

Edith Stein¹

Edith Stein was a saintly Carmelite, a profound philosopher and brilliant writer, had a great influence on the women of her time, and is having a growing influence in the intellectual and philosophical circles of today's Germany and of the whole world. She is an inspiration to all Christians whose heritage is the Cross, and her life was offered for her own Jewish people in their sufferings and persecutions.

Born on October 12, 1891, of Jewish parents, Siegfried Stein and Auguste Courant, in Breslau, Germany, Edith Stein from her earliest years showed a great aptitude for learning, and by the time of the outbreak of World War I, she had studied philology and philosophy at the universities of Breslau and Goettingen.

After the war, she resumed her higher studies at the University of Freiburg and was awarded her doctorate in philosophy *Suma Cum Laude*. She later became the assistant and collaborator of Professor Husserl, the famous founder of phenomenology, who greatly appreciated her brilliant mind.

In the midst of all her studies, Edith Stein was searching not only for the truth, but for Truth itself and she found both in the Catholic Church. She was baptized on New Year's Day, 1922.

After her conversion, Edith spent her days teaching, lecturing, writing and translating, and she soon became known as a celebrated philosopher and author, but her own great longing was for the solitude and contemplation of Carmel, in which she could offer herself to God for her people. It was not until the Nazi persecution of the Jews brought her public activities and her influence in the Catholic world to a sudden close that her Benedictine spiritual director gave his approval to her entering the Discalced Carmelite Nuns' cloistered community at Cologne-Lindenthal on October 14, 1933. The following April, Edith received the Habit of Carmel and the religious name of "Teresa Benedicta of the Cross," and on Easter Sunday, April 21, 1935, she made her Profession of Vows.

When the Jewish persecution increased in violence and fanaticism, Sister Teresa Benedicta soon realized the danger that her presence was to the Cologne Carmel, and she asked and received permission to transfer to a foreign monastery. On the night of December 31, 1938, she secretly crossed the border into Holland where she was warmly received in the Carmel of Echt. There she wrote her last work, *The Science of the Cross*.

Her own Cross was just ahead of her, for the Nazis had invaded neutral Holland, and when the Dutch bishops issued a pastoral letter protesting the deportation of the Jews and the expulsion of Jewish children from the Catholic school system, the Nazis arrested all Catholics of Jewish extraction in Holland. Edith was taken from the Echt Carmel on August 2, 1942, and transported by cattle train to the death camp of Auschwitz, the conditions in the box cars being

¹ Taken from http://www.ewtn.com/faith/edith_stein.htm

so inhuman that many died or went insane on the four day trip. She died in the gas chambers at Auschwitz on August 9, 1942.

We no longer seek her on earth, but with God Who accepted her sacrifice and will give its fruit to the people for whom she prayed, suffered, and died. In her own words: "One can only learn the science of the Cross by feeling the Cross in one's own person." We can say that in the fullest sense of the word, Sister Teresa was "Benedicta a Cruce" -- blessed by the Cross.

Pope John Paul II beatified Sister Teresa Benedicta of the Cross on May 1, 1987, and canonized her on October 11, 1998.

Small group discussion questions:

- 1) After reading St. Theresa of Avila's autobiography, Edith Stein closed the book and said, "This is the truth." When was a time in which you were sure that you encountered the truth?
- 2) Have you ever experienced the cross in your own life as a blessing? How?
- 3) How does suffering draw us closer to God?
- 4) What else strikes you about St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross (St. Edith Stein)? How does her story inspire you to grow / change?