



St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross

(Edith Stein, 1891 – 1942)

She was a brilliant scholar, a contemplative mystic, and a “liberated” feminist. At various times she was also a devout Jew, an atheist, a philosopher, a Catholic, and a Carmelite nun. Hers was a heart that hungered for truth, with a passion that burned with such purity and clarity that Pope John Paul II, whose own *Mulieris Dignitatem* and “Letter to Women” bear the unmistakable imprint of her spirit, canonized her less than fifty years after her death at Auschwitz.

Edith Stein was born to a devout Jewish family in Breslaw (now Wroclaw, Poland) on Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement. She lost her father when she was only two years old. Sustained by her faith, Edith’s mother worked hard to support her eleven children. And yet, by the time she was a teenager, Edith no longer practiced her childhood faith. She considered herself an atheist.

Despite this, her search for truth continued. Edith was introduced to Christianity at university through her study of philosophy, which encouraged her to be open to “transcendent realities,” as well as the example of friends who had converted to the faith. There were other signs as well: One day Edith observed a woman laden with packages, who entered the church and paused for a few moments’ prayer. Edith was struck by the casual familiarity of that anonymous soul, who had stopped by for an “intimate chat” with God, a few moments of simple communion. She never saw the woman again, but her wordless example spoke volumes to Edith’s hungry heart. Years later, Edith came upon the autobiography of Teresa of Avila, and read it in a single afternoon. So profoundly was she affected by it, Edith determined then and there to become both a Catholic and a Carmelite. (Although she did convert almost immediately, she did not take the habit of Carmel for another decade.)

After her conversion to the faith, Edith continued to write and lecture, and was a powerful voice in the Catholic Women’s Movement in Germany from 1927 to 1933, until it was no longer safe for her to continue her work. She then entered the Carmel of Cologne just before her forty-second birthday. She spent five years there; her sister Rosa, who converted in 1936, worked at the convent as a third-order Carmelite.

By 1938 the convent walls could no longer protect the sisters, who were sent to Holland. Then the Netherlands fell under Hitler’s power; not long after, the Dutch bishops wrote an encyclical denouncing the atrocities inflicted by the Nazis. All Roman Catholic Jews in Holland were rounded up for execution. Edith and Rosa were among those captured and sent to Auschwitz. Even in her last days on earth, Edith was a living witness to the power of the cross. As the Holocaust raged all around her, she saw the cross that had been placed upon on the shoulders of the Jewish people. “Most of them will not understand it,” she wrote. “But those who do understand must accept it willingly in the name of all. I wanted to do that... But in what the bearing of the cross was to consist I did not yet know.”

A week after arriving at the camp, Edith and Rosa were both sent to the gas chambers. Edith was just fifty years old.

The role and nature of woman was the subject of Edith’s most remarkable and original work. Unlike radical feminists of her time (and ours), Edith recognized the real, fundamental differences between the sexes. She believed that these differences are not arbitrary, but are imprinted upon us, body and soul. She insisted that these differences are not hierarchical or diminishing; rather, she perceived the complementarity of the sexes as a necessary good. Whether at home, in the workplace or professional environment, women have the power to transform society in ways that men cannot. And all is accomplished through the power of love, and the power of the cross.