

EDITH STEIN

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In a letter written during World War I, Edith Stein could say "that there has never been as strong a consciousness of being a state as there is in Prussia and the new German Reich. That is why I consider it out of the question that we will now be defeated." During the same period (already a Doctor of Philosophy, she was research assistant to Edmund Husserl) she wrote that "to be at the service of a person, in short -- to obey, is something I cannot do." Twenty-four years later, in 1942, A Carmelite nun, vowed to poverty, chastity and obedience, she was executed at Auschwitz under the anti-Jewish laws of the expiring Third Reich.

Edith Stein, Sister Teresa Benedicta a Cruce, has already been declared Blessed by John Paul II and her canonization is said to be imminent; she is a powerful symbol of the mystery of the Jewish people. Her memoir, *Life in a Jewish Family 1891-1916*, like her recollection of her first studies at the University of Gottingen, puts before her reader Jews who are completely assimilated, Germans among Germans. Edith lost her religious faith as a university student but continued to attend synagogue with her devout widowed mother. She became absorbed in philosophy, the

phenomenology of Husserl, until, as the result of reading the autobiography of St. Teresa of Avila, she entered the Catholic Church to the great sorrow of her mother. She was baptized on January 1, 1922, not yet thirty-one years old.

There seemed little doubt that Edith Stein would eventually be canonized, and so she was. It is imaginable that she will be declared a Doctor of the Church (which would give us a triad of Carmelite Theresas so designated).. Many of her writings are of interest only to philosophers, but her role in the Church is surely not confined to them.

It was not until 1933 that Edith stopped teaching, because of the Nazi laws against Jews, and entered the Carmelite convent in Cologne. This brilliant gifted woman, who had been engaged in scholarly study and writing, had no reason to think that this would continue in the convent. Thomas Merton gave up his worldly ambition to become a writer when he became a Trappist and the laurel that had eluded him as a layman came to him as a monk. But Edith Stein had already made her mark as a scholar prior to becoming a nun. It is one of the great blessings of her life -- I mean blessing for us -- that she was urged to continue her philosophical writing.

The masterpiece she wrote, *Finite and Eternal Being*, could not be published at the time because of her Jewish origins, but eventually it was. It is a work of breathtaking scope, comparable to St. Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Contra Gentes*. In a comprehensive *tour de monde* embracing the

natural and supernatural, Edith Stein exhibits her training as a phenomenologist as well as her immersion in the thought of Aquinas after her conversion.

She wrote as well *The Science of the Cross*, a study on St. John of the Cross, and various other spiritual works which are gradually finding their way into print. *Essays on Woman* contains talks and articles written during the decade prior to her entrance into Carmel.

Edith Stein is a model for the Catholic philosopher. Once she had entered the Church, although she was a fully formed thinker, she became as a little student again when she began to study St. Thomas Aquinas. Those who overlook and even disdain the Church's reiterated recommendation of Thomas Aquinas as our mentor in theology and philosophy are rebuked by the docility of this brilliant woman. That the study of Thomas was philosophically and theologically fruitful is everywhere evident in her Catholic writings.

But the universal appeal of this saintly woman lies in her abiding and personal pursuit of the truth. "This is the truth," she said when she put down the autobiography of Teresa. The next step was obvious. She must become a Catholic. She studied the catechism and missal and presented herself at the rectory door, to the astonishment of the priest who quizzed her on her knowledge of the faith.

Saintly people are singled out by the Church because they have

something special to tell us about what it means to be a Christian. It could be argued that the great significance of Edith Stein for the present lies in her wise reflection on what it means to be a Christian woman in the modern world.

Others would argue that her exemplary role is to be found in her intellectual labors, her philosophical and theological contribution.

Some would seek her significance in something more universal, in the quest for sanctity at a stage of history that seems to have lost all sense of God.

Phenomenology is a mode of philosophy that brought many to the faith. Behind its forbidding facade, it retains the original conception of philosophy as the pursuit of wisdom, as a way of life. *Primum vivere, deinde philosophari* (Live first, then philosophize) is a maxim that has its importance. But more important still is the realization that to philosophize truly is to live more truly.

It was the hunger and thirst for truth that brought Edith Stein to Christ and to the cross. She offered her death at Auschwitz for the Jewish people. Recently, there was controversy over the location of a Carmelite Convent there where Edith Stein and so many others had been so brutally slain, some Jews taking offense at the cross that had been raised on the site.

Edith Stein would have understood. The cross is always a sign of contradiction. It is also our only hope.