

- **Blessed Franz Jägerstätter OFS** was born May 20, 1907 in St. Radegund, a village in the mountainous area of Upper Austria along the German border.
- Born illegitimate, Franz was raised by his grandmother until he was adopted by his stepfather when his mother later remarried.
- As a young man, Franz was a bit of a wild child and carouser. He also fathered an illegitimate daughter.
- In his late teens or early twenties, Franz moved away to work on a farm in a neighboring town, as well as in nearby mines, before ultimately returning to St. Radegund.
- Shortly after his return, Franz settled down and married. He also became a dedicated Catholic thanks in large part to the religious devotion of his wife, Franziska. After their wedding, the newlyweds went on a pilgrimage to Rome and had their marriage blessed by Pope Pius XII. Upon their return, Franz took over the running the farm of his widowed mother-in law, and he and his wife ultimately had three children together. Franz became a Secular Franciscan in 1940.
- With the rise of Nazism in Europe, Franz was dismayed by what it represented. He was especially troubled by how many Catholics supported Hitler and the Nazi takeover of Austria. He was quoted as saying: “I believe there could scarcely be a sadder hour for the true Christian faith in our country”.
- Franz was the only citizen of St. Radegund who voted against the *Anschluss*, the annexation of Austria by Germany. His dissent was disregarded and the town vote was submitted as unanimous.
- Franz was openly anti-Nazi, and although he was drafted in 1940, completed his training and was ultimately conscripted, he refused to take the Hitler Oath. However, he was able to gain exemption as a farmer and return home in 1941.
- His military experience during training, the suppression of the Church, and information about the Nazi “euthanasia program” caused Franz to further

object to Nazism and to question the morality of the war. He even traveled to Linz to express his concerns with the Bishop, but found that Church officials were largely afraid of opposing the Nazi regime.

- Franz was finally called up for military service in 1943. At the garrison in Linz on March 1st, he refused to take the Hitler Oath or fight as a Nazi soldier, declaring himself a conscientious objector. Franz offered to become a medic, but that offer was refused and he was arrested by the Nazis. He was held in Linz until May, when he was transferred to a prison in Berlin. The priest of St. Radegund tried in vain to get Franz to concede and serve as a Nazi soldier to save his own life, but Franz refused, declaring that to do so was in opposition to his deep faith and religious convictions.
- During his time in prison, Franz corresponded with his wife Franziska and children by letter. Franziska supported him, but the Jägerstätter family was ostracized and suffered scorn by the people of St. Radegund, who saw Franz as a traitor for his conscientious objection. Even after the war, Franziska was denied a widow's pension by the Austrian government, since Franz was still considered a mere traitor rather than a victim of Nazi persecution. Her pension was not approved until 1950.
- Many of the letters Franz wrote while in prison were later published and compiled in book form. In reading them, it is obvious that Franz was anguished by his situation and by his family's suffering. However, he remained deeply devout, steadfast in his opposition to supporting the Nazi effort by becoming a Nazi soldier because of the evil it represented.
- Franz wrote: "If I must write . . . with my hands in chains, I find that much better than if my will were in chains. Neither prison nor chains nor sentence of death can rob a man of the Faith and his free will. God gives us so much strength that it is possible to bear any suffering."
- Franz was declared guilty of undermining the military morale in a military trial on July 4, 1943.
- He was given a last opportunity to sign a document in which he renounced his conscientious objection, because by that time, his refusal had become a symbol of Nazi resistance in Austria. However, Franz still refused to be complicit in any way with the Nazi regime and was executed on August 9, 1943

at the age of 36. His last words were “I am completely bound in inner union with the Lord”.

- The story of Franz Jägerstätter was largely forgotten after the war. He was essentially written off as a traitor who failed in his duty as a husband, father and countryman. His ashes were not returned for burial in St. Radegund cemetery until 1943.
- In 1964, a biography on Franz Jägerstätter, **In Solitary Witness** was published, and his fame grew as a devout Catholic and conscientious objector. As worldwide knowledge of his inspiring story became more well known—and more people saw the great sacrifice and devotion of Franz during the war—the narrative regarding his life and ultimate execution began to change.
- Jägerstätter’s death sentence was nullified in May 1997.
- A *Stolperstein* (a brass plate inscribed with the name and life dates of victims of Nazi extermination or persecution) was placed in his honor in St. Radegund in 2006.
- Pope Benedict XVI declared Franz a martyr in June of 2007, and he was beautified in October of that same year.
- The Feast Day of Blessed Franz Jägerstätter’s is May 21st, the day of his baptism.

LEARN MORE

- **In Solitary Witness: The Life of Franz Jägerstätter** by Gordon Charles Zahn (Book/Audiobook)
- **Franz Jägerstätter: Letters And Writings From Prison**—A compilation by Erna Putz (Book)
- **Franz Jägerstätter: A Man of Conscience** (Documentary, 2009)
- **A Hidden Life** (Feature Film, 2019)

WHY I CHOSE BLESSED FRANZ JÄGERSTÄTTER OFS

- **Blessed Franz Jägerstätter OFS** was not a Franciscan saint, but he was a Catholic martyr and a Secular Franciscan, so doing a presentation on him seemed very relevant. His story also seemed very timely, given all of conflict and division in our own country over sociopolitical issues—especially in regard to our Catholic faith and what it means to be a Franciscan and follower of Saint Francis. Franz demonstrated that it is not always the easy route, and requires resolve, sacrifice, and sometimes not going along with what is most popular or personally expedient.
- I also identified with Jägerstätter's decision to change his life and dedicate himself to the Lord as a Secular Franciscan—something I felt very connected to as someone in Candidacy and close to Profession.
- I was very inspired by Jägerstätter's deep faith and willingness to stand by his spiritual convictions, despite widespread social criticism and lack of support by Church officials, who instead sided with the Nazi regime. Franz was condemned by his peers and countrymen as a bad father, husband, and countryman—and then executed as a traitor. But like St. Francis, his only concern was his dedication to the Lord and following in the footsteps of Christ, even if that meant sacrificing his own life over being complicit to evil.
- Blessed Franz Jägerstätter is a great role model to me as Secular Franciscan, as I can be tempted to give priority to current social/political norms over what I profess as a Secular Franciscan—over following Scripture—over opposing evil. His story reminds me to question what is overwhelming popular or technically legal—and that sometimes we must make faith-based choices that are not the most convenient—choices that may require personal sacrifice. It can be a challenge not to be led by personal bias, or to accept the status quo and pledge loyalty to leaders without question. Franz never let the sociopolitical idealism of the day corrupt him, and he paid the ultimate price as testimony to his faith.