

Homily For Sunday, August 24, 2008

21st Sunday - Ordinary Time

Introduction

One theme which today's Scriptures underscore is that of Power - the conferral of power by God on Eliakim in the reading from Isaiah and Jesus' giving Simon Peter power as the "Rock on which He would build the Church".

In both cases the power granted brought with it awesome responsibilities. In addition, its use was to be for the common good.

I

In preparing today's liturgy the planners saw that we, the privileged middle class of this country, also possess substantial power. The words of Jesus in another context come to mind in this regard: "To whom much is given, much is expected" (Luke 12:48)

II

As I reflected on this theme this week, I happened to be reading about another person who relatively speaking did not possess much power, but whose testimony proved enormously powerful in the long run: Franz Jagerstatter.

He was a peasant, born in 1907 in a remote Austrian village, St. Radegund, whose country was occupied by Hitler's 3rd Reich at the outset of the Second World War. All Austrian men of fighting age were expected to serve in the German Army, but when Jagerstatter's call to service came, he refused to collaborate in any capacity with what he believed was an unjust war.

Franz Jagerstatter was a devout Catholic and consulted widely with priests and even his bishop on this matter. All of them advised him to submit to the Nazi authorities and at least take a passive role as a medic in the war. However, Jagerstatter's conscience would not allow even that non-combatant status, since, as he said, it would only free another man to go into battle.

III

The reasons given Jagerstatter to comply with the orders to join the military are familiar to us today:

-one does not have all the facts which one's government has for engaging in a war - so one cannot really make a determination to refuse serving one's country

-as a married man with small children (which Jagerstatter was) he should think of those obligations and not risk the certain reprisals which would come from not serving in the military

-after the war his country would need men of principle like Jagerstatter to rebuild Austria, so he should not risk everything by refusing to join the military.

IV

This brave peasant held to his belief that the war was unjust and that for the sake of his own should he could not participate in it. He was called up to serve early in 1943 and upon refusing was sent to the notorious concentration camp at Auschwitz, where he was beheaded on August 9, 1943 - just 65 years ago this month.

And then he was "forgotten".

V

However, in the early 1960's, some fifteen years after the end of World War II, an American peace activist, Gordon Zahn, heard about Jagerstatter and interviewed many people who had known him. That began a slow discovery of Jagerstatter's amazing and lonely story which finally resulted in his being beatified as Blessed Franz Jagerstatter by the German pope, Josef Ratzinger (Benedict XVI) in October of 2007.

Conclusion

The Jagerstatter story has so many parallels with our own time and leaves us with the question: how do you, how do I use our power for the common good.