truthfulness, served as a mirror for anyone who questions his Christian existence if things come to a head. Christians have always suffered throughout history because they told the truth. The testimony of the martyrs shows that the homeland of a Christian is heaven.

During the beatification process of Franz Jägerstätter, Manfred Scheuer, postulator at diocesan level and current bishop of Innsbruck, presented him as a martyr who was clearly killed because of his faith. Sometimes this position is disputed because Franz Jägerstätter was executed because of his conscientious objection, and not because of an article of faith. Bishop Scheuer rejected these objections because they make an undue distinction between faith and ethics:

The martyrs of the 20th century augment our view and, by that, they make it possible to interpret the signs of the time; in times of hatred, barbarity and contempt for human beings, they portray the truth of God and the dignity of man. With their diagnosis of society and their ideologies they were not fanatics or deluded, but were much clearer than many of their contemporaries. Their prophetic testimony of the Christian truth was based on a radical and far-sighted analysis, which unmasked political systems that despised man and God, racism, the ideology of war and of the deification of the state and their declared will to destroy Christianity and the Church. To them, trust in God was combined with a radical critique of ideologies and idols. They realised the power of resistance which is in faith (Scheuer 2002).