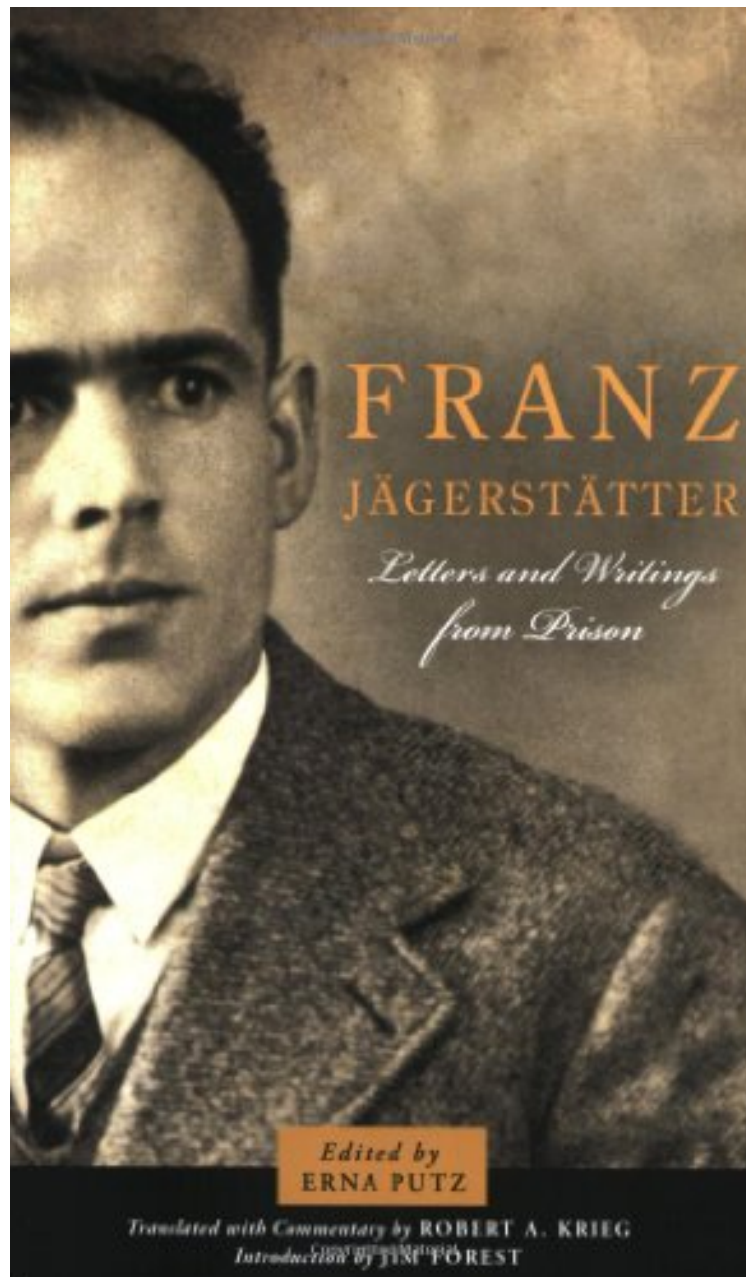


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## Franz Jagerstatter: Letters and Writings from Prison

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**From Orbis Books : Franz Jagerstatter: Letters and Writings from Prison** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Franz Jagerstatter: Letters and Writings from Prison:

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Being a saint when everything is a moral compromise

By Peter S. Bradley

Franz Jagerstatter was a Catholic Austrian farmer who graduated from a one-room school at fourteen. He spent some time working in the mines before returning to his home-town of St. Radegund. At St. Radegund he fathered a child out of wedlock and then married Franziska Schaninger and started farming. The couple had two small children and Franz grew deeper in his Catholic faith. In 1938, Austria was incorporated into the National Socialist (NS) German Reich, initially by force and then by a plebiscite. From 1940 to 1941, Franz was inducted into the Austrian army, where he was trained as a soldier away from St. Radegund. During that time, he wrote letters to wife. These letters are beautiful expressions of the love of a man for his wife and family. Franz also offers the perspective of an Austrian peasant on his times, his faith and on the NS influence on Austria. These letters are particularly poignant because we know Franz's destiny. After he was mustered out of training in 1941, Franz returned to St. Radegund, where he thought about the NS and what it meant to be complicit in NS evil. In 1943, Franz was recalled to military service. The NS was an evil condemned by the Catholic Church. Bishops and priests were arrested and imprisoned for speaking against the NS. Service in the military was service to evil, but Franz had a family and not serving was disobedience to the State, and to God who ordained the State, and was punishable by death. Soldiers were dying in the East for an evil cause, and while military service was less risky than a predestined execution by guillotine, death in such service would be a violation of conscience, which could merit eternal loss. Franz was impaled on the cruelest dilemma devised by humanity: be true to his conscience and die, a death that would jeopardize his family; or be false to his conscience and court damnation. The uneducated Austrian farmer pondered his moral situation and made his decision. He would report for military service and refuse to take the oath to Hitler. Having made this decision, he reported for military service, refused to take the oath, was interrogated repeatedly, was advised by priest and family that his death would be loss to his wife and his two small children, who he dearly loved. But he remained true to his conscience, and on August 9, 1943, Franz was executed by beheading by guillotine, an unknown and unremarked martyr. His memory was recaptured by the publication of a book - *In Solitary Witness* by Gordon Zahn - in the 1960s and on October 26, 2007, Franz Jagerstatter was beatified by Pope Benedict at the Linz Cathedral at a mass attended by his wife and children, who had been denied a pension after the war because of Blessed Franz's wartime refusal to serve in the NS army. The story is quite simply remarkable. I am interested in the history disclosed by the story in the subtext, but, first, I have to point out that Blessed Franz's writing is beautiful and his practical theologizing is simply profound. Pre-postmodern culture did a good job of teaching grammar and rhetoric and the practical contents of knowledge. One can marvel at the lucidity of the prose of this man who dropped out at equivalent of the Ninth grade when compared to the poor quality of writing and reflection turned out by college graduates. One also notes how much Catholicism played in Bl. Franz's life and reflections. I had not heard of him until I happened upon him while reading Robert Krieg's *Catholic Theologians in Nazi Germany*. I don't think many have or Bl. Franz's memory would be gracing the pages of anti-Catholic books who like to showcase "good Catholics" like Deacon Lichtenberg and Father Maximilian Kolbe. Of course, Bl. Franz's unredeemed Catholicism is a problem. As stated in the Introduction by Jim Forest: "Franz Jagerstatter remains a challenge, and not only because of his costly refusal to surrender his conscience to the Nazis. One aspect of that challenge is Franz's deeply traditional faith, an example far from fashionable today even among Catholics. While certainly not unaware of the church's human shortcomings and the ways so many bishops compromise the Gospel in order to be on good terms with political leaders. Franz Jagerstatter was a grateful Catholic committed to the church and its sacramental and devotional life." (p. xxvii). Of course, it does not occur to the introduction to think that perhaps - just perhaps - it was Franz's sacramental life that assisted him in his decision and his life. One "counter-intuitive" aspect of Bl. Franz's letters is how many priests were arrested and imprisoned for anti-NS activities as part of their pastoral activities. Hence, Bl. Franz refers to Father Josef Lindinger who criticized the NS in 1938, whereupon the NS broke the windows on his rectory and forced him to resign. (p. 37.) Father Karobath, the priest at St. Radegund, was arrested and imprisoned for criticizing the NS. (p. 248.) Father Leopold Arthofer was imprisoned in Dachau from April 4, 1941 to April 4, 1945. (p. 247.) Another pastor after having his sermon reported by a midwife to a teacher received a rebuke from the NS for preaching that parents should send their children to Mass on holy Days. (p. 44). Father Gebetsberger was arrested in February of 1940 and imprisoned for 6 months because of his criticism of NS. (p. 73.) Despite making a big contribution to the NS, the hofbauer family had their Gasthaus shut down because their son Pastor Johann ("Pleikner") Hofbauer had publicly criticized the NS. (p. 92.) In prison, awaiting execution, Bl. Franz was by a Tyrolean priest, Franz Reinisch, a priest of the Pallotine order, whom the Reich had executed on August 21, 1942 because of his refusal to take the military oath, a revelation that gave Franz consolation as he awaited execution. (p. 125.) Bl. Franz's experience made him express regret that priests and bishops were not critical of the NS after the 1938 Anschluss, but he acknowledged the risk to them in speaking their true minds. He also noted that they had not been given the same grace he had been given in his willingness to die for his faith and conscience. Franz deduced his moral obligation from Catholic teaching. He notes that when it was free to do so, the Austrian Catholic church condemned the Nazi. He also knows that the Pope had condemned National Socialism (in *Mit Brennender Sorge*), and he knew that teaching had never been countermanded, so he understood the silence of his priests and bishops as part of that condemnation. "If it were only a war about land as so many others have been and if

Germany were actually to end up as the victor, then Catholics at the end of this war would possess the same rights as every other citizen in the German Reich. But if this war is in fact a revolution or a conflict about religious belief, then I could fight for the N.S. Reich as much as I want and yet I - despite all of the exertions and sacrifice that I as a poor soldier had offered - would be seen at the war's end to be an enemy of the Reich because I a Catholic would still not commit myself to National Socialism. In other words, I would be seen at the war's end as Austrian Christians are seen today, even though they submitted themselves - not freely - four years ago to the National Socialist. These thoughts alone suffice for someone not to fight for this state or for the NS Volk community. Further, I believe that many people have forgotten what the Holy Father said about National Socialism in his encyclical many years ago, namely that National Socialism is even more dangerous than Communism. Since Rome has not withdrawn this judgment, I believe that it is not likely a crime or a sin if someone as a Catholic were to refuse the current obligation for military service - even though a person who refuses military service is surely looking at death. Is it not more Christian for someone to give himself as a sacrifice than to have to murder others who possess a right to life on earth and who want to live in order to save their lives for a short while." (p. 190.) I have read so many books written since Hochhuth's slanderous "The Deputy" that take it as given that Pius was silent because of his (irrational) (overstated) fear of Bolshevism. But that is not what one Austrian farmer understood living in the mix of history with his life on the line. So, where did Bl. Franz get this insight if it wasn't what was understood at the time? (Which it was.) Here is an extended passage on the catechism of silence: "On one occasion, someone told me that we can belong to the NS Party or contribute to the Winter Help Work without giving the matter any further thought. This person said it makes entirely no difference if we engage in these activities because Rome has canceled its ban [against membership in the NS Party]. However, I did not believe this answer, and so I inquired further into this matter with a higher religion authority. He told me that the first answer was not true because Rome has still not made a decision about [National Socialism] in general. I believe that it is pointless to ask priests about this matter. First, they have no more specific instructions from higher church officials. Second, if a priest were to say something different from what the N.S. Party holds and if he himself were betrayed, we know what would happen to him. Third, it can also be that priests themselves are not clear about the entire matter. During a retreat a priest who is a member of a religious order said that many parents come to him with questions about their children. He said further that these parents themselves should already know what they have to do. He acknowledged the difficult situation in which many parents today find themselves when their consciences tell them something different from what the party says. Everyone knows that to decide against the party's wishes is likely to jeopardize one's livelihood. It would perhaps be better if the church were not to make a decision in this matter, for many people would not be able to go against the party despite an ecclesiastical judgment. These people know that with one blow their entire life would be ruined. Moreover, as long as the church has not made a definite decision in this matter, accountability before God for many people will not be so difficult. All of us who were educated in the Catholic religion know that we are not allowed to participate in political parties that are enemies of the church or to contribute to such parties so that they can have a wider influence. My conscience has much to say about all of this. I believe that if people have a full recognition that this political party that they are joining or have joined or to which they have contributed is an opponent of the church and if these people continue to it so that they obtain earthly advantages, then they may find themselves facing eternal disadvantages. We should not, of course, pass judgment on others when they participate in this or that, make contributions or engage in NS fund-raising. We do not know whether they have a full recognition that the party to which they belong is an opponent of the church. Or if they know this, they may not know that belonging to such a party is not allowed by the Catholic Church. There are also many people who even believe that to contribute to the NS Party is a Christian act." (p. 195 - 196.) Elsewhere he wrote: "It does not even belong to us to condemn either the National Socialists as a group or as individuals. But as Catholics we must condemn and reject the NS convictions and the ideas of those people who believe that we are not able to become fortunate on this earth through the teachings of Christ. It is a certain sign that such people know too little about the Christian faith. Because our faith offers so much, we shall become fortunate through it not only in eternal life but already here in this world. So we Catholics have not the least reason to allow our faith to get somehow combined with other teachings. The Catholic Church has not yet declared that the NS Party is an opponent of the church and hence has not said that it forbids, Catholics, under the pain of sin, from belonging to the party. The church has remained silent on this matter. Nevertheless we surely know what this party is and how it stands in relation to the church. Many Austrians will be able to remember the words of the Holy Father in the encyclical that came to our ears as drastic changes were occurring in Austria: that the National Socialist danger is as dangerous for us as the Communist danger." (p. 202.) Franz sneered at the NS insistence on being a part of a "Volk community." (p. 24.) At one point he writes to his wife: "these are the purest of Volk treks. They are worthless endeavors in which we simply march down a road." (p. 65.) The Nazis taught their soldiers that "all of us should help one another" but that the NS would not insert their mentality into him. (p. 72.) The enforced silence on the Church was part of Bl. Franz's suffering. He writes: "Have the National Socialists now - after more than two years of bringing about the horrible murder of people - adopted a new orientation that would allow and even promote the silence of church officials? Have church officials reached the decision that it is now permissible for Catholics to belong to a party that opposes the church? Have they given a

positive evaluation of National Socialism." (p. 174.) It is clear that he understands that the answer is "no," but he questions whether it would have been better for the Austrian Church to have had martyrs as examples. And, yet, he does not mean to throw stones at our bishops and priests. They are humans of flesh and blood as we are and they can be weak." (p. 175.) (He also speculates that the bishops might have expected a quick fall of the Nazi government, which survived against all expectations. (Id.) Bl. Franz was also able to make sense out of his own suffering by his faith. There are some moving passages where he meditates on the meaning of suffering and the cross he must bear in being faithful to Christ. This is heady stuff today where the default "heroic" position is for the hero of a story to inveigh against God for being so cruel. Franz does not doubt the mercy of God and he recognizes who the enemy is, namely National Socialism. Franz does not blame the Nazis individually. (P. 199 ("while I have surely pounded hard against National Socialism, I am not permitted to attack National Socialists. To do so would go against the commandment concerning love of neighbors. We should condemn the NS views or convictions but not the people who hold these convictions. It belongs to God alone to judge people and to condemn them. All of us are brothers and sisters before God.") Unlike modern commenters who are befuddled by an obvious truth, Bl. Franz had no doubt that the Reich was the enemy of the Church. During his interrogation, Bl. Franz learned the following: "This morning a man whose father is a general told me that someone in a position higher than a general has said: "One must first fight against our enemies outside and afterward against our enemy inside, namely the C[hurch]."" (p. 108.) Franz's meditations on bible verses and the Our Father are moving for their simplicity and clarity. This is a book that deserves to be read as both inspirational material and a kind of practical guide for living in morally compromised times. 3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Blessed Franz Jagerstatter By vfarm Wow, what a book. I read this over the past winter and love everything about this person. What a humble soul, what a good man, thanks Franz... 0 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Five Stars By Customer I need help getting my laptop to play it

Franz Jgersttter, an Austrian farmer, a devoted husband and father, and a devout Catholic, was executed in 1943 as a result of his refusal to serve in the Nazi army. Before taking this stand Jgersttter consulted both his pastor and his local bishop, who instructed him to do his duty to the fatherland and to obey the lawan instruction that violated his conscience. For many years Jgersttter's solitary witness was honored by the Catholic peace movement, while viewed with discomfort by many of his fellow Austrians. Now, with his beatification in 2007, his witness has been embraced by the universal church. He stands as one of the great witnesses and martyrs of our time. These writings, including correspondence between Franz and his wife Franziska and a series of reflections written in prison, represent the first English translation of Jgersttter's writings. An introduction by Jim Forest and notes by the translator, Robert Krieg, set these writings in the context of Franz's life and times. His moving expression of faith and his unswerving obedience to conscience carry an urgent message for today: "Although people have accused me of criminal behavior and condemned me to death, be consoled knowing that in God's eyes not everything is criminal which the world perceives to be criminal]]]"