



St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross (St. Edith Stein)

BORN 1891; DIED 1942
RELIGIOUS AND MARTYR
FEAST DAY: AUGUST 9



T. TERESA BENEDICTA OF THE CROSS was almost an exact contemporary of Adolph Hitler, only two and a half years younger than him. Yet while his depravity resulted in her death, the brilliant light of her faith made tawdry all his aspirations to worldly glory.

Edith was born in Breslau, Germany (modern Wrocław, Poland), the youngest of seven children of Siegfried Stein and Auguste Courant, Orthodox Jews. Edith's father died of sunstroke when she was not yet two years old. By thirteen, she abandoned Judaism and told everyone that she was an atheist. Educated by people who espoused only rationalism — that only what could be observed could be proved — she concluded that Judaism could not be proved and so she could not accept it.

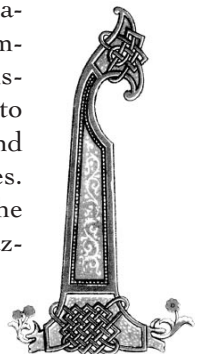
As a teenager, Edith already displayed a tremendous love of learning, and a mind brilliant in everything but mathematics. She was also interested in politics and espoused the right for women to vote. At fourteen, angry because an anti-Semitic teacher had not given her a deserved top ranking, she quit school. Private tutoring allowed her to complete her studies, and she entered the University of Breslau at twenty, one of the first women admitted to a major university in Germany. Although at first interested in psychology, she transferred to the University of Göttingen, Ger-

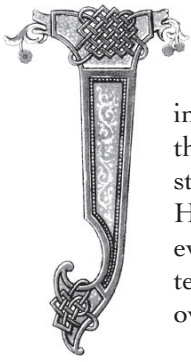
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many to study the new approach in philosophy called “phenomenology,” which had been developed shortly after Edith's birth by faculty member Edmund Husserl to elevate psychology by harmonizing observation, theory, and reason. She became Husserl's most gifted protégé and later his assistant and collaborator. Edith sought out phenomenology because she wanted to discover a way of thinking deeply rooted in truth, and felt that this approach, which emphasized observing everything without prejudice or emotional blinders, would be the best way to discover truth. She would write later that she was seeking truth, and that those who seek truth long to find God, whether they know it or not.

She completed her doctorate at the University of Freiburg with highest honors at twenty-five.

During the calamitous years of World War I, Edith was already beginning to explore Judaism, Protestantism, and Catholicism. A number of her Jewish friends had become Christians, mostly Lutheran. In 1917, she went to visit one of these, a close friend whose husband had died in the war, to offer her condolences. Instead of meeting a woman bowed under the weight of sorrow, she found the widow amaz-





ingly calm. Edith wrote later: “It was then that I first encountered the cross and the divine strength which it inspires in those who bear it.” Her atheism was shattered in a moment, and even her original Judaism paled before the mystery of Christ’s redemptive suffering and victory over death.

The next few years for Edith were a time of both hesitation and intense exploration for something that would fill her heart as well as satisfy her mind. Among her readings during this period were the spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola, which she approached as a psychologist but concluded by praying as one thirsting for God. At the home of friends, she discovered the autobiography of the great Carmelite mystic St. Teresa of Ávila, *The Life*. Devouring it in one all-night session, she joyfully realized: “That is the truth!” The next morning, she bought a Catholic catechism and a missal for Mass. Soon thereafter, she went to Mass for the first time. After Mass, she asked the priest to baptize her. When he asked where she had obtained her instruction, she smilingly replied that he need only question her about her understanding of the faith. She was baptized six months later at the age of thirty, an event that left her mother, to whom she had grown closer over the years, grief-stricken.

Although by this time a celebrated philosopher and writer, Edith took a teaching position at a Dominican school in Speyer, Germany. She was a demanding teacher, yet helpful to her charges both in their studies and in their personal problems, extending herself especially to girls who were lonely or homesick. She also quiet-

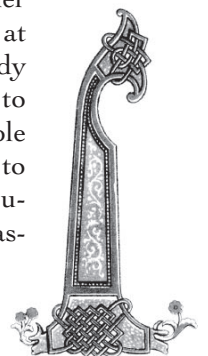
ly helped the poor of Speyer. She wrote about women both as professionals and with dignity equal in God’s eyes to men, focusing on the ethics of the female professions and on the supernatural vocation of women. Edith also trained Dominican nuns who themselves intended to be teachers, becoming informally the Mistress of Novices because of her practice of virtue as well as because of her formation of them as teachers. She immersed herself in the study of Catholic philosophy, and her translations and commentaries led to public lectures, so that she continued to be in the public eye.

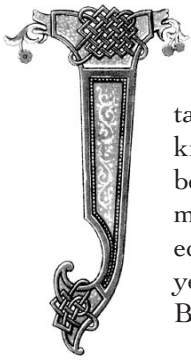
Soon after her baptism, Edith felt called to become a Carmelite nun, but her very fame and influence led her spiritual directors to persuade her to postpone entering the cloister, feeling that she was doing a great deal of good in the apostolate of teaching. They also knew that her mother’s heart would be broken. Edith spent these years deepening her life of prayer. She read Scripture, prayed the Liturgy of the Hours, and loved greatly the liturgical life of the Church.

At forty-one, Edith was appointed lecturer at the Institute of Scientific Pedagogy at Munster, Germany. However, the Nazi regime forced her resignation in 1933, and she was no longer permitted to lecture publicly. As a result, her spiritual director felt that it was time for her to enter the Carmelite order, which she did at Cologne, Germany that year. She had already rejected opportunities to flee to London or to South America, choosing instead the probable path of suffering and consciously intending to offer her life for both Jews and their persecutors. Her mother, then eighty-four, was devas-



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tated by Edith's decision, especially since she knew she would never see her daughter again, because Carmelite convents were cloistered (her mother died three years later, having responded to Edith's letters only after a silence of two years). Edith took the religious name of Teresa Benedicta of the Cross.

Although Teresa had never cooked, sewed, or done housework and never attained great competence in the domestic chores that make up the greater part of convent life, she saw these as a school of humility necessary to counteract all the honors that had been heaped on her. As a member of the community, she was cheerful, warm, serene, and full of laughter. Yet her effort to live the simple life of the community cost her a great deal since, well past the age of forty, she had to learn the radical obedience and self-denial of religious life. Her superiors continued to allow her to write, and in the next several years she wrote pamphlets and booklets as well as completing *Potency and Act* and her most famous work, *Finite and Eternal Being*. Her letters influenced several friends and former students to convert to Catholicism or to enter religious life. Her sister Rosa, who had believed the Catholic faith for years, was baptized soon after their mother's death.

The Nazi grip on Germany tightened in the next few years, so in 1938 the Carmelites secretly sent Teresa from Cologne to the convent of Echt in the Netherlands. She knew that staying would have put her sisters in religion in danger for sheltering her as a Jew; they sent her away because they feared for her life. At Echt, she gave spiritual direction to novices and worked on her last book, *The Science of the Cross*. Two years later, Rosa came to live at the convent outside the enclosure, acting as doorkeeper. She also sought to become a Carmelite, but the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands in 1940 prevented this from happening.

As the Nazis began to harass and hound

Dutch Jews, all the Christian churches protested. The Nazis then threatened to round up Jewish converts to Christianity. Realizing the peril of her situation, Teresa's superiors tried to send her to a convent in Switzerland. However, the convent could not take Rosa, so Teresa asked to remain until a way could be found to house both of them. This was done, but neither could leave without permits from the government. Before this was obtained, on July 1, 1942 all Catholic children of Jewish descent were forbidden Catholic education; no other schools were open to them. The Archbishop of Utrecht protested, condemning as well the de-

portation of Jews from Holland. In response, on July 2, the Nazis arrested all priests and members of Dutch religious orders of Jewish descent, including Teresa and Rosa. In the hearing of others, Teresa said to Rosa: "Come, let us go for the sake of our people." They were taken away in a police

van and kept for a few days at Dutch transit camps, where Teresa prayed, consoled people, and cared for the children of terrified mothers, spreading peace to everyone she helped. She and Rosa were then transported across Germany with hundreds of others over a period of four days to the concentration camp of Auschwitz, Poland. They experienced the dreadful conditions of the cattle cars: they were hot and crowded, had no place to relieve themselves, and lived with stench and those who went insane or died during the ordeal. Following their arrival, Teresa and Rosa, with the others chosen for death, were forced to remove all their clothing, given soap and towels, and told to walk the long distance to "showers" to be "disinfected." Because the Nazis had not yet worked out the "right" amount of poisonous gas, people were still alive twenty-four hours later. More poisonous gas was added to kill the rest. Teresa and Rosa died together, naked before the world but clothed in glory before God.

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