

Franz Jägerstätter

Conscientious Objector, Martyr (1907-1943)

"Neither prison nor chains nor sentence of death can rob a man of the Faith and his own free will. God gives so much strength that it is possible to bear any suffering, a strength far stronger than all the might of the world. The power of God cannot be overcome."

In the early hours of March 1, 1943, an Austrian peasant, Franz Jägerstätter, bade farewell to his wife and home and set off by foot for the neighboring town. On a hill on the outskirts of St. Radegund, he turned one last time to take in the village of his birth, the parish church where he had served as sexton, and the fields where he had labored as a farmer. Upon recognizing him, a neighbor called out in the customary greeting, "Go with God, Franz," to which Franz answered, "You'll see no more of me."

The next day he turned himself in at the induction center in Enns, where he had been ordered to report for military service. After stating his refusal to serve in Hitler's army, he was arrested and imprisoned. He was later tried before a military court in Berlin and sentenced to death. On August 9, 1943, he was beheaded as an "enemy of the state."

To the villagers of St. Radegund, Jägerstätter's death was a sad embarrassment. But no one was surprised by his stand. It was well known that Jägerstätter had undergone a profound conversion sometime after his

marriage. Once known as something of a village ruffian, Jägerstätter had returned with zeal to the Catholic faith of his upbringing. Some felt he took his piety "a bit too far," but there was nothing of the "fanatic" about him. He was known as a man of honesty and high principle, devoted to his family and to the practice of his faith. In normal times these characteristics would not have distinguished him from his neighbors, much less have hastened his death. But these were not normal times.

In 1938 Austria was invaded by Hitler and annexed into "Greater Germany." Most Austrians welcomed the *Anschluss*, which was subsequently ratified by a national plebiscite. Jägerstätter made no effort to disguise his disdain for the Nazis, and it was widely known that in the plebiscite he had cast the single "no" vote in the village. He likened that day to the original Maundy Thursday when the crowd chose the murderer Barabbas over Christ. He let it be known that whatever else might happen, he would never serve in Hitler's army.

The moment of decision came when he was served with his induction notice in 1943. Before taking his fateful stand Franz sought the counsel of his parish priest and even the local bishop. They joined his wife, family, and neighbors in trying to shake his dangerous resolution. Franz considered every argument, from the appeal to his responsibilities as a husband and the father of three daughters, to his duties to the Fatherland and his obligation to leave political judgments to those in higher authority. But no one could persuade Franz to alter his conviction that any form of service in the army would involve recognition of the Nazi cause. This, he was convinced, would be a mortal sin.

In a remarkable document written in prison, Franz described a dream he had had in 1938 in which crowds of people were struggling to board a shiny new train. At some point he heard a voice announce, "This train is bound for hell." It occurred to him afterward that this train was a symbol for the Nazi movement. Surely, he concluded, one should not board such a train; surely, having discovered its destination, one ought to jump off such a train before it reached its goal, even though it might cost one's life.

While in prison Franz continued to hear appeals from the prison chaplain, his attorney, and even the military officers before whom he was tried, urging him to renounce his conscience and save his life. But Franz was convinced that he could not prolong his life at the price of his immortal soul. In this case, obedience to Christ must mean disobedience to the state. But he took comfort in the knowledge that "not everything which this world considers a crime is a crime in the eyes of God. And I have hope that I need not fear the eternal Judge because of this crime."

For years this story was little known beyond a small circle of Jägerstätter's family and fellow villagers. It was only in the 1960s, through the work of an American scholar, Gordon Zahn, that the extraordinary story of Franz Jägerstätter and his "solitary witness" was fully documented. Since then he has been acclaimed by many in the church as one of the great saints and martyrs of our time. Nevertheless, support for his cause still encounters opposition from those who believe his beatification would reflect badly on all those of his countrymen who "did their duty" in time of war. Such attitudes, alive today, only underscore

the remarkable courage of Jägerstätter's stand fifty years ago. Somehow, in contrast to virtually the entire church establishment of his country, he was able to discern how impossible it was to reconcile the evil nature of Nazism with the commandments of Christ. Nevertheless, his sacrifice, seemingly fruitless in his own time, presented an example, a beacon of conscience, that would illuminate the path of generations to come.

See: Gordon Zahn, *In Solitary Witness: The Life and Death of Franz Jägerstätter* (Springfield, Ill.: Templegate, 1964, 1991).

St. Edith Stein

Carmelite Martyr (1891-1942)

"Do you want to be totally united to the Crucified? If you are serious about this, you will be present, by the power of His Cross, at every front, at every place of sorrow, bringing to those who suffer, healing and salvation."

Edith Stein was born the eleventh child of Orthodox Jewish parents in Breslau, Germany, on October 12, 1891. Her birth fell on Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement, a fact whose significance she later noted. Independent by nature and gifted with a prodigious intelligence, Edith had abandoned her family's faith by the time she was thirteen. She declared herself an atheist — only the first of a series of blows to her pious mother — and devoted herself to the study of philosophy. She was accepted as one of the first women students at the University of Göttingen, where she studied under the brilliant Edmund Husserl, father of phenomenology. Stein became one of his star pupils, so respected by Husserl that he invited her to become his assistant at the University of Freiburg. There she completed her doctorate at the age of twenty-three, writing a dissertation on the nature of empathy.

There was a strong ethical dimension to the phenomenological school, and a number of Husserl's disciples were professing Christians. In the years after World War I Stein herself began to feel a growing interest in religion. This culminated one night in 1921 when she happened upon the autobiography of *St. Teresa of Avila, the sixteenth-century Carmelite mystic. With fascination she read through the night and by morning concluded, "This is the truth." She was baptized as a Catholic on the following New Year's Day.

Edith's mother wept when she heard the news of her daughter's conversion. Faced with Edith's resolution, however, she had little choice but to acquiesce. Edith continued to accompany her mother to synagogue, feeling that in accepting Christ she had been reunited, by a mysterious path, with her Jewish roots.

Stein initially believed that with her conversion she should abandon thoughts of a scholarly career. For eight years she taught in a Dominican school for girls. But her study of *Thomas Aquinas eventually rekindled her interest in academic pursuits. After preparing a scholarly work integrating phenomenology with scholasticism, she obtained an academic post in Munster in 1932.

This position, however, would be shortlived. As the Nazis rose to power, Stein almost immediately felt the reverberations of anti-Semitism. With unusual foresight, she recognized the destination of this campaign of hatred. Somewhat audaciously, she wrote to seek an audience with Pope Pius XI, hoping to alert him to the peril facing the Jews. Her request was not answered. Meanwhile, with the regrets of the university administration, she was dismissed from the teaching position she had barely begun.

Already Stein understood the terrible storm that was approaching, and she felt in some way that her Jewish-Christian identity imposed a unique vocation. While praying at the Carmelite convent in Cologne, she later wrote,

I spoke with the Savior to tell him that I realized it was his Cross that was now being laid upon the Jewish people, that the few who understood this had the responsibility of carrying it in the name of all, and that I myself was willing to do this, if he would only show me how.

For the meantime, the loss of her job enabled her to pursue her growing attraction to religious life. She applied to enter the Carmelite convent in Cologne. Once again her mother wept — this time accusing her of abandoning her people in time of persecution. It was a bitter charge, and one that would cloud their parting. After spending a final evening with her mother in the synagogue, Edith bade her farewell. None of her family was present on April 15, 1934, to witness her formal clothing in the Carmelite habit. She took as her religious name Sister Teresa Benedicta a Cruce — Blessed by the Cross. It was a name, she later explained, chosen to refer “to the fate of the people of God, which even then was beginning to reveal itself.”

In 1938 the all-out war against the Jews was declared on November 8, the **Kristallnacht*. Believing that her presence in the convent endangered her Sisters, Stein allowed herself to be smuggled out of the country to a Carmelite convent in Holland. She had no thought of escaping the fate of her people. In fact, she prepared a solemn prayer which she delivered to her prioress, “offering myself to the Heart of Jesus as a sacrifice of atonement” for the Jewish people, for the aversion of war, and for the sanctification of her Carmelite family. Having contemplated and faced the reality of death, she was delivered from further anxiety, and thus prepared to await the end.

In 1940 the Nazis occupied Holland. Despite her cloistered status, Stein was required to wear the Yellow Star of David on her habit. Soon the deportations began. All the while Stein hurried to finish her study of the mystical theology of **St. John of the Cross*. She was consoled by the presence of her sister Rosa, who by this time had also converted and joined her in the convent as a laywoman.

The Germans had indicated a willingness to spare Jewish-Christians, provided the churches kept silent. When on July 26, 1942, a statement by the Catholic bishops of Holland denouncing the persecution of the Jews was read from pulpits throughout the country, the Nazis retaliated in rage. Within a week all Jewish Catholics, including members of religious orders, were under arrest. For Stein and her sister the end came on August 2, when the Gestapo arrived at their convent. Rosa was distraught, but Edith reassured her: “Come, Rosa. We’re going for our people.”

Survivors of the following days describe the nun’s courage and composure despite her clear certainty of the fate that awaited her. She occupied herself with prayer while caring for the terrified children and consoling mothers separated from their husbands. Someone described her as a “Pietà without the Christ.”

From a detention camp in Holland she followed the same route as millions of others: the wretched journey by sealed boxcar, the arrival half-starved at a strange camp amid snarling dogs and cursing guards, the infamous “selection,” then the stripping, then the brisk walk to the shower room, from which none emerged.

Edith Stein died in the gas chamber of Auschwitz on August 9, 1942. In 1998 she was canonized as a confessor and martyr of the church by Pope John Paul II, an event that provoked considerable controversy. Many Jews complained that Stein, like six million others, had died as a Jew, and not for her Christian faith. There is a truth to this. But what is remarkable about Stein is not the manner of her death but her understanding of that death — in solidarity with her people, as an act of atonement for the evil of her time, and as a conscious identification with the cross of Christ.

See: Waltraud Herbstrith, *Edith Stein: A Biography* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983).

Fannie Lou Hamer

Prophet of Freedom (1917-1977)

"I am sick and tired of being sick and tired."

Fannie Lou Hamer was born the daughter of sharecroppers in the Mississippi Delta, a poor black woman in the poorest region of America. And yet she rose up from obscurity to challenge the mighty rulers of her day, a towering prophet whose eloquence and courage helped guide and inspire the struggle for freedom.

Until 1962 her life was little different from other poor black women in rural Mississippi. One of twenty children in her family, she was educated to the fourth grade and, like her parents before her, fell into the life of sharecropping. This system allowed poor farmers to work a piece of the plantation owner's land in exchange for payment of a share of their crop. In practice, it was a system of debt slavery that combined with segregation and brute force to keep the black population poor and powerless. Looking back on her own twenty years of sharecropping, Hamer later said, "Sometimes I be working in the fields and I get so tired, I say to the people picking cotton with us, 'Hard as we have to work for nothing, there must be some way we can change this.'"

The way opened up for Hamer when she attended a civil rights rally in 1962 and heard a preacher issue a call for blacks to register to vote. At the age of forty-five Hamer answered the call, though it meant overcoming numerous threats and obstacles and resulted in the eviction of her family from their plantation home. Hamer took this as a sign to commit herself to full-time work for the freedom movement, serving as a field secretary for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and quickly rising to a position of leadership.

For a black person in 1963 to challenge the system of segregation in Mississippi was literally to court death. Hamer, like other activists in the movement, faced this reality on a daily basis. In the summer of 1963 she was part of a group arrested in Charleston, South Carolina, after they illegally entered the side of a bus terminal reserved for whites. While in jail she was savagely beaten, emerging with a damaged kidney and her eyesight permanently impaired.

In 1964 Hamer led a "Freedom Delegation" from Mississippi to the National Convention of the Democratic Party in Atlantic City. There they tried unsuccessfully to challenge the credentials of the official white delegation. President Lyndon Johnson would tolerate no such embarrassment to the party bosses of the South, and the Freedom Delegation was evicted. But Hamer touched the conscience of the nation with her eloquent account of the oppression of blacks in the segregated South and their nonviolent struggle to affirm their dignity and their rights.

In later years, Hamer's concerns grew beyond civil rights to include early opposition to the Vietnam War and efforts to forge a coalition among all poor and working people in America — the Poor People's Campaign that Martin Luther King left uncompleted. In all these endeavors, Hamer was sustained by her deep biblical faith in the God of the oppressed. "We have to realize," she once observed,

just how grave the problem is in the United States today, and I think the sixth chapter of Ephesians, the eleventh and twelfth verses help us to know ... what it is we are up against. It says, "Put on the whole armor of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we wrestle not against flesh and blood but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this

world, against spiritual wickedness in high places." This is what I think about when I think of my own work in the fight for freedom.

In the nonviolent freedom struggle of the 1960s ordinary people — men, women, and children — became saints and prophets. Inspired by a vision of justice and freedom, sustained by faith, they found the strength to confront their fears and stand up to dogs, fire hoses, clubs, and bombs. In the ranks of this extraordinary movement Hamer was a rock who did as much as anyone of her time to redeem the promise of the gospel and the ideals of America. She said,

Christianity is being concerned about your fellow man, not building a million-dollar church while people are starving right around the corner. Christ was a revolutionary person, out there where it was happening. That's what God is all about, and that's where I get my strength.

Hamer died of breast cancer on March 14, 1977.

See: Danny Collum et al., "Fannie Lou Hamer: Prophet of Freedom," *Sojourners* (December 1982).

Mohandas K. Gandhi

"Great Soul" of India (1869-1948)

"If I have read the Bible correctly, I know many men who have never heard the name of Jesus Christ or have even rejected the official interpretation of Christianity who will, probably, if Jesus came in our midst today in the flesh, be owned by him more than many of us."

Mohandas K. Gandhi, hero of the Indian independence movement, did more than any person in history to advance the theory and practice of nonviolence. Others had embraced nonviolence as a personal or religious code. But it was Gandhi who demonstrated that the same spirit of nonviolence he embraced as a principle of life could be harnessed as a principle of political struggle.

Though his relevance is universal, Gandhi has always presented a special attraction and challenge for Christians. As a young lawyer in South Africa he was pursued by evangelical friends who avidly sought his conversion. Gandhi read the Bible and attended their services, only to be confirmed in the Hindu faith of his birth. But it was a faith always open to a greater truth, a truth larger, as he perceived it, than the capacity of any person, church, or tradition to contain it completely. Later, as he came to regard the personal search for truth as inseparable from the public struggle for freedom and justice, Gandhi posed a different kind of challenge. Here was a Hindu who politely rejected the dogmatic claims of Christianity while embracing, with every ounce of his will, the ethical claims of Christ.

In either case, Gandhi's influence on Christians has owed less to his specific comments on Christianity than to his ability to recall, in his witness, the features of Christ and the gospel commandment of love. Nevertheless, Gandhi's writings document his profound appreciation of Jesus, the influence of Christian ideals, and his devotion to many Christian friends. His frequent recourse to Christian Scripture led spiteful critics to accuse him of being a "secret Christian," a charge Gandhi considered both a libel and a compliment: "a libel because there are men who believe me to be capable of being secretly anything, . . . a compliment in that it is a reluctant acknowledgement of my capacity for appreciating the beauties of Christianity." Indeed, if left with the Sermon on the Mount and his own interpretation of it, he said he would gladly call himself a Christian. But he conceded honestly that his interpretation would fall short of orthodoxy.

Gandhi's difficulties with Christianity were at once theological and ethical. He could not bring himself to regard Jesus Christ as the only Son of God. Nor could he accept that his salvation hinged on such a confession. At the same time, the behavior of Christians left him doubtful that their religion had any superior or unique claim to the truth.

His early childhood impressions of Christianity centered on the belief that Indian converts were required to renounce their cultural heritage, to embrace "beef and brandy." Later experiences in England and South Africa did little to change his opinion. It was his encounter with the writings of *Leo Tolstoy that sparked his discovery of what he called the "true message of Jesus," as represented in the Sermon on the Mount with its emphasis on the "law of love." In Tolstoy Gandhi found a confirmation of his own inclination to distinguish between the message of Jesus and the teachings and practice of the Christian church. Thus, Jesus became for Gandhi an object of reverence and devotion, uncompromised by the failures and betrayals of his Christian followers.

Gandhi returned to India, where he tested and developed his philosophy of nonviolent action in the struggle for Indian independence. In the context of his encounters with Christians Gandhi continued to express his opinions on the subject of Jesus, Christianity, and the missionary enterprise. He confessed his sincere devotion to the figure of Jesus, whom he regarded as an ideal representative of nonviolence. He embraced not only the Sermon on the Mount but Jesus' redemptive suffering unto death, and he cited Jesus' example of loving service as the essence of true religion. At the same time he voiced criticism of orthodox Christianity, both for its dogmatic claims and its ethical shortcomings. Christendom, judging from his experience on the receiving end, appeared to be the very negation of the Sermon on the Mount. On the subject of Christian missionary activity in India he was particularly outspoken. He believed that most missionaries harbored disdain for the traditions and culture of India and were blind to their own identification of the gospel with Western civilization. He rejected the teaching that salvation was available only through Christianity and regarded the pursuit of converts as a form of spiritual imperialism, a violation of his own belief in the equality of all faiths.

Long before his death at the hands of a young Hindu fanatic on January 30, 1948, Gandhi's authority as the Mahatma, or "Great Soul," had spontaneously extended beyond his native country. Although his particular brand of asceticism conformed to Indian cultural norms, he was one of those examples of unquestioned holiness — *St. Francis comes to mind as another — whose challenge transcends the limits of his age and culture. It is the example of someone like Gandhi that makes it impossible for most Christians to maintain the notion that salvation is restricted to the visible church. Indeed, Gandhi is a powerful argument for the capacity of non-Christians to function for Christians as saints — living icons of the invisible God.

This is not to bestow on Gandhi the status of "honorary Christian." He remained a committed Hindu and always resisted, with good humor, the opinion of those Christians who held that "if only he accepted Christ" his example would be complete. Jesus, as Gandhi observed, called human beings not to a new religion but a new life. There are nevertheless many Christians who have become better Christians because of Gandhi, who have rediscovered different emphases in the gospel, and have been led to view the suffering figure of Christ through new eyes.

See: M. K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (Boston: Beacon, 1957); Robert Ellsberg, ed., *Gandhi on Christianity* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1991).

Oscar Arnulfo Romero

Archbishop and Martyr of San Salvador (1917–1980)

"I rejoice, brothers and sisters, that our church is persecuted precisely for its preferential option for the poor and for seeking to become incarnate in the interests of the poor. . . . How sad it would be in a country where such horrible murders are being committed if there were no priests among the victims."

The selection in 1977 of Oscar Romero as archbishop of San Salvador delighted the country's oligarchy as much as it disappointed the activist clergy of the archdiocese. Known as a pious and relatively conservative bishop, there was nothing in his background to suggest that he was a man to challenge the status quo. No one could have predicted that in three short years he would be renowned as the outstanding embodiment of the prophetic church, a "voice for the voiceless," or, as one theologian called him, "a gospel for El Salvador." Nor could one foresee that he would be denounced by his fellow bishops, earn the hatred of the rich and powerful of El Salvador, and generate such enmity that he would be targeted for assassination — the first bishop slain at the altar since *Thomas Becket in the twelfth century.

Something changed him. Within weeks of his consecration he found himself officiating at the funeral of his friend *Rutilio Grande, a Jesuit priest of the archdiocese, who was assassinated as a result of his commitment to social justice. Romero was deeply shaken by this event, which marked a new level in the frenzy of violence overtaking the country. In the weeks and months following Grande's death Romero underwent a profound transformation. Some would speak of a conversion — as astonishing to his new friends as it was to his foes. From a once timid and conventional cleric, there emerged a fearless and outspoken champion of justice. His weekly sermons, broadcast by radio throughout the country, featured an inventory of the week's violations of human rights, casting the glaring light of the gospel on the realities of the day. His increasingly public role as the conscience of the nation earned him not only the bitter enmity of the country's oligarchy, but also the resentment of many of his conservative fellow bishops. There were those among them who muttered that Romero was talking like a subversive.

The church in El Salvador was not the first church to suffer persecution. The anomaly was that here the persecutors dared to call themselves Christians. Their victims did not die simply for clinging to the faith, but for clinging, like Jesus, to the poor. It was this insight that marked a new theological depth in Romero's message. For Romero, the church's option for the poor was not just a matter of pastoral priorities. It was a defining characteristic of Christian faith: "A church that does not unite itself to the poor in order to denounce from the place of the poor the injustice committed against them is not truly the Church of Jesus Christ," he wrote. On another occasion he said, "On this point there is no possible neutrality. We either serve the life of Salvadorans or we are accomplices in their death. . . . We either believe in a God of life or we serve the idols of death."

Once his course was set, Romero followed his path with courageous consistency. Privately he acknowledged his fears and loneliness, especially the pain he felt from the opposition of his fellow bishops and the apparent distrust of Rome. Constantly he was accused of subordinating the gospel to politics. At the same time he seemed to draw strength and courage from the poor campesinos, who embraced him with affection and understanding. "With this people," he said, "it is not hard to be a good shepherd."

The social contradictions in El Salvador were rapidly reaching the point of explosion. Coups, countercoups, and fraudulent elections brought forth a succession of governments, each promising reform, while leaving the military and the death squads free to suppress the popular demand for justice. As avenues for peaceful change were systematically thwarted, full-scale civil war became inevitable. In 1980, weeks before his death, Romero sent a letter to President Jimmy Carter appealing for a halt to further U.S. military assistance to the junta, "thus avoiding greater bloodshed in this suffering country." On March 23, 1980, the day before his death, he appealed directly to members of the military, calling on them to refuse illegal orders:

We are your people. The peasants you kill are your own brothers and sisters. When you hear the voice of the man commanding you to kill, remember instead the voice of God. Thou Shalt Not Kill. . . . In the name of God, in the name of our tormented people whose cries rise up to heaven, I beseech you, I beg you, I command you, *stop the repression.*

The next day, as he was saying Mass in the chapel of the Carmelite Sisters' cancer hospital where he lived, a single rifle shot was fired from the rear of the chapel. Romero was struck in the heart and died within minutes.

Romero was immediately acclaimed by the people of El Salvador, and indeed by the poor throughout Latin America, as a true martyr and saint. For Romero, who clearly anticipated his fate, there was never any doubt as to the meaning of such a death. In an interview two weeks before his assassination, he said:

I have frequently been threatened with death. I must say that, as a Christian, I do not believe in death but in the resurrection. If they kill me, I shall rise again in the Salvadoran people.

Martyrdom is a great gift from God that I do not believe I have earned. But if God accepts the sacrifice of my life then may my blood be the seed of liberty, and a sign of the hope that will soon become a reality. . . . A bishop will die, but the church of God — the people — will never die.

See Oscar Romero, *Voice of the Voiceless* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1985); James R. Brockman, *Romero: A Life* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1989).

Thomas Merton

Trappist (1915–1968)

"The Christian life — and especially the contemplative life — is a continual discovery of Christ in new and unexpected places."

In 1949 a surprising title made its way onto the best-seller lists. *The Seven Storey Mountain* was not a mystery or a tale of alpine adventure. It was the autobiography of a clever young man named Thomas Merton who had turned his back on the modern world to adopt the austere, medieval regime of a Trappist monk. What made the book so fascinating was that Merton appeared to be, as he described himself, "the complete twentieth-century man." He had enjoyed a life of freedom, excitement, and pleasure only, in the end, to reject it all as an illusion.

Merton told a story — by turns funny and sad — of the search for his true identity and home: of his orphaned childhood, his education in France, England, and Columbia University, of the pride and selfishness that brought nothing but unhappiness to himself and others. And he told of how his search had led him ultimately to the Catholic church and finally, on the eve of World War II, to the Trappist Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky. On viewing the silent monks, dressed in their white habits and kneeling in prayer in the chapel, Merton had exclaimed, "This is the true center of America."

It was in some respects a classic tale of conversion. And yet for many readers, encountering Merton's book in the postwar years, his story struck a very contemporary note. It fed a widespread hunger for spiritual values in a world poised between war and the empty promise of "happy days." Suddenly Merton was the most famous monk in America. The irony was not lost on him. He had become a Trappist in part to escape the claims of ego, the anxious desire to "be somebody." And yet his superiors felt his writing had something to offer the world and they ordered him to keep at it. And so he did. Yet for all the books he would go on to produce, he remained firmly identified with his autobiography. It became a painful burden. "The Seven Storey Mountain is the work of a man I never even heard of," he would later protest.

One aspect of the book that he particularly came to regret was the attitude of pious scorn directed at "the world" and its citizens. He had seemed to regard the monastery as a haven set apart from the *massa damnata*. Only with time had he realized that "the monastery is not an 'escape' from the world. On the contrary, by being in the monastery I take my true part in all the struggles and sufferings of the world."

In one of his journals he recorded a moment of mystical insight that marked a critical turning point in his life as a monk. It occurred during an errand in Louisville, "at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district."

I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness.

Merton suddenly experienced a sense of solidarity with the human race — not simply in sin, but in grace. "There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun. . . . There are no strangers! . . . The gate of heaven is everywhere."

For years Merton had devoted creative thought to the meaning of monastic and contemplative life. But from this point on he became increasingly concerned with making connections between the monastery and the wider world. Scorn and sarcasm gave way to compassion and friendship. This was reflected in his writing. Along with the more traditional spiritual books there appeared articles on war, racism, and other issues of the day. Long before such positions were commonplace in the church he was a prophetic voice for peace and nonviolence. In fact, his writings were so controversial that for some years he was ordered to remain silent on "political" topics. Only after the Second Vatican Council was he freed from such censorship.

Ironically, this increasing engagement with the secular world and its problems was accompanied by an increasing attraction to an even more total life of contemplation. In 1961 he was given permission to move into a hermitage on the monastery grounds. There he continued to perfect the delicate balance between contemplative prayer and openness to the world that had become the distinctive feature of his spirituality.

Merton maintained a wide circle of friends. Many of them knew something of the tensions which at times characterized relations with his religious superiors. In the spirit of the 1960s some of them frankly questioned whether his vocation wasn't an anachronism and challenged him to "get with it." In fact, Merton's personal temptations were all in the direction of even greater solitude among the Carthusians or in some other remote setting. But in the end he always returned to the conviction that

his best service to the world lay in faithfulness to his monastic vocation, and that his spiritual home was at Gethsemani.

In his last years a more liberal abbot did encourage Merton to venture forth. In 1968 he accepted an invitation to address an international conference of Christian monks in Bangkok. Merton was particularly excited about the prospect of exploring his deep interest in Eastern spirituality. In this respect, as his journals show, the trip marked a new breakthrough, another encounter with the "gate of heaven" that is everywhere.

On December 10 he delivered his talk and afterward retired to his room for a shower and nap. There he was later found dead, apparently electrocuted by the faulty wiring of a fan. For all his restless searching he had ended exactly as he had foreseen in *The Seven Storey Mountain*. The book had concluded with a mysterious speech in the voice of God:

I will give you what you desire. I will lead you into solitude. . . .
Everything that touches you shall burn you, and you will draw
your hand away in pain, until you have withdrawn yourself from
all things. Then you will be all alone. . . . That you may become the
brother of God and learn to know the Christ of the burnt men.

See: Lawrence S. Cunningham, ed., *Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master* (New York: Paulist, 1992); Jim Forest, *Living with Wisdom: The Life of Thomas Merton* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1991).

Ignacio Ellacuría and Companions

Jesuit Martyrs of San Salvador (d. 1989)

"What is it to be a companion of Jesus today? It is to engage, under the standard of the cross, in the crucial struggle of our time: the struggle for faith and that struggle for justice which it includes."

On the morning of November 16, 1989, news photographers in El Salvador recorded a scene of abomination: the bodies of six Jesuit priests strewn across the garden lawn of the University of Central America. Those seeking a meaning for their deaths could look to the Latin American church's option for the poor or to the Jesuits' commitment to social justice. Indeed, they could look to the Sermon on the Mount. But the immediate context was the fratricidal war in El Salvador, which in November 1989 had reached a critical stage. For several weeks, the capital city of San Salvador was swept up in the most serious rebel offensive of the ten-year civil war. As fighting spread to the formerly insulated neighborhoods of the rich, the military responded with panic and desperation.

On the evening of November 15, in a meeting of top military commanders (as investigations would later disclose), the order was given to eliminate all suspected sympathizers with the leftist rebels and to wipe out their "command centers" in the city. One of those present was Colonel Guillermo Alfredo Benavides. Within his sector of command lay the Jesuit-run Central American University.

Later that night, in the early morning hours of November 16, a unit of the Atlacatl Battalion, an elite "antiterrorist" force notorious for its record of human rights abuses, stole onto the campus of the university. The troops had been told that the targets of their operation were the intellectual authors of the uprising. After locating Father Ignacio Ellacuría, rector of the university, along with five other Jesuits asleep in their community residence, the troops forced the priests outside, had them lie on the lawn, and then scattered their brains with machine-gun fire.

Aside from Father Ellacuría, fifty-nine, the other priests were Ignacio Martín-Baró, forty-seven, a psychologist and vice-rector of the university; Juan Ramón Moreno, fifty-six, a theologian; Amando López, fifty-three, a theologian; Segundo Montes, fifty-six, superior of the community; and Joaquin López y López, seventy-one, national director of the "Faith and Joy" catechetical movement. Unexpectedly, the troops also discovered a housekeeper, Elba Ramos, and her sixteen-year-old daughter, Celina. Ironically, the two women, frightened by the street fighting outside, had chosen to remain in the supposed safety of the university. They were also murdered.

For years the Jesuits of the university had been a thorn in the side of the military and the ruling elite. This was not because they supported the rebels, but because they had consistently denounced the injustice and repression that fed the bitter war, and because they had sought to promote a negotiated settlement to the conflict. The Spanish-born Ellacuría

had emerged as a particularly effective and eloquent advocate of national dialogue. But he was also outspoken in criticizing the injustices endemic to Salvadoran society, and he had earned the enmity of the military command with his frequent denunciation of their reign of terror. As a result, he was often identified by name in right-wing propaganda as the intellectual "brains" of the "communist" movement.

Ellacuría and his fellow priests were no communists. They were priests who had struggled hard to live out the church's proclaimed "option for the poor." More specifically they had committed themselves to the vision of the Jesuits' 1975 General Congregation, which defined the Society's mission in terms of "service of faith and promotion of justice." As intellectuals, as well as priests, they had committed the university itself to this mission, believing that in a world of conflict a Christian university must stand for truth and with the victims of violence. Because of this stand, the university had become a frequent target of bombs and right-wing terror.

Ellacuría, the theologian, was increasingly moved to articulate the meaning of faith and the gospel from the perspective of the suffering poor. In an arresting phrase, he liked to speak of the "crucified peoples" of history. Thus, he compared the poor with Yahweh's Suffering Servant. In their disfigured features he discerned the ongoing presence and passion of Christ — suffering because of the sins of the world. In this light, the task of the Christian was not simply to contemplate the mystery of suffering, but to "take the crucified down from the cross" — to join them in compassion and effective solidarity.

Thus, the decade that began with the assassination of *Archbishop Romero ended in this savage bloodletting. Romero had said, "I am glad that they have murdered priests in this country, because it would be very sad if in a country where they are murdering the people so horrifically, there were no priests among the victims." Friends of the slain Jesuits felt it was significant that in their death they were joined by two humble Salvadoran women, representatives of the more than seventy thousand victims, mostly poor and anonymous, who had already died in that decade of war. So in their deaths they joined their features to the face of the crucified people — victims of the same sin, witnesses to the same hope.

Segundo Montes had spoken for all his brothers when he explained to an interviewer his decision to remain in El Salvador: "This is my country and these people are my people. . . . The people need to have the church stay with them in these terrible times — the rich as well as the poor. The rich need to hear from us, just as do the poor. God's grace does not leave. So neither can we."

See: Jon Sobrino et al., *Companions of Jesus: The Jesuit Martyrs of El Salvador* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1990).

Bishop James E. Walsh

Confessor to the Chinese (1891-1981)

"Prayer is so powerful. I am a living example of what prayer can do."

On July 10, 1970, a frail and elderly man left the company of the Red Guards and walked across the bridge linking mainland China and the island of Hong Kong. On the other side he was embraced by a crowd of friends and fellow Maryknoll missionaries who, forewarned of his arrival, had gathered to welcome him to freedom. After twelve years in prison, Bishop James E. Walsh, the last foreign missionary in communist China, was on his way home.

Walsh was born on April 30, 1891, in Cumberland, Maryland. After graduating from college he became one of the original pioneers of Maryknoll, the Catholic Foreign Mission Society of America, established in 1912. Maryknoll had been founded with the grand vision of sending American missionary priests to China, and Father Walsh was among the first departing team. He worked for eighteen years in Yeungkong in southern China, where he quickly developed a deep respect for the culture of China and a love for its people. In 1927 he was named a bishop.

For ten years (1936-1946) Walsh was recalled to the United States to serve as the second superior general of Maryknoll. During that time he worked hard to instill in the Maryknollers a keen sense of the spirituality of mission and a willingness to "give everything for Christ." But in 1948 he was back in Shanghai, serving as director of a board overseeing the work of Catholic foreign missionaries in China. Two years later the communist Revolution reached Shanghai. Walsh's activities were increasingly restricted and he experienced various forms of harassment, but he continued for some years to operate in relative freedom. In the meantime many other foreigners were either expelled or detained, if they did not leave voluntarily. His classmate from Maryknoll, Bishop Francis Ford, died in a Communist prison in 1952.

Walsh, however, insisted that he would never voluntarily leave his assigned field of mission. In a moving article written in 1951 he explained his reasons:

At a time when the Catholic Religion is being traduced and persecuted with the design of eliminating it from China, I think it is the plain duty of all Catholic missionaries... to remain where they are until prevented from doing so by physical force. If internment should intervene in the case of some, or even death, I think it should simply be regarded as a normal risk that is inherent in our state of life... and as a small price to pay for carrying out our duty... In our particular case I think that such an eventuality would be a privilege, too, because it would associate us a little more intimately in the Cross of Christ.

Walsh believed that the vocation of a priest was not simply represented in his occupational work — whether teaching, preaching, or performing pastoral duties. The vocation remained the same, even when all these activities were stripped away. Part of it was a matter of remaining at all times open to divine providence. "If we start to pick and choose for ourselves, it is very hard to tell if we are carrying out our vocation or running away from it."

As for the danger that arrest would mean "enforced inactivity" and thus a waste of one's gifts, he observed that "suffering patiently borne is activity, so is prayer, so is any kind of mental work — things which can be done, one would think, in prison as well as anywhere... A priest and a father does as much for his flock by suffering for them — and maybe he does even more."

Walsh eventually had occasion to test these convictions. He was finally arrested in 1958 and charged with conspiracy and espionage. For the first two years he was held in solitary confinement and subjected to endless interrogation sessions. He was finally "convicted" and sentenced to twenty years in prison.

Walsh accepted his situation with remarkable serenity. He later observed, "My twelve years of prison life went by without too much difficulty. The experience was not pleasant. Life seemed rather wearisome at times. But I was not despondent at all nor even unhappy." He spent much of the time saying the rosary and studying a Chinese dictionary, convinced that by such quiet witness he was serving the gospel as faithfully as he could. Finally in 1970, at the age of seventy-nine, he was taken to the border and freed.

Walsh returned to Maryknoll, where he lived on for more than a decade. He rarely spoke of his ordeal and never expressed bitterness or resentment toward his captors. He spent much of his remaining time in prayer, though he was always eager to encourage young missionaries and to share with them his own sense of the spirit of Maryknoll. As he once said, "That spirit is charity, and if there is any other spirit, Maryknoll does not want it and could not conceivably profit by it."

He was revered by Maryknollers and others around the world as a heroic and holy confessor. But he always disclaimed any special recognition. When he was awarded the prestigious Cardinal Gibbons Award from Catholic University in Washington he said,

I am not aware that I ever did anything to deserve such an honor. True, I did spend twelve years in prison in China, and that is something unusual, no doubt. But in my case, the experience was just a routine part of my profession, and therefore, I consider it no great credit to myself. I was a Catholic priest and my people were in trouble. So, I simply stayed with them as all priests should at such times.

Bishop Walsh died at Maryknoll on July 29, 1981, at the age of ninety.

See: Bishop James E. Walsh, *Zeal for Your House* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Maryknoll Publications, 1976); Jean-Paul Wiest, *Maryknoll in China* (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1988).

St. Thomas More

Martyr (1478-1535)

"Little as I meddle in the conscience of others, I am certain that my conscience belongs to me alone. It is the last thing that a man can do for his salvation: to be at one with himself."

Thomas More was one of the most highly respected men of his time. A successful barrister, a judge known for his scrupulous integrity, a scholar, famous for his wit and learning, he rose by sheer merit to the highest status of any commoner in England. After a series of important public offices he was in 1529 appointed by King Henry VIII to the post of lord chancellor of England. To this his friend *Erasmus, the Continental humanist, remarked, "Happy the commonwealth where kings appoint such officials."

Despite his achievements, More had little ambition for worldly success. As he later wrote, "Reputation, honor, fame, what is all that but a breath of air from another person's mouth, no sooner spoken but gone? Thus whoever finds his delight in them is feeding on wind." More was a man of deep and demanding faith. In his youth he had considered a monastic vocation before deciding instead that he was called to serve God in the world. While outwardly he enjoyed a life of comfort, in the privacy of his spiritual life he wore a hair shirt, attended daily Mass, and practiced a strict discipline of prayer.

More maintained a large household and took special delight in his children. His role in overseeing the education of his daughters, especially Margaret, his eldest and favorite, was considered remarkable for the time. After the death of his beloved first wife, he quickly married an older widow, Alice. She proved a loyal wife and a good stepmother, though she was prone to exasperation with her husband's scholarly friends, his sense of humor, and his costly scruples.

King Henry had reckoned wisely on his chancellor's brilliance and honesty. In all matters of his office More served with loyalty and distinction. But circumstances were to evolve to the point that Henry required a more absolute loyalty than More could offer. For some years the court of Henry had been moving toward a fateful collision with the authority of the Catholic church. The issue was the king's desire to annul his marriage to Catherine of Aragon so that he might marry Anne Boleyn. Catherine refused to acquiesce in this scheme, and the pope upheld the inviolability of their marriage. When Henry made clear his intention to have his way, regardless of the church's ruling, More resigned his office rather than publicly oppose the position of the king. He retired to his country home and endeavored to ignore the raging controversy. Nevertheless, it was widely remarked that he declined to attend the coronation of Queen Anne. In 1534 an Act of Succession was proclaimed. All the king's subjects were required to take an oath recognizing the offspring of Henry and Anne as true successors to the throne. More had no problem with this. As far as he was

concerned the king was free to declare any successor he liked. However, the oath also required an avowal that the king's marriage with Catherine had been no true marriage and a repudiation of "any foreign authority, prince or potentate." Such an oath represented a decisive break with the authority of the pope. This oath More refused to take. Consequently, on April 13 he was arrested and imprisoned in the Tower of London.

He remained there for fifteen months. All the while the court pressured him either to take the oath or to state his reasons for withholding his assent. More would do neither, believing that as long as he kept his opinions to himself he could not be convicted of treason. He was presented with a parade of clergy and bishops who all (save Bishop John Fisher) had signed the oath. More maintained that others must abide by their own conscience, as he must be true to his own. Meanwhile, the miseries of prison life, including cold, hunger, and vermin, were compounded by pressure from his family. When his wife tried to coax him to alter his course, he responded, "My good woman, you are no good at doing business. Do you really want me to exchange eternity for twenty years?"

On February 1, 1535, Parliament passed the Acts of Supremacy, which proclaimed the king "only supreme head of the Church of England." Thomas continued to maintain his silence. Finally in June he was brought to trial. On the basis of perjured evidence, he was convicted of having spoken against the Acts and sentenced to death. Now, with his fate settled, Thomas at last broke his silence. He denied that Parliament had the authority to set up a temporal lord as head of the church. No more could the English Parliament overrule the law of the universal church, he declared, than the City of London could make a law against an act of Parliament. Finally, he addressed the lords who condemned him, noting that while "St. Paul had persecuted St. Stephen, "and yet be they now both twin holy saints in Heaven... so I verily trust, and shall therefore right heartily pray, that though your lordships have now here on earth been judges of my condemnation, we may yet hereafter in Heaven merrily all meet together to everlasting salvation."

He spoke in similar terms as he bade farewell to his loyal daughter Margaret: "I will pray for us all with my whole heart, that we may meet one day in heaven, where we shall forever be gay and have no more pains."

On July 6 he was taken to the site of execution. Though he had grown weak and haggard in his months in confinement, he was not abandoned by his famous wit. Attempting to make his way up the scaffold he addressed his guard, "I pray you, master Lieutenant, see me safe up, and as for my coming down, let me shift for myself." Addressing those gathered about he made brief remarks before laying his head on the executioner's block: "I die in and for the faith of the holy Catholic Church. Pray for me in this world, and I shall pray for you in that world. Pray for the king that it please God to send him good counsellors. I die as the king's true servant, but God's first." His feast and that of his fellow martyr John Fisher are celebrated on this day.

See: Anthony Kenny, *Thomas More* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983); Christian Feldman, *God's Gentle Rebels* (New York: Crossroad, 1995).