

**SLD07.15.07 15<sup>th</sup> Ordinary Edith Stein**  
**Emory Presbyterian Church**  
**Luke 9: 23-34, I Corinthians 1:18, 22-23**  
**Jill Oglesby Evans**

### **“Edith Stein – Jewish Saint of the Cross”**

Picture a little German Jewish girl of the 1890s, sitting with her mother in a synagogue, formally dressed in black as they attend the Sabbath service. This is Edith Stein, or little “Yitschel” as she was then called.<sup>1</sup>

Now see Catholic news headlines in 1998 when Pope John Paul II canonizes Edith Stein as St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, confessor and martyr. How does one get from synagogue to Catholic sainthood? Edith Stein might reply, why, “there’s a seed within each one of us pushing blinding towards fulfillment of the goal for which we are created. This is the path for which God created me, the path of the cross.”

Born on Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement, in 1891 in Breslau, Germany, Edith Stein was the youngest of eleven children in a devout Jewish family. When she was not yet two years old her father died suddenly, leaving Edith’s mother to raise the seven remaining children and manage the family business. Stein forever regarded her mother as a living example of the strong woman of Proverbs 31, who rises early to care for her family and trade in the marketplace.

By her teenage years, however, Stein no longer practiced her Jewish faith. Although she continued to admire her mother’s attitude of openness toward God,<sup>2</sup> Stein considered herself an atheist, focusing more on scientific lines of inquiry. A skeptic by

---

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.piercedhearts.org/theology\\_heart/edith\\_stein\\_cross.htm](http://www.piercedhearts.org/theology_heart/edith_stein_cross.htm), “Edith Stein and the Science of the Cross,” by Freda Mary Oben. p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> [www.catholiceducation.org/articles/religion/re0001.html](http://www.catholiceducation.org/articles/religion/re0001.html).

nature, she developed a caustic, some said “deliciously malicious,” wit which she exercised freely.

But when the bright and academically gifted Edith went off to University and began to study philosophy with the reknown Edmund Husserl, founder of phenomenology, she found herself opening to the possibility of transcendent realities, and her atheism began to crumble. One summer, at the age of 29, Stein picked up the autobiography of St. Teresa (you remember the 15<sup>th</sup> century “Wild Woman of Avila” and Doctor of the Church who founded the Carmelite order?) and found herself swept away by Teresa’s ardor and commitment to Christ. The following January Stein was baptized into the Christian faith, expressing a desire even then to enter religious orders, though for practical and personal reasons, including the blow it would represent to her mother, she was advised against it.

Still Stein found herself turning inward, seeking to change her personality, seeking a deeper relationship with God, seeking to become (as Caryll Houselander called it) an “other Christ.” She began an intense study of the great Catholic philosopher, Thomas Aquinas, and found his perspective of the unity of body and soul sparking such questions as “What makes a person?”, “What makes for personal happiness?” and “How might one conform best to the will of God?”

And what she concluded in those years was this: (quote) “God simplifies this whole problem by creating each human being as an image of God’s Self.” A particular, even peculiar image, to be sure. Yet “there is a divine seed within each one of us pushing blindly toward fulfillment of the goal for which God created us,” she said. “Think of a plant that reaches constantly for sun, air and water, and which, when conditions

support it, finally flowers to its own unique perfection. That's how we are, you and I - instilled also with a waiting perfection, a holiness, that is a unique image of God.”<sup>3</sup> This is the seed in that keeps pressing, pushing, pulsing throughout our lives, ever seeking to actualize, to manifest, to incarnate itself.

From this new perspective, this wisdom of faith, the scientific agnostic that Stein had once been began lecturing widely in Europe, becoming a leading voice in the Catholic Woman's Movement. By the time Hitler rose to power in early 1933, she had also gained considerable renown in the German academic community through her books and articles. By March of that year, due to Hitler's growing popularity and the increasing pressure on the Jewish people, Stein's colleagues, realizing that she was no longer safe, offered her a teaching position in South America. Not willing to leave her mother, now 84, or her people, Stein decided instead to fulfill her long-standing desire to enter religious life. On October 15, just after her forty-second birthday, Edith Stein entered the Carmelite Order of Cologne, taking the name Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, saying,

“I told our Lord that it was His cross that was now being placed upon the Jewish people; that most of them did not understand this, but that those who did would have to take it up willingly in the name of all. I would do that. But what this carrying of the cross was to consist in, that I did not yet know.” It wouldn't be long before she found out.

First, Stein's family saw her entry into the convent as a betrayal, coming at the worst possible time, when Jewish persecution was intensifying. Christianity was the religion of their oppressors and they couldn't understand what it meant to her. When Stein's mother heard of her decision to enter the convent she was crushed, asking,

---

<sup>3</sup> Oben, p. 1.

“Why did you have to get to know him (Jesus Christ)? He was a good man – I’m not saying anything against him. But why did he have to go and make himself God?” Later her niece wrote, “in following her conscience on the road to Christianity Aunt Edith felt she was pursuing her Jewish path to its ultimate goal. But it is impossible, from the Jewish perspective, to see it that way.”<sup>4</sup> Still, though many felt Stein had abandoned Judaism, Stein regarded herself as ever loyal to her Jewish heritage.

For five years Stein remained in Cologne, Germany, participating in the life of the Carmelite community with great joy while continuing her scholarly work. Until, on the night of November 9, 1938, came the terror of Kristallnacht, German for “Crystal Night,” or, the Night of Broken Glass, when all over Germany Jewish homes, shops and villages were ransacked, Jews beaten to death, buildings destroyed by sledgehammers, streets covered in smashed windows, 1,668 synagogues violated, 267 set on fire, and 30,000 Jewish men taken to concentration camps.<sup>5</sup>

Fearing for Stein’s safety, the nuns in Cologne sent her secretly to the Carmelite Order in Echt, in the Netherlands. Her sister, Rosa, by now also a Carmelite, later joined her there. But when Holland fell to the Nazis and Dutch bishops issued an encyclical attacking the anti-Semitic atrocities of the Nazi regime, the Gestapo retaliated by rounding up all Roman Catholic Jews and sending them to death camps.

On August 2, 1942, Edith and Rosa Stein were arrested, forced to wear the yellow star of David, and, in a filthy, crowded boxcar, transported to Auschwitz, Poland. “Come, Rosa,” said Edith gently. “We go for our people.” One week later both were executed in the gas chambers. Edith Stein was 50 years old.

---

<sup>4</sup> [www.americancatholic.org/Messenger/Oct1998/feature2.asp](http://www.americancatholic.org/Messenger/Oct1998/feature2.asp)

<sup>5</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kristallnacht>

Forty five years later, on May 1, 1987, Pope John Paul II beatified Sister Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, (for Catholics, beatification is one step short of sainthood), an act to which some Jewish groups objected. For whether Stein was killed for her Jewish ethnicity, her faith, or both, is for them, open to debate. The position of the Catholic Church remains that Stein died in retaliation for the Dutch church's public condemnation of Nazi racism and therefore was a martyr for the moral position of the church.<sup>6</sup> So strong was this sentiment that, on October 11<sup>th</sup> of 1998, Pope John II canonized Edith Stein as a full saint, confessor and martyr of the church.

As Calvinists, of course, we don't fuss with such distinctions among degrees of holiness. To us, Edith Stein, as all the gospel witnesses of this summer saints series, is as much a sinner before God as you or I. For our purposes, the value of the witness of her life springs less from any presumption of personal holiness than from her insight about the Christian faith being rooted in the cross of Jesus Christ, and the manner in which she lived out that truth. For in direct contrast to such latter day self-serving spins as the Gospel of Prosperity, or even the make-nice politeness of decent and orderly American Protestantism, Stein, like Jesus, like Paul, like Calvin, places the fulcrum of Christian faith directly on the harsh, frightening, inconvenient, death-dealing yet somehow life-redeeming cross of Jesus Christ.

Declares Jesus in today's text, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me." Declares Paul to the church in Corinth: "The message about the cross...to us who are being saved...is the power of God" (I Cor 1:18) And again, to the Galatians, "May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me,

---

<sup>6</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edith\\_Stein](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edith_Stein), p. 2

and I to the world.” To which he adds, “for a new creation is everything!” A new creation is everything.

That’s the ultimate point, you see – not the death worked by the cross but the new creation God works through it. That’s the Good News. The Bad News is there’s no getting to it without the cross. There’s no avoiding the suffering and the pain and the heartbreak, no way around the cross to the resurrection, no way to Easter except through Good Friday, no new creation without death first.

It’s a hard truth, though I’m convinced almost everybody already knows it, or gets to know it sooner or later. At least everybody who stays around long enough to have their heart broken, or lose their loved ones, or age, or fail, or experience the madness and sadness that accompanies any dramatic change.

We know there’s no way around the cross, not in this life. It’s just that it’s a long way from the safety and security of the “Jesus Loves Me This I Know” of Sunday School to the harsh reality of what it really takes to live, and die, and live again. And some of us can’t help but cling to a pleasant, biddable God who’ll make things right if we just behave. But as Calvin remarked, “although the preaching of the cross does not agree with our human inclination, if we desire to return to God our Author and Maker...in order that God may again begin to be our Father, we ought nevertheless to embrace it humbly.”<sup>7</sup>

If last week’s misbehaving saint, Caryl Houselander, witnessed that Christ is found in all people, and that to be fully faithful, one must become fully who one is, the testimony of this week’s Jewish Catholic martyr is, and I quote, “In this growing into

---

<sup>7</sup> Institutes of the Christian Religion, II, vi, I.

oneself and toward God, one inevitably and irrevocably encounters the cross.”<sup>8</sup> In order to become fully what God creates us to be, in order for that God-placed seed in us to flourish, it has to push to and through some pretty mean, seemingly unyielding, crossly concrete. Know anybody over the age of, say, 13, for whom that’s *not* true?

Still, for Stein, the cross of Jesus Christ encompassed, explained and forecast not just the suffering but the *hope* of human existence. The reason to hold the Cross central to one’s faith is not only because of the shared death it represents but the new creation toward which it points. Stein’s cross was an empty cross; Stein’s Jesus, a resurrected Savior. For her, this is the witness of Jesus’ story from beginning to end.

In an essay entitled, “The Mystery of Christmas,” she wrote,

“The Christian mysteries are an indivisible whole...Thus the way from Bethlehem leads inevitably to Golgotha, from the crib to the Cross. ...The star of Bethlehem shines in the night of sin. The shadow of the Cross falls on the light that shines from the crib. This light is extinguished in the darkness of Good Friday, but it rises all the more brilliantly in the sun of grace on the morning of the resurrection. The way of the incarnate Son of God leads through the Cross and Passion to the glory of the Resurrection. In His company, the way of every one of us, indeed of all humanity, leads through suffering and earth to this same glorious goal.”<sup>9</sup>

The goal is full personhood according to the unique and particular image of God created us to be. And both the Bad News and the Good News for people of faith is that the way to this goal is, irrevocably, the way of the Cross.

Frequently in her lectures and writings, Stein said that if there were only one thing to tell her audience and readers, it would be to counsel them to live as God’s child, surrendering oneself totally to God’s hands with perfect trust and humility, placing all sorrows and hopes in God’s hands, seeking God’s will over one’s own. On the way of the Cross, she said, this is the highest act of freedom available to any person. Stein’s

---

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.oecd.or.at/ics/edith/stein\\_2.html](http://www.oecd.or.at/ics/edith/stein_2.html), p. 2.

<sup>9</sup> Oben, p. 2.

exercise of that high act of freedom led both to her death and to her new life in Christ Jesus. To what, do you suppose, might it lead in you or me?

To the glory of God. Amen.