

Homily for August 30th 2020
22nd Sunday Ordinary Time

The Cross' call, contradiction and cost in the life of St Teresa Benedicta of the Cross

I am currently reading a biography on the life of Edith Stein, entitled “Edith Stein: The life and legacy of St Teresa Benedicta of the Cross”. It chronicles the life of this 20th century saint from her birth into a German Jewish Family in 1891, through to her conversion to Catholicism in 1922; her entering the Carmelite order in 1933; her death at Auschwitz on August 9th 1942, to her Canonization by Pope St John Paul II on October 11th 1998. The narrative covers the whole of the 20th century and the name she took as a religious was her way to express the fullness of her formation as a Jewish, European intellectual whose mind and heart were fully formed by her love of Christ Jesus and his Church.

As a 15-year-old Edith had rejected any form of religious faith. At that age she stopped praying. She wanted to rely exclusively on herself and was concerned to assert her freedom in making decisions about her life. At the end of a long journey, she came to the surprising realization:

***only those who commit themselves to the love of Christ become truly free.*¹**

At this age she was also discovering a deep love for and giftedness to think deeply about complex intellectual ideas. She was drawn particularly to the study of a philosophical school called Phenomenology. Another 20th century saint, St John Paul II was also greatly influenced by the founder of Phenomenology, Edmund Husserl and one of Edith's teachers, Max Scheler. Scheler was the subject of the doctoral thesis of Karol Wojtyla (Pope St. John Paul II).¹

Phenomenology — was a philosophical school that sought to explain the connection between the visible world and the world of ideas and values and stirred Edith in her study of the meaning and purpose of human life. Phenomenology, a twentieth-century philosophical movement, is an outgrowth of and response to what might be termed “modern philosophy.” Through modern philosophy, with its origins in Descartes, Western civilization has come to think of human consciousness as egocentric. In this way of thinking, we cannot know the world outside our minds. We can know only our perceptions of that world. In its most extreme, “We do not know how to show that our contact with the ‘real world’ is not an illusion, not a mere subjective projection.” Such a world view is charged with consequences. Public space is diminished by the vast chasm between our own private worlds. Truth is either unknowable or relative. And philosophy cannot be ordered, as it had been in ancient and medieval philosophy, toward discovering truth. In modern philosophy, the mind is conceived as “generating truth through its own efforts. . . . The mind is not receptive, but creative. . . . [It] invents itself and constructs its truths”

A way to summarize this way of thinking was expressed by St. John Paul II in his homily at Edith Steins' canonization:

¹ http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/1998/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_11101998_stein.html

The modern world boasts of the enticing door which says: everything is permitted. It ignores the narrow gate of discernment and renunciation.

Phenomenology is an attempt to liberate the mind and philosophical thought from the confines of modern and postmodern thought. It articulates that a reality exists outside our minds and that we can access this reality.² Edith became a devotee of this school which led her to one day reading the autobiography of the 16th century Carmelite St Teresa of Avila.

About to turn thirty years old, Edith immersed herself in the autobiography of the sixteenth-century mystic and Carmelite reformer. Fascinated, Edith read the book in one night, proclaiming simply, “This is the truth!” Her “long search for the true faith” simply and suddenly found its source. For years Edith had looked for truth philosophically, as a scholar. “It was the ‘truth of things,’ the ‘things themselves,’ the objects. Now in Teresa of Avila she was filled with the truth of love that is not knowledge, but relationship. Teresa lived in mystical friendship with God and with him whom God had sent, Jesus Christ.”

Thus, began Edith Stein’s journey into the Church and was received on New Year’s Day 1922. The ensuing years resulted in her discerning a vocation to the religious life as a Carmelite. On October 14th 1933, the eve of the Feast of her beloved Spiritual Mother, St Teresa, Edith Stein took the name St Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, or “Teresa, blessed by the Cross.”

St Theresa Benedicta of the Cross understood what St. Paul expresses in today’s reading from Romans. Here was a woman who presented her body as a living sacrifice who was so open and receptive to the Truth so that her mind was renewed. She thereby experienced a deep and lasting transformation. Like Jeremiah in today’s first reading there was in her this burning fire that she could not hold in.

It is always the opportunity Jesus presents to us, to respond to his invitation to pick up our Cross and follow him. For as was true with Edith, it is the same with us. What do we make of Jesus and his Cross?

We can with St. Peter see the cross as the objectionable and rebuke Jesus for the way of suffering. Or with St Teresa Benedicta of the Cross we can recognize:

“No spiritual work comes into the world without great suffering. It always challenges the whole person”.²

As she matured, a deeper conversion happened in the life of this sister in Christ, where she saw clearly the call of the cross, the contradiction of the cross and the cost of the cross. It is this same conversion to Jesus and his cross that he calls each of us to as well. The cross’ call, contradiction and cost.

² http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/1998/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_11101998_stein.html

The Cross that called Edith required that even against her family's pleading and a decision that broke her mother's heart, Edith became a Catholic and this caused her sorrow and pain as she saw how her choice could not be understood or received by her mother. When we respond to the call of the Cross we are resolved to follow the one who is the Truth, the one who is outside of me, the one Lord, Jesus Christ. But as we respond to the Cross' call we also discover there is a seeming contradiction of the Cross. It is in surrendering our life, we can discover a freedom that we have not known before. Upon telling her of her decision to become a Carmelite and parting from her, never to see her mother again, Edith writes:

“I could not feel any wild joy. The scene I had just left behind was too terrible for that. But I felt a deep peace, in the harbor of the divine will.” The following day at the Cologne Carmel, “in deep peace I crossed the threshold into the House of the Lord”³

Here is the contradiction of the Cross. Although pained by the suffering her decision caused her mother, Edith knew she was in the harbor of the divine will. This in turn helped her to discover the cost of the Cross, described by Jesus this way:

For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. ²⁶⁴For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?⁵

Edith Stein, Teresa blessed by the Cross understood what it cost to follow Jesus. In her last poem, written soon before she was taken by the Nazis to Auschwitz – (she was arrested on August 2nd 1942 and died in Auschwitz on August 9th of that same year), she gives thanks for the life she had come to know because of her willingness to lose her life:

***Are you not the sweet manna
Which flows from the heart of the Son
Into mine,
Food for angels and for the blessed?
He who from death to life arose,
Has awakened me, too, to new life,
From the sleep of death,
New life he gives me day by day.
Someday his abundance will completely flow
through me.***

Today in sharing with you something of the life of one so blessed by the Cross may we hear more fully the call of the Cross, experience the seeming contradictory freedom that is known by those who count the cost and follow Jesus, the Way, the Truth and the Life.

The Cross' call, contradiction and cost in the life of St Teresa Benedicta of the Cross is an inspiration to me and I hope it is for you too.