

rectifying some previous and long-endured injustice. If the Church has in the past leant her influence rather heavily on the side of governments, and discouraged the individual who has withheld the service demanded, the reasons are plain enough. All the same, in an age in

which constitutional safeguards can so easily and suddenly disappear, and tyrannies can arise, the more opinion can be fortified in the direction of respecting the individual conscience, the better it will be for the twentieth-century political man.

(By courtesy of THE TABLET)

An Enemy of the State

Thomas Merton

In Solitary Witness, by Gordon Zahn. (Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1964.) 42s.

On August 9th, 1943, the Austrian peasant Franz Jägerstätter was beheaded by the German military authorities as an "enemy of the State" because he had repeatedly refused to take the military oath and serve in what he declared to be an "unjust war." This Austrian was not only a conscientious objector, but he was a fervent Catholic, so fervent that some who knew him believe him to have been a saint. His lucid and uncompromising refusal to fight for Germany in the Second World War was the direct outcome of his religious conversion. It was the political implementation of his desire to be a perfect Christian.

Franz Jägerstätter surrendered his life rather than take the lives of others in what he believed to be an "unjust war." He clung to this belief in the face of every possible objection not only on the part of the Army and the State, but also from his fellow Catholics, and, of course, his own family. He had to meet practically every "Christian" argument that is advanced in favour of war. He was treated as a rebel, disobedient to lawful authority, a traitor to his country. He was accused of being selfish, self-willed, not considering his family, neglecting his duty to his children.

His Austrian Catholic friends understood that he was unwilling to fight for Hitler's Germany, but yet they argued that the war was justified because they hoped it would lead to the destruction of Bolshevism and therefore to the preservation of "European Christianity." He was therefore refusing to defend his faith. He was also told that he was not sufficiently informed to judge whether or not the war was just. That he had an obligation to submit to the "higher wisdom" of the State. The Government and the Führer knew best. Thousands of Catholics, including many priests, were serving in the armies, and therefore he should not try to be "more Catholic than the Church."

He was even reminded that the bishops had not protested against this war, and in fact not only his pastor but even his bishop tried to persuade him to give up his resistance because it was "futile." One priest represented to him that he would have innumerable opportunities to practise Christian virtue and exercise an "apostolate of good example" in the armed forces. All these are very familiar arguments frequently met with in our present situation, and they are still

assumed to be so conclusive that few Catholics dare to risk the disapproval they would incur by conscientious objection and dissent.

Jägerstätter's fellow villagers thought his refusal was evidence of fanaticism due to his religious conversion at the time of his marriage in 1936, followed by an "excess of Bible reading." His conscientious objection is still not fully understood in his native village, though on the local war memorial his name has been added to those of the villagers who were killed in action.

The peasant refused to give in to any of these arguments, and replied to them with all simplicity:

"I cannot and may not take an oath in favour of a government that is fighting an unjust war. . . . I cannot turn the responsibility for my actions over to the Führer. . . . Does anyone really think that this massive blood-letting can save European Christianity or bring it to a new flowering? . . . Is it not more Christian to offer oneself as a victim right away rather than first have to murder others who certainly have a right to live and want to live just to prolong one's own life a little while?"

When reminded that most Catholics had gone to war for Hitler without any such qualms of conscience, he replied that they obviously "had not received the grace" to see things as they were. When told that the bishops themselves expressed no such objections, he repeated that "they had not received the grace" either.

Jägerstätter's refusal to fight for Hitler was not based on a personal repugnance to fighting in any form. As a matter of fact, Jägerstätter was, by temperament, something of a fighter. In his wilder youthful days he had participated rather prominently in the inter-village gang wars. He had also undergone preliminary military training without protest, though his experience at that time had convinced him that army life presented a danger to morals.

Shortly after Hitler took over Austria in 1938, Jägerstätter had a dream in which he saw a splendid and shining express train coming round a mountain, and thousands of people running to get aboard. "No one could prevent them from getting on the train." While he was looking at this, he heard a voice saying: "This train is going to hell." When he woke up, he spontaneously associated the "train" with Nazism.

His objection to military service was, then, the fruit of a particular religious interpretation of contemporary political events. His refusal to fight was not only a

private matter of conscience : it also expressed a deep intuition concerning the historical predicament of the Catholic Church in the twentieth century. This intuition was articulated in several long and very impressive meditations or "commentaries" in which he says :

"The situation in which we Christians of Germany find ourselves to-day is much more bewildering than that faced by the Christians of the early centuries at the time of their bloodiest persecution. . . . We are not dealing with a small matter, but the great (apocalyptic) life and death struggle has already begun. Yet in the midst of it there are many who still go on living their lives as though nothing had changed. . . . That we Catholics must make ourselves tools of the worst and most dangerous anti-Christian power that has ever existed is something that I cannot and never will believe. . . . Many actually believe quite simply that things have to be the way they are. If this should happen to mean that they are obliged to commit injustice, then they believe that others are responsible. . . . I am convinced that it is still best that I speak the truth, even though it costs me my life. For you will not find it written in any of the commandments of God or of the Church that a man is obliged under pain of sin to take an oath committing him to obey whatever might be commanded him by his secular ruler. We need no rifles or pistols for our battle, but instead spiritual weapons—and the foremost of these is prayer."

The American sociologist, Gordon Zahn, who is also a Catholic, has written an absorbing, objective, fully documented life of Jägerstätter, in which he studies with great care not only the motives and actions of the man himself, but the reactions and recollections of scores of people who knew him, from his family and neighbours to fellow prisoners and prison chaplains. One of the most striking things about the story is that repeated attempts were made to save the peasant-objector's life, not only by his friends, by priests, by his attorney, but even by his military judges (he was not in the hands of the SS).

Jägerstätter could have escaped execution if he had accepted non-combatant service in the medical corps, but he felt that even this would be a compromise, because his objection was not only to killing other men, but to the act of saving his own life by an implicit admission that the Nazis were a legitimate régime carrying on a just war. A few minutes before his execution Jägerstätter still calmly refused to sign a document that would have saved him. The chaplain who was present, and who had tried like everyone else to persuade the prisoner to save himself, declared that Jägerstätter "lived as a saint and died as a hero."

It is important to observe that though the Catholic villagers of his native St. Radegund still tend to regard Jägerstätter as an extremist and a fanatic, or even as slightly touched in the head, the priests who knew him and others who have studied him have begun to admit the seriousness and supernatural impact of his heroic self-sacrifice. There are some who do not hesitate to compare his decision with that of Thomas More.

One of the prison chaplains who knew him said : "Not for an instant did I ever entertain the notion that he was a fanatic or even possibly mentally deranged. He did not give the slightest impression of being so." And a French cell-mate said of him that he was "one of the heroes of our time, a fighter to the death for faith, peace and justice."

Finally, it is interesting to read the very reserved judgment of the bishop who, when consulted by

Jägerstätter about this moral problem, urged him to renounce his "scruples" and let himself be inducted into the army.

"I am aware of the 'consistency' of his conclusions and respect them—especially in their intention. At that time I could see that the man thirsted after martyrdom and for the expiation of sin, and I told him that he was permitted to choose that path only if he knew he had been called to it through some special revelation originating from above and not in himself. He agreed with this. For this reason Jägerstätter represents a completely exceptional case, one more to be marvelled at than copied."

The story of the Austrian peasant as told by Gordon Zahn is plainly that of a martyr, and of a Christian who followed a path of virtue with a dedication that cannot be fully accounted for by human motivation alone. In other words, it would seem that already in this biography one might find plausible evidence of what the Catholic Church regards as sanctity. But the Bishop of Linz, in hinting at the possibility of a special calling that might have made Jägerstätter an "exceptional case," does not mean even implicitly to approve the thesis that the man was a saint, still less a model to be imitated. In other words, the bishop, while admitting the remote possibility of Catholic heroism in a conscientious objector, is not admitting that such heroism should be regarded as either normal or imitable.

Conscientious objection is still not proposed to the average Catholic as a rational and Christian option. For him, the true heroes remain "those exemplary young Catholic men, seminarians, priests and heads of families who fought and died in heroic fulfilment of duty and in the firm conviction that they were fulfilling the will of God at their post. . . ."

It is still quite possible that even to-day, in an era of new war technology and new threats of global destruction, when the most urgent single problem facing modern man is the proliferation of atomic and nuclear weaponry, many Catholic bishops will continue to agree with this one. It is true, they admit that there is such a thing as an erroneous conscience which is to be followed provided it is "invincible." "All respect is due to the innocently erroneous conscience," says the Bishop of Linz, "it will have its reward from God."

Of whom is he speaking ? Of the Catholic young men, the priests, and the seminarians who died in Hitler's armies "in the firm conviction that they were fulfilling the will of God" ? No. These, he says, were *men* (and the word is underlined) acting in the light of "a clear and correct conscience." Jägerstätter was "in error" but also "in good faith."

Certainly the bishop is entitled to his opinion : but the question of whose conscience was erroneous and whose was correct remains one that will ultimately be settled by God, not man. Meanwhile, there is another question : the responsibility of those who help men to form their conscience — or fail to do so. And here, too, the possibility of firm convictions that are "innocently erroneous" gives food for some rather apocalyptic thought.

The real question raised by the Jägerstätter story is not merely that of the individual Catholic's right to conscientious objection (admitted in practice even by those who completely disagreed with Jägerstätter) but the question of the Church's own mission of protest and prophecy in the gravest spiritual crisis man has ever known.
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CONTENTS

A RIGHT OF CONSCIENCE	1
AN ENEMY OF THE STATE by Thomas Merton	3
NOTES ON CATHOLIC ANTI-SEMITISM by James Milord	5
HOW TO AVOID WAR by Bernard Daly	5
BOOKS	6
PAX DIARY	7
THE OTHER SIDE	8

A RIGHT OF CONSCIENCE

When the Vatican Council reassembles, it will be faced with an agenda far beyond its capacity to discuss with the thoroughness the various subjects demand. Much will inevitably be relegated, just as happened at the end of the Council of Trent, to the Holy See and the Congregations, or to whatever body will represent and be a practical embodiment of the collegiality of the bishops. There will have to be selection, and there will be heart-burning and very possibly a demand for a further session, as a painful necessity but one preferable to leaving fundamental tasks unfaced.

But there are some matters which the Council could tackle without any great drain on its time, decisions it could announce which come naturally and logically out of the attitude it has manifested so far. One of these is the right of conscientious objection in war.

The Council has been notable for the emphasis given to the fundamental but widely obscured part of Catholic doctrine which affirms the supremacy of conscience, the duty a man has to follow his conscience, even where he has failed in that other duty of forming it rightly with all

the helps available to him. This is being resoundingly asserted in the context of ecumenism, where Catholics are called to show respect for honest convictions and the men holding them, even though we think that objectively their convictions are mistaken. In the relations with Protestant Christians nothing is more important than this recognition of good faith and the respect to which it is entitled.

It also surely follows that the Church should recognise the right of conscientious objection on the part of citizens or subjects. But it must be recognised that such recognition has been unhappily lacking in the past. It can be truly said that the Church has always been conscious of the precarious foundations of human society, of how easily it can fall apart, reducing men to solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short existences, and that from the beginning the Christian message was not only to fear God but to honour the King as excelling; and that the main line of Catholic tradition has preached the duty of civil obedience. It has not been abject or unqualified obedience, and St. Thomas soon qualified to be acclaimed as the first Whig, and the right of rebellion in