

June 28, 2020 Who is First Homily: “Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me.” (Mt. 10:37-38)

Franz Jägerstätter is one of the unlikely heroes of the Twentieth Century. His is a story of valor under fire. A citizen of Austria, he was married and the father to his wife’s three children. As a sexton, he did odd jobs in and around his church, where he was gainfully employed. His life took a dramatic turn when, in 1938 Adolf Hitler came to power in his native land. He was told in no uncertain terms that 1) he must swear allegiance to the Chancellor of the Third Reich, Hitler and 2) He must serve in the Nazi Army. Jägerstätter refused, knowing that his refusal would cost him his life. He was urged by his neighbors to be sensible and not risk his life by offending the Nazis. He simply refused to budge. He remained steely in his resolve to be steadfast and true to his conscience.

While in prison and awaiting execution, he wrote words of great passion and conviction. “Again and again people stress the obligation of conscience as they concern my wife and children. But I cannot believe that just because a man has a wife and children he is free to offend God. Did not Christ himself say “he who loves father, mother or children more than me is not deserving of my love?””

Up until the end of his life, the opportunity to avoid death was still available to him. He heard the very same appeal Christ heard while dying on the cross: “Save yourself by coming down from the cross”.

On the fourth of August in 1943, Jägerstätter was beheaded in a Berlin prison. He died a martyr. The words of Jesus in today’s gospel apply to him. “He who loses his life for my sake will find it.” (Mt. 10:39)

In today’s gospel we are given an account of Christ’s mission discourse. He tells his disciples that they must put him first if they wish to follow Him. He certainly wants them to love and honor their parents but they are to love Him even more. He asks a lot of them. The consequences are likely to be nothing less than dramatic: domestic turmoil and division.

“...for I have come to set a daughter against her mother.” (Mt. 10:35)

When disciples are rejected by their own family members, they will know the cost of being a disciple of Jesus. One of the great Catholic figures of the last century was a German born Jewish convert and Carmelite nun, Edith Stein. She and her sister, Rosa, also a convert, were arrested by the Gestapo and later boarded a train for the infamous Nazi Concentration camp, Auschwitz. Her mother, a devout Orthodox Jew, was crestfallen upon hearing of her daughter’s conversion. She simply could not understand her decision, nor did she condone it. Although Edith was understandably upset about her mother’s pain and sadness, she held firm in her Catholic faith.

Given our human weakness, we sometimes make the choice to “play it safe” and follow the path of least resistance. For the sake of domestic tranquility we are likely to find room for compromise. Is our weakening of our resolve fair to Jesus, who expects great things of us?

In the Year of Our Lord, 202 AD a young Christian teen named Perpetua gave birth while in prison. One day in the middle of a meal she was apprehended and dragged to court. Not surprisingly, the news of

her arrest quickly spread in the nearby neighborhoods. When she appeared before the judge, her distraught father appeared, carrying Perpetua's son in his hands. He pulled her aside and said to her words of anguish "Pity the poor child".

The judge remonstrated with her. "Pity your father's white hair, your child's tender age. Just sacrifice to the gods for the welfare of the emperors."

She replied, "No".

"So, then, you are a Christian?" asked the judge.

"Indeed, I am."

Her fate was then sealed. She was executed.

Dear friends, those with whom we have the closest ties, such as our parents, friends, relatives, a sibling or a teacher, are no doubt important to us. But Jesus must always come first.

He demands our undivided loyalty.

Amen!