



Carmelite Spiritual Center

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Life is Worth Giving

ST. EDITH STEIN LIVED JEWISH/CHRISTIAN FAITH

by Fr. Kevin Shanley, O.Carm.

The somewhat recent canonization of St. Edith Stein in 1998, and the more recent publication of her 1933 letter to Pope Pius XI asking him to speak out against the "war of exterminating Jewish blood" by the Nazis, have made the Discalced Carmelite nun a great topic of interest in the current Church.

Her Apr. 12, 1933 letter to the Vatican stated: "Not only the Jews but also thousands of Catholic faithful in Germany — and I believe in all the world — for weeks are waiting for and hoping that the Church of Christ will make its voice heard against such abuses in the name of Christ."

She added that Catholics "feared the worst for the worldwide image of the Church itself, if the silence continues further. We are also convinced that this silence cannot in the long run obtain peace from the current German government."

Birth in Germany

But who was this courageous cloistered Carmelite nun who was a protege of the founder of Phenomenology, Prof. Edmund Husserl of Germany, brilliant^{ly} of thought and love of people, who ended her life's journey in the gas chambers of Auschwitz Death Camp in Poland in 1942?

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Born into an observant Jewish family in Breslau, Germany on Oct. 12, 1891, Edith Stein was very much her mother's favorite. She was also protected and spoiled by her older sisters and brothers. As a child, she developed rapidly and is described as wise beyond her years and saucy, sometimes dreamy, reserved and anxious. Ironically, she initially found school difficult but later developed into a very brilliant and challenging student. She was the youngest of seven surviving children in the Stein Family.

St. Edith Stein would later write: "We are in the world to serve humanity." This outlook on life would be put to a great test when Europe was plunged into World War I in the summer of 1914. The young student soon went to the Red Cross to volunteer as a nursing assistant and worked devotedly for the soldiers in a typhoid military hospital on the Eastern Front of the Germany Army.

Although the devastation of the war disrupted Edith Stein's work on her doctoral thesis ("On the Problem of Empathy"), it undoubtedly gave her much patience and practical experience in the subject area. Then followed a period of what was probably a form of depression.

Scholarly Pursuits

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With the help and encouragement of academic friends, she was able to return to her scholarly pursuits and received her doctorate "summa cum laude" (with highest praise) in 1916 from the Albert-Ludwig University of Freiburg. But World War I had changed her and the world greatly.

It was in the summer of 1921 while visiting friends that Edith Stein came across a biography of St. Teresa of Avila, a great Carmelite mystic and reformer of religious life. Up to that point, religion had played only a minor role in her life. Virtually an agnostic caught up in the academic life, Edith Stein then felt a great calling to a life of Faith and a mystical relationship with God.

Day of Baptism

On the day of her baptism, Jan. 1, 1922, she had made a decision to enter the Discalced Carmelite Order of St. Teresa when the time was right. However, her conversion proved to be a more than difficult experience for the Stein Family. But she tried to explain, especially to her beloved Mother, that it was the fulfillment of a Faith journey and not a renunciation of her Jewish beliefs.

Stein then spent happier years in teaching, especially young women. She was courageous in her presentations on the true equality of women and was an ^{ve} obvious favorite with her students.

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She did not avoid the difficult and highly debated question of priesthood for women. Though not called to such a vocation, her outlook was: "Whether ordained or not ordained, whether man or woman, everyone is called to follow Christ." She was also convinced that "only the more purely developed male and female uniqueness can ~~yield~~ yield the highest attainable likeness to God. Only in this fashion can there be brought about the strongest interpenetration of all earthly and divine life."

The next step of her life was then entry to Carmel. And on Apr. 21, 1935, Edith Stein professed her vows as Sr. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, a name she had chosen herself, at the Carmel in Cologne^e. Here she was encouraged to continue her academic pursuits and also completed her final work, "The Science of the Cross."

The Rise of Adolph Hitler

But the rise of Adolph Hitler and Nazism in Germany made Europe unsafe for millions of Jews, even those who had become Catholics. Following the infamous "Kristallnacht" by the Nazis in 1938, Edith Stein was transferred to the Carmel at Echt in Holland. Ironically, when the Dutch bishops protested the deportation of the Jews from Holland, the Nazis retaliated by rounding up all the converted Jews for transportation to death camp at Auschwitz, and elsewhere.

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Aboard the train were Edith Stein and her sister, Rosa, who had also been baptized a Catholic. With great calm, Edith Stein encouraged her sister to go peacefully into the Nazi S.S. van sent to arrest them on Aug. 2, 1942. "Come, Rosa," she said, "we go for our people."

Within a week, on Aug. 9th, both were gassed ^(AND) & cremated in the Birkenau section of the death camp not far from where they had both begun life.

And thus ended the heroic life of St. Edith Stein who believed she was "in the world to serve humanity."