

# The conflict between the Church and Nazism

## Two competing worldviews

Right up to the end, the leaders of the Third Reich held fast to not only the political, but also the virtually religious objectives of Nazism. As late as January 1945, the notorious Roland Freisler expressed this to Count Moltke: “Christianity and we are alike in only one respect: we lay claim to the whole individual. ... ‘From which do you take your orders? From the hereafter or from Adolf Hitler? To whom do you pledge your loyalty and your faith?’”<sup>24</sup>

Prelate Johann Neuhäusler, who was himself imprisoned in Dachau concentration camp for more than four years, related: “On 26<sup>th</sup> May 1941, on arrival at the camp, a man from the political department of the Sachsenhausen-Oranienburg concentration camp said to the author: ‘We will annihilate the Catholic Church and the whole of Christianity in Germany. This swindle has got to stop.’ When I responded, calmly and firmly: ‘That aim has often been announced and attempted over the past 1900 years, but no one has ever succeeded in achieving it,’ the SS man stated resolutely: ‘Yes, but we will accomplish it. We have a plan, a clearly thought-out plan which has been worked out down to the smallest detail. We shall destroy the churches.’”<sup>25</sup>

A secret directive, sent by Reich Leader Bormann to Nazi district heads and Reich governors and dated autumn 1941, clearly shows that the Nazi Party gave priority to gaining influence over young people: “The National Socialist (The Nazis’ official name was the National Socialists, as they preferred to call themselves) and the Christian viewpoints are irreconcilable ... No one would know anything about Christianity if it had not been

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24 Helmut James von Moltke, *Briefe an Freya (Letters to Freya) 1939–1945*, Munich 1988, p.608

25 Johannes Neuhäusler, *Kreuz und Hakenkreuz (Cross and Swastika)*, Munich 1946, p.17

drummed into them since childhood by the church ministers ... Therefore, if in the future our youth no longer hear anything about this Christianity, whose teachings are far inferior to our own, Christianity will disappear by itself ... All influences which might compromise or even damage the leadership of the German people exercised by our Führer, with the help of the National Socialist (Nazi) Party, must be eliminated. The German people must, step by step, be freed from the grip of the churches and their instruments, the ministers. Naturally, from their point of view, the churches will and must defend themselves against this loss of power. However, the churches must never be allowed to regain any influence over the leadership of the German people. This influence must be broken, completely and finally.”<sup>26</sup>

## **Unrecognized resistance**

For years after 1945, Franz Jägerstätter's surviving family had no claim to financial support. In the letter from the Office of the Upper Austrian State Government notifying the family that support had been refused, dated 10<sup>th</sup> August 1948, this decision was justified as follows: “Victims of the struggle for a free, democratic Austria as defined by the Victims' Assistance Act are persons who fought for an independent, democratic and historically-aware Austria, in particular against the aims and ideas of Nazism, either with weapons in hand or through their wholehearted, outspoken opposition in word and deed. The report submitted by the Ostermiething Police Command, dated 21<sup>st</sup> March 1948, states that the husband Franz Jägerstätter had certainly been an opponent of Nazism, but that his actions could not be evaluated as an attempt to establish a free, democratic Austria as defined in Section 1 of the Victims' Assistance Act of 1947. He was known to be melancholy and stated that he would not fight for Hitler before his conscription into the German Armed Forces. This conviction did not arise from a will to oppose Nazism for a free Austria, but from his religious views.”

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26 Ibid. p.358 ff

For the authorities in post-war Austria who had to make decisions on the claims to financial support submitted by the victims of Nazism, the only thing which counted was the “fight with weapons in hand”, as stated in the official letter to Franziska Jägerstätter refusing financial support. The Gestapo in “Upper Danube” (as the Nazis called Upper Austria in order to eradicate the name “Austria”) were somewhat alarmed by the influence of the Catholic Church on people’s worldview. In the upper Innviertel, the region extending from Braunau to the borders of the province of Salzburg (Franz Jägerstätter’s other home province), Nazi organizations tended to be less successful. This may largely have been due to the skeptical attitude towards anything foreign or new of the people living there – and going to church frequently was also a chance to demonstrate one’s distance from those in power.<sup>27</sup> One priest recalls this period: “I’ve never seen my church as full as it was when some village big shots of the time tried to ban church-going. Because, in the Innviertel, pressure always produces resistance.”<sup>28</sup>

## **Bishop Gföllner’s outspoken opposition**

In the Diocese of Linz in Upper Austria, the Church engaged in an ongoing critical examination of Nazism as it gradually took hold of Germany during the thirties. Johannes Maria Gföllner was Bishop of the diocese from 1915 to 1941. He is regarded as the first Bishop to recognize the dangers of Nazism. In 1932, the diocesan gazette contained lengthy bibliographical references on this topic; the reason given for this was that “every pastor must have accurate knowledge of the rapidly-growing Nazi movement.” As the consultant on politics at the Bishop’s Conference, Gföllner composed a pastoral letter on “true and false nationalism”. Since the newly-appointed Archbishop of Vienna, Innitzer, wanted to enter into further negotiations with the Nazi Party about the points in their program which were not compatible with the teachings of the Church,

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27 Cf. Wolfgang Katzböck, *Fromm – aber nicht klerikal. Glaube und Kirche im Innviertel* (Pious but not clerical. Faith and the Church in the Innviertel) Yearbook of the Diocese of Linz 1979, p.53

28 *Ibid.*

no joint statement was released by the bishops.<sup>29</sup> The Bishop of Linz directed that his pastoral letter should be read out throughout his diocese on 22<sup>nd</sup> January 1933. In summary, his verdict on Nazism was: “Nazism is spiritually sick with materialistic racial delusions, un-Christian nationalism, a nationalistic view of religion, with what is quite simply sham Christianity; we therefore reject its religious program. All convinced Catholics must reject and condemn it; for, if as Pope Pius XI has declared, ‘it is impossible to be both a good Catholic and a true Socialist’, then it is also impossible to be both a good Catholic and a true Nazi.”<sup>30</sup>

Gföllner regarded the myth of racial purity propagated by Nazism as “a backsliding into an abhorrent heathenism”.

“The Nazi standpoint on race is completely incompatible with Christianity and must therefore be resolutely rejected. This also applies to the radical anti-Semitic racism preached by Nazism. To despise, hate and persecute the Jewish people just because of their ancestry is inhuman and against Christian principles ... however, the international Jewish worldview does differ from the Jewish folk traditions and the Jewish religion. There is no doubt that many Jews who are alienated from God do have a harmful influence on almost every area of modern cultural life.”

Many fierce discussions flared up over the pastoral letter, and Bishop Gföllner responded by sending out another one on 26<sup>th</sup> March 1933. He described the first text as “a probe which reveals the thoughts of the heart”, no mere “private viewpoint of the Bishop, but an obligatory enunciation of church doctrine”. This was, he said, in no way a “view held only by the Diocese of Linz”. The Bishop’s statements on the issue of anti-Semitism were twisted to mean the opposite: the Nazi propaganda machine used portions of them for its own purposes. On the other hand, on Holy Thursday in 1933, members of the Linz Nazi Party put up a poster saying “Jew-Christ drop dead” on the door of the Linz Catholic Press Association.<sup>31</sup>

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29 Cf. Erika Weinzierl-Fischer, *Österreichs Katholiken und der Nationalsozialismus. Erster Teil 1918–1933* (Austria’s Catholics and Nazism. Part One 1918–1933) in: *Wort und Wahrheit* 18 (1963), p.436

30 This and the quotations which follow are from Jakob Fried, *Nationalsozialismus und katholische Kirche in Österreich* (Nazism and the Catholic Church in Austria), Vienna 1947, Document 2

31 Cf. Richard Kutschera, *Johannes Maria Gföllner. Bischof dreier Zeitenwenden* (Johannes Maria Gföllner. Bishop of three historical turning points), Linz 1972, p.92ff.

The pastoral letter was followed by a dispute with Abbot Alban Schachleitner, a Nazi sympathizer. In 1918, the Abbot had had to leave the Emmaus Monastery in Prague due to the fighting over nationality between the Czechs and Germans there. His nationalist convictions led to his becoming a follower of Hitler from 1926 onwards. The Abbot tried to refute Gföllner's pastoral letter in an article published in the Nazi newspaper "People's Observer", dated 1<sup>st</sup> February 1933. Schachleitner's statements brought him into conflict with the entire episcopacy; on 20<sup>th</sup> February, he was suspended by the competent Roman Congregation "for severe and persistent disobedience".<sup>32</sup> Following this, the Nazi Party of Feilnbach, Bavaria, organized a torchlight procession in honor of the Abbot, in which several hundred Nazi storm troopers took part.<sup>33</sup>

## **Gföllner continues to confront the issue**

Within his diocese, Bishop Gföllner did not give up his outspoken opposition to Nazism. In 1936, he printed a statement issued by the Dutch Episcopacy in the diocesan gazette.<sup>34</sup> In the same year, he issued a further statement on Nazism and an endorsement of his pastoral letter of 1933.<sup>35</sup> Immediately after the publication of the Papal Encyclical entitled "With Burning Concern" in April 1937, Gföllner compiled a condensed version of it and directed it to be read out from every single pulpit in the diocese. The Bishop of Linz gave his reasons for directing that only the Encyclical against Nazism, and not the Encyclical against Bolshevism which was published at the same time, should be read out: "For the Church in Germany is closer to us – not only geographically and historically, but also because the Germanic character of the Austrian people, in particular, causes us to feel that we share its troubles; in the end, the dangers to which the Church in Germany is exposed are also the dangers we our-

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32 Cf. Official Journal of the Archdiocese of Munich and Freising, 1933, 48 and 86 f. Quotation from Helmut Witetschek, *Die kirchliche Lage in Bayern* (The situation of the Church in Bavaria), Mainz 1966, 1 Note 1

33 Cf. *ibid.*

34 Linz diocesan gazette 1936, p.85f

35 *Ibid.* p.163

selves face, and to which we would most certainly be exposed likewise if the ideology of Nazism, which has been condemned by the Pope, were to further spread in Austria or were even to take over here, due to political circumstances.” The Bishop again emphasized the core message of his pastoral letter of January 1933: “It is impossible to be both a good Catholic and a true Nazi.”<sup>36</sup>

After the Nazis took over power in Austria and the rapid unfolding of their reign of terror, this became one of Franz Jägerstätter’s chief mottos.

## **The upheaval of 1938 Taken aback by the methods of the Nazis**

The Austrian bishops and priests were unprepared for the sudden takeover of power by the Nazis and the methods used by their secret police, the Gestapo. They learned through painful experience that telegrams, letters and phone calls were all kept under surveillance. The new Nazi district head of Vienna, Bürckel, had already drawn attention to himself as an active opponent of the Church while in his previous post on the Saar in Germany. In Vienna, he managed to contrive the Austrian bishops’ fatal recommendation that the popular vote on the annexation of Austria by Germany should be held on 10<sup>th</sup> April 1938.

In the spring of 1938, Bishop Gföllner displayed a markedly more distant attitude to the new rulers than, for example, the Archbishop of Vienna, Cardinal Innitzer. The Cardinal visited Hitler in the Hotel Imperial, whereas Gföllner refused to meet or to greet the Führer when he came to visit Linz Cathedral. Concerning the “Solemn Declaration” (the Austrian bishops’ recommendation that the popular vote should be held), Gföllner, with tears in his eyes, told a priest that he had not been able to persuade the other bishops to act otherwise.<sup>37</sup>

After the new rulers banned Catholic associations, the Diocese of Linz immediately began an intensive program of pastoral care for young peo-

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36 Linz diocesan gazette 1937, p.50

37 Cf. Zinnhobler, Gföllner, in : Zinnhobler, Diocese of Linz p.67.

ple. The success of the Church's youth work surprised not only the state security departments but also, as in the case of the youth pilgrimage to Maria Scharten, the organizers as well.<sup>38</sup>

## **How Franz Jägerstätter experienced the Church's struggle**

When she was asked why her husband was not drawn into the war, Franziska Jägerstätter answered spontaneously: "Because they (the Nazis) persecuted the Church and the priests so much." If one takes the imprisonment of priests as an indicator, the Church carried on its fight with unrivalled fierceness in both the Diocese of Linz and, in particular, the district of Braunau.

On the occasion of a visit made by the German Foreign Minister Ribbentrop to Pope Pius XII on 10<sup>th</sup> March 1940, the Pope lodged a complaint in a note "concerning the sufferings of the Catholic Church in Germany"; this note already referred to the systematic suppression of charitable works and organizations "particularly in Austria", and a complaint was made concerning the frequent "imprisonment of pastors, particularly in Austria."<sup>39</sup>

A relatively large number of priests from the Diocese of Linz were given prison sentences for offenses such as "malice" or "radio crimes". The number of priests who were imprisoned in concentration camps without a trial was particularly high. Nine priests from the Archdiocese of Vienna were sent to concentration camps, and of this number, one died.<sup>40</sup> From the Diocese of Linz, which was only half the size of Vienna, forty were sent to concentration camps and eleven died.<sup>41</sup> For comparison, here are the corresponding figures from several Bavarian dioceses, which do confirm the exceptional situation in Linz – particularly when one considers

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38 Cf. Klostermann in: Zinnhobler, Diocese of Linz, p.196.

39 Alberto Giovanetti, *Der Vatikan und der Krieg* (The Vatican and the War), Cologne 1961, 184 ff

40 Cf. Jakob Fried, *Nationalsozialismus und katholische Kirche in Österreich* (Nazism and the Catholic Church in Austria), Vienna 1947, p.90 f.

41 Cf. *Widerstand und Verfolgung in Oberösterreich* (Resistance and Persecution in Upper Austria), II, 15–24.

that the Nazis had come to power five years earlier in Bavaria: three priests from the Diocese of Augsburg, thirteen from the Archdiocese of Bamberg, nine from the Archdiocese of Munich, eleven from the Diocese of Passau and eight from the Diocese of Regensburg were sent to concentration camps.<sup>42</sup>

The approach taken by the Gestapo within the Diocese of Linz still varied widely from one district to another. Whereas it was relatively safe to actively conduct church youth work in the district of Wels, a successful religious revival event for girls, organized by a Bavarian priest in Hochburg in the district of Braunau in 1942, was reason enough to arrest the village priest.

The number of priests arrested in the Deanship of Ostermiething, to which St. Radegund belongs, beggars all comparison: of the ten to eleven priests conducting pastoral care within the Deanship, eight were arrested. Particularly severe methods must have been applied in the district of Braunau, as many priests from neighboring deanships were also imprisoned.

Throughout the Diocese of Linz as a whole, 11 per cent of the priests were given prison sentences;<sup>43</sup> however, systematic research would probably reveal a considerably higher figure.

## **Active Nazis in the Upper Innviertel**

According to the results of the election, from 1930 to 1931, the Nazis gained a foothold in the Jurisdiction of Wildshut, which covers exactly the same area as the Deanship of Ostermiething. In 1933, the Dean of Ostermiething already observed the following: "Our people living on the border are entirely consumed by the ideas of Nazism, and enthusiasm for Austria is now at zero level."<sup>44</sup> The following year, he noted: "And peo-

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42 Cf. *Widerstand in Bayern (Resistance in Bavaria)*, in: *zur debatte, Themen der Katholischen Akademie in Bayern (Publisher) (Open to Debate; Issues of the Catholic Academy in Bavaria)*, Munich, Vol. 13 1983, Nos. 2, 7-12.

43 Cf. *Widerstand und Verfolgung in Oberösterreich 1934-1945 (Resistance and Persecution in Upper Austria 1934 - 1945)*, II, 14-24.

44 Unless otherwise stated, the relevant information comes from the parish chronicles of the parishes concerned.



ple's stupidity is so great that although they can see the devastating effects of the Nazi government in the Third Reich, they can hardly wait to be swallowed up by it. The German People's Gymnastic Association is in fact none other than a Nazi organization. On Sunday 27<sup>th</sup> January, another vituperative poster was put up. This insurgency of Austrian traitors is being generously funded by the German government, with money and materials, by newspaper and radio." In February 1934, after this same dean and pastor had forbidden the local schoolchildren to join the Gymnastic Association, three swastikas were daubed on the walls of the rectory at night. In Ostermiething, the Nazis conducted weapon drills involving up to 30 men. Weapons, explosives and propaganda material were smuggled over the border into Austria.

The border sentries of the Austrian army were powerless to stop this happening. From 1933 onwards, acts of vandalism were repeatedly committed against rectories or chapels in several parishes. After the invasion of Austria by Germany, the pressure put on the priests by local Nazis increased enormously. In Hochburg, Father Josef Lindinger was literally hunted through his parish; the farmer who gave him shelter was locked up in "protective custody". Due to pressure by the Nazi authorities, Lindinger had to give up his parish. On 9<sup>th</sup> November 1945, he wrote to his Bishop: "He (Lindinger) would always be very grateful to Divine Providence for bringing him to Franking. If he had been able to remain in Hochburg, he would certainly have been deported to Dachau – for some people from Hochburg had even followed him to Franking and threatened him with Dachau, and he would certainly never have returned from there."<sup>45</sup>

Severe pressure was also put on the priest in the parish of Geretsberg. In 1939, on the occasion of the first celebration of the Holy Mass by a newly-ordained priest, the mayor and local Nazi leader issued the following decree:

- 1) Any written invitation to take part in the church procession or any such request made outside the church is forbidden. Should these occur, the church procession will be forbidden.
- 2) No triumphal arch may be erected.
- 3) Schoolchildren are not permitted to take part in the church procession.

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45 Diocesan archives of Linz, personnel records on Josef Lindinger

- 4) The garlanding may take place. Any request that others should join in is likewise forbidden.”

In Geretsberg, the rectory garden and large portions of the rectory were seized by the government, and two pastors were forced to leave the village, one after the other.

The priests in St. Pantaleon suffered a great deal. The village mayor, Kaltenegger, was an outspoken hater of the Church. This former pupil of the Jesuits always spoke of the Church as the “black brood”, which he intended to annihilate as soon as possible. It was his doing that no church services could be held in St. Pantaleon on important Christian feast days. In 1940, 1941 and 1942 no Christmas mass was held in the parish as, each time, the current priest was either arrested or, at the very least, driven away just before Christmas: instead, the Mayor organized “Yule celebrations”. In 1941 and 1942, the Holy Week Liturgy could not be held in the parish church. From May 1942 onwards, no pastoral care could be given in St. Pantaleon by a resident priest, due to the seizure of the rectory by the District Administration of Braunau.

The priest of Tarsdorf was arrested as early as 15<sup>th</sup> June 1938.

Despite, or perhaps because of, the activities of illegal Nazis before 1938, their organizations met with little success in the Upper Innviertel region. One Gestapo officer told the then town priest of Braunau: “In the Innviertel, all our efforts count for nothing; and that is your fault.” Some of the resistance was probably also due to the mindset of the people of the Innviertel region, who always respond to pressure with resistance.

## **St. Radegund was different**

Even at the time of the Nazi takeover of power in March 1938, St. Radegund stood out as being different. As there had been no illegal Nazis in the village, no one could be found who was willing to take over the post of Mayor; it was not until the district authorities threatened to appoint an outside commissioner to the post, that a farmer allowed himself to be persuaded to take on the job – the argument being that “someone has to do it”.



*Josef Wengler and Franz Jägerstätter (with bicycle)*

Amongst those asked if they wanted to take on the post of Mayor was Franz Jägerstätter. In telling his wife about it, he expressed astonishment that his fellow citizens saw the post as being completely unconnected to the exercise of religion. For him, acceptance of a Nazi post was completely opposed to his faith. The minutes of Nazi meetings over the following years show that the neighboring villages found the political leadership in St. Radegund too unreliable; Nazi party members from Hochburg arrived to put things to rights. Following Jägerstätter's criminal conviction in the summer of 1943, the village lost its independence and was incorporated into the municipality of Ostermiething. In the 1980's, former Nazi activists from Ostermiething were still saying that Franz Jägerstätter had made things very difficult for his home village through his refusal, as the village had, after all, hauled him out of the army twice before.

In the summer of 1940, the people of St. Radegund demonstrated that they were unanimously and solidly behind their pastor. On 10<sup>th</sup> July 1940, Father Josef Karobath was arrested for preaching a sermon against

the Nazi regime. The farmer Josef Wengler was suspected of having denounced the pastor. He fell under suspicion because he had been heard to praise the Nazis; thanks to the child benefit introduced by the Nazis, the financial situation in his family of nine children had markedly improved. The farmer was discriminated against and ignored by the whole village, on the assumption that he had betrayed the pastor. Everyone left him, for example, standing alone in the church square, and no one spoke to him except Franz Jägerstätter, who was convinced of his innocence. It subsequently came to light that head teacher and Nazi "Cell Leader" Bandzauer had been the informer. Karobath's successor, Father Fürthauer, would also have problems with this teacher. In that same year, Franziska Jägerstätter wrote to her husband, while he was doing military service: "There's been another row over our pastor up, at the school. On Sunday, he announced that parents were welcome to send their children to mass. Apparently, the Mittermeier girl told the midwife and she told the teacher, and of course then the pastor got told off by him, because those at the top either don't want or can't bear to see the children still going to church – after all, the youth belong to them. The teacher must now try his hardest to move with the times and drive home the new spirit, so that he can keep well in with those at the top, and also because of the conscription. It would certainly have been a terrible shame for the kind man – I would have been so sorry, and you too, and most people here in St. Radegund, he could have had our pastor removed, a man who's done only good to his parishioners."<sup>46</sup>

The parish of St. Radegund, with its almost unanimous support of the pastor, was however the one exception throughout the region. In Hochburg, St. Pantaleon, Geretsberg, Eggelsberg and Ostermiething, the local Nazi party leaders repeatedly intimidated not only priests, but also church organists and inconvenient private individuals.

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46 Franziska to Franz, dated 3<sup>rd</sup> Dec. 1940 (131)

## Mistrustful right from the start

In the years before the German invasion, Franz Jägerstätter held no political office in his home village. He must have known about the activities of the illegal Nazis in neighboring villages, which were mainly directed against the pastors. People were also concerned about incidents like the one in Maria Ach, near his wife's parents' home, when the Hitler Youth came from Burghausen in Germany, to loudly disrupt the Corpus Christi procession on the Austrian side of the River Salzach. The pastoral words of the Bishop of Linz on the subject of Nazism and the Papal Encyclical "With Burning Concern" increased Franz's mistrust of the Nazis.

In January 1938, he had a very personal experience with this issue. In what Franz called a 'dream', the irreconcilability of the Catholic and the Nazi worldviews became clear to him. In answer to the question as to whether one could be both a Christian and a Nazi, he described his experience: "At first, I lay in bed without sleeping until it was nearly midnight, though I wasn't ill, and then I must have slept a little after all; suddenly, I was shown a fine railway train, which was driving round a mountain; not only the adults, but even the children were flocking towards this train and the crowd could hardly be held back; how few adults there were who did not get into the train in that place, I would rather not say or write. Then suddenly a voice said to me: 'This train is going to hell.' At that moment, it seemed to me that someone took me by the hand. 'Now we are going into purgatory,' the same voice said to me, and the suffering I saw and felt there was so terrible that, if the voice had not told me that we were going into purgatory, I would certainly have believed that I was in hell. Probably only a few seconds passed while I looked at all this. Then I heard a swishing sound, saw a light, and everything was gone. I then immediately woke my wife and told her all that had happened. Of course, until that night, I could not really believe that the suffering in purgatory could be so great." Some years later, Franz set this dream down on paper and interpreted it: "At first, that moving train was quite a riddle to me, but the more that time passes, the more the moving train is unveiled to me. And today, it seems to me that this image represented none other than Nazism, as it was closing in or creeping up on us at that time, with all its different organizations attached – for example, the N.S.D.A.P., the

N.S.W., the N.S.F. and the H. J.<sup>47</sup> etc. In other words, the whole Nazi movement and every organization which sacrifices and fights for it.”<sup>48</sup>

This dream led Franz Jägerstätter to make an extensive examination of Nazism, and also of the position of the priests and bishops. He wrote further: “Recently, it said in the newspaper that the Nazi party has gained 150,000 new members, and that in fact this is because of youngsters joining the Hitler Youth. If we just look at the adults, particularly those who have property or who are officials or who run a business, and even unskilled workers or qualified craftsmen – how many are there who don’t either belong to some Nazi organization or who haven’t put a offering into the Nazis’ red collecting tins? There are only two possibilities: is membership of the Nazi movement, and also putting money in their red collecting tins, a help or a hindrance for us Catholics in achieving blessedness? If the Nazis are a help for us in achieving blessedness, then it’s a blessing for the whole people that Nazism, with all its organizations, is spreading so rapidly – for, I believe the German people have never been so keenly involved in charitable Christian associations and have never been so willing to make sacrifices, as they are now for the Nazis. Even though anyone can readily see that money doesn’t matter much to the German state, for it can make as much money as it needs for the home country, and anyway the money has no value for countries which haven’t yet been conquered. In any case, they actually write very clearly what the W.H.W.<sup>49</sup> really is. In Mautern, I saw a poster on a wall which said: ‘May your sacrifice in the W.H.W. be your public avowal of the Führer.’ So the Führer wants to constantly test his people to see who’s for or against him. In Germany, before Hitler took over, they used to say that Nazis were not allowed to take Communion. And how do things look now in this great German Reich? Some people go, so it seems, quite placidly up to the altar rail, even though they’re members of the Nazi Party, and have let their children join the Party, or are even training to become Nazi educators themselves. Has the Nazi Party, which has been murdering people in the most atrocious way for more than two years now, really changed its pro-

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47 NSDAP – the Nazi Workers’ Party of Germany, NSW – (probably) the Nazi People’s Welfare Organization, NSF – the Nazi Women’s Association and HJ – the Hitler Youth

48 Gefängnisbriefe und Aufzeichnungen (Letters from Prison and Writings), p.124 f

49 Short for: Winterhilfswerk (Winter Relief Organization), a Nazi welfare organization

gram, making it permissible or a matter of indifference for its members to take Communion? Or have the church leaders already given their decision or approval, so that it's now allowed for Catholics to join a party which is hostile to the Church? Yes, sometimes it makes you want to just shout out. If you think it over a little, could it come as a surprise if even the most fair-minded were to go crazy in such a country? The way things look, we're not going to see any bloody persecution of Christians here after all, as the Church now does almost everything the Nazi Party wants or orders. Of course, it's true that there certainly wouldn't be many good priests left at liberty and able to carry out their work in Austria if the Catholic clergy of this country had put up some serious opposition to the Nazis at the time of the popular vote on 10<sup>th</sup> April, instead of even praising that Party for many a good deed, thus handing them a landslide victory with almost a hundred per cent of the votes. I believe that it would hardly have been worse for real Christian faith in our country if not one Catholic church were left open and if, perhaps, thousands had already sacrificed their blood and their lives for Christ and their faith, rather than silently watching this falsehood as it takes an ever greater hold on everything around it! True, many are already waiting impatiently to be liberated from this unhappy situation. In fact, it would be a good idea to remember the words of the Führer when he says: 'Man, help yourself, then God will help you too.' So I want to call out to each person who's sitting in the train: 'Jump out before this train reaches the end of the line, even if it costs you your life!' Therefore, I believe that what God has shown me in this dream or vision, and what He has put into my heart, is clear enough for me to decide whether I'm a Nazi or a Catholic!"<sup>50</sup>

Statements issued by the Church and an inner experience which he ascribed to God's guidance both aroused Franz Jägerstätter's mistrust of the new rulers and their worldview. He tried to show some understanding for the way church officials had later given in to the Nazis. The fate of Jesus Christ, His Apostles and of the early Christians helped him to accept that persecution and suffering might be the possible consequences of dissent. Following on the above, Franz Jägerstätter wrote: "However, let's not throw stones at our bishops and priests because of this; after all, they are human

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50 Gefängnisbriefe und Aufzeichnungen (Letters from Prison and Writings), p.126 f

beings of flesh and blood like us, and can therefore become weak. They are, perhaps, tempted by the evil one far more than we are. Maybe they were too little prepared to take on this fight and to make that decision: live or die. Wouldn't it make our hearts tremble too, if we suddenly found out that we had to appear before God's judgment seat this very day, even though we would normally only be held accountable for a few of our fellow men? That's why it's easy to imagine what a difficult decision our bishops and priests were faced with in March 1938. Also, our bishops may have believed that it would only be a short time before everything would collapse again, and that through their compliancy they'd be able to spare the faithful much martyrdom and torment – but unfortunately, things turned out differently: years have passed, and every year thousands of people are having to die still believing this falsehood. We can therefore easily imagine what a heroic decision it would be to admit, in front of the people, everything that has been done wrong over the past years. Let's not make it even harder than it already is for them by accusing them. Rather, let us pray for them, that God may lighten the great task that lies ahead of them. If we look seriously at the time we live in now, we have to admit that the situation for us Christians in Germany is far more comfortless and confused than it was for the early Christians under the bloodiest persecutions. Many people would perhaps think, 'Why did God have to let us live in a time like this?' We can't blame God for this, nor perhaps put the blame at other people's door, for as the saying goes: 'As one makes his bed, so must he lie.' And even today, if we have the will to seriously strive and to invest all our strength, it's possible, with God's help, for us to work our way out of the swamp in which we're stuck, and to attain eternal bliss. Of course, one should not regard the suffering of this world as the worst thing possible: even the great Saints often had to suffer terrible things, until God took them up into His heavenly mansions; the Lord, too, did not spare his Apostles great suffering, and most of them died as martyrs, but did so much work for Christ despite all. And maybe, for our sinful life, we'd like to have a life free from pain and struggle and a peaceful death, and to enjoy eternal bliss into the bargain. Christ himself, the Most Blameless, suffered more terribly than all other men, and bought us Heaven by His suffering and His death, and are we not willing to suffer for Him?"<sup>51</sup>

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51 Gefängnisbriefe und Aufzeichnungen (Letters from Prison and Writings), p.127 ff



## **Franz votes “No” in the popular vote**

In the spring of 1938, the people of St. Radegund had no leanings towards Nazism. At the first public rally following the German invasion, the village teacher gave a speech in the open air. According to Franziska Jägerstätter's account, many people came to this rally. Franz, who watched the proceedings from some distance away, was disappointed. Originally, he had not intended to take part in the popular vote, fixed for 10<sup>th</sup> April, on the annexation of Austria by Germany. He argued that it was not a real vote if the Germans had already arrived with their tanks. There was great alarm in St. Radegund as to what might happen if a person from the village did not turn up to vote. Franz's godson Franz Huber recalls how the blacksmith, who was a highly-regarded Christian in the village, tried to persuade Franz to go to vote. Franziska Jägerstätter was feeling the pressure too – the Nazi reign of terror had immediately begun: “People had already been arrested in many places”, is how she describes the fear she felt. She tried to persuade Franz to vote after all, and even threatened (this was the only occasion that she ever did so, as she emphasizes) to stop loving him if he would not listen to her. Naturally, this upset her husband, and they were able to talk the whole thing over together. Franziska was sorry that she had put him under such pressure, and this incident helped her to understand that there was a certain sphere of life within which she had to respect her husband's conscientious stance. The words “If you do that, I won't love you any more” never once passed her lips again, not even when she felt the deepest anxiety about him. Franz went to the vote, but voted “No” – however, the fact was suppressed by the electoral authorities in St. Radegund, who instead reported a one hundred per cent “Yes” vote.

Such initial, symbolic actions, seemingly unimportant in themselves, which people carry out under political pressure, are of great significance with regard to sundry deeds which may be demanded of them later.

Jägerstätter refused to vote “Yes” and thus preserved his freedom of action. In 1940, in the French village of Le Chambon, the Evangelical pastors there refused to take the first oath of allegiance demanded by the Vichy regime: they did not organize the mandatory Fascist flag salute at their school. This example showed people that it was possible to disobey

police regulations. They had a sense of solidarity and independence which made it possible for them to save the lives of hundreds of Jewish refugees a short time later.<sup>52</sup>

## **That “Yes” vote must be taken back**

Franz Jägerstätter constantly asked himself where the cause of all the injustice and suffering lay, and he concluded that it was the fault of human beings: “But ever since people have existed on this earth, experience teaches us that God gives people free will and has only very seldom noticeably interfered in the fate of individuals and peoples, and that therefore it will be no different in the future either, except at the end of the world. Adam and Eva already completely ruined their destiny through their disobedience towards God; God gave them free will and they would never have had to suffer if they had listened more to God than to the tempter. Even His beloved Son would then have been spared infinite suffering. And so it will remain until the end of the world: that every sin has consequences. But woe to us if we always try to avoid shouldering those consequences and aren’t willing to do penance for our sins and errors.”<sup>53</sup>

The argument that nothing much would happen to Austrians and Bavarians in the event of defeat also seemed implausible to Jägerstätter: “Let’s just ask ourselves: are Austria and Bavaria blameless that we now have a Nazi government instead of a Christian one? Did Nazism just simply drop on us from the sky? I believe we needn’t waste many words about it, for anyone who hasn’t slept through the past decade knows well enough how and why everything has come about in the way it has. I believe that what happened in the spring of 1938 was not so very different from what happened on Holy Thursday, more than 1900 years ago, when the Jewish people were given the freedom to choose between the innocent Redeemer and the criminal Barabbas: then, too, the Pharisees distributed money amongst the people to get them to shout loudly, in order

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52 Cf. Philip Hallie, *Die Geschichte des Dorfes Le Chambon (Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed)*, Neukirchen-Vluyn 1983, p.97 f.

53 *Gefängnisbriefe und Aufzeichnungen (Letters from Prison and Writings)*, p.130

to mislead and intimidate those who still stood by Christ. In March 1938, what horror stories weren't spread and invented here in Austria against Chancellor Schuschnigg, a still Christian-minded man, and against the clergy? Those few who didn't catch the madness and who couldn't be persuaded to cast that misguided 'Yes' vote were simply labeled fools or Communists, yet today the Nazis still haven't given up the struggle to maybe win those fools over to the Nazi movement after all, or at least to sacrifice them to their ideology!"<sup>54</sup>

Here, too, Franz Jägerstätter was speaking from experience. When there was no way of avoiding it, the village community of St. Radegund did come to terms with the new regime, and were therefore always trying to make Franz toe the line as well. According to Franziska Jägerstätter's account, the village officials asked the local Nazi party leader, a man called Sauer from the village of Hochburg, for his support in this matter. But he too was unable to persuade Franz to (for example) donate anything to the party or to accept any money from the state, such as child support. As, following Germany's annexation of Austria, the young farmer often got caught up in political discussions in guesthouse saloons, he tried to avoid such places.

After the "betrayal on Holy Thursday" Franz Jägerstätter expected the situation to change only through a Good Friday event. "If Christ is once more to reign in our beautiful Austria, Good Friday must follow Holy Thursday, for Christ first had to die before He could resurrect from the dead. And for us, too, there can be no joyful resurrection until we are willing to suffer and, if need be, even to die for Christ and our faith. Holy Thursday for us Austrians was that darkest of days, 10<sup>th</sup> April 1938. On that day, the Austrian Church let itself be taken prisoner and has been lying in chains ever since, and until that "Yes", which was at that time given in a very cowardly and frightened way by many Catholics, has been answered by a resounding "No", there'll be no Good Friday for us; we will indeed have to die because of this, though not for Christ – many may perhaps die fighting for a Nazi victory."<sup>55</sup>

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54 Gefängnisbriefe und Aufzeichnungen (Letters from Prison and Writings), p.130 f

55 Ibid. 133

## The local authorities in St. Radegund help Franz

After Franz's first conscription into the German Armed Forces in June 1940, a letter written by Franz to his wife reveals his strained relations with the local authorities.

He had obeyed his conscription into the army without seeking support from the village party leaders to obtain a possible deferment of his military service, "for we shouldn't stoop to becoming a mere football for the political leaders to kick around; I believe we're going to need a staunch will very often from now on."<sup>56</sup> However, for Franziska the situation reached a crisis just a short time later; a few weeks after the birth of her third child and at a time when her mother-in-law was in hospital, she fell ill herself. The Mayor, who had heard the news from a neighbor, who had happened to stop by at the farm, took the initiative himself and within a very short time brought Franz home from the barracks at Braunau. At the beginning of October 1940, Franz was conscripted again, and again made no effort to apply for exemption. Later, during his military service, he did ask his wife to obtain exemption, but he said that no one need expect him to make any political concessions: "Greet the village authorities most warmly for me – I'll certainly quarrel with them if I'm allowed to come home."<sup>57</sup> In March 1941, the authorities at St. Radegund again pushed through Franz Jägerstätter's exemption on the grounds of his "reserved civilian occupation" as a farmer. At the beginning of April 1941, he was demobilized and did not have to undergo conscription again for almost two years.

In the letters exchanged by the Jägerstätters during the winter of 1940 to 1941, the couple already began to discuss the Nazi program of murder. On 27<sup>th</sup> February 1941, Franz wrote cautiously from the Wachau in Lower Austria: "Ybbs is a very beautiful town on the Danube; there's quite a large mental asylum here, which used to be full of patients, but now probably even the mad have become sane, because there are no longer very many of them in the asylum. My dear wife, there must be some truth in what you told me once, about what's happening to these people. As one farmer

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56 Franz to Franziska, dated 23<sup>rd</sup> June 1940 (5)

57 Franz to Franziska, dated 7<sup>th</sup> November 1940 (17)

here where we're quartered, told us, it seems that some very sad things have already happened here."

The Nazi program of "euthanasia" affected St. Radegund too. On 16<sup>th</sup> May 1943, Franziska wrote to her husband of the sudden death of a child who had shortly before been put in a home for the disabled.

