

Cardinal beatifies Austrian beheaded in 1943

VATICAN CITY - A Vatican cardinal beatified Franz Jagerstatter, an Austrian farmer who was beheaded in 1943 after he refused to fight in Hitler's army.

Presiding over the beatification Mass in Linz, Austria, Oct. 26, Cardinal Jose Saraiva Martins said Blessed Jagerstatter offered an example of how to live the Christian faith fully and radically, even when there are extreme consequences.

Blessed Jagerstatter was beatified as a martyr, which means he was killed out of hatred for the faith.

Many Austrian church leaders attended the beatification liturgy, and the Austrian bishops' conference recently called Blessed Jagerstatter "a shining example in dark times."

In 1943, however, his refusal to serve in the Nazi army was not supported by his priest, his bishop or most of his Catholic friends. Particularly because he had a wife and three daughters, many advised him to think of his family and put aside his conscientious objection to the Nazi war machine.

Cardinal Saraiva Martins, head of the Vatican's Congregation for Saints' Causes, said in his beatification sermon that Blessed Jagerstatter's decision represents "a challenge and an encouragement" for all Christians who want to "live their faith with coherence and radical commitment, even accepting extreme consequences if necessary."

His courage of faith, the cardinal said, is an important example in modern times, when people face "conditioning and manipulation of consciences and minds, sometimes through deceitful means."

Cardinal Saraiva Martins emphasized that Blessed Jagerstatter was quite a normal person, someone with faults and who for a period seemed to take his faith lightly.

According to biographies, he was a fun-loving youth who chased after girls and rode

a motorcycle, and once fathered a child out of wedlock. After marrying, however, his religious faith deepened.

In 1940, at the age of 33, he was conscripted into the German armed forces and underwent basic training. After returning home in 1941 on an exemption as a farmer, he began examining closely the religious reasons for refusing to carry out military service.

He studied the issues in detail, and at one point wrote a series of questions about the morality of the war that he discussed with his bishop. He emerged from that conversation saddened that the bishop seemed afraid to confront the issues.

In 1943, after being called to active duty, he reported to his army base and stated his refusal to serve. A military court rejected his assertion that he could not be both a Nazi and a Catholic, and condemned him to death for undermining military morale. His offer to serve as a military paramedic was ignored.

A priest from his home village visited him in prison and tried to talk him into serving in the army, but to no avail.

Blessed Jagerstatter was beheaded by guillotine Aug. 9, 1943. "I am convinced that it is best that I speak the truth, even if it costs me my life," he wrote before his execution.

In a final letter to his wife, he asked her forgiveness and said he hoped his life would be accepted by God as "atonement not just for my sins but also for the sins of others."

A chief question raised in Blessed Jagerstatter's writings is how much obedience a good Christian owes to civil authorities when their demands conflict with Gospel teachings.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church, published in 1992, addresses that issue, stating: "The citizen is obliged in conscience not to follow the directives of civil authorities when they are contrary to the demands of the moral order, to the fundamental rights of persons or the teachings of the Gospel. Refusing obedience to civil authorities, when their demands are contrary to those of an upright conscience,

finds its justification in the distinction between serving God and serving the political community.”