

Following the canonization of Edith Stein : The Aftermath

by Fr. Pius Sammut, OCD

"Edith Stein stands out as a beacon of light amid the terrible darkness which has marred this century." (Pope John Paul II)

"For the honor of the Blessed Trinity, the exaltation of the Catholic faith and the fostering of the Christian life, by the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ, of the holy Apostles Peter and Paul, and our own, after due deliberation and frequent prayers for the divine assistance, and having sought the counsel of our Brother Bishops, we declare and define that Blessed. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, Edith Stein, is a saint and we enroll her among the saints, decreeing that she is to be venerated in the whole Church as one of the saints. In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit".

Many Rejoiced

With these solemn words pronounced in Latin, Pope John Paul II canonized St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, Edith Stein, a Jewish philosopher, convert to the Catholic faith, Carmelite nun and martyr at Auschwitz. The canonization took place during a solemn concelebrated Mass in Saint Peter's Square on Sunday, October 11, 1998. The square was packed. The weather was beautiful. The Pope was dressed in red.

The Catholic Church rejoiced that one of her children was affirmed as a role model for Christians and in fact for anyone who is searching for truth. "Men and women of today with a great nostalgia for God who anxiously seek the truth in a world of ideological and religious trends may find an enlightening answer in the experience and teachings of Teresa Benedicta of the Cross: the answer of a woman of our time, who walked in the night of the drama of our century, restless and thirsting always for the truth, until she finally found Christ and, with Him, the meaning of life and the peace she had yearned for so long," concluded Father Camilo Maccise, the OCD General, in his Circular Letter "Losing to Win" announcing the canonization of Edith Stein. She is the first Jewish-born saint of the modern era to be canonized by the Catholic Church.

The Carmelite family rejoiced that another one of her daughters has been recognized a role model for all Christians. As the Pope said, "Now alongside Teresa of Avila and Thérèse of Lisieux, another Teresa takes her place among the host of saints who do honor to the Carmelite Order."

"In the martyr, Sister Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, so many differences meet and are resolved in peace," Pope John Paul affirmed. It was a ceremony filled with remarkable gestures of reconciliation. The Church exerting all its ceremony and solemnity in a tribute to a woman of Jewish heritage. Relatives of holocaust victims, Stein's family, sharing a dais with the outgoing German Chancellor Helmut Kohl.

But this conciliatory spirit was not shared by all.

Many Protested

Anyone following the news on the secular media received another message. The three main news agencies, CNN, Associated Press and BBC took a controversial stand. This canonization was termed "problematic, "offensive" and "an attempt to appropriate the Holocaust without coming to grips with it".

"Jews angry over sainthood for Jew-turned-Catholic nun" the CNN announced, and later, "Canonization of Jewish-born nun outrages some Jewish leaders". "Dubious Saints" stated dogmatically The Washington Post. Time Magazine asked the question : "A Martyr - but Whose?". In England, The Guardian asserted : "Auschwitz saint angers Jews" and The Times Of London, "Fury as Jewish nun who died in Auschwitz is made saint". Most of the press, which I had the possibility to have access, followed the same furrow : "Despite protests, nun made a saint" (Los Angeles Times), "Nun's atonement for church stirs sainthood controversy" (Detroit News), "Catholics, Jews divided over Auschwitz martyr's canonization" (Miami Herald), "Jewish Saint a Sin - Critics" (New York Daily News), "A canonization with controversy" (Philadelphia Inquirer), "Pope Canonizes Jewish-Born Nun; Jews Protest" (Reuter)...

It is significant that all quoted the same, identical four sources, Zuroff, Rosen, Zevi and Farhi. It makes one wonder.

Efraim Zuroff, head of the Simon Wiesenthal Centre's Jerusalem office, who spelled out his position in this way, "It is outrageous. "This is a very public slap in the face to the Jewish community. The Pope is sending an extremely negative message to the Jewish community that, in the eyes of the Catholic church, the best Jews are those that convert to Catholicism". Rabbi David Rosen, director of the Anti-Defamation League's Israel office, claimed that the Catholic Church failed to emphasize Stein's Jewish roots. "She wasn't killed because she was a Catholic ... she was killed because she was born to Jewish parents, and that is what needed to be emphasized in any statement about her death". Tullia Zevi, the former president of Italy's Jewish communities, called it "an ambiguous choice which could hurt dialogue between Catholics and Jews". In Paris Rabbi Daniel Farhi, head of the French Jewish Liberal Movement, claimed that the canonization ceremony "a new stumbling block. She was murdered because she was Jewish, not because she was Christian. This canonization will inflict a fresh wound in the hearts of the descendants of the victims of the Holocaust and of its survivors".

Anti-Semitism and Assimilation

Why all this uproar? What is behind this agitation? Why did the Pope's actions have the opposite effect of what was originally intended? "We see her canonization as a unique opportunity for Jews and Catholics for reflection and reconciliation," said the Rev. Remi Hoeckman, secretary of the Vatican's commission for relations with Jews. "It in no way lessens, but in reality strengthens, our need to honor the six million Jews who died in the Shoah," Hoeckman said. Why did then many Jewish organizations turn critical?

Cardinal William Keeler is the the US Catholic Bishops episcopal moderator for Catholic-Jewish relations. Just six days before Edith Stein was to be canonized, he wrote an Advisory Update to the Bishops, in which he specified what are the two main concerns among a section of the Jewish community. The first one, he states, is "that the raising up of a convert of Jewish background for Catholic veneration might occasion the development of organized movements within the church to proselytize and convert other Jews". The second concern is "I".

In fact the papers were relentless in affirming this. Richard Cohen in The Washington Post affirmed : "Jewish groups fear that the enormity of the Holocaust will slowly shrink until, years from now, it will be subdued into a universal experience: Everyone suffered, Jews too. But Jews disproportionately suffered. It was the intention of the Nazis to kill them all -- and they nearly succeeded. Polish Christians suffered enormously, it's true, but Jewish life in Poland was virtually extinguished."

According to many of these newspaper reports, the Pope has his own agenda which he wants to impose on the Christian and secular world. "As a Catholic and as a Pole, he seems determined to make history conform to his own experience -- the Nazis' persecution of the Polish people in general and Catholic clergy and intellectuals in particular. It was not just the Jews who suffered, this Pope seems to be saying."

On one hand, Jews and Christians agree that no-one more than the present Pope, worked towards the normalization of relations between the Catholic Church and the Jewish community. Even his critics admit that his actions in this area have been courageous and unprecedented.

The Pope lost many good Jewish friends to Hitler's Nazi regime and hence has a personal interest to stamp out anti-Semitism and promote an honest respect between the two faiths. He suffered in his own flesh the effects of the holocaust. Even the Time magazine states clearly that the Jewish leaders regard this canonization as only "a dissonant motif in Pope John Paul II's otherwise triumphant symphony of Catholic-Jewish brotherhood - a master work that is very much part of his grand plan for the church's millennial jubilee." It was Pope John Paul II who established Vatican recognition of Israel, visited the synagogue of Rome (in 1986), had many contacts with various Rabbis and Jewish political leaders, was host of a huge commemorative concert for the Shoah's victims, and even in the actual ceremony decreeing Stein's sainthood, reached out in a very explicit way to the Jewish community "The value of her testimony is to render ever more firm the bridge of mutual understanding between Christians and Jews," he appealed.

In March 1998, the Holy See's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews issued a public statement of repentance titled "We Remember". "At the end of this millennium the Catholic Church desires to express her deep sorrow for the failures of her sons and daughters of every age. ... The church approaches with deep respect and great compassion the experience of extermination, the Shoah suffered by the Jewish people during World War II. It is not a matter of mere words, but indeed of binding commitment. We pray that our sorrow for the tragedy which the Jewish people have suffered in our century will lead to a new relationship with the Jewish people. We wish to turn awareness of past sins into a firm resolve to build a new future in which there will be no more anti-Judaism among Christians.... The spoiled seeds of anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism must never again be allowed to take root in any human heart."

The media however reply that within the Catholic Church there seems to be conflicting interests and concerns. In the late 1980s accusations intensified when a conflict arose over a Carmelite cloistered convent at the edge of the Auschwitz concentration camp - the convent was eventually moved away from the camp's wall at the specific request of Pope Paul II. Just before the canonization of Edith Stein, many criticized the Pope's decision to beatify Alojzije Cardinal Stepinac, the Croatian courageous Bishop who was persecuted by the Communists and who saved many Jews during World War II but who, many Serbs and Jews claim symbolizes the Croatian church's co-operation with the wartime fascist regime.

The main fear however, seems to be the drive - according to these critics - which is being made

to canonize Pope Pius XII by the year 2000.¹ For a long time, Pope Pius XII was honored as a friend by the Jews around the world. But in 1963 the situation changed drastically after the play 'The Deputy' written by Rolf Hochhuth, where Pope Pius XII is portrayed as a coward or even worse, as a calculated political opportunist, who preferred to remain silent in face of the atrocities which were committed in the second world war.² The Pope did condemn the Nazi and did defend and help the many Jews, saving thousand from certain death - but this is not considered sufficient by these critics. Nor the fact that an open and public condemnation would have harmed, not aided the Jews, is accepted by these same critics.

This is the immediate historical and cultural background to the restlessness which the canonization of this Jew-turned-into-Catholic martyr created.

Was Edith a Christian martyr?

The whole question hinges on her identity as a Catholic martyr. The Nazi killed her because she was a Jew. She came from a Jewish family and was thus considered racially Jewish. Witnesses reported that when she tried to confess her faith, an Auschwitz guard rebuffed her with the words, "You damned Jew." When the Nazi soldiers came to arrest her, Edith Stein herself encouraged her hesitant sister Rosa with these words, "Let us go go our people...". In his homily, the Pope is very clear. "Because she was Jewish, Edith Stein was taken with her sister Rosa and many other Catholic Jews from the Netherlands to the concentration camp in Auschwitz, where she died with them in the gas chambers. Today we remember them all with deep respect. A few days before her deportation, the woman-religious had dismissed the question about a possible rescue: "Do not do it! Why should I be spared? Is it not right that I should gain no advantage from my Baptism? If I cannot share the lot of my brothers and sisters, my life, in a certain sense, is destroyed". And further on, the Pope reiterates, "Aware of what her Jewish origins implied, Edith Stein spoke eloquently about them: "Beneath the Cross I understood the destiny of God's People...." In her mind, Edith never for a moment felt that she had ceased to be a Jew.

She is definitely an "eminent daughter of Israel". No one doubts that.

Yet she is at the same time a "faithful daughter of the Church". Holocaust scholar Zev Garber wrote a very beautiful study "Edith Stein : Jewish perspectives on Her Martyrdom". In it he states that, "Her act of Christian martyrdom gives the church every right to claim her ultimate sacrifice as an act of testimony to the passion of Jesus, preparing the world for the kingdom of God."

The roundup that doomed her was an explicitly announced reprisal for a brave Catholic stance: the Dutch bishops' public denunciation of the German persecution of Jews in a pastoral letter one week before. (3) "It was revenge." says Father Peter Gumpel, a quiet, resourceful Jesuit scholar, who is the relator of the cause of Pope Pius XII and whose family was furiously persecuted by the German Nazis. "Were it not for the bishops' statement, she wouldn't have been killed. In simple words, it is true that if she was not Jewish, Edith Stein would not have been deported and killed. But it is also true that if the Catholic Bishops did not manifest publicly against the deportation of the Jews, she would most probably have lived. So being the victim of the hatred and vengeance of the Nazis against the Catholic Church, we venerate her as martyr. She went towards the cross of Auschwitz not just as a Jew but as Catholic Jew. Nazi wanted to punish the Catholic Church in Holland for its stand against the Jewish deportation."

The Pope Speaks

During the canonization celebration, the Pope tried to bridge these differences. He also went beyond.

On Sunday October 11, he spoke three times. First during mass, then during the midday Angelus and in the evening during a concert by the Symphonic Orchestra and the choir of "Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk" at Pope Paul VI Hall to honor this occasion and also to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of his election as Pope. In this Magisterium, he outlined two areas of specific interest to the contemporary person - the intrinsic relationship between love and truth and the value of the cross when freely accepted in union with Christ.

Only the love of Christ makes us truly free, he states. We live in a society which is guided by the pleasure principle - I do it because I like it. Everything is an open door. Try it - if you like it, if it gratifies you, enter. If you do not like it, if it smacks of sacrifice or renunciation, just quit. A very superficial attitude of life which is feeding us bitter fruit. Edith Stein, the Pope says, liked freedom. She broke of her protective familial ties. She even "consciously and deliberately stopped praying" at the age of 14. She always wanted to make her own decisions... family, school, college, career, working as a nurse, friends... And yet, "at the end of a long journey, she came to the surprising realization: only those who commit themselves to the love of Christ become truly free."

"For a long time Edith Stein was a seeker. Her mind never tired of searching and her heart always yearned for hope. She traveled the arduous path of philosophy with passionate enthusiasm. Eventually she was rewarded: she seized the truth. Or better: she was seized by it. Then she discovered that truth had a name: Jesus Christ. From that moment on, the incarnate Word was her One and All. Looking back as a Carmelite on this period of her life, she wrote to a Benedictine nun: "Whoever seeks the truth is seeking God, whether consciously or unconsciously".

The love of Christ and human freedom are intertwined. Truth is not the opinion of the majority. One cannot use truth against love or love against truth. Many deny this in their practical life and suffer the consequences. "St Teresa Benedicta of the Cross says to us all: Do not accept anything as the truth if it lacks love. And do not accept anything as love which lacks truth! One without the other becomes a destructive lie."

This new Saint teaches us also that love for Christ undergoes suffering. "Whoever truly loves does not stop at the prospect of suffering: he accepts communion in suffering with the one he loves... The mystery of the Cross gradually enveloped her whole life, spurring her to the point of making the supreme sacrifice. As a bride on the Cross, Sr Teresa Benedicta did not only write profound pages about the "science of the Cross", but was thoroughly trained in the school of the Cross."

The prevailing tendency today is to value life only to the extent that it brings pleasure and well-being. Suffering seems like an unbearable setback, something from which one must be freed at all costs. "Death is considered "senseless" if it suddenly interrupts a life still open to a future of new and interesting experiences. But it becomes a "rightful liberation" once life is held to be no longer meaningful because it is filled with pain and inexorably doomed to even greater suffering." (Evangelium Vitae).

The Church knows and human experience testifies that suffering can always become a source of good. "The true message of suffering is a lesson of love. Love makes suffering fruitful and suffering deepens love. Through the experience of the Cross, Edith Stein was able to open the way to a new encounter with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Faith and the Cross proved inseparable to her. "

"Having matured in the school of the Cross, she found the roots to which the tree of her own life was attached. She understood that it was very important for her "to be a daughter of the chosen people and to belong to Christ not only spiritually, but also through blood".

"We give thanks to God for this gift. May the new saint be an example to us in our commitment to serve freedom, in our search for the truth. May her witness constantly strengthen the bridge of mutual understanding between Jews and Christians."

The Love of Christ Knows No Borders

Professor Zev Garber underscores a very deep lesson. "We would suggest, with all deference that the Church and the Jewish people can agree that the courage and passion of Edith Stein should help Christians learn the lessons of Shoah, but they necessarily differ in their theology of redemption. For the Church, it is the Easter faith, spirit over matter, that enables victory to be proclaimed over Golgotha and Auschwitz. For the synagogue, it is the covenanted oath at Sinai, uniting spirit and matter and resulting in everyday acts of holiness, that permits Zion to triumph over Auschwitz."

In this context, the Pope made this impassioned, fervent plea. "From now on, as we celebrate the memory of this new saint from year to year, we must also remember the Shoah, that cruel plan to exterminate a people, a plan to which millions of our Jewish brothers and sisters fell victim." It will remind us of our sin. It will remind us of our commitment never to repeat such ethnic cleansing. "We must all stand together: human dignity is at stake. There is only one human family. The new saint also insisted on this: "Our love of neighbor is the measure of our love of God. For Christians and not only for them no one is a "stranger'. The love of Christ knows no borders"."

St Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, pray for us! Amen. (4)

1. "Now, the pope moves on to Pius XII. His elevation to sainthood is on the fast track. With him, even more than the others, this sprint to sainthood seems a transparent attempt to pardon the wartime church for its thundering silence as the Jews of Europe were being slaughtered." The Washington Post

2. Only days before assuming the Chair of Peter as Pope Paul VI, Cardinal Giovanni Montini wrote to The Tablet correcting Hochhuth. His words are perhaps the best commentary on Pope Pius XII attitude during World War II, "Let us suppose that Pius XII had done what Hochhuth

blames him for not doing. His actions would have led to such reprisals and devastations that Hochhuth himself, the war being over and he now possesses of a better historical, political and moral judgment, would have been able to write another play, far more realistic and far more interesting than the one he has in fact so cleverly and ineptly put together : a play that is about a Deputy, who through political exhibitionism or psychological myopia, would have been guilty of unleashing on the already tormented world still greater calamities involving innumerable innocent victims, let alone himself..."

3. In fact Pope Pius XII was about to issue a sternly worded protest against the Jews' deportation on the *Osservatore Romano*, when he got word of the Nazis' vicious reaction to the Dutch church's defiance. He decided to burn his statement.

4. The OCD General House in Rome prepared an excellent WWW resource center on Edith Stein. It includes the full homily of the Pope on her canonization, a life of Edith Stein in different languages, a Circular Letter of Father General Father Camilo Maccise "Losing To Win" and all the talks in their respective languages given by international experts on Edith Stein during the International Symposium which was held in Rome October 7-9, 1998.

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