

October 4, 2020 | 27th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)

[IS 5:1-7](#)

[PS 80:9, 12, 13-14, 15-16, 19-20](#)

[PHIL 4:6-9](#)

[MT 21:33-43](#)

By Don Timmerman

Today's readings give us a lesson in doing the right thing even when it leads to suffering. We know pruned grape branches produce more grapes. The branches suffer being cut back so the vine produces more fruit.

After the U.S. drafted Benjamin Salmon into World War I, he became the first U.S. Catholic to object to the Just War Doctrine in writing. Salmon cited his religious convictions in a letter to the President, stating, "When human law conflicts with Divine law, my duty is clear. Conscience, my infallible guide, impels me to tell you that prison, death, or both, are infinitely preferable to joining any ...army."

Salmon believed that the idea of "just" war went against the nonviolent teachings of Jesus. He said that WW I created 17,000 new war profiteering millionaires while US soldiers received only \$50 a month to sacrifice their lives in Europe. The government declared him insane and sent him to a psychiatric hospital.

The religious persecution included physical torture and emotional abuse. Friends, family, and fellow Catholics rebuked him. The Knights of Columbus kicked Ben out.

At the time Catholics were marginalized in the U.S. as social outsiders. One of the reasons the Knights had formed was to help Catholics be seen as patriotic Americans. That's why sixty-eight dioceses and twenty-seven Catholic societies formed the National Catholic War Council. The NCWC wrote a letter to President Woodrow Wilson pledging Catholic support for WW I. Almost all U.S. bishops supported sending our men to the war. We now know WW I began because England and Germany were competing for access to oil in Bagdad. They wanted to fuel their navies to compete for racist invasions, conquest, and colonization around the world to enrich themselves. Nations often start wars to take resources that do not belong to them. Like the tenants in the vineyard, we forget the earth and everything on it belongs to God like the tenants in the vineyard.

Just as those tenants killed the landowner's servants, Ben Salmon was sentenced to death. He found some Church support, including Msgr. John Ryan, a moral theologian at the Catholic University of America. Msgr Ryan and the American Civil Liberties Union which had formed to aid Conscientious Objectors, defended Ben until his sentence was commuted. Ben was released in 1920 after four and one-half months in solitary confinement during two and one-half years of military imprisonment.

Our nation and the Church have rethought Conscientious Objection. The Vatican ordered the immediate disbanding of the NCWC in 1922. The bishops have noted that, "...between the fourth century and our own day, the theme of Christian non-violence and Christian pacifism has echoed and re-echoed, sometimes more strongly, sometimes more faintly," and that many great Christian figures took non-violent stands. They point out that St. Francis of Assisi forbid members of his lay orders from taking up arms, and declared their support for conscientious objection to participation in war.

The U.S. military and bishops now recognize conscientious objection to participation in all war can apply to Catholics. The USCCB has repeatedly advocated a legal right to Conscientious Objection based on Church Just War Doctrine. The Supreme Court has ruled against that twice. It's still illegal for U.S. troops to practice Just War Doctrine. Full traditional Romanized Catholic orthodoxy is outlawed in the military while there is legal protection for converting to pacifism!

There is movement to get Salmon the same recognition as Blessed Franz Jägerstätter, an Austrian Just War-based Conscientious Objector executed by Nazis in 1943. Pope Benedict XVI, who participated in the German WW II Army himself, beatified Franz as a martyr in 2007.

Ben Salmon never returned home because of death threats. He died in 1932 at the age of 43. His death was attributed to the ill-treatment he had received in prison.

Like the story in the Gospel, the son was mistreated and eventually killed by the workers in the grape fields. The Gospel says, "The Kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a people that will produce it.

Many Catholic workers have been jailed following the nonviolent Christ who says "love your enemies" even when the USCCB disagreed with our most recent three popes on U.S. wars.

Christ is the vine. We are the branches. Are we willing to be pruned of violence or any patriotism which contradicts Christ in order to produce good fruit?

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