

Following Conscience: A Pilgrimage in the Footsteps of Blessed Franz Jägerstätter

By Bridget Durham OFS, Minister

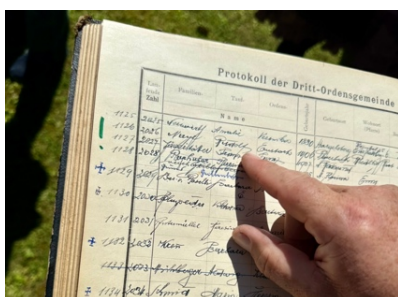
Blessed Franz Jägerstätter Secular Franciscan Fraternity, Flagstaff, Arizona

In the spring of 2025, I joined fellow Franciscans on a pilgrimage to Germany and Austria to trace the life, faith, and sacrifice of Blessed Franz Jägerstätter, the humble Austrian farmer, husband, father, and Secular Franciscan who followed his conscience to martyrdom during World War II.

Before this journey, I knew about him, mostly from what I had learned through books and references in my Franciscan formation. Becoming part of a fraternity under his patronage led me to want to know him better, not just as a historical figure, but as a brother in faith and an example of what it means to live the Gospel radically in everyday life. Walking where he lived, prayed, and suffered transformed that knowledge into something living and deeply personal. This pilgrimage became a profound spiritual encounter with a man whose courage still speaks powerfully to our times.

Our pilgrimage began in Altötting, Germany, home of *Our Lady of Altötting*, a beloved Marian shrine and a place long associated with miracles and prayer. We also visited the nearby church of Saint Konrad of Parzham, the humble Capuchin Franciscan whose simplicity and devotion profoundly influenced Blessed Franz's spirituality. Standing before these shrines, we reflected on how Marian devotion and Franciscan humility shaped Franz Jägerstätter's own faith.

We next traveled to Enns, Austria, where Franz was first imprisoned. He was held in Enns after his arrest. It was there that he was questioned about his refusal to serve in the military and urged to change his decision, but he remained firm in conscience. After this imprisonment, Blessed Franz Jägerstätter was transferred to Berlin and tried by a Nazi military tribunal for refusing to swear allegiance to Adolf Hitler. His decision was rooted not in politics but in his Catholic faith and his formed conscience. On August 9, 1943, he was executed by guillotine at Brandenburg Prison in Berlin. He accepted death rather than betray God or his conscience. His courage in the face of evil continues to stand as a powerful witness to moral integrity and faith.



Enns is also the place where Blessed Franz became a member of the Third Order Franciscans (we now know as the Secular Franciscan Order). Seeing the church where his Franciscan vocation took root offered a powerful connection to my own call as a Secular Franciscan. In the local church, we viewed

the book of professions in which his name is written, a simple record that marked an extraordinary fidelity to the Franciscan charism. The experience of renewing our own profession in the same place that Franz Jägerstätter professed is beyond words.

The visit to Enns also included a stop at the Austrian Military Academy, which now has a Blessed Franz Jägerstätter Chapel on its base. There we learned that cadets study his example as part of their moral and ethical formation, reflecting on the dedication and courage it takes to form and follow one's conscience. The Academy also acknowledges the lasting effects that World War II has on its community, reminding its cadets that true strength lies not in obedience alone, but in moral responsibility and character. Blessed Franz's life continues to guide future leaders toward integrity, humility, and peace.

From Enns, we journeyed to Puppung, a small Franciscan friary and retreat center in Upper Austria that also houses a Franz Jägerstätter Chapel. Inside this chapel, a guillotine stands in place of a crucifix. The juxtaposition of these two instruments of execution is a stark but powerful reminder that both Jesus Christ and Blessed Franz accepted death rather than deny truth and conscience. Walking into the chapel, a **startling reverence washed over us**, and silence fell as we absorbed the reality before us.



The next day, we went to St. Radegund, a quiet village nestled between the Alps, where Franz Jägerstätter lived with his family and farmed the land. We visited his modest home, its simplicity reflecting the life he chose. We also attended Mass in his parish church, where he once served as sacristan, and where his ashes are enshrined in the altar. Standing in the same pews where Blessed Franz prayed, and before his visible mortal remains, I felt the nearness of someone who wrestled honestly with faith and fear.

As we learned more about the Jägerstätter family, we were moved by the stories of Franziska Jägerstätter, Franz's wife, whose love and devotion sustained him through his struggle. She is remembered as a woman of remarkable faith who supported her husband's conscience, cared for their three daughters, and, after his death, quietly lived out the Gospel with strength and grace. After the war, when others in her village who had family members who had joined the Nazis, under pressure or out of fear, shunned her for the stand her husband had taken by not joining the Nazi army. Yet she forgave and endured with humility, remaining a devoted Catholic and a gentle witness to mercy and peace.

We were also deeply blessed to visit with his daughter, Maria Dammer, shortly before her passing in June 2025. Her warmth, joy, and steadfast faith were a living continuation of her father's witness and a grace to all who met her.

Throughout the journey, we met those dedicated to preserving Franz Jägerstätter's memory and message. Dr. Erna Putz, a foremost scholar on Blessed Franz and Franziska Jägerstätter, shared insights into their letters and spiritual life. She helped us see how their marriage and family became a living witness of faithfulness, prayer, and mutual trust in God.

Along the way, we also met and socialized with many Secular Franciscans from Austria and Germany. Our common joy in living the Gospel in the spirit of St. Francis of Assisi overshadowed any language barriers. We shared stories, songs, and smiles, discovering that the bonds of fraternity and faith transcend words.



Our pilgrimage then brought us to Linz, Austria, where we met with members of the Franz and Franziska Jägerstätter Institute, whose mission is to preserve their memory and promote education about conscience and faith. Their work continues the witness of the Jägerstätters in our modern world.

In Linz, we visited the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, where Blessed Franz Jägerstätter's beatification took place in 2007. The church houses relics of Blessed Franz, including a letter he wrote to his wife, Franziska, and a portrait of her placed beside the reliquary. Seeing their love and faith remembered together brought a deep sense of tenderness and hope, a reminder that holiness is born not only in courage, but also in fidelity and love.

In that sacred space, we prayed together with Bishop Manfred Scheuer of the Diocese of Linz, who, as Bishop, oversees Blessed Franz's cause for canonization. His presence and words, along with Dr. Erna Putz's reflections on Franz and Franziska's faith, deepened our understanding of the holy courage that flows from a life rooted in conscience and the Gospel.



Pilgrimage is more than travel; it is about conversion and immersion in another place and culture, among its people. Before I came, Blessed Franz Jägerstätter was someone I admired. Now, having walked where he walked and prayed where he prayed, I feel as though I have met a family member. His witness is not abstract. It is living, immediate, and challenging.

Blessed Franz once wrote from prison: “Better to have one’s hands in chains than one’s will.” His words remind us that true freedom is found in obedience to conscience and in fidelity to God, even when it leads to suffering.

As Minister of the Blessed Franz Jägerstätter Secular Franciscan Fraternity in Flagstaff, Arizona, I carry from this pilgrimage a renewed sense of mission: to help our fraternity, and all who seek peace, to follow the quiet voice of conscience with joy, integrity, and hope. May Blessed Franz and Franziska Jägerstätter intercede for us, that we might live with the same faith-filled courage and love that defined their lives.

About the Author

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