

Feast of St Theresa Benedicta of the Cross

(Edith Stein)

August 9th 2016

Edith Stein was born on October 12, 1891, the Jewish Day of Atonement, in Breslau, a town situated today within the borders of Poland but at that time part of the Prussian empire. She was the seventh and youngest child of pious Jewish parents, and was doted on by her parents like, in her own words,

“a cross between a fairy princess and a porcelain doll.”

During her teenage years Edith’s faith faded, and by the time she was ready for university study she considered herself an atheist. As a university student she became fascinated by the work of Edmund Husserl, considered the founder of the famously complex system of philosophy called phenomenology. She longed to study with the master personally and so went in 1913 to Göttingen, where Husserl taught. Immediately she fell in love with the natural beauty and the deep intellectual culture of the place, and in short order she was introduced to Husserl and to the circle of brilliant students that had formed around him, including Dietrich von Hildebrand and Max Scheler, two thinkers who would deeply influence the development of Catholic thought in the twentieth century.

At the age of 25 she earned her doctorate in 1915.

In 1917, during the fiercest fighting of the First World War, Edith paid a courtesy call to the widow of Adolf Reinach, an old acquaintance from her Göttingen days who had been killed in battle. She expected to find the young woman devastated, but instead she found her sad but fundamentally at peace. Her serenity, Edith learned, was the product of the woman’s Christian faith. Edith commented later,

“It was my first encounter with the Cross and the divine power that it bestows on those who carry it.”

This insight was an extraordinary breakthrough for the intense, rational woman who long ago had given up on religious faith. What began to strike her, in the wake of this encounter, was that many of her colleagues in the Husserl circle— as well as the master himself— were devout Christians.

One night, while staying with friends outside Freiburg, Edith searched through their library looking for something to divert her for the evening. She came upon Saint Teresa of Avila’s autobiography. She took the book off the shelf and stayed up all night reading it. The next morning she put down the text and declared simply,

“That is the truth.”

It seems fair to conclude that the reading of Teresa’s Life was the galvanizing moment, the occasion for all of the strands to come together. After a few weeks of reading and praying, Edith approached the local priest and asked to be received into the church. When he balked, due to her recent conversion, she said

“Test me!”

She was baptized on January 1, 1922 at the age of 31. She fell in love with the Eucharist, spending hours a day in silent adoration. So impressed were the Dominican sisters with whom she lived, that they set up a special chair for her near the Blessed Sacrament.

On April 15, 1934, Edith Stein was received into the Carmelites and took the name

Sister Teresa Benedicta a Cruce,

literally,

Teresa, blessed by the cross.

In 1938 Sister Teresa took her final vows as a Carmelite and was thus privileged to wear the black veil, evocative of her total consecration to Christ. In November of that same year Kristallnacht (the Night of Broken Glass) took place, and suddenly Jews all over Germany were in acute danger. Concerned for her safety, Edith’s superiors transferred her from the Carmel in Cologne to the Carmel of Echt in Holland. But just two years later the Nazis overran Holland. On Sunday August 2, 1942, the Gestapo came for Edith and her sister, who had joined Edith in the convent. Amid the confusion, anxiety, and raised voices, Edith calmly said,

“Come, Rosa, we’re going for our people.”

The sisters were held briefly in a camp in Holland and then were packed onto what amounted to a cattle car for the trip to Auschwitz. A former student of Edith’s reported an encounter with the nun when the train stopped briefly at a platform in Germany. After greeting her, Edith asked her to convey a message to the mother superior in Echt:

“We are going to the East,”

a sentence with both a literal and a spiritual meaning. She was undoubtedly trying to communicate information about their geographical destination, but “the East” is also mystical language for heaven and eternal life.

On August 9, 1942, Edith arrived at the death camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau. She was selected for immediate execution. The guards brought her to a crude barracks where she was forced to remove her clothes, and then to a small execution chamber where she was murdered by poison gas. Subsequently, her body was placed in a pit and burned— and the ashes strewn to the wind.

In Edith Stein, St Theresa Benedicta of the Cross, we see someone with a soaring intellect, who in the words of Jesus from today’s Gospel was willing to change so to become like a child. She humbled her mind and heart so as to conform her life to the Truth of Revelation. She came to exclaim in the words of today’s Psalm:

The law of your mouth is better to me than thousands of gold and silver pieces. How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth.

St. Theresa Benedicta of the Cross was one of the sheep that had gone astray but on being found by the shepherd Jesus experienced profoundly these famous words:

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil, for thou art with me, thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies. Surely thy goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the House of the Lord forever.