

9 August 2004
61st anniversary of the death of Franz Jägerstätter

Reflection by the Rev Sidney Hinkes
given in Westminster Cathedral Crypt, London

When we arrived in St. Radegund last year for the sixtieth anniversary of Jägerstätter's execution, the young Austrian whose house we stayed in said "This is a divided village. The people here are either one hundred per cent for Jägerstätter or one hundred per cent against him". We who are for Jägerstätter need to understand those who are against him. I think there are three kinds of opponent.

There are those who judge Jägerstätter to be lacking in patriotism. At the 1993 pilgrimage, during the Mass outside Jägerstätter's house, a local political leader called on the congregation to remember also those who gave their lives at Alamein and Stalingrad. There were growls of discontent from the congregation, but the speaker did not seem to expect them. Even the struggle by Jägerstätter's supporters to get his name on to the village war memorial implied that the other names on it were to be honoured. Love of country is not to be written off as a bad emotion. Some countries are called Fatherland, some Motherland. Both terms remind us that our country is our home. It is where we are born, where we grow up, where people love us and we love them, where we come to be whatever we come to be. Patriotism is a strong appeal for the war leader to make, and they are not bad people who respond to it. Jägerstätter loved his country too, but he loved the Gospel more. He loved justice and truth more.

Secondly, there are those who consider themselves the true Christians. They see Jägerstätter not only as the man who betrayed his country but as the man who betrayed his religion. The appeal made to the Austrian people in 1943 was not only to their love of country. It was also to their love of Christ, his Church and the Faith. In 1993 outside the church at Ostermiething, I congratulated one of the soldiers who had spoken in the service and added "And that is from a former enemy". "O no," he answered, "England was never our enemy. The enemy was Russia. We went to fight against atheism". My mind flashed back to the German soldiers whom we took prisoner who asked "England is a Christian country, isn't it? Why are you not fighting with us against the atheists?" Jägerstätter had an answer to that argument. "To convert a people from atheism," he said, "we send missionaries. But the missionaries would not make many converts if they went with bombs, grenades and bullets". He always made his point simply and clearly. Theologians have filled many libraries with commentaries on the words of Jesus "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's". They do not match Jägerstätter for brevity, simplicity and clarity. In life and death he witnessed to his deep convictions. Love of country is good, but Truth is to be loved more. Defence of the faith is good but it can only be done in a way consistent with the faith.

Thirdly, there are those who do as the State demands because they are afraid to refuse. I think we should not judge them badly unless we are certain that we are braver. The example of the Early Church in the face of this dilemma is one of mercy and compassion. It was the confessors who had suffered in the persecution who pleaded that those who had denied the faith under pressure should be forgiven and readmitted to Communion. Jägerstätter leaves judgment of others' souls in the hands of God.

Much is demanded of those who are born into an age which requires heroism as the norm. Jägerstätter was born into such an age. Heroic witness was required in Austria in 1943. It was the Church's duty to say in the name of Jesus Christ that Nazism was wrong, that the persecution of the Jews was wrong, that the war was wrong. This witness was not given by every Christian, but it was given by the sacristan of St. Radegund. Witness like his is needed today, for today also we are called on by our governments to support wars with noble arguments that conceal less noble aims. We have come here today to venerate Jägerstätter. It is not enough. We have to imitate him.