

Edith Stein: Blessed By The Cross  
by Fr. Pius Sammut, OCD

Personal Testimony

I was present when during a General Chapter meeting with Pope John Paul II, a petition was made in the name of all the provincials of the Discalced Carmelite Order to accelerate the canonization of Edith Stein. The Pope smiled and knowingly remarked that "she has written too much". When a process for canonization starts, obviously all the writings of the potential saint have to be carefully scrutinized. And this was taking some time in the case of Edith Stein because she was quite a prolific and deep writer! Try to read her philosophical writings and you will know what I mean!!

The breakthrough came through in 1986, when the Congregation approved the request presented by Father Simeon, Postulator General of the Discalced Carmelite Friars, who interpreting the desire of the German and Polish Episcopal Conferences, petitioned that the martyrdom of this future saint be included with the heroic virtues as the motive of her canonization. The process thus gained momentum. Martyrdom is a grace given to the few.

In 1997 Teresia Benedicta McCarthy a small girl from Boston USA, diagnosed with irreversible liver damage after swallowing a potentially fatal dose of Tylenol recovered suddenly after her parents prayed to Edith Stein. This prompted Pope John Paul II to officially recognize this sudden healing as a miracle, thus paving the way for her canonization on October 11, 1998.

A paradoxical life

Who is she? What is her secret?

One incident, I believe, summarizes her life and her character. It happened on her 42nd birthday, which that year happened to coincide with the end of the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles. The road had just been cleared for her to join the cloistered Carmelite Sisters. Her family was shocked with this decision. Out of deference towards her mother, that day Edith went with her to the synagogue. After the liturgy, mother insisted that they walk home, a distance of almost three miles. Edith herself recounts the scene : "But I had to consent, for I could see that she wanted very much to walk with me undisturbed. (Mother) "It was a beautiful sermon, wasn't it?" (Edith) "Yes." "Then it is possible for a Jew to be pious?" "Certainly - if one has not learnt anything more." Then came the despairing reply : "Why have you learnt more? I don't want to say anything against him. He may have been a very good man. But why did he make himself God?"

This brief episode tells everything. The way. The search. The mystery. The vocation. The pain. The secret.

The Way

"I , Edith Stein, was born on October 12, 1891 in Breslau, the daughter of the deceased merchant Siegfried Stein and his wife Auguste, neé Courant. I am a Prussian citizen and Jewish." In these stringent words, Edith speaks of her birth. She was the youngest of the seven surviving children; her parents had eleven children in all. They had come to Wroclaw, Poland, formerly named Breslau, Germany from Lublinitz to seek a better livelihood.

October 12 also happened to be the Jewish Day of Atonement, the "Yom Kippur". Atonement Day was the great annual day of humiliation and expiation for the sins of the nation. It was kept on the tenth day of the month Tishri, that is, five days before the feast of Tabernacles, and lasted from sunset to sunset. See Leviticus 16:8.

Nothing happens by chance and in fact, "my mother always laid great stress on my being born on this day... The Day of Atonement is the most solemn of all Jewish holidays, the day when the high priest entered the Holy of Holies, taking along the sacrifices to be offered in atonement for himself and all the people, after the scapegoat, burdened with the sins of the nation, had been driven into the wilderness." Her mother was right.

Two years later, on a very hot day in July 1893, the mother, was holding a mere 21 month-old Edith as her husband made his farewells; he was going on a long trek to a distant forest for his lumber business. Edith called after her father from her mother's arms, and this moment was the last memory Frau Stein retained of her husband for he was to die of sunstroke that very day. Suffering knocks a lot of nonsense out of us. It induces humility and cuts us down to size.

Her mother took over the management of the lumber business, and the elder sisters took their turns caring for Edith and her other sister Erna, who was just a year older than Edith. However the mother remained always at the center of the home and for Edith, she was always an image of the proverbial Biblical woman of faith, courage, and industry.

Probably because she was the youngest and fatherless, Edith grew up to be a headstrong, stubborn child. "During my early years, I was mercurially lively, always in motion, spilling over with pranks, impertinent and precocious, and at the same time, intractably stubborn and angry if anything went against my will... Her (sister Elsie) last resort was to lock me in a dark room. When this danger loomed, I would lie on the floor, stiff with resistance, and it took superhuman efforts for my frail sister to lift me and carry me off. In no way resigned to my fate, screaming at the top of my lungs, I hammered on the door with both fists until..." She was also very talented, with a precocious mind and an excellent memory. At age six, she insisted with her normal tenacity, to enter into the elementary school even though she was under age.

"From October 1897 to Easter 1906 I went to Viktoriaschule in Breslau, and from Easter 1908 to Easter 1911 to the Breslau Girls' Secondary School affiliated with it. Here I passed my school certificate examination." She later wrote, "School played a major role in our childhood. I could almost say I felt more at home than in my own house."

Jewish faith was alive in their household. However this did not had a deep effect on Edith. In her early teens, she suddenly decided to stop praying and was to consider herself an atheist until she was 21 years old.

A young adult of twenty, in 1911 she enrolled at the University of Breslau. There were not many women at the time who continued their studies. She enrolled in philosophy, psychology, history, and German philology. She was there two years. In 1913 she went to the University of Göttingen ('dear old Göttingen' she calls it in her "Life in a Jewish Family") to attend a summer session under the noted philosopher Edmund Husserl, and there she stayed.

From psychology she passed to philosophy. Husserl had begun a very strong counter current to Kantian idealism insisting that we live in a world objectively real which the mind can know. Kant had taught that whatever lies outside my mind cannot be really grasped by my mind! Everything

is subjective. Many still believe this. The criterion for good or bad is what I like, my pleasure. Husserl's insistence on the reality of the objective world also included a recognition of the reality of the transcendent. This line of thought offered abundant material for the searching, uncompromising mind of Edith. She wanted to "view things free from prejudice and to throw off blinkers". A deep-sea diver!

We have an eye witness of her life at the University. Her classmate Rose Bluhm-Guttman later wrote of those days: "We spent a wonderful summer semester together in Göttingen. I studied mathematics and philosophy, so did Edith, along with history. Back at the university, a number of us had become inseparable. Though all of us took our work seriously, we still managed to find time for the things young people enjoy. We went on wonderful trips in the mountains, we danced, and we put together lovely musical evenings and special skits. Not only did we take all the same seminars in philosophy and education, we also worked together for the Democratic Party (women at that time still didn't have the vote) and both followed with great interest anything that concerned the subject of women's careers. We shared a lovely little apartment with a bedroom, study and cooking privileges too, if I remember correctly. Dinner we ate out, but made our own breakfast and supper. Edith could cook and clean as well as I. She was the most gifted woman I have ever met in my life - and I have known many extraordinary women."

Her life was not all work and school. "What I truly hoped in my life was a great love and a happy marriage. .. There was actually someone I met at the university whom I thought of as my future husband. But practically no one has any idea of this..."

In the meantime, the First World War had broken out. So, in 1915 Edith interrupted her studies for five months to serve as a Red Cross aide at a hospital in Austria. She dutifully asked her mother for her blessing; her mother wrote back : "I forbid this. These soldiers are not only ill but are covered with lice. Edith, you will not go with my permission." Her reaction was adamant, "Then I shall have to go without it!" There she nursed soldiers infected with contagious diseases - spotted fever, dysentery, and cholera.

### The Search

In 1917 she followed "the Master" Husserl in his new assignment at the University of Freiburg where he had been given a chair in phenomenology. In fact Husserl recognizing her genius, chose her to be his first assistant there at Freiburg. She had just got her doctorate in philosophy, summa cum laude. (Her doctoral dissertation was translated into English by her grandniece, Waltraut Stein; it is called : On The Problem of Empathy. ) An exceptional step forward for her, considering that she was only twenty five. Her assignment was to teach Husserl's beginning students - she referred to the group as her "philosophical kindergarten" ! - and to transcribe and edit Husserl's notes which normally needed careful editing, and often even elaboration.

"The pursuit of truth was my only passion." This was not theory for her She wanted a truth she could live and die for. Her philosophizing was not a sterile intellectual game but a search for a meaning in life. What is the meaning of life? Why are we here? Why study, get married, have children, work? What is the rationale of all this? Two encounters were to have a decisive impact on all her life orientation.

In Göttingen she had attended the lectures of Max Scheler, another phenomenologist, who introduced specifically Catholic ideas into his lectures. His lectures left an indelible mark on her.

Scheler, a recent convert to Catholicism, demonstrated with compelling genius that faith alone makes the human being human. At the base of all moral activity one can only place humility - he argued - because the sole meaning of life is to lead the person to lose himself in God and so open himself to the possibility of resurrection. "Unless the grain of wheat ..." "The barriers of rationalistic prejudice, something I grew up with, without being aware of it, fell and suddenly I was confronted with the world of faith. People I dealt with on a daily basis, people I looked up to in admiration, lived in that world." A breakthrough for this highly analytical mind.

Then a second decisive event. In November 1917 the news arrived that Adolf Reinach, the colleague of Husserl in Göttingen, was killed in battle. A terrible blow for Edith who revered this lecturer, a man possessing a "natural goodness". She knew him and his wife Anna very well. When she went to their home to arrange his papers, she expected to find a shattered woman. Instead, she found a woman confident in the strength of the Cross; "it brings healing and life to all" Anna confidently confessed to Edith. The latter did not say anything at the time, but 35 years later wrote : "It was then that I first encountered the Cross and the divine strength which it inspires in those who bear it. It was the moment in which my unbelief was shattered, Judaism paled, and Christ streamed out upon me: Christ in the mystery of the Cross." Truth was becoming flesh in her...

She had been touched by God. The way to total surrender was moving ahead. Faith is a journey.

### The Mystery

In the meantime the political situation in Germany was changing rapidly.

When she left Husserl because she could not longer work with him, she found it very difficult to find a new university teaching post even though she had all the recommendations and qualifications she needed. Anti-Semitism was rearing gradually its repulsive head. So she spent the next three years at home in Breslau, during which time she wrote and taught while the drama of her conversion deepened.

In her study "Psychic Causality", Edith describes a "state of resting in God" which becomes "a spiritual rebirth" in the person who surrenders to God and hands over all efforts of mind and will for "a certain receptivity." This is what happened!

One summer evening in 1921, Edith was visiting her friends from the University of Göttingen, Theodor Conrad and Hedwig Conrad-Martius. Her friends went out one evening, leaving Edith to entertain herself with a book. She picked up Teresa of Avila's autobiography, *The Life*. She was simply transfixed. When Edith closed the book at sunrise, her only remark was "This is the truth", and went directly to buy a Catholic catechism and a missal. In Teresa of Avila, truth coincides with love and this was the key Edith was looking for. When later she wrote a delightful paper on the life of Saint Teresa, she named it significantly "Love for Love".

On New Year's Day of 1922, Edith was baptized at St. Martin's Church in Bergzabern. She chose as her baptismal name Theresa, and her sponsor was her Protestant friend who had Saint Teresa's *Life* in her bookcase, Dr. Hedwig Conrad-Martius. It is she who recalls that Edith on that day "had the happiness of a child, and this was most beautiful". She was thirty years old.

Edith had thought of baptism as a preparation for religious life in a convent. Everything or nothing. However, she could not bring herself to deal with such a severe double blow to her mother. It was months before she had the courage to tell Frau Stein of her conversion to Catholicism. When she finally told her, her mother did not flare up, she did not get angry. Her reaction was heartbreaking. She started weeping. Never had any of her family seen Frau Stein crying, not even at the death of her husband.

A member of the family remarked, "We simply could not conceive how our Edith's lofty spirit could demean itself to this superstitious sect".

Her spiritual director, Canon Shwind of the Cathedral at Speyer - "This lady-philosopher! Ten theologians couldn't answer all the questions she asks me!!!" - suggested a time to mature in her new faith. So, she assumed a quiet teaching post at the oldest Dominican convent in Germany - St. Magdalena in Speyer - where she taught German to high school girls, novices and nuns preparing to teach. During this time she had the chance to familiarize herself with the true Catholic milieu and go deep into the the intelligible principles of faith. Following the suggestion of the Jesuit Father Erich Prztwara, she started translating two of the most eminent theologians of Catholicism - Cardinal Newman and Thomas Aquinas.

Her translation of Aquinas' De Veritate included a brilliant phenomenological commentary on Thomistic metaphysics which proved to be a breakthrough in Catholic intellectual circles in Germany. She even published a comparative study of Husserl's phenomenology and the philosophy of Aquinas in the occasion of Husserl's 70th birthday. During these years, she was also working on her own Act and Potency, the embryo of her great philosophical work, Finite and Eternal Being. This exposure to the great minds of Catholicism freed Edith immensely. They opened vistas not even imaginable before and provided the stimulus to venture further. Even prayer life became more real. Later she was to write : "No human eye can see what God does in the soul during hours of inner prayer. It is grace upon grace. And all of life's other hours are our thanks for them."

The "Master Educator" as she called God continued his unrelenting work in molding her into a saint. Her personality as a teacher and as an educator acquired now deeper consistency. Education was one way of reaching out and helping others. She was known to be a friendly and pleasant teacher who worked hard to convey her material in a clear and systematic manner, and whose concern extended beyond the transmission of knowledge to include the formation of the whole person. "To be honest, she gave us everything, " remarked one student. "With her, you sensed that you were in the presence of something pure, sublime, noble.. something that elevated you..." The real teacher is like the candle which lights others in consuming itself.

"The entire educational process must be carried out with love which is perceptible in every disciplinary measure and which does not instill fear. The most effective educational method is not the word of instruction but the living example without which all words remains useless." Futile idealism? Perhaps this kind of 'futile idealism' is what is lacking today in our educational system!

During this time she started frequenting the Benedictine Abbey of Beuron. There she met the young abbot Dom Raphael Walzer, who became her spiritual director following the sudden death of Canon Shwind. Here she found the logistics she needed to intensify her prayer life and at the same time discover the richness of the public liturgical prayer as lived by the Benedictines. She enjoyed sitting in the front of the Church because in this way she could participate better! Her Jewish background helped her also to understand the Sacraments better.

Jesus was a Jew. The Eucharist was born during the Passover Seder. "The prayer of the Church is the prayer of the ever-living Christ. Its prototype is Christ's prayer during his human life."

Seven years in this rather quiet atmosphere in Speyer prepared her for her next role as a public speaker. Her studies on Thomism and phenomenology and her analysis of woman's being and vocation proper to her feminine cosmogony, attracted attention. She started receiving invitations to lecture first in Germany - Ludwigshafen, Heidelberg, Essen, Berlin, Rhineland... then in Switzerland - Zurich... and in Austria - Vienna, Salzburg... During this time she developed her vision of the significance of woman in today's society. What she offered basically was a perspective which went beyond the philosophical or sociological verbalization of womanhood, stressing the unique role which a woman can live specifically because of her femininity as revealed in Christianity. She created an explanation grounded in faith. This small, thin person who spoke simply in a low voice held huge audiences spellbound.

### "An Extraordinary Vocation"

After Hitler became Chancellor of the Reich in the winter of 1933, Edith had to discontinue lecturing at the German Institute of Scientific Pedagogy in Münster, the new post she had just assumed in the summer of 1932. She was deeply pained by all this anti-semitism. She was proud of her Jewish heritage and she was a patriotic German. She could not fathom all this racial hatred even though she was cognizant all the time of its slow cancerous growth. She understood that God was calling her for a mission. "There is a vocation for suffering with Christ and by that means for involvement in his work of salvation. Christ continues to live and to suffer in his members. The suffering gone through in union with the Lord is his suffering, and is a fruitful part of the great plan of salvation". She slowly began to realize that her long journey towards Christ was meant for this possibility to join Christ in His redemptive action. "You don't know what it means," she told her confessor, "what it means to me to be a daughter of the chosen people - to belong to Christ, not only spiritually, but according to the flesh."

"I said to the Lord as the words 'Jesus is in agony until the end of the world' kept repeating themselves in my mind, that it was His cross that was now being laid on the Jewish people. Most of the people did not understand this, but those who did had to bear it willingly in the name of all others. I wanted to do that..."

Her 'career' in the world was obviously at an end. "There is nothing to regret about the fact that I can't continue to lecture. To me a great and merciful providence seems to be standing behind it all..." She submitted a request for a private papal audience. Rome answered with a benediction for herself and her family. Many did not yet realize the seriousness of the Nazi threat. How could they?

She could now step into her most intense and decisive stage in her life and finally follow her own dictates and become a religious. After consulting again with Abbot Walzer her mind was set. This is what she wrote in her diary, "On April 30, Good Shepherd Sunday, I attended part of the Thirteen Hours devotion which Saint Ludger's parish was celebrating in honor of its patronal feast. I arrived in the afternoon, determined not to leave, until I found out if I could now enter Carmel. Just as the concluding blessing was being given, I felt the Good Shepherd giving me his consent."

"I ask you to join me in thanking God for the great grace of this extraordinary vocation..."

She realized however what this call from God would entail in terms of emotional pain for her family. She knew that joining Carmel would give the impression that she was deserting her people now that they were being systemically harassed. Her 12 year-old niece asked her, "But why, now?"

She was simply going deeper. In a letter written in 1938, and later in the dramatic dialogue "Conversations At Night", she declares that, like Queen Esther who had also been singled out from her race to plead for the lives of her people, she too, would plead for her people to the heavenly King.

Her biggest concern was obviously her mother, who was simply petrified when Edith told her of her decision to become a religious. "In those weeks, I often thought : which of us will break down, my mother or I? But both of us held out to the last day." The last day at home was her birthday.

For a long while after Edith's departure, Frau Stein maintained a stony silence, never answering Edith's weekly letters. Only three years later did she include a little note in the letters sent to Edith by her sister Rosa. It was so painful for this noble, cultured, Jewish mother.

On October 13, 1933, Edith arrived in Cologne to enter "the harbor of God's will" - the Discalced Carmelite family. It was a joy and a struggle. "Everyone knows that more laughing and joking goes on in novitiate than anywhere else. Novices laugh about anything - or, for that matter, about nothing at all. Edith Stein joined wholeheartedly in the fun. Sometime she laughed so hard, especially when the joke was on her - that the tears rolled down her cheeks." The will of God is always heaven. On the other hand "when it came to housework she was always making all kinds of mistakes on account of her lack of practical experience..." She herself once remarked "Novitiate can be terribly trying on someone of forty.." A woman at forty is already set in her mental pattern. In the words of her prioress, "it was a descent from the summit of a great career in the depths of insignificance." However, she felt very much at home in Carmel. Amazing grace!

When Edith wrote a short biography on the French Carmelite Sister Marie-Aimée de Jésus, she spoke about an incident in the life of this noteworthy woman which can bring some light on her own vocation. When Dorothea - this was Sister Marie-Aimée baptismal name - was nineteen, she was introduced to a young man with the hope that the two may fall in love and get married. "Dorothea did not say a word... The Lord had revealed himself beside this young man 'in the full radiance of his virginal beauty' and said, 'Compare!' ..." Edith Stein compared and chose the 'most handsome of all Adam's sons'. And so, five months later she was clothed in the Carmelite habit. A host of professors, former students and friends were present. Missing were Edmund Husserl, who was ill, and her family. She chose the name Theresa Benedicta of the Cross. Saint Teresa. Saint Benedict. Blessed by the Cross.

She had fully expected to give up intellectual activity, but her superiors did not allow it. The mind is not a vessel to be filled but a fire to be kindled, one of the Greek philosophers used to say! Her first project after her entrance to the convent was to write a history of her family in order to combat the Nazi caricature of Jewish humanity - Life in a Jewish Family. She finished her major project, Finite and Eternal Being , in only nine months. Most of her spiritual writings, essays, meditations and holy texts were written at this time, but none were published because of the Aryan regulations.

We become contemplatives when God discovers Himself in us. She was becoming a real contemplative. "There remains the bond that binds heart to heart,/ The stream of life that springs from yours/ And animates each limb." Life in Carmel is very simple. Nothing romantic. Simply basic. It offers a creative space where the spirit can grow. There is a balance of work, prayer, recreation, silence. She had quite a few visits from friends. She kept a lively correspondence with some. "Once you are joined to the Lord, you become as omnipresent as He is."

September 1936 her mother died, still unreconciled with her daughter. The following winter, Rose, her sister, became Catholic. During Easter week of 1939 Sister Therese Benedicta pronounced her solemn vows. Now she was full-fledged Carmelite. One of her biggest desires and prayers was also fulfilled during this time - her old master and mentor, Edmund Husserl, on his deathbed turned back to God.

### The Pain

"In the desert solitude, the instrument was forged, hardened in the fire of suffering. It lay ready for action in the hand of the Master. And the Lord did not hesitate to make use of it."

In fact her quiet life at Carmel was shattered like glass, along with the lives of all the other Jews in Germany, on the night of November 8, 1938 - the "Night of Crystal." The dreadful onslaught against the Jews was on. Jews deported, Synagogues burnt, businesses demolished... Edith Stein listened to the news which trickled into Carmel like "someone numbed with pain". On the last night of 1938, the prioress decided to have Edith transferred to the Carmel in Echt, Holland. "It was a painful separation for everybody."

She adjusted quickly even if at the beginning it was painful. "He who has laid the Cross on my shoulders managed to make it sweet and light." Amazing words coming from a woman who was passing through big trials and anguish. Really Jesus can do everything....

The very next day that Hitler announced his decision to repress Polish resistance, thus heralding the start of the second world war, Sister Theresa Benedicta wrote a note to her Mother Superior, "please permit me to offer myself to the Heart of Jesus as a sacrifice of atonement for true peace..." It was Passion Sunday. Paul had said much earlier that every Christian is called "to fill up through his own sufferings what was lacking in the passion of Christ".

In 1940 Rosa, her sister, joined Edith at the Echt Carmel. This was joy for Sister Theresa Benedicta. On September 15, 1941, both sisters, were forced along with their Jewish brethren, to wear the Yellow Star of David inscribed "Jew." Later, they were obliged to report periodically to the Gestapo. One day in the office at Maastricht, Edith greeted the officer with "Praised be Jesus Christ!", the habitual greeting of Catholic Germany, rather than the Nazi greeting of "Heil Hitler!" Edith later explained that she had been compelled to make this utterance in a clear recognition of the eternal struggle between God and Satan. The officer just stared at her and said nothing.

The prioress, attempting to get Edith out of Holland, had applied to a Swiss Carmel, but Edith would not go without her sister and this caused delay. Finally, arrangements were made for them both. Edith was to go to the Le Paquier Carmel, Rosa to a home for Third Order Carmelites. But now they had to await approval from the authorities in Holland.

Meanwhile, Edith was not idle. She had started writing a study of the life, theology, and poetry of St. John of the Cross. Significantly she named it : The Science of the Cross.

The end was however, near. The events came in quick succession. July 11, 1942 :A coalition of Protestant and Catholic clergymen sent a telegram of protest to Reichskommissar Seyss-Inquart. They declared their "outrage" at the imminent deportations of the Jews; such actions, the clergymen wrote, "ran counter to divine commandments of justice and charity." They ended their telegram by saying that on the following Sunday they would proclaim their protest in pulpits all over the country. Should the clergymen do that, Seyss-Inquart warned them, he would no longer respect the relatively protected-status which up to now the baptized-Jews in Holland had been enjoying. The Catholic priests went ahead and read the protest in their churches on July 26. The very next day the inevitable happened : "Because the Bishops interfered", Seyss-Inquart ordered ALL Catholic Jews to be deported before the week's end.

On August 2, in one single sweeping operation, all Jewish Catholics were put under arrest. It was a Sunday. At the Carmelite monastery in Echt, the evening mental prayer hour began, as usual, at five pm. Sister Theresa Benedicta read the point of meditation on Saint John of the Cross, as was also usual. A few minutes of silence followed. Then heavy pounding at the door resounded through the nuns' choir. The SS men had come; almost before the nuns realized what was going on, Sister Benedicta and Rosa Stein had been taken away. The last words they heard were Edith's as she said to Rosa, "Come, let us go for our people." She did not flee in fear in face of the cross. She embraced it in Christian hope with final love and sacrifice. Her marriage to the Lamb was finally going to be consumed.

Four final stops. First, local police headquarters... Then, Central Camp in Amersfoort... Here, twelve hundred Jews were put on a train and taken to the central detention camp of Drente-Westenbork...Physical deprivation. Psychological suffering. Emotional pain. "What distinguished Edith Stein from the rest was her silence," wrote a survivor. "Many mothers were on the brink of insanity and sat moaning for days, without giving any thought to their children. Edith Stein immediately set about taking care of these little ones."

In the middle of the night before August 7 - just five days later... the whole contingent started the final journey towards their last stop - Auschwitz. Witnesses say Sister Theresa Benedicta, still clad in her Carmelite habit, remained very serene. Serenity isn't freedom from the storm, it is peace within the storm.

The train arrived at Auschwitz in the early hours of August 9. Once there, the people found themselves being separated, the men from the women. Decisions of who were to live and who were to die were made. Those spared would be subjected to hard work or certain unusual medical experiments; few would survive more than a month. The children, the elderly, the women who looked too frail, were selected for immediate death. They were given wash cloths for the supposed "shower" and marched directly to the cottage for gassing. So, Sister Therese Benedicta walked to her death. She died in the choking poison gas. Her body was then dumped as rubbish in a common lot.

Her soul was already elsewhere.

Edith's last sight of the external world was suffering and anguish. Her internal eyes saw HIM. She had trusted in Him. She knew He will never disappoint her. She knew He will never deceive her. He did not.

She was 50 years old when He came in her "like a fiery torrent and swept her soul into the sea of endless love...."

### The Secret

Any study of this amazing woman is bound to be incomplete because she had such a rich character. Life provided her a diverse environment that widened her horizons considerably. She embodied an exceptional fullness of life in the midst of the culture of death. There are, however, three traits which come out strongly and which can help us to understand better this woman - her iron will character, her vision of women and her love of the Cross.

#### A. 'Determinacion determinada'

In *The Way of Perfection*, chapter 21, Saint Teresa is very clear about what is needed if one wants to entertain successfully the adventurous journey in prayer. "Now returning to those who want to journey on this road and continue until they reach the end, which is to drink from this water of life. I say that how they are to begin is very important - in fact, all important. They must have a great and very resolute determination : to persevere until reaching the end, come what may, happen what may, whatever work is involved, whatever criticism arises, whether they arrive or whether they die on the road, or even if they don't have courage for the trials that are met, or if the whole world collapses."

Saint Teresa gives three reasons for this tenacity. First of all, it is not fair to ask back what has already been given : "What bride is there who in receiving many valuable jewels from her bridegroom will refuse to give him even a ring, not because of what it is worth, for everything belongs to him, but to give it as a pledge that she will be his until death? Does this Lord deserve less, that we should mock Him by giving and then taking back the trifle that we gave Him?" Secondly, "the devil is extremely afraid of determined souls, for he has experienced the great harm they do him. And all the harm he plans to do them turns out to their benefit and to that of others as well; and he comes out with a loss." And thirdly, "the person who does so struggles more courageously. He knows that, come what may, he will not turn back. As in the case of one who is in a battle, he knows that if he is conquered they won't spare him his life and that if he doesn't die in battle, he will die afterward. He struggles with greater determination and wants to fight like a desperado -- as they say -- and he doesn't fear the blows so much, because he is convinced of how important victory is and that for him to conquer is to live... Don't be afraid that the Lord will leave you to die of thirst, for He calls us to drink from this fount."

This steadfastness was innate in the character of Edith. Her mercurial character gave way to a docility which surprised her mother and sisters. "Anger outbursts became all but nonexistent; early in life I arrived at such a degree of self mastery that I could preserve my equanimity almost without a struggle." Whenever she decided on something, she did it. When she was thirteen, she announced that she wanted to leave school. And this is what she did. When she felt that God was no longer a part of her intellectual framework, she stopped believing in Him. Her strength of will rejected all sophistry. When she wanted to go and serve the wounded soldiers during World War One, she went even if her mother refused to give her permission. When she knew that God was calling her to be Catholic, and later to be a Carmelite nun, she did just that even if she was conscious of the turmoil these decisions would cause to her family. She lived in a very dramatic way the "hate your mother and brothers and sisters... and your own life" which Jesus Christ speaks in the Gospel.

In his book 'The Spiritual Genius of Saint Therese of Lisieux', the French philosopher Jean Guitton puts it this way : "She had the unflinching devotion to truth and a noble refusal to bow to any conviction other than that of conscience, associated with the great tradition of Jewish spirituality."

Later on she says "My search for truth was a constant prayer". A consolation, remarks the Pope "for those who have a hard time believing in God. The search for truth is itself in a very profound sense a search for God."

God worked on this tenacity transforming it into availability. He managed to sift it from stubbornness and arrogance. "We sometimes forget that we shall please Him best, and get more from Him.. when we use what we have by nature to the utmost at the same time that we look out for what is beyond nature in the confidence of hope and faith," wrote Cardinal Newman.

This inner attitude to keep believing in the promise, come what may, is basic in Christianity. To choose God above everything else is the only risk that can catapult us to sanctity. This is called also "the simplicity of love".

## B. The Wonder of Women

"A small, delicate, surprisingly unpretentious woman, simply and tastefully dressed... Yet within her penetrating eyes lay something mysterious and solemn and the contrast between this and her simplicity created a certain awe.. at least in me." This is how one of the listeners to her lectures described her.

There is a reason why Edith Stein eventually became a leading voice in the Catholic Women's Movement in Germany, speaking at conferences and helping to formulate the principles behind the movement

Her intellectual, avid mind was searching for the real meaning of femininity. What does it mean, in a vision of faith, to be a woman? Her interest in womanhood was not simply academic; it developed because of her educational profession. Especially when she was teaching girls in Speyer. She felt the need to educate women in ways that would be consonant to them as women.

She saw there are differences between men and women and these differences must translate themselves in a new pedagogical approach to education. Basing herself on the Thomistic notion of the human person as a dual and interactive reality of body and soul, she affirms that the body is essential to the person, and not simply a gadget or a shell for the soul that could be discarded without serious loss to the "real" self. A woman's body stamps her soul with particular qualities, which are distinctively feminine. The same with men obviously. These complimentary features should be recognized and celebrated and not minimized and deplored. There are two ways of being human, as man or as woman. Simply stated, a woman is a person whose human nature is uniquely feminine. She based her arguments on common sense, psychology and Scripture.

Genesis speaks clearly that every woman is meant to be a companion (her espousal vocation) and a mother. Her natural calling is that of a wife and a mother.

To be a mother... A woman's unique strength is her spiritual maternal love. Motherhood is

woman's distinctive gift to society. "To cherish, guard, protect, nourish, and advance growth is her natural, maternal yearning." Many are the consequences. Because of this maternal attribute, relationships for women are vitally more important than work, career, success, fame. Besides, the concern of woman is with the total development of the individual. Motherhood also is called to extend beyond the biological family. She is called to give humanity back to this sick society. It is woman who can help humanity discover that a person's dignity comes from his being created and not from other considerations, such as usefulness, strength, intelligence, beauty or health. I am important because I am me and not because I am useful or productive.

To be a companion... The espousal dimension involves sharing the life of another, entering into it and making that person's concerns one's own. Women have a greater capacity for exercising empathy. They feel more the other. A wonderful gift which can heal many.

Woman can fulfill this dual mission in three different ways : marriage, practice of a profession, a spouse of Christ. When speaking about working outside the home, Edith underscores the necessity that whatever profession a woman may be in, she has to live it in a feminine way; every profession can be humanized, made more person-friendly, and brought into greater contact with human concerns. "The nation . . . doesn't simply need what we have. It needs what we are." Dominant cultures are attempting to masculinize woman in the name of 'liberation'. It is vital to reaffirm woman's uniqueness.

In Mary, the mother of Jesus, Edith sees the prototype of pure womanhood. Mary was her inspiration in the discovery of a new feminine identity in the Gospel perspective. "The image of the Mother of God demonstrates the basic spiritual attitude which corresponds to woman's natural vocation."

( See this an excellent resource on the WWW full of links of the Catholic Perspective on Women in Society and in the Church.. It also includes an excellent article of Laura Garcia on Edith Stein's vision on women which appeared in Crisis).

### C. Ave Crux, spes mea!

The last note which Sister Theresa Benedicta managed to write to her Carmel in Echt while she was already on her journey to death said this : "One can only learn the Science of the Cross if one feels the Cross in one's own person. I was convinced of this from the very first and have said with all my heart, 'Hail the Cross, our only hope'."

Suffering appeared early in Edith's life. The death of her father when she was not even two years old, her hypersensitivity when she was still a child ("The sight of a drunkard could haunt and plague me for days and nights at end"), her psycho-somatic sickness when she was an adolescent, the suicide of her uncle Jakob when she was a teenager.. all marked her deeply. Pain was not a stranger in Edith's chamber.

However it was pain overcome which cracked open her incredulity-mechanism. It is normal to be sad when things go wrong. It is normal to feel happy when things go your way. What is not normal is to be at peace when adversity knocks at your door. This is what astounded Edith when she saw the young Anna Reinach accepting with serenity the death of her husband. "I accept that Adolph now lives with God. He has reached his goal."

"It was my first encounter with the Cross," she wrote later to her Jesuit friend, Father Hirschmann, "and the divine power it bestows on those who carry it. For the first time, I was

seeing with my very eyes the Church, born from her Redeemer's sufferings, triumphant over the sting of death. That was the moment my unbelief collapsed and Christ shone forth - in the mystery of the Cross."

It is not a mere coincidence that her last writing, never finished because of her sudden arrest, was on the 'Science of the Cross'. She felt that her mission was to consciously combine her sufferings with the atoning sacrifice of our savior Jesus Christ. She saved people through her atoning death.

What good is trouble? Sister Theresa Benedicta tackles this phenomenon also analytically. In various meditations which she wrote specifically to share with her sisters in Carmel, she speaks clearly how "the chief weapon" of the Christian in this struggle between Christ and the Anti-Christ is the cross. "Everyone who in the course of time, has borne an onerous destiny in remembrance of the suffering Servant or who has freely taken up works of expiation has by doing so canceled some of the mighty load of human sin and has helped the Lord carry his burden. "

Man spontaneously runs away from suffering. Only the energy which comes from God sustains us to accept suffering or even desire suffering. But this not out of a pious reminder of the sufferings of Christ, but because in Christ, suffering is fruitful. It saves. It saves us because it prunes off unwanted and useless growth forces, thus forcing the plant to use its life to produce more fruit. It saves others because it releases a powerful dynamic energy which reaches others and transforms them. It was "beneath the Cross that the Virgin of Virgins became the Mother of Grace."

"Is not the Cross Christ's message of love? ... Yes, the Cross is the first letter of God's alphabet ... The Cross is inscribed in the life of every person. Wanting to exclude it from our lives is like wanting to ignore the reality of the human condition. ... Take up the Cross and carry it as a message of love and forgiveness..." Pope John Paul II said forcefully to a group of young people .

The paradox is that pain and adversity, once accepted in Christ, "fill one with a strong and pure joy". "To suffer and to be happy although suffering, to have one's feet on the earth, to walk on the dirty and rough paths of this earth and yet to be enthroned with Christ at the Father's right hand, to laugh and cry with the children of this world and ceaselessly sing the praises of God with the choirs of angels - this is the life of the Christian until the morning of eternity breaks forth."

What a breathtaking panorama coming from a remarkable woman! Incredible what He can do with us when we allow Him to work.

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Obviously the best way to know Edith Stein is to read her own works. However it is beneficial to read a good bibliography before one reads her writings. The best two available in English are Hilda C. Graef 'The Scholar and the Cross' (1955) and Waltraud Herbstrith 'Edith Stein' (1985). Four volumes of her writings have been published by ICS Publications, Washington DC. They include Life in a Jewish Family, Essays on Woman, her doctoral dissertation, The Problem of Empathy and The Hidden Life, her spiritual essays and meditations