

Peace Symposium for the 71st anniversary of the death of Franz Jagerstatter

For almost 30 years, believers from Italy, the USA, Germany, Switzerland and Austria gather for the anniversary of Blessed Franz Jagerstatter in and around St. Radegund and give a confession of peace. On August 9, 1943, the Innviertel farmer and conscientious objector Franz Jagerstatter was murdered in Brandenburg near Berlin. For the 100th anniversary of the outbreak of the First World War, guests from the United States attended the annual Jagerstatter Commemoration in St. Radegund on August 9, 2014, remembering the conscientious objector of World War I, Ben Salmon.

The professor of theology and ethics, Michael Baxter (De Paul University Chicago), was invited by Pax Christi Austria together with the daughter of Ben Salmon, Sr. Elizabeth Salmon, and peace activist Pat McSweeney to give an insight into the life and thinking of the American conscientious objector and to point out parallels to Franz Jagerstatter.

In the parish hall of Tarsdorf Baxter gave his presentation in front of an international audience, including the daughter of Franz Jägerstätter, Maria Dammer, the Bishop of the Diocese of Innsbruck, Manfred Scheuer, and the Upper Austrian missionary in Brazil, José Hehenberger.

Conscientious objector of the 1st World War

In 1917 Ben Salmon did not follow the conscription order of the U.S. Army. In numerous letters to the U.S. government he expressed his refusing attitude: The war was not compatible with his Christian setting. Consequently, Salmon argued against the theory of 'just war'. "I refuse to support organized murder. I must serve God first. As I serve it, it is impossible to do otherwise.", Ben Salmon said in his letter in response to the conscription. In the following years, Salmon was repeatedly arrested and sentenced to death by a military court for "propaganda and desertion" in 1918. The death sentence was subsequently converted to 25 years in prison.

Although one month later the war in Europe ended, his jail term was not reduced. Even in jail he was still involved in peace activities and, consequently, was punished with solitary confinement. The American Civil Rights Movement took up his arguments and his case and thus achieved more attention all over the country. This movement and some people from the Catholic Church tried to achieve his release and were successful in November 1920 when he was finally released.

Michael Baxter characterized the commitment of Ben Salmon pointing out his persistence, strength of faith and the consequent following of his conscience. In his lecture in Tarsdorf Baxter analyzed the situation of the Catholic Church in the United States at the time of the outbreak of the First World War. Like many historians Baxter also stated that the Catholic Church fully supported the war. The nationalist goals were stronger than the appeals of Pope Benedict XV. for peace. "The Christians were not one in Christ, but rather separated and enemies", said Baxter in his analysis.

A special pleasure was that Ben Salmon's daughter - 89-year-old Maryknoll Sister Elizabeth Salmon - also took part in the commemoration and described her experiences with her father. "My father was a very humorous person and obviously that was his rescue," said Sr. Elizabeth.

Connection Salmon and Jagerstatter

In Tarsdorf also the possible link between Ben Salmon and Franz Jagerstatter was discussed. Both were objectors of conscience and of the Christian faith. Both could see through and reveal the

dehumanizing ideologies of the time. By dealing with Ben Salmon, the American historian Gordon Zahn in his sociological research got in touch with the issue of "conscientious objection". He wrote his dissertation on the topic "What enables us to not see what happened?". In this connection he heard about Franz Jagerstatter, a man who "saw what happened". Gordon Zahn's work on Franz Jagerstatter was essential for the reception of Jagerstatter.

International Jagerstatter commemoration on the day of his death

For about 30 years, every year people from around the world gather on the day of his death to think of Franz Jagerstatter and his testimony. This year again members of the Jagerstatter family and over 100 people from many countries of the world came together in the parish church of St. Radegund at the hour of death at 4.00 pm. The prayer for peace in the world was standing in the focus. Diocesan bishop Manfred Scheuer headed mass in the evening. As a native of Upper Austria, with his research he was instrumental for the beatification of Jägerstatter.

The content of his sermon was peace work. Scheuer first characterized the "architecture of war" as one that makes you sick of stupidity and dullness and damages the soul of man. Scheuer in detail spoke about the background and consequences of the First World War. "A consequence of the First World War was the spreading idea that different people cannot live together. By nationalist aberrations homogeneous nations should be created, in which there is no room for others or for minorities", said Scheuer in his homily.

Architecture of Peace

As an alternative Scheuer described an "Architecture of Peace". As pillars of peace he listed the pillars mentioned by Pope John XXIII in the encyclical "Pacem in Terris": truth, justice, love and freedom. "Franz Jagerstatter is an example and a witness of these pillars," said Scheuer. Furthermore: "This morning we have heard in the lecture that in the 1st World War altars were built for the fatherland. Franz Jagerstatter expressed criticism of ideology. He was not stupid and blinded, but rather clear and farsighted. He is a martyr who was put in front of the alternative god or idol, Christ or Führer. He spoke a resolute No to National Socialism that was rooted in his educated and mature conscience." Scheuer recalled that nowadays people are taken into a stream of preconceptions. Here too, Franz Jagerstatter can be a witness. He had no fear of his own conviction, which was against the mainstream. "He has paid the price of solitude for his inner freedom. Except his wife, almost everyone in church and society did not understand him and left him alone. Because of this, a space of freedom and love of God could unfold."

With a candlelight procession to the grave of Franz and Franziska Jagerstatter the memorial on August 9 was completed.

Elisabeth Jungmeier, Eder-Cakl