

Franz's marriage to Franziska Schwaninger

Two souls on a religious quest

The marriage of Franz Jägerstätter to Franziska Schwaninger is unanimously described by the people of St. Radegund as being a turning point in his life: it made “a different man” of him. This is to some extent true, yet this was a marriage of two young people who had both, independently of one another, already embarked on an intensely religious path in life. In the parish chronicle of St. Radegund, Father Josef Karobath⁹ wrote the following short description of the life of Franz Jägerstätter: “In his youth, just like other young people. In 1934 he became serious; at that time, he planned to enter a monastery as a lay brother. I advised him against it.”¹⁰ The village priest thought it would be more sensible for Franz, the only son, to take over the farm and take care of his old mother.

Franziska Schwaninger had grown up on a farm in the village of Hochburg, 12 km away, in a deeply religious family. Both her father and her grandmother were members of the Marian Congregation, and her grandmother also belonged to the Third Order of St. Francis. Born on 4th March 1913, Franziska was deeply influenced by Father Josef Lindinger, the priest of Hochburg, who was active in the pastoral care of young people, and she herself was a youth leader in her home parish. From 1934 onwards, she worked as a dairy and kitchen maid at the “zur Reib” guesthouse near her parents' home. In 1935, she considered becoming a nun and, together with the waitress at the same guesthouse, visited the Vöcklabruck School Sisters, who worked at the nearby village of Ranshofen, to ask if it was possible. These nuns ran the kindergarten in Ranshofen, gave religious instruction and played an important role in the pas-

9 Josef Karobath was the priest of St. Radegund from 1934 to 1970; in 1940, he was put into the Gestapo prison for seven weeks because of an “inflammatory” sermon, and was subsequently banished from the district of Braunau (until 1945).

10 Parish chronicle of St. Radegund p. 147



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toral care of the parish. Franziska Schwaninger and her friend were told to come back again in six months. Looking back, Franziska thinks that the nuns probably thought that they were too light-hearted: “We were very jolly and laughed a lot.” During the following six months, her future husband entered her life. She got to know him at a social event where, in order to earn a little extra money, Franziska was setting up the bowling pins. During her first conversations with Franz, it was she who was careful to ascertain whether he attended church on Sundays. Father Karobath describes Franziska Schwaninger as “a very good and idealistic girl.”¹¹

In 1934, independently of each other, she and Franz had both taken part in the festivities to mark the sanctification of the Capuchin monk Konrad von Parzham in nearby Altötting. It is certainly possible that Franz’s desire to enter a monastery, and perhaps also Franziska’s desire to enter a convent, may have been connected with this event.

The two young people did not have a long engagement. In 1933, Franz’s adoptive father, Heinrich Jägerstätter, had died of pulmonary tuberculosis at the age of 49. Aloisia Sommerauer, Franz’s cousin and foster sister, contracted the same disease and was buried in St. Radekund on 9th April 1936 – Franz und Franziska’s wedding day. The farm urgently needed a mistress. The newlyweds not only chose an unusual time of day for the wedding – 6 o’clock in the morning on Holy Thursday – but they also deprived the family and the village of the large wedding feast which was customary in that region. Immediately after the wedding, they set out on a pilgrimage to Rome. They were not even able to attend the funeral of Franz’s foster sister Aloisia. Such a honeymoon was something very unusual for St. Radekund, and was repeatedly mentioned in all the recollections of Franz. The pilgrimage was also relatively expensive, as the cost for one person amounted to seven months of Franziska’s wages. Rome, where the group had an audience with Pope Pius XI, and the journey to Naples and Sorrento, were a great experience. The trip had originally been Franz’s suggestion, and Franziska had enthusiastically agreed. Franz wanted to go on more pilgrimages with his wife, every 10 years. For Franziska, the fact that she was later able to go on pilgrimages to Rome to mark her 50th and 60th wedding anniversaries were signs or gifts from her husband in Heaven.

11 Ibid.

Franz's religious faith grows deeper

According to information from Franziska Jägerstätter, she was the one who was the more active in faith when she and Franz began their married life together. She often went to the Holy Communion and kept the Sacred Heart of Jesus Fridays. Her husband's interest was awakened by her attitude so that, for example, he often joined her in receiving Communion. This was noticed by his fellow-parishioners, as it was an unusual thing for a man; it was his wife's "fault" that he had become noticeably more religious, that he had become "a different Franz". Franz and Franziska read the Bible together. Extensive theological reading was considered to be more of a masculine activity; however, as the three children soon came along, Franziska was usually too tired to read much in the evenings.

Later, when they were separated from one another and Franz was being victimized for his religious attitude by his superiors in the army, his strong religious faith was a reassurance to his wife: "It's a great comfort to me that you love praying so much, and so can maybe manage to bear everything patiently during this difficult time. From your letters I gather that, despite everything, you aren't unhappy and often find time to go to church to find consolation and courage there."¹²

Looking back on the religious dimension of her married life, Franziska Jägerstätter says: "We helped one another go forward in faith."

12 Letter from Franziska to Franz dated 20th Feb. 1941 (140) The whole, largely unpublished, exchange of letters between Franziska and Franz Jägerstätter, together with his notes compiled in prison, will be published in autumn 2007 in Styria, Vienna

They remained in love

Franz Jägerstätter once said to his wife: “I could never have imagined that being married could be so wonderful.” Franziska’s most telling statements about her marriage are: “We got on very well indeed ... We were really fond of one another.” Throughout the less than seven years of married life which they shared together, Franz and Franziska always remained in love. As one sign of their being in love, Franziska described a game they used to play, whereby whenever one of them had a surprise for the other, the other one first had to search for it. Franz used to hide the little presents he brought home for her, and Franziska used to hide her husband’s favorite cakes which she had baked for him. During Franz’s first period of military service in June 1940, which lasted only a few days, his wife was in a difficult situation, with her husband conscripted into the army, her mother-in-law in hospital, and she herself, a few weeks after the birth of her third child, left weak and without any help on the farm. At first, Franz could only try to console her in a letter: “It’s hard to see someone suffering when you aren’t able to help, especially when it’s your wife whom you love with all your heart.”¹³ He told her that she should at least try to unburden her soul by pouring her heart out to him in her letters, for no one except God would understand her more. Franz also made it clear that the children should take priority over the chores on the farm. He advised his wife: “Don’t get too caught up in work and worldly cares. Just leave whatever you can’t easily do, for your first concern must be for our children, and after all, in the long run you could never cope with both the children and the farm. That’s why I put the children and their mother first, because they should mean much more to us than the farm.”¹⁴

At the beginning of his second period of military service, which lasted from October 1940 to April 1941, Franz mentioned that the military exercises were not as hard to bear as his separation from Franziska.¹⁵ At the time, he could have postponed this separation somewhat if he had only

13 Letter from Franz to Franziska, dated 23rd June 1940 (5)

14 Ibid.

15 Cf. Franz to Franziska, dated 13th October 1940 (8).

“got into the good books” of the local leaders of the Nazi Party, because (as Franziska wrote). The recruits who arrived carrying requests for a deferment of their military service, signed by these Party leaders, were always sent home again.¹⁶ Franz answered that he was lucky to be stationed in the nearby town of Enns, that the others didn’t know how long their deferment would last either, and stated what was important for him: at the moment, he would no longer perceive any trace of the physical well-being of a whole lifetime, “but the fact that we’ve enjoyed such happy, peaceful years in our marriage – this happiness will be unforgettable for both of us, and it will stay with me for all time and eternity. You know how much joy the children gave me. And that’s why, even here, such a feeling of happiness still sometimes comes over me, that tears of joy often come to my eyes whenever I think of seeing you all again.”¹⁷

Franziska’s often displayed a great deal of humor in her letters – as, for example, when she reminded Franz to send her three pence (by return of post), to pay for the picture of a bishop which she had enclosed in her letter,¹⁸ or to return the kiss which she had sent him.¹⁹

The children miss their father

Franz must have given the children a great deal of attention even when they were still very small, as the three-year-old and the two-year-old missed him very much during his first period of military service. His wife wrote: “Rosi always asks for you when we go to bed: ‘Don’t lock Daddy out’, at mealtimes: ‘Save some for Daddy’, and when I pick her up at night: ‘Daddy not home yet.’ Sometimes she starts crying because Daddy doesn’t come. Then little Maria says: ‘Bring sausage!’”²⁰

Father Josef Karobath, the priest of St. Radegund, was arrested in the summer of 1940, and while he was in prison, Franz Jägerstätter wrote him

16 Cf. Franziska to Franz, dated 9th October 1940 (103)

17 Franz to Franziska, dated 19th October 1940 (10)

18 Cf. Franziska to Franz, dated 20th October 1940 (107)

19 Cf. Franziska to Franz, dated 31st March 1941 (150)

20 Franziska to Franz, dated 9th October 1940 (103)



Franz as a recruit in the German Armed Forces, at Enns, November 1940

a letter. At the end of the letter, he said: “Hardly had I finished writing this letter when we had an accident here at home: little Maria, our second child, walked over the hot stove and burned the soles of both feet very badly. You easily can imagine the pain she felt. You don’t realize how much you really love your children until you have to watch them suffering without being able to help them.”²¹

One of the most powerful testimonies to Franz and Franziska Jägerstätter and their relationship is a letter of Franziska’s to the prison chaplain, Father Heinrich Kreutzberg, dated 5th September 1943. She had not yet received the official announcement of the execution of her husband on 9th August, together with his last letter. The chaplains, Albert Jochmann from Brandenburg and Kreutzberg from Berlin, informed Franziska of the death of her husband; Kreutzberg described his visits to Franz in the prison. Franziska answered: “Have received your kind letter with the words of comfort, many thanks. I particularly thank you from the bottom of my heart for visiting my dear husband so often in prison. It must have made him very happy, to receive words of comfort from representatives of Christ even in his cell, and to even be able to receive the dear Lord Jesus in the Holy Communion, as he always did his best to follow the Commandments. So it will not have been too great a sin that he did not obey the state, and I hope that, with God’s help, he will surely have safely reached his eternal goal after all. I feel very sorry he’s gone, because I’ve lost a dear husband and a good father to my children, and I can also assure you that our marriage was one of the happiest in our parish – many people envied us. But the good Lord intended otherwise, and has loosed that loving bond. I already look forward to meeting again in Heaven, where no war can ever divide us again. I want to say again, with all my heart: may God reward you for all the good you have done my dear husband. With deepest respect and gratitude, Franziska Jägerstätter.”²²

21 Franz to Father Josef Karobath, dated 19th July 1940

22 Franziska J. to Father Heinrich Kreutzberg, dated 5th Sept. 1943, Diocesan archive of Berlin, Bequest of Father Kreutzberg, V/35-1

A father-in-law's friendship

An unusually good relationship also developed between Franz and his father-in-law, Lorenz Schwaninger. They both shared a deeply religious outlook. Franziska's father signed a letter to Franz, dated 29th October 1940: "Your friend, L. Sch." During Franz's absence, his father-in-law helped out on the farm. He had already handed his own farm over to his son – however, tensions between himself and his daughter-in-law caused him to feel redundant there. He asked Franz for his opinion concerning this conflict, and Franz gave it straightforwardly in a letter: "... according to our human way of thinking and feeling, we'd naturally always prefer to get back at others a bit in some things, but according to Christian thinking, we're not allowed to do that – we must return good for evil." Christ himself, wrote Franz, had led the way with his example. "And only love is able to restore peace time and again ... but don't be cross with me for writing these lines."²³

23 Franz to his father-in-law, dated 27th Nov. 1940 (24 a)

