

*A Saint of our Time:
Edith Stein – St Teresa Benedicta of the Cross*

*Patrick Burke, O.Carm.
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Edith Stein was born into a close-knit Jewish family in Silesia, Germany on 12th October 1891. It was the Day of Atonement or Yom Kippur. Her great grandfather was a cantor in the local synagogue. Edith's childhood was very much rooted in the Jewish faith. She was a mere twenty one-month-old when her father died of sunstroke at work.

Frau Auguste Stein was an intelligent and energetic woman. Her burdens were many – the deaths of four of her children, the collapse of the family business lumber in Lublinitz, the move to Breslau, the sudden death of her husband and her taking-on the debt-ridden lumber business on her own shoulders. Edith comes across as a precocious child, self-willed, highly strung and subject to tantrums. She was a voracious reader. After the age of seven the temperamental young child tended towards being a quiet introvert, subject to intense suffering in her own secret world. School turned out to be a great source of freedom. In her teens, she confesses, she gave up prayer and could not believe in the existence of a personal God. At the age of fifteen, the child who had so loved the books announced suddenly to her mother that she did not wish to continue at school. As a result, she was sent to help her sister, Else, married to a doctor and living in Hamburg, with the family and house keeping. But six months later she returned to resume school and went on to complete her exams with distinction. Academia was more to her liking than domesticity at her sister's.

When the Stein family moved to Breslau, Edith attended the High School and finished there. In 1911 she enrolled at the University, registering in Experimental Psychology in the Department of Philosophy. She later wrote that at the time, 1911-13, the existence of the human soul was not acknowledged in the field of psychology. She became disenchanted with study at Breslau and, attracted by Edmund Husserl and his writings, she transferred to the University of Gottingen where he lectured. Later she acknowledged a decidedly religious influence in her move. She found herself in a circle of Jewish intellectuals – Husserl, Reinach and Scheler in particular – who had over their time become Christians. Husserl from the beginning was impressed by Edith and required no further credentials for her when she admitted that she had perused the whole second volume of his Logical Investigations.

The new discipline of phenomenology, which treats of the perception of things, that of which the sense or mind directly notes, was established by Husserl who leaned on the earlier Thomism in his search for truth. This involved not only the reality of the physical/visible world, but also the reality of the transcendent. This was something that attracted Edith enormously. It was a new world to her. At Gottingen she found the great intellectuals trying to come to terms with the essence of supernatural truths which they considered just as real as other phenomena.

Edith's "atheism" was challenged by the objective clarity, which was basic to phenomenology. She now had to study the Greek philosophers and under Husserl's influence took up medieval Scholasticism. Two professors, Max Scheler and Adolph Reinach, by their own Christian fervour and scholarship influenced Edith and others in their studies. In Edith's case, she developed a deep absorption with the person and the human spirit. She completed her doctoral thesis "On the Problem of Empathy" and presented it to Husserl. While she awaited the result she taught for eight months at the High School, Burial where she herself had been a pupil. In August 1916, she received her doctorate "summa cum laude" from

Husserl, now appointed to the chair of Phenomenology at Freiburg University, who recognising her uniqueness invited her to come as his first assistant. She accepted and stayed for eighteen months.

Both family and friends attest to Edith's own richness in empathy. This particular gift had its influence in her search for God. When Adolf Reinach died at the front in 1917, Edith went to his funeral at Gottingen and meeting her friend, his widow Anna, was surprised at her obvious peace. Adolf had become a Protestant at the Front and Anna had followed him into the Church. Anna Reinach's confidence in the power and mystery of the Cross in the death of her husband was decisive in moving Edith closer to Christianity. At Freiburg, Edith, as well as editing Husserl's works, wrote articles herself; "Psychic Causality," "The Individual and Community" and "The State." She began to campaign for the German Democratic Party, giving expression to her concepts of the nature of the State and of justice as well as the position of values such as religion. In Autumn, 1918 she left her post at Freiburg and returned to Breslau where she continued to study and write. But probably because she was a woman she failed to get a university post despite her recognised qualifications.

During the next three years while Germany was becoming politically more unstable, for Edith the long traumatic conversion process was developing. Since the death of Reinach and the subsequent visit to Anna, she had become a Christian in fact if not in name. She did not know which denomination to join. The fervent Catholicism of Max Scheler had already imbued a deep spiritual sensitivity. The decision came in the Summer of 1921 when she was on a prolonged visit to the home of Hedwig Conrad-Martius, where many members of the Gottingen Philosophical Circle came to exchange views and renew their intellectual strength. One evening, after her friends had gone out, Edith picked up by chance St. Teresa's Autobiography and fascinated by it, did not close the book until dawn. She was convinced of the truth of St. Teresa's experience. That morning she bought a Catholic catechism and a missal.

On January 1, 1922 she was baptised at St. Martin's Church. Bergzabern. Suddenly this recognised intellectual abandoned her plans for a scholarly career and retired to a quiet Dominican school at Speyer. Edith now taught high school girls, novices and nuns preparing for teaching. Her prayer became the energising force behind her work and charitable activities. She accepted little reimbursement other than her keep and some clothes. She wanted to become a religious but her spiritual director, Canon Schwind, did not permit it because of her prominence as a laywoman, but also to avoid hurting her mother. Edith read the Divine Office daily and grew rapidly in appreciation of the whole liturgy of the Church. She used the Benedictine Abbey at Beuron, a famous liturgical centre, for her retreats and prayer events. During her time in Speyer, she translated Cardinal Newman's "Letters and Journals" (1801-1845) and "The Idea of a University" into German as well as St. Thomas Aquinas' "De Veritate" (On Truth) from Latin. The latter contained a brilliant phenomenological commentary with the translation. On Husserl's seventieth birthday in 1929 she contributed an essay to a comparative study "Husserl's Phenomenology and the Philosophy of St. Thomas."

At this time she began to concentrate on woman's nature and vocation and gave her first lecture on the topic in 1928. Her subsequent contributions comprise her important work "Die Frau" (The Woman) in which she sees "woman's unique strength in a spiritual maternity which should be exercised through her professions and which represents her femininity regardless of marital status." Because of the demands on her as a speaker in 1931 she had to leave her teaching post at Speyer. By 1932 she was the accepted intellectual leader of Catholic feminism in Europe. In her lectures, she was really contending with the growing Nazi ideology, which aimed to reduce women to the 3Ks, children, kitchen, church, in German. She urged that women be trained in value judgements and be able to take their proper place in the world.

In Breslau, she continued her study but found it impossible to get a teaching post at the University of Freiburg. The in 1932 she accepted an important post at the German Institute of Scientific Pedagogy in Munster. On 12th September she took part in a Seminar held in Juvisy, France. The only woman invited to attend, she made a great impact on the learned participants, including Maritain and Gilson.

Edith wished to become a contemplative religious and despite the satisfaction of her study and lecturing she was suffering from the attraction of the interior life, particularly in its urgency. On the 30th January 1933 Adolf Hitler became Reich Chancellor of Germany. Edith's Jewish presence was now an embarrassment at the Institute. With her final lecture there on 25th February she felt that God's hand was in this. An anti-Jewish boycott was put into effect throughout Germany on 1st April 1933. This was a turning point in Edith's life and she understood fully the reality of the coming evil for herself, for the Church and for the Jewish people.

As she prayed long hours in the Church of St. Ludgeri in Munster, she realised what was being asked of her and of the Jewish people. She now made the great decision to enter Carmel. Others have said that it was her belief that the Carmelite Order excels in a free and joyous participation in Christ's redemptive action. She would offer up her prayer and her life in reparation for both Jew and Nazi, for the persecuted and the persecutors. Edith wished to set herself on God's side in order to fight the sins and disorders which were causing such terrible misery, pain and despair. Through prayer she would show the face of Christ's love. While her own family continued to love her, they could not be reconciled to her entry into Carmel.

She was just turned 42 years of age when on 14th October 1933 she entered the Carmelite Monastery, Cologne. She asked for the religious name Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, expressing by it her gratitude to St. Teresa and to St. Benedict for her conversion and for her devotion to Christ's Passion. In the convent, she continued her intellectual work which her superiors felt were the fruit of her intense prayer life and devotion. First came "Life in a Jewish Family," already begun before she entered. She subsequently finished "Finite and Eternal Being" and wrote on different themes including "The Prayer of the Church."

She made her simple vows in 1935. Meanwhile on the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross, Frau Auguste Stein had died, unreconciled to her daughter's decision. In the Spring of 1936

the Nazis marched into the Rhineland. Despite the ominous signs, Edith was overjoyed when her sister, Rosa, joined her at Christmas. Rosa had been a believer for a long time and was baptised that Christmas. In March 1938 Hitler invaded Austria. In the face of growing oppression of all Jews and their sympathisers, evidenced in the fire-bombing of the “Kristallnacht” in the previous month, Edith fled to the Carmel at Echt in Holland during the night of the 31st December. At her new home Edith was very happy with the community who jokingly accepted her inadequacy in the domestic areas at sewing and housekeeping. She taught the novices Latin and was responsible for the spiritual and intellectual training of the nuns who did the manual work. In 1940 her sister Rosa joined her at Echt and as a member of the Third Order acted as portress for the nuns. Hitler invaded Holland in May and there was no chance of further flight. From 1st September 1941 the two sisters like other Jews were forced to wear the Yellow Star of David on which was inscribed the word “Jew” and they had to report periodically to the Gestapo.

She continued to share her spiritual riches with her Carmelite Sisters, writing works of a mystic nature. Always the reality of the Cross was evident and she clearly believed that the time for the Holocaust was nigh. In retaliation for the Dutch Catholic Bishops’ pastoral letter condemning the deportation of the Jews, the Nazi authorities on 2nd August 1942 ordered the arrest of all Dutch Catholics of Jewish descent. Edith and Rosa were among those arrested that evening, with Edith saluting Rosa with “Come, let us go for our people” as they left their convent for the last time. During the following days they were taken to two Dutch camps, Amersfoort and Westerbork, and finally to Auschwitz. Edith would insist that the love which endures the Cross and wounds, ultimately overcomes all lovelessness. The two sisters were in the transport that left Westerbork on 7th August and arrived at Auschwitz in the early hours of the 9th. According to the camp authorities they died in the gas chambers on 9th August, 1942.