Michael W. Hovey

A Man of Peace
GORDON C. ZAHN, 1918–2007

On the night of John Leary’s funeral in Boston in August 1982, I ran into Gordon Zahn in Copley Square. His face was lined with tears. Young Leary, a Catholic pacifist and Harvard grad, had dropped dead a few days before while jogging along the Charles River. He was twenty-four years old.

“I’m Mike Hovey,” I said, sensing Professor Zahn didn’t recognize me. “I lived with John at Haley House [the Boston Catholic Worker].”

“Oh yes,” Gordon responded. “Have you eaten yet?” Then he invited me for a drink and a bite. “I need some company,” he said. It was the beginning of a long friendship.

Gordon died at the age of eighty-nine on December 9, 2007, from complications related to Alzheimer’s disease.

He never cut an imposing figure. He dressed like a college professor, which he was, and his demeanor was modest and never overbearing. A hearing impairment that began in his mid-twenties made him strain to follow what others were saying, especially in groups. But whatever he lacked in physical stature, his moral consistency and personal courage made people pay attention.

His many contributions to the Catholic Church on issues of conscience and war, peace, and social justice will long outlive him. His writings as a Catholic “public intellectual”—for an audience both in and outside the academy—and his leadership in various peace organizations (he was a cofounder of Pax Christi USA) began early on. He was a conscientious objector during World War II. A letter he wrote at the time seeking support for his position from his archbishop in Milwaukee was never answered. That experience helped shape Zahn’s life mission, which was to draw attention to the church’s failure to “speak truth to power” and to constructively engage leaders and the faithful in rediscovering the pacifist roots of early Christianity.

After the war, Gordon took a doctorate in sociology and began an academic career. He never married. As a faculty member at Loyola University Chicago, he wrote his first book, German Catholics and Hitler’s Wars. In it he explored the role of the German Catholic hierarchy in Nazi Germany and how it generally counseled “prudence,” if not wholesale capitulation, in dealing with the authorities. Jesuit and Vatican officials alike tried to suppress publication of the book, but failed. While researching the topic on a Fulbright scholarship, Gordon discovered the story of a young Austrian farmer, Franz Jägerstätter, who refused to serve in the Nazi army and was beheaded for his conscientious objection in Berlin on August 9, 1943. Jägerstätter went to his death without the support of his pastor or his bishop, and he left behind a wife and four daughters.

Gordon’s In Solitary Witness: The Life and Death of Franz Jägerstätter was published in 1964. The following year, Archbishop Thomas Roberts, SJ, of Bombay, drew attention to Jägerstätter’s example in a speech at Vatican II. That speech, together with lobbying by Gordon and other Catholic pacifists (among them Dorothy Day, Eileen Egan, and James Duonglass) led the council to include support for conscientious objection to war in Gaudium et spes—a significant change in Catholic teaching.

As Jägerstätter’s story became more widely known, thanks initially to Gordon’s book, growing numbers of people from around the world began to gather annually at Franz’s grave. Eventually, the church in Austria opened the process for promoting his canonization. This past October, a major stage in that process was reached in Linz, Austria, when Jägerstätter was declared “Blessed,” a martyr for the faith. His daughters and his ninety-four-year-old widow, Franziska, were joined by more than five thousand others at the Mass of beatification. Unfortunately, Gordon was not able to attend because of his declining health.

In the 1980s, Zahn became a key consultant to the U.S. bishops’ committee charged with drafting the pastoral letter, The Challenge of Peace: God’s Promise and Our Response. Again, history was made when the bishops wrote that pacifism and a commitment to Christian nonviolence are fully consonant with gospel principles, and thus legitimate positions for Catholics to take regarding war. Gordon’s writings proved seminal in this declaration.

Gordon wrote several other books, including one on his experience in the Civilian Public Service during World War II, and another on British Royal Air Force chaplains. He also edited a collection of Thomas Merton’s essays on war and violence. From 1950 to 1999, he wrote more than thirty articles and reviews for Commonweal, usually on issues related to peacemaking, but also on other disputed topics like the civil rights of homosexuals (which he defended), and women presiders at the Eucharist at the Milwaukee Catholic Worker house (which he opposed).

After retiring from teaching at the University of Massachusetts–Boston in 1982, Gordon ended his career as national director of the Pax Christi USA Center on Conscience and War in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where I served as executive director. I learned much while seated at the master’s feet, including the importance of ending the day with a decent martini! May he rest in peace.

Michael W. Hovey was honorably discharged by the U.S. Navy in 1976 as a conscientious objector. He is director of the Office for Catholic Social Teaching for the Archdiocese of Detroit.