

OUR  
Edith  
Stein

Carmel Clarion  
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# Carmel Clarion

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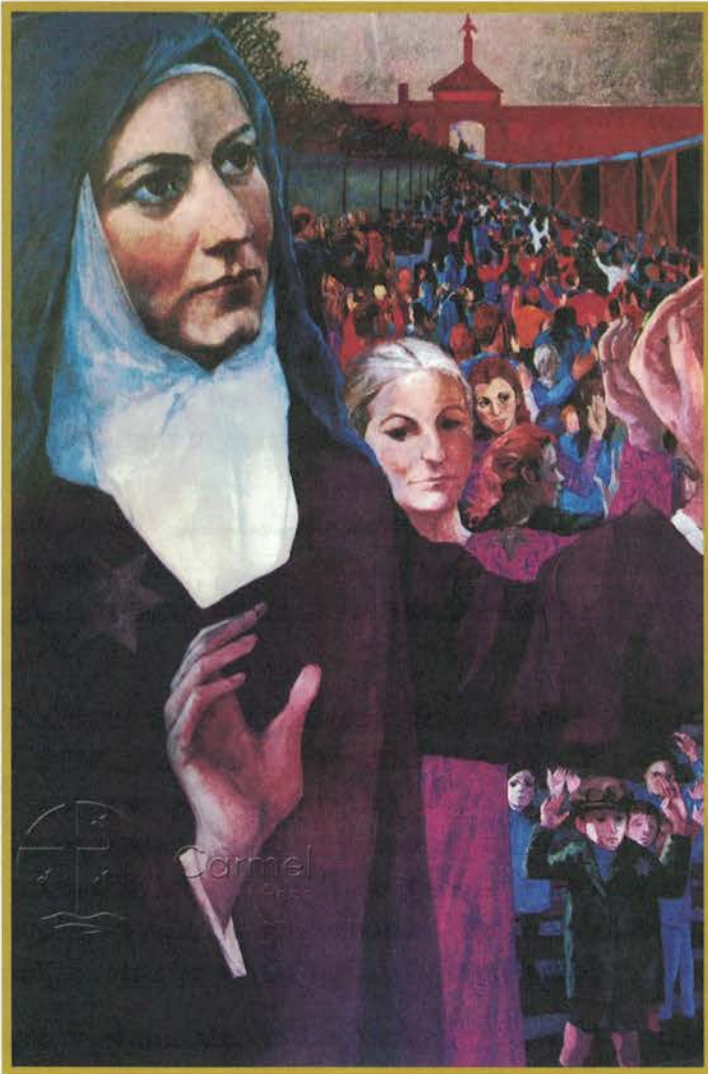
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# From the Provincial Delegate



Painting by Mother Marie Celeste, O.C.D.+ Carmel of Reno, NV.

What God asks of most of us is simply to be faithful in the circumstances in which we find ourselves, to do ordinary things with love. For the most part, the heroic and the extraordinary are not our lot. This does not mean that we are exempt from the cross, only that we grow closer to the Lord by living out the vocation he has given us, being where he wants us to be and doing what he wants us to do.

There are some, however, of whom more is asked. Let me present a Discalced Carmelite who falls into this category: St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross. Edith Stein, a Jewish atheist, was a brilliant philosopher and scholar. Upon reading the *Life* of St. Teresa she recognized the truth therein and converted to Catholicism. She then became a Carmelite nun, Sister Teresa Benedicta of the Cross. She was arrested and sent to Auschwitz where she was executed in 1942. She has been canonized by Pope John Paul II.

She once wrote: "To be a child of God means to go hand-in-hand with God, to do his will; to place our hopes and cares in his hands and no longer be concerned about one's self or future. ...Trust in God will remain unshakably firm only if it is willing to accept from the Father's hand anything and everything" (*Essential Writings*, p. 62).

It is said that, upon her arrest, St. Teresa Benedicta told her sister Rosa, "we are going for our people." She was last seen caring for the neglected, frightened children. Little did she know when she made her profession of vows that God would ask her to leave the cloister and give herself so completely.

**Yet this is precisely what she wholeheartedly did.**

Fr. Salvatore Sciorba, O.C.D.

Daughter, sister, aunt, friend,  
student, and professional.

Philosopher, *summa cum laude*.  
Educator, Author,  
Lecturer on women's issues.

Experienced discrimination as a  
woman and a Jew when she  
applied for a teaching position  
at the University of Freiburg.

Read St. Teresa of Jesus' *autobiography* in 1921.  
It is said that Edith exclaimed:  
"This is the truth."

Catholic Convert: Baptism,  
First Communion,  
Confirmation, all in 1922.

Teacher at the Grammar School  
and Teacher Training College of  
the Dominican Nuns at Speyer,  
1923-31.

Public addresses in and outside of  
Germany; translation work and  
other literary activity, 1928-32.

Lecturer at the German Institute  
for Scientific Pedagogy in Münster,  
1932-33.

Entry into the Carmel  
of Cologne, 1933.

Religious name:  
Teresa Benedicta a Cruce.  
(Teresa Blessed by the Cross)

Transfer to the Carmel  
of Echt, Holland, 1938.

Important works are written:  
*Finite and Eternal Being*;  
*The Science of the Cross*,  
1934-42.

Introduction of the Process  
of Beatification, 1962.



## Edith Stein



## Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, O.C.D.

- Born:** October 12, 1891 in Breslau (German Empire)  
on Yom Kippur, the "Day of Atonement."
- Died:** August 9, 1942 in Auschwitz, the concentration  
camp in Nazi-occupied Poland.
- Beatified:** May 1, 1987 in Cologne, Germany  
by Pope John Paul II.
- Canonized:** October 11, 1998  
by Pope John Paul II.
- Feast Day:** August 9.

*Those who seek the truth are seeking God,  
whether they know it or not.*

Top right: Edith during a summer vacation in Breslau in 1926.  
Lower left: Photograph from her passport.

# Revisiting the Life of Edith Stein

Edith Stein's life,<sup>1</sup> from early childhood until the time when she died in the Birkenau section of Auschwitz, is not different from the lives of other ordinary people. Canonized on October 11, 1998, this first Jewish-born saint lived during a period of history in which the industrial revolution had deeply permeated every aspect of society and not always influenced life-styles in the most positive way.

The economy in Germany had collapsed and there was an unemployment crisis as a result of the revolutions from 1918-20. National political stability was in trouble and society was threatened after the fall of the Bismarckian rule. Naturally, the effects of these devastating events would have a consequence on the family nucleus, and a strong backlash brought new problems which contested morality.

Edith Stein lived in one of Germany's most catastrophic times. She was born in Breslau, Silesia (Prussia) on October 12, 1891, which in that year fell on the feast of Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement). She was the eleventh and last child (four of her siblings died in infancy) of Auguste Courant and Siegfried Stein. Her family life had its sufferings and challenges as well as its joys and rewards.

After her father's sudden death, when she was only eighteen months of age, her mother undertook the responsibility for her husband's lumberyard business and managed it successfully to provide

<sup>1</sup> All biographical information in the introduction and in subsequent sections is taken from *Life in a Jewish Family and Self-Portrait in Letters* unless otherwise indicated by a citation. Please see the references on page 25.

financial stability for the family. It was her wish to see her children receive a good education, and she made this possible by furnishing the funds for a university degree for her children who desired one.

As a child, Edith was precocious and received a lot of attention from her siblings which was a great motivation for her. Her eldest brother Paul, in particular, was playful and had the ability to awaken her intellectual curiosity.

Edith's early formative years left delightful memories of family members who openly expressed their love and care for one another. She had a faithful playmate, Erna, her older sister by two years, with whom she built closer bonds than with her other siblings.

Edith began school in 1897, at the Viktoriaschule in Breslau at the age of six. She excelled in her studies, had friends and faith. It was a good time and a safe place for her. During her elementary years her mother taught her that it is better to be good than to be smart. This helped her to cope with the inequities in life such as being denied the awards that she well deserved. Nonetheless, Edith was ambitious and intense about her work.

Edith suffered a tremendous setback as an early teenager and decided to forego her studies after having succeeded academically. There was an eight year period when she considered herself an atheist and exhibited a strong will. She was sent to Hamburg where she lived with her older sister Else and her husband Dr. Max Gordon, and their two small children. After ten months of laboriously helping with the household tasks

and dealing with the difficulties in Else's marriage, Edith decided to go back to school.

She pursued her studies at the Breslau Girls' College where her reserved personality became more and more apparent. Frau Stein was concerned about Edith's ambition, her strong feminist inclination, and her rigidity. Edith was fluent in French, English, Spanish, and Latin and had a good knowledge of Greek and Hebrew. The program for the farewell party for her class included epigrams about the students. Edith's epigram read:

Let woman equal be with man,  
So loud this suffragette avers,  
In days to come we surely can  
See that a Cab'net Post is hers.

Stein, *Life in a Jewish Family*

Edith asked the principal to write a message on the back of her program. Quite prophetically he wrote, in a play of words on her surname, "Strike the stone [Stein] and treasures will gush forth" (Stein 1987b, 179). She next went to the University of Breslau for two years, 1911-13, where she concentrated her efforts in the study of experimental psychology and philosophy while also taking courses in history and literature.

Edith always enjoyed outdoor activities, especially walks in the forest and hikes in the mountains. Like any young woman, she also had her secret desires. She admits:

Though totally dedicated to my work, I still cherished in my own heart the dream of a great love and of a happy marriage. Though I had no inkling of Catholic doctrines on faith and morals, I fully espoused the Catholic ideal of matrimony. It happened, at times, that I found among my associates a young man whom I liked very much and whom I could imagine as a future life-partner. But hardly anyone was aware of this, and so I

might well appear to most persons as distinctly cool and unapproachable. (Stein 1987b, 227).

She set off for Göttingen in 1913 at the age of twenty-one, where she would study under the direction of Edmund Husserl, father of phenomenology. Edith had read his second volume of *Logical Investigations* while preparing to write a thesis for her psychology seminar. She came to the realization that psychology, as a science, still lacked an objective foundation with established basic concepts. Therefore, it required further development to be considered a true science, in her view. Edith learned that phenomenology offered the means whereby one could categorize concepts as well as analyze and describe events as one experienced them. This type of approach or system was precisely what was lacking in psychology. While at Göttingen she continued her studies in history and German literature.

In January of 1915 she took the State Examination/ *pro facultate docendi* in Philosophical Propaedeutics, History and German. Later that year, she would take a leave from her studies to volunteer for service with the Red Cross in the Military Hospital for contagious diseases at Mährisch-Weißkirchen. Edith could not see why she should be better off than those people suffering in the trenches; besides, her fellow students were in the service, too. Though her mother strongly opposed this decision, the patriotically-minded Edith went ahead without her mother's permission. Upon her return from volunteering for six months, she taught for the first time in the Breslau school system.

In 1916, Edith had completed her studies at Göttingen and was completing her dissertation *On the Problem of Empathy*. Edith was beginning to venture onto an open avenue toward success as a philosopher which would end in the knowledge



Edith in Göttingen, Winter semester 1913-14.

of the Source of all things—her recognition of the first reality and truth which is found in God alone. That same year, Husserl transferred to the University of Freiburg where he was called to the post of full professor. Unable to take her final examinations with the faculty she knew well at Göttingen, she took the examinations at Freiburg.

In early 1917, Adolf Reinach, privatdocent in philosophy, Husserl's assistant, and a friend whom Edith deeply admired, was killed in action. Edith visited Anna Reinach, who requested that she arrange Adolf's philosophical papers. Edith was afraid to encounter a sad, grieving widow and fearful of feeling the loss of Adolf's warm and kind presence. However, Edith found a woman who accepted her husband's death because she understood the mystery of the cross and its healing. Anna facilitated her change of attitude toward this tragedy. Edith recognized, through Anna's faith, that for the first time she had encountered the true meaning of the Cross

and the strength it gives those who embrace it. She said, "For the first time I saw before my eyes the Church, born of Christ's redemptive suffering, victorious over the sting of death. It was the moment in which my unbelief was shattered, Judaism paled, and Christ streamed out upon me: Christ in the mystery of the Cross" (Posselt 2005, 59).

Edith received her degree of Doctor of Philosophy, *summa cum laude*, on March 30, 1917, and shortly before that accepted work as Husserl's assistant. She helped revise his writings, making the necessary corrections that improved the expression of his philosophical thought. She taught newcomers courses in phenomenology and called these groups her Philosophical Kindergarten. Because of a difference of opinion with Edith regarding her job description, Husserl failed to recognize her contributions and was unable to consider her a collaborator. Though she had worked with great dedication and care, Edith resigned at the beginning of 1918.

Edith was searching for a professorship at the University of Göttingen. In November of 1919 she learned that her application had been ignored for over an entire year by the faculty and that her thesis had not been examined. It was a case of discrimination and "...the record makes it clear that there was more than rejection of a woman behind the move" (Stein 1987b, 418). She also made an attempt at the University of Kiel but to no avail.

Among the people she met through the philosophical circle at Göttingen, two thinkers indirectly influenced Edith's thinking: Adolf Reinach, who became a Lutheran, and Max Scheler, a Catholic. Edith trusted these people and considered their teachings important. She wrote, "I contented myself with remaining open to suggestions from my surroundings, accepting

them and being affected by them almost without noticing it" (Posselt 2005, 45). Although she was not directly pursuing questions pertaining to a belief system or faith, her mind was retaining the necessary elements that eventually led her thinking to connect with her heart. Edith's conversion was based on the unity of her intellect and an emerging spirituality which gave her a new life, a life of faith.

During the summer of 1921, Edith read *The Life of St. Teresa of Avila*. Reading the autobiography of the sixteenth-century Carmelite nun and mystic from Avila, Spain, gave Edith the resolve to convert to Catholicism.

Edith was received into the church on January 1, 1922, the day of her baptism, and also received Holy Communion for the first time in Bergzabern. On February 2, 1922, the sacrament of Confirmation was administered to her in Speyer. The most difficult thing for Edith was to let her mother, a devout Jew, know that she had become a Catholic. Her baptism would bring the greatest conflict with her mother and both would suffer greatly from Edith's decision. For Frau Stein, Edith's conversion was like the death of one of their people. For her part, Edith could not be as close to her mother, and had to bear the alienation and anguish of her mother's embitterment. Despite the fact that she converted to Catholicism, Edith still considered herself Jewish; in her own eyes she never left her people.

Edith taught at the Dominican nuns' training school, St. Magdalena, in Speyer from 1922-31, at which time she became well acquainted with the Catholic world. Her philosophical background led her to study the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas in order to examine the implications of his thinking. At the suggestion of the Jesuit philosopher-theologian Erich Przywara, Edith translated Aquinas's *De Veritate* (On Truth) into German.

Among other works Edith translated were John Cardinal Newman's *Letters and Journals* (1801-45) and *The Idea of a University*. During this time she began writing *On Potency and Act* and *Husserl and Aquinas: A Comparison* a study she prepared for Husserl's seventieth birthday.

As an intellectual, Edith recognized that the emphasis given to educate men completely ignored that women are also entitled to an education that develops their faculties. One striking contradiction in the educational system in Germany at that time was that, while universities were slowly beginning to admit women into their classrooms, they were not accepted into many of the secondary schools that would prepare them for a university (Oben 1990, 113-25). Edith concentrated her writing and speaking efforts on an analysis of woman's nature in order to create an educational system specific to the training of women for vocational occupations, professional work, and teaching careers. All of these options would be in accordance with an ethos appropriate for women (Stein 1987a, 3-42). Still at the Dominican School during this time, her position in this analysis reflected a Catholic perspective, and people realized how appropriate her ideas were for the Catholic society in Bavaria during those years.

She strongly believed that women should be prepared for the single life, regardless of whether they might marry. Her thinking was along these lines:

Edith's investigations taught her a great deal more than woman's subordination to man, and she denounced as 'deprivation proper to women' the concept of a life bound to man 'by fetters of servitude' and 'the wilting of a woman's mind in the physico-sensual life.' Some of her works on 'subordination to sex' are strikingly relevant in the light of eroticism. No woman, she maintained,



will find herself by simply being a 'rebel slave.' If it be true that 'the meaning of specifically womanly existence cannot be understood merely in terms of relationships between men and women,' and if the role of mother is essential, still neither of these relationships helps us to fully understand all that a woman is. A woman is no more meant for man than for herself. They both have a place in God's plan. (De Fabrègues 1989, 49-50)

Father Pryzwara persuaded her to lecture and arranged for speaking engagements. She reached many Catholics who were ready to listen to her ideas. Her presentations met the needs of this specific population because she provided answers to problems as she grappled with a male-oriented and materialistic society.

As Edith continued to pursue the truth, she was convinced that Catholic doctrine could be applied to people's lives. Incorporating this doctrine would bring a visible difference in the quality of the spiritual life. God is involved in people's lives and, therefore, addresses the reality of a suffering world. From 1928-32, Edith was a speaker at educational workshops and congresses in Germany and abroad (Prague, Vienna, Salzburg, Basel, Paris, Bendorf); and in 1933, she was dismissed as a lecturer by government decree because of Nazi anti-Semitism. She lectured at the German Institute for Scientific Pedagogy in Münster from 1932-33.

In the spring of 1933, Edith had hoped to arrange a private audience with Pope Pius XI and plead with him to issue an encyclical condemning the growing anti-Semitism in Germany. Because it was a Holy Year, there would be pilgrimages to Rome and her only possibility to see the pope would be with a small group. This, of course, would not have been wise in view of the nature of her request. Instead, Edith wrote the pope a letter in which she set forth her plea in detail.

Edith knew that the letter had been delivered to the Holy Father unopened because sometime thereafter she received a blessing for herself and her relatives (Batzdorf 1998, 198). At this time Adolf Hitler was head of the German fascist party and beginning forcefully to execute his plans for the elimination of the Jewish people.

Edith entered the monastery in Cologne on October 14, 1933. Six months later, on April 15, 1934, she received her religious habit and chose the name Teresia Benedicta a Cruce (Teresa Blessed by the Cross). On the morning of September 14, 1936, the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross, the nuns were celebrating the renewal of their vows. Edith had a strong sense of her mother's presence at her side during the ceremony. Later that day a telegram confirmed that, after a struggle with stomach cancer, her mother had died at the same time as the ceremony. Edith made her final profession on April 21, 1938. On May 1, 1938, she received her black veil from Bishop Stockums and late in the day of December 31, 1938, she crossed the border into Holland to live in exile with the nuns in Echt. Edith feared that if she did not leave Germany, the nuns in Cologne would suffer a reprisal from the Nazis because of her Jewish origins. She resumed her writing and in 1941 finished an article on *The Symbolic Theology of Pseudo-Dionysius*. She was also working on *The Science of the Cross*.

Edith's sister Rosa, who had converted to Catholicism years earlier and had relocated from Breslau to live near Edith, was serving as portress for the Echt monastery. The occupation of Holland by the Nazis meant that Edith and Rosa had to search for refuge again and were waiting for permission to go to Switzerland. The churches of the Netherlands were shocked by the measures being taken against the Jews excluding them from participation in public life. A pastoral letter from the Dutch Bishops was read from the pulpit



Edith Stein as a postulant wore a wedding dress as was the custom. The silk was later reworked into a vestment.

on Sunday, July 26, 1942, at all Masses, urgently requesting those in authority to dismiss the decree and not carry out its order. Because the bishops interfered, an order to deport all Catholic Jews by the end of the week was put into effect.

Edith and Rosa were arrested by the SS (abbreviation for Schutzstaffel, the Nazi elite guard) on August 2, 1942. They were interned in the transit camp at Westerbork. Edith and Rosa died in Auschwitz at the hands of the Nazis (gassed and cremated) on August 9, 1942. Edith's detainee number was 44074. Pope John Paul II beatified Edith in Cologne on May 1, 1987 and canonized her on October 11, 1998.



# OUR Edith Stein: A Mystical Life



The study of Edith Stein's life, from early childhood to her death in Auschwitz, reveals a process of transformation that affected her entire existence. This process begins when she follows a call that later proved essential to her achievements. Edith knew that she needed to persevere although she did not know where this call would lead her. The visible benefits of her commitment to this call are reflected in the transformation of her personality, the development of a profoundly meaningful spirituality, and her outreach to the world through her contemplative vocation, which is the height of the purpose of her life.

The call she perceived ultimately led her to her death as a martyr. The analysis of these events, as they unfold throughout her life, raise the question of whether she was a mystic or not. The answer, of course, will depend on how one defines mysticism.<sup>1</sup> Many assume that it must involve extraordinary phenomena such as raptures and levitations, but Carmelite saints and many others insist that such things are not essential in the journey to God. Certainly, she is a witness of the highest form of intellectual activity—a conscious relation with God—an experience of unity which connects the interior life to the reality of the outer world. Here, I would like to draw on the writings of Evelyn Underhill,<sup>2</sup> a modern-day expert on the Christian mystical tradition, and use her five criteria or categories for identifying the mystical of life of Edith Stein:

1. Mysticism is practical, not theoretical;
2. Mysticism is an entirely spiritual activity;
3. The business and method of mysticism is love;
4. Mysticism entails a definitive psychological experience; and
5. True mysticism is never self-seeking.

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<sup>1</sup> An article by James Wiseman, O.S.B., in the *New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1993) p. 681, explains the different ways "Mysticism" is defined.

<sup>2</sup> Evelyn Underhill was a scholar of mysticism and a teacher of the spiritual life. She dedicated her work to understanding and defining mysticism, an area of human development within the field of spirituality. Mysticism for her "is the name of that organic process which involves the perfect consumation of the love of God: the achievement here and now of the immortal heritage of man...It is the art of establishing his conscious relation with the Absolute" (Underhill 1990, 81).

## PRACTICAL

*(Mysticism is practical, not theoretical. Mystics tell us how they acted)*

Spiritual activity happens in the quiet depths of the person. It is the result of "the evolving strengths which culminate in an ascent to the heights" (Stein 1987b, 4). Union with God results in an understanding of the ineffable and brings changes to the one who has come to this union. However, it is not accomplished by one's merits, but solely because God has desired to grant one this union.

Edith repeatedly writes that "what happens interiorly to a person, in that person's life with God, remains hidden so that no one is to be informed of it" (Stein 1992, x). This union sheds light about situations that are happening in the sense world without revealing itself exteriorly. There is a wisdom to spiritual activity. On the one hand, it is the achievement of the ascent of heights and on the other hand, it is a simple and basic surrender. These two elements are the basic ingredients necessary for union with God. In her work on philosophical foundations of psychology, written before her conversion, she gives an example from the life of prayer in her analysis of the phenomenon of vitality. It appears to be her experience that:

There is a state of resting in God, of a complete relaxation of all mental effort, when one no longer makes any plans or decisions, where one no longer acts, but abandons all the future to the Divine Will. . . . Perhaps I have been granted this state after an experience that was too much for my powers, so that it completely absorbed my spiritual vitality and deprived me of all energy. Compared with the failure of energy for lack of vitality, resting in God is something entirely new and peculiar. The former was the stillness of death. This is now replaced by the feeling of being in a safe keeping, of being delivered from all worry, responsibility and need for action.

And while I'm giving in to this feeling, I am gradually beginning to be filled with new life and the desire for activity without any voluntary effort. This life-giving influence seems to be the result of an activity and a power not my own, which became effective in me without making any demands on my energy. The only condition of such a spiritual re-birth seems to be a certain receptivity, that has its foundation in the very structure of the person which is removed from all psychic mechanism. (Graef 1955, 30-31)

Hilda Graef writes that, although this presentation is in the context of a philosophical work, it may almost be called mystical in a larger sense. She points out the components of the mystical experience which are found in Edith's experience: the abandonment to the divine will, the passivity of both discursive reason and will, the knowledge of being in the safe-keeping of God, and the felt influence of a mysterious power clearly known as distinct from the ego and as acting without its voluntary cooperation. Graef also notes that there is nothing harmful to her, physically or mentally, as she goes through the experience. Rather, there is a revitalizing of the personality. Furthermore, the example refers to the experience being attributed to the structure of the person, that is, the mystical experience of the soul when it is transformed into God's image when there is union with God (Graef 1955, 31).

The only point which could be argued against this being interpreted as a mystical experience is the fact that Edith states it occurred after a certain stress that drained her nervous resistance. Graef explains that it seems intrinsically not improbable that God would allow such a genuine mystical experience to someone who is chosen to live the contemplative life, particularly as a way of revealing to her the source of strength and peace in her life (Graef 1955, 31-32). There is a clear understanding of what happened both physically and mentally to Edith: her soul was completely

infused with divine presence. The experience of resting in God is fitting and appropriate for such a great gift of love that unites her with the Creator.

From the story of her life, it is evident that Edith paid attention to the nuances that led her to know that spiritual activity was at work in her soul. During the summer of 1921, Edith read the autobiography of St. Teresa of Jesus and found it convincing. The elements in the situations and circumstances around her, and in her, which were growing and working to prepare her to know the truth, culminated and revealed to her at this time and place what she needed to acknowledge as the truth. It was now the beginning of the second phase of her journey, a spiritual journey with its own basic steps, but with continuous movement toward more unfolding of the truth. Edith would be assisted by discernment from this point on, yet she continued to live a practical life. Her life was now enriched as she understood the role of the Holy Spirit's guidance.

As the review of her life shows, we know that Edith had a strong sense of her mother's presence at her side during the ceremony when the nuns were renewing their vows. It was the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross, and later that day a telegram arrived with the news that her mother died at the same time as the ceremony. Edith knew that it was her mother without any doubt because this clear sense of knowing is not psychologically based. It is a knowing without any external and superficial stimuli or emotions, but a knowing that is distinct, true to reality, and a revelation that is not disputed or argued. An experience like this one is accepted for what it is: a knowing, a message that needs no further rationalization. It may have well been God's way of allowing Edith to finally surrender any grief over the relationship with her mother that had been hurt by her decision to become a Catholic. Everything was all right from that moment on. In

any event, the reality of the death of Frau Stein was made known to Edith at the precise moment it happened.

In a letter to her friend Sister Callista in 1938, Edith addressed the question of the life of mystical graces and explained the opinion of our holy parents, St. Teresa of Jesus and St. John of the Cross, the reformers of the Carmelite order. She concluded this segment of the letter by expressing her thought: "Anyway, I think there is more security in doing all one can to become an empty vessel for divine grace. 'Tear your heart away from all things. Seek God, and you will find him.' (Maxim of our Holy Mother)" (Stein 1993, 286). Edith was writing about her own experience, her transition from the life of the senses to the life of the spirit. She expressed it so well because she knew that it required great effort and constancy to reach higher places (Underhill 1990, 83). It is the act of surrendering to that movement toward God that cannot be stopped when the call is imminent.

She wrote to Sister Agnella in 1940 about the recognition of guidance and how one should go forward with the pursuit of perfect love. Her explanation is written in a practical way:

Should we strive for perfect love, you ask? Absolutely. For this we were created. [Perfect love] will be our eternal life, and here we have to seek to come as close as possible. Jesus became incarnate in order to be our way. What can we do? Try with all our might to be empty: the senses mortified; the memory as free as possible from all images of this world and, through hope, directed toward heaven; the understanding stripped of natural seeking and ruminating, directed to God in the straightforward gaze of faith; the will (as I have already said) surrendered to God in love.

This can be said very simply, but the work of an entire life would not attain the goal were God not to do the most essential. In the meantime we may be confident that he will not fail to give grace if we

faithfully do the little we can do—the little taken absolutely, is for us a great deal. And while we are about it, we have to be careful not to wish to judge for ourselves how far we have come. Only God knows that. (Stein 1993, 318-19)

## **SPIRITUAL ACTIVITY**

*(Mysticism is an entirely spiritual activity)*

Edith's friend Fritz Kaufmann was seeking advice and she explained how he should strive for spiritual activity by beginning with a basic *modus operandi*:

Become like a child and lay your life with all the searching and ruminating into the Father's hand. If that cannot yet be achieved, then plead; plead with the unknown and doubted God for help in reaching it. Now you look at me with amazement that I do not hesitate to come to you with wisdom as simple as that of a child. It is wisdom because it is simple, and all the mysteries are concealed in it. And it is a way that most certainly leads to the goal. (Stein 1993, 51)

Because God is the initiator of this process, each person is led on an individual path and reaches different levels of spiritual maturity in different ways and times. Listening intensely to one's interior voice is important. It allows one the freedom to make oneself available and transparent before God. Edith expressed this very well:

We can do very little ourselves, compared to what is done to us. But that little bit we must do. Primarily, this consists before all else of persevering in prayer to find the right way, and of following without resistance the attraction of grace when we feel it. Whoever acts in this way and perseveres patiently will not be able to say that his efforts were in vain. But one may not set a deadline for the Lord. (Stein 1993, 101)

Doing that little bit and persevering must then lead one to observing a practice of spending

time in the presence of the Lord. God desires to be with one and is pleased with one's response because it is for one's benefit. Edith wrote:

The Lord is present in the tabernacle in his divinity and in his humanity. He is not present for his own sake but for ours: it is his delight to be with the 'children of men.' He knows, too, every thoughtful and sensitive person will feel attracted and will be there as often and as long as possible. And the practice of the church, which has instituted perpetual adoration, is just as clear. (Stein 1993, 141)

Proper spiritual work absorbs the total person and gathers together all things with the divine. There is a transformation insofar as joy and happiness are reflected from the one who is in union with God. Edith was spending numerous hours in prayer and was clearly so close to God that prayer did not tire her. Students and teachers at the Dominican School were aware of the time she spent motionless before the tabernacle. Oftentimes she would not leave the chapel and would be found in the exact same place when someone returned later in the evening. There was a simplicity and a gentleness in her complete attention to what was happening to her during prayer. She never spoke about it; rather, she kept it as her secret.

Although Edith never spoke about her interior life, it is clear that she had a strong awareness of the spiritual movement that was active and in constant motion. She was convinced that there were immense graces during the hours spent in inner prayer and that the work God does in the soul simply cannot be quantified or qualified. The mystical experience is of utmost importance because it elevates one's consciousness into more profound stages of knowing. It integrates and sets one's faculties in order, thus allowing one to externalize spiritual truths because there has been a union with God. There is no greater value in life than to know God.

The mystic realizes that synchronicity exists between the interior and the exterior—they are a parallel and simultaneous movement. As quiet activity happens interiorly, there is also conscious activity happening exteriorly (directly related to the interior activity). Edith writes: "For those blessed souls who have entered into the unity of life in God, everything is one: rest and activity, looking and acting, silence and speaking, listening and communicating, surrender in loving acceptance and an outpouring of love in grateful songs of praise" (Stein 1992, 16).

There is a direct action corresponding to everything that happens interiorly. One must listen carefully and in silent contemplation for many hours to the Word of God until it moves one, in God's chosen way, to bear fruit through action. Edith observes, "As long as we are still on the way—and the farther away from the goal the more intensely—we are still subject to temporal laws, and are instructed to actualize in ourselves, one after the other and all the members complementing each other mutually, the divine life in all its fullness" (Stein 1992, 16).

Edith knew that authentic prayer is the prayer of the church. Through prayer something happens in the church because the church itself is praying. As Edith prayed she was aware that she was a part of the church. She writes, "The soul that has achieved the highest level of mystical prayer and entered into the 'calm activity of divine life' no longer thinks of anything but of giving itself to the apostolate to which God has called it" (Stein 1992, 16).

## LOVE

*(The business and method of mysticism is love)*

Edith's reserved and quiet manner attracted children. When her nephew Helmut had pneumonia at age four, he was recovering in the room adjacent to Edith's study. He would call for



Edith with a young relative, 1921.

her and ask her to bring her homework with her. He wanted her to come to his bedside and would let her know that she did not have to work. He enjoyed playing with her and became attached to her. When Edith's sister Erna became engaged, Helmut asked Edith, "Will you be my bride?" She replied "Yes," sat him on her lap and gave him some of her cake, saying that a bride and groom had to share everything. He liked what she said very much but suddenly became alarmed because he had eaten cake at his home earlier and did not give her any. He then justified himself by telling her that she was not his bride at that time.

He would give her little projects he had made in kindergarten and occasionally check how many he had given her by looking into the chest where she kept them. His fantasy of marrying Edith went on for several years. At age seven, he became ill again, and Edith took over complete care of him. When his mother brought him something to eat, he would ask her to leave because he did not need two people. This relationship was close and loving. Edith had a disposition that was open to love. She could receive it without difficulty from her nieces and nephews and could give it where it was called for and appropriate. This ability to

relate to people reflects her goodness and speaks of a non-selfish personality.

Those who did not know her well described her as shy and distant when she was a teenager: "She had become more silent, though she never excluded herself from the social life of her school friends" (Graef 1955, 9). She developed a detachment from persons or events, a true inner freedom from outside controls. This allowed her to maintain objectivity and emotional equilibrium. It is known that "her friendship was sought because she had a reputation for being discreet, averse to gossip" (Graef 1955, 9). When Edith made friends, she kept them for life, kept in touch with as many people as she could throughout the years, and sincerely appreciated them.

Her sensitive personality was touched by other's pain. Understanding suffering opens one's soul and thus allows one to be sympathetic and helpful toward others. Edith's decision to serve as a volunteer for the Red Cross was an act that not only proved her patriotism but speaks of her caring nature. She was compelled to help those who were in need and she was not going to turn away from helping them. It was of primary importance for her to be of assistance at such a time. In her autobiography she makes reference to the recovery of her patients, as if she had a personal relationship with them (Stein1987b, 105).

Her comments suggest a sense of responsibility and genuine concern, because even though these people were not her friends, Edith saw them as important and approached them with respect. She was asked to cleanse the mouth of a particular patient with a small cloth whenever she passed by his bed. A look from him always expressed his gratitude for this small service of love (Stein 1987b, 325).



Edith with the nursing staff in the Moravian Weisskirchen Military Hospital.

As a teacher she worked successfully with her pupils. She was careful, deliberate, and warm to those with whom she worked:

Edith Stein regarded education as a form of apostolate, and generously devoted herself to the needs of her students—the girls at the secondary school, the students at the Teacher Training Institute, the Dominican teacher candidates and novices. Their own testimonies bear this out: 'She rapidly won the student's hearts, serving us all as a shining example with an influence that has lasted down to the present day. Modest and unassuming, she went about her work basically unseen and unheard, always equally friendly and ready to be of help.' (Herbstrith 1985, 37)



Dr. Lucy Gelber, in the introduction to *Essays on Woman*, states that “the fruitfulness of her profession as a teacher was secured by her balanced temperament, her genuine knowledge, and her impersonal love for her pupils” (Stein, 1987b, 3).

These brief anecdotes are not about superficial demonstrations of affection or emotion. They are exhibitions of silent love that actively played a role in a situation that was either short or long term. It was a love that was generous and consistent and which brought wellness into the physical world. It was motivated by a heart that desired to serve the Source of that exterior demonstration of love—the love of God that had found a home in Edith’s heart. The driving force (God’s love) was eager, through Edith’s personality, to accomplish a small mission like caring for a child in illness or instructing students throughout an academic year. There was humility in the manner in which her service for another played itself out. It was not conceited, arrogant, or self-important. It was detached—a pure expression of giving without any strings attached whatsoever.

Beyond the service that Edith gave in the world, she knew her call was of a greater nature. By leaving all behind, she would be able to serve in a realm that was different from meeting the needs of others on a daily basis in a physical and tangible way. Her way of loving and serving would come through her contemplative vocation. To stand before God in intercession for those in most need, whom she did not know, was her call. This is her obedience to the source of love in her heart—listening to the inner voice and acting accordingly to what was requested. In 1932, Edith wrote to her friend Anneliese in response to a question she had about vocations:

There is a vocation to suffer with Christ and thereby to cooperate with him in his work of salvation.

When we are united with the Lord, we are members of the mystical body of Christ. Christ lives on in his members and continues to suffer in them. And the suffering borne in union with the Lord is his suffering, incorporated in the great work of salvation and fruitful therein. That is a fundamental premise of all religious life, above all of the life of Carmel, to stand proxy for sinners through voluntary and joyous suffering, and to cooperate in the salvation of humankind. (Stein 1993, 128)

This response was written ten years before her death in Auschwitz. To cooperate with human salvation by withstanding suffering is redemptive. Edith understood suffering intellectually because, through a mystical love, she had developed a movement towards God that was direct and clear and not blocked by needs that were psychological or physical. Rather, mystical love was a more accessible way of knowing God’s desire and some of his ways rooted in a wisdom not of the world.

While Edith was at the concentration camp in Westerbork, en route to Auschwitz, she made herself available to those in need. A Jewish businessman who escaped deportation wrote:

Among the prisoners who arrived on 5 August Sister Benedicta made a striking impression by her great calm and composure. The misery in the camp and the excitement among the newcomers were indescribable. Sister Benedicta walked about among the women, comforting, helping, soothing like an angel. Many mothers were almost demented and had for days not been looking after their children, but had been sitting brooding in listless despair. Sister Benedicta at once took care of the poor little ones, washed and combed them, and saw to it that they got food and attention. As long as she was in the camp she made washing and cleaning one of her principal charitable activities, so that everyone was amazed. (Graef 1955, 229)



Edith Stein during her time in Speyer.

Two of the short letters that reached the nuns in Echt were written from Westerbork. On August 4, 1942, Drente-Westerbork, Barracks 36, Edith wrote: "Now we have a chance to experience a little how to live purely from within" (Stein 1993, 351). Two days later, her note had one simple request from the nuns, "I would like the next volume of the breviary (so far I have been able to pray gloriously)" (Stein 1993, 353).

Edith had learned to trust and forget herself and did as much as she could until the very end. This, however, did not mean that she did not suffer and feel deep sorrow, but that she managed her suffering in a different way. Another witness wrote:

The great difference between Edith Stein and the other sisters lay in her silence. My personal

impression is that she was most deeply sorrowful, but without anxiety. I cannot express it better than by saying that she gave the impression of bearing such an enormous load of sorrow that even when she did smile it only made one more sorrowful. She hardly ever spoke, but she often looked at her sister Rosa with indescribable sadness. . . . She was thinking of the sorrow she foresaw, not her own sorrow, for that she was far too calm, she thought of the sorrow that awaited the others. Her whole appearance, as I picture her in my memory sitting in that hut, suggested only one thought to me: a Pietá without Christ. (Graef 1955, 229)

### PSYCHOLOGICAL

*(Mysticism entails a definite psychological experience)*

Edith wrote "During my early years, I was mercurially lively, always in motion, spilling over with pranks, impertinent and precocious, and, at the same time, intractably stubborn and angry if anything went against my will" (Stein 1987b, 73). When her sister Else's child training techniques failed, she locked Edith in a dark room where she screamed and pounded on the door until her mother set her free. She was very sensitive and would dwell on events for days.

The sight of a drunkard, for instance, would haunt her. Years later she decided to abstain from alcohol to "avoid being personally responsible for losing even the smallest particle of my freedom of spirit and my human dignity" (Stein 1987b, 74). Talk of murder would keep her awake and events that had any thrill to them would bring about outbursts of "nerves." Edith had to be protected from over-excitement.

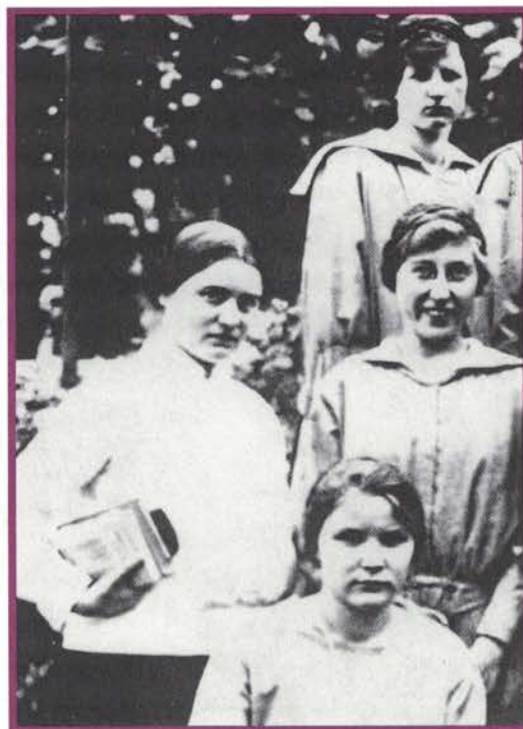
She had a mind of her own and was extremely determined to get her way. (These can be strong traits for the youngest in a family who more characteristically can be calm and less easily aggravated by other's teasing. However,

the youngest can tend to be more spoiled and protected.) "In my dreams," she wrote, "I always foresaw a brilliant future for myself. I dreamed about happiness and fame for I was convinced that I was destined for something great and that I did not belong at all in the narrow, bourgeois circumstances into which I had been born" (Stein 1987b, 77).

She did not confine her world in any way, and the sky truly was the limit for her. She was ambitious, hard working, and had a strong feminist bent. All of her desires and attitudes would have to come into balance, both in strength and temperament, in order for the real person to emerge. It certainly would not happen overnight but would be the result of a long process of conversion and the practice of faith.

One night after a party, Edith's friend Hugo Hermesen walked her home. He told her: "Well, I wish you the good fortune of finding in Göttingen people who will satisfy your taste. Here you seem to have become far too critical" (Stein 1987b, 195). This comment astonished her because nobody ever criticized her. Edith reflected on this comment:

So I had been living in a naive conviction that I was perfect. This is frequently the case with persons without any faith who live in an exalted ethical idealism. Because one is enthused about what is good, one believes oneself to be good. I had always considered it my privilege to make remarks about everything I found negative, inexorably pointing out the other persons' weaknesses, mistakes, or faults of which I became aware, often using a ridiculing or sarcastic tone of voice. There were persons who found me 'enchantingly malicious.' So these words of farewell from a man whom I esteemed and loved caused me acute distress. I was not angry with him for saying them. Nor did I shrug them off as an



Edith Stein as instructor in the garden of the St. Magdalene's Convent with boarding students.

undeserved reproach. They were for me a first alert to which I gave much reflection. (Stein 1987b, 195)

After her conversion, Edith still maintained a rigidity that made her unapproachable to some. Her students complained about it, and one in particular "who felt drawn to religious life, wanted to discuss the matter with her; but when she was actually before her door she was so nervous that she turned back without having asked her" (Graef 1955, 41).

Another student felt that Edith was too far above them—too clever and too great a personality—so that they shied away. In general an exterior demonstration of ease and joy were lacking in her disposition. Graef points out that Edith "had not yet fully fathomed the mystery of the glorious freedom of the children of God" (Graef 1955, 41).

Another student once hurt her right wrist the day before she had to write an essay. She believed that the accident would excuse her from writing

the essay. However, Edith told her, "Well, then you will try with your left hand." The girl was dumbfounded but realized that if Edith had been in her place she would not have excused herself but simply used her other hand. This same student found Edith's comments on her paper sarcastic, making her feel that she could not live up to her teacher's standards. She had used many citations to adorn her essay and Edith wrote, "The use of quotations proves that other people are clever" (Graef 1955, 42).

Edith was accustomed to working in a style that was not expected of young girls because, after all, she had a serious university career and graduated with the highest honors and distinction. She was, perhaps, not even aware that she was cold when she taught and directed the girls. However "she did give them assignments that were fitting to their age and their interest. She was available to whomever needed a listening ear, was kind to them, and never was impatient" (Graef 1955, 43-44).

Edith's cool and reserved ways were a very personal matter and were never directed against any of her students. The reasons for this behavior were in part her upbringing, her self-imposed discipline in order to succeed as a student, and her detachment, which kept her free from exterior controls. Edith would eventually become light-hearted and less rigid in her exterior demeanor.

The more Edith comprehended the mystery of the Cross and embraced it as her own, the more her mind could expand and open to areas of intellect that previously were foreign to her. Edith eventually lived from the center of her being, and her view of life was generated from this center. She had learned to rely on a strength that was unshakable and did not allow her to be disturbed.

The quality *not to be disturbed*, by events or circumstances which are not always pleasant in one's life, is not egotistical behavior; rather, it is the result of a transformation that comes from prayer. Her numerous hours in prayer healed the dysfunctions of the ego and aligned her behavior with the authentic being she was created to be. Her ability to grow consciously toward God allowed her to adapt by releasing anything in her personality that would prevent her from this turning toward the center.

She had a free and open mind and was a critical thinker. In a letter to Mother Callista, at the College Marianum, in 1932, she gives some advice:

I would not dodge the question of sex—on the contrary, one ought to be glad when a spontaneous opportunity arises to speak honestly and clearly on the subject, since it simply will no longer do to send the girls out into the world without having taught them about sex. But one must choose [the topics] carefully, avoiding sultry eroticism. However, teaching the elementary facts of life and their meaning, honestly as well as realistically, is far from dangerous. Of course, should you have totally ignorant children among your students, even this may precipitate a crisis; you have to know your class and treat them accordingly. (Stein 1993, 121)

Edith knew that maturity was not always a function of age and was aware of the harm that could be done when a person is not ready to listen to facts. She knew this not only about the importance of proper education, as in instruction on sex, but in confronting another's problems and faults because "criticism can be understood only when truth dawns from within" (Stein 1993, 125-26).

Mystical experience does have an effect on the person. A change in one's behavior stems from an awareness of the Absolute. A vision of the Absolute causes a psychological modification in

which the limited being is shaped in a unique manner with fewer interferences regarding its knowledge of reality. Edith changed so much that she wrote: "The question of whether I have accustomed myself to the solitude made me smile. For most of my life I have had much more solitude than I have here. I miss nothing that is outside, and have everything I lacked there; therefore I must be grateful for the entirely unmerited, immense grace of my vocation" (Stein 1993, 199).

### **NEVER SELF-SEEKING**

*(True mysticism is never self-seeking)*

One outstanding quality in the life of Edith was her pursuit of the truth. To know the truth was most important to her. It was the driving force behind her determination to be a serious student. She mastered the subjects that she was required to learn and the more she learned, the more she needed to continue to explore. Her intellectual capacity, as we know, was exceptional. By developing her intellectual ability, she gradually paved the road that would lead her to know the truth.

This truth has two dimensions: First, it is the truth that Christians know as Christ living within and as Creator of all. Second, it is the truth that Christ was directing her life in a specific way, which is different from the way others may be led. In following through with the decisions that she made, the truth slowly started to reveal itself in Edith's life. It was a matter of constancy and careful thinking about the events that were happening to her personally. In life all around her, she finally understood how truth itself was leading her. She would be led deeper and deeper into the mystery of God's work in her life. This is the individual and exclusive experience of the mystic as one who listens to the inward movement that is ever so subtle and ever so revealing of one's purpose in this life.

She attended the University at Göttingen where she made friends with the elite circle of philosophers, some of whom were to become prominent figures in the world of philosophy. Most important, some of these people whom she admired and trusted were surrounding her with Christian ideas and doctrines. Initially, it did not lead her to faith but to a region of phenomena which she could not pass by blindly. Edith writes about the influence that this period had in her life and how it affected her beyond the sphere of philosophy:

With good reason we were repeatedly enjoined to observe all things without prejudice, to discard all possible 'blindness.' The barriers of rationalistic prejudices with which I had unwittingly grown up fell, and the world of faith unfolded before me. Persons with whom I associated daily, whom I esteemed and admired, lived in it. At the least, they deserved my giving it some serious reflection. For the time being, I did not embark on a systematic investigation of the questions of faith; I was far too busy with other matters. I was content to accept without resistance the stimuli coming from my surroundings, and so, almost without noticing it, became gradually transformed. (Stein 1987b, 260-61)

The influence of these people and what they were teaching served as the seeds that ultimately grew and flourished interiorly in Edith's being. She was changing without realizing it. Her decisions began to be based upon her thoughts and feelings regarding what she encountered in her immediate environment.

For Edith, decisions could no longer be made from a purely rational standpoint or out of convenience. She began to surrender to the promptings of what was right for her. She developed a listening to an already existing interior knowledge which, together with a conscious, rational assessment of the circumstances at hand, at that particular time

and place, allowed her choices to be appropriate for her. A clear example of her decision-making is when Edith asked Husserl to give her a theme for her doctoral dissertation. She was familiar with Scheler's writings on *Phenomenology and Theory of the Feelings of Sympathy* and became interested in the phenomena of empathy. He agreed that she should work on the matter although he required a specific format for the dissertation. Edith understood sympathy and was not satisfied with leaving her knowledge at that level. She wanted to examine what the experience of empathy consisted of.

She was intellectually ready to pursue more but was also motivated by an interior sense of what implications this phenomenon had in people's lives. She had returned from volunteering for the Red Cross and felt that there were many human problems pressing her (Stein 1987b, 376). This experience opened her to the immediate needs of those suffering and to the complexities of the medical profession with all its human frailties and good intentions. She now had to look at the problem of empathy from the very beginning and leave aside all material and sources that she had previously used. When she sat down to work, she felt as if:

I was like a tiny dot in limitless space. Would anything come to me out of this great expanse—anything which I could grasp? I lay as far back as I could in my chair and strenuously focused my mind on what at the moment I deemed the most vital question. After a while, it seemed as though light began to dawn. Then I was able, at least, to formulate a question and to find ways to attack it. And as soon as one point came clear, new questions arose in various directions. . . . Page after page was filled. The writing would bring a rosy glow to my face, and an unfamiliar feeling of happiness surged through me. When I was called to dinner I returned, as it were, from some distant world. Exhausted yet exhilarated I



Photograph of Edith's passport.

went downstairs. I was amazed at all the knowledge I now had about things of which I had been totally unaware a few hours earlier. I was delighted to have so many attached threads which I would be able to pick up later.

However, every day I felt that the ability to continue my work was like a new gift. And continue I did—for nearly three months at one stretch. Then I had the sensation that something had detached itself from me and formed an existence of its own. (Stein 1987b, 377)

She read the autobiography of St. Teresa of Jesus and followed through with this moment of revelation by doing the practical things necessary to become a Catholic. She went out the next day to buy a missal and a Catholic catechism to prepare herself to be baptized and to receive Holy Communion which took place on January 1, 1922. An acquaintance of the Stein's spoke about Edith after she had let her family know about her conversion. She said:

I am convinced that the change which had taken place in Edith, and which lit up her whole being with supernatural radiance, disarmed Frau Stein. As a God-fearing woman, she sensed, without realizing it, the holiness radiating from her daughter, and though her suffering was excruciating she clearly

recognized her helplessness before the mystery of grace. We could all see at a glance that Edith had become another person, though she clung to her people with as much love as before and did everything possible to prevent any alteration in their relationships. (Posselt 1952, 66-67)

On one occasion Edith could not enter the building where she was living at the Collegium Marianum when she was a lecturer at the German Institute for Educational Theory in Münster, 1933. She spent the night with a couple who lived nearby and engaged in a conversation with the husband. He explained what the American newspapers were publishing regarding the atrocities committed against the Jews. Edith was aware of how this news was affecting her. She thought to herself, "I had heard of rigorous measures against the Jews before. But now it dawned on me that once again God had put a heavy hand upon his people, and that the fate of this people would also be mine" (Posselt 2005, 115). Edith was sensitive enough not to tell this man that she was a Jew. She knew that it would violate a law of hospitality and would upset his rest that night. Under other circumstances, she would not have hesitated to explain her position on the matter (Posselt 2005, 115).

In a letter in 1938 to Mother Petra Brüning, Edith wrote about her trust in her mother who would watch over her siblings. She commented, "And [I also trust] in the Lord's having accepted my life for all of them. I keep having to think of Queen Esther who was taken from among her people precisely that she might represent them before the king. I am a very poor and powerless little Esther, but the King who chose me is infinitely great and merciful. That is such a great comfort" (Stein 1993, 291). Edith asked her brother-in-law, Hans Biberstein, in a letter in 1939: "I wonder: will we live to see the events of our days become 'history'? I have a great desire to see all this sometime in the light of



Last picture of Edith Stein. Spring or Summer 1942.

eternity. For one realizes ever more clearly how blind we are toward everything" (Stein 1993, 315). She had no idea how God would use her life or what her destiny would be. Edith would make history. She had a practical sense of what was happening as she saw her relatives emigrate to the United States.

After Edith was arrested by the SS, a small picture was found in her cell. On the back she had written her desire to sacrifice her life for the conversion of Jews. This item was lost; however, a request written to the Prioress written on an old post card remains. It reads:

Passion Sunday, 26 March 1939.

Dear Mother,  
Please, will your Reverence allow me to offer myself to the Heart of Jesus as a sacrifice of propitiation for true peace: that the dominion of Antichrist may collapse, if possible, without a new world war, and that a new order may be established? I would like it [my request] granted this very day because it is the twelfth hour. I know that I am nothing, but Jesus desires it, and surely He will call many others to do likewise in these days.

Edith Stein, (Posselt 2005, 212).

## SOME THOUGHTS AND REFLECTIONS

The study and interpretation of the life of Edith Stein brings up many new questions about her, particularly because she is someone who lived a profound spiritual life, a realm that is not tangible to a very factual and material world. As Underhill defined the five categories, there is sufficient evidence to sustain that her experience, as we know from her biography, letters, and secondary sources, was in line with what is expected in mystical experience.

However, in the first category, "mysticism is practical and not theoretical," it seems that the definition requires more intense experiences than what is known to us about her. Would that be different if Edith had lived longer? Different if she had completed the writing of her biography? Different if her personality had not been as reserved and she had been able to speak about the inner secrets of her life? These questions are all speculative.

The expectation of finding mystical experiences similar to the ones St. Teresa of Jesus, St. John of the Cross, and St. Francis of Assisi experienced was not met. Her scholarship reflects the way in which she directed her inner thoughts and feelings. Writing was the medium she used most comfortably to express her most profound experience of God—her union with God—her understanding of the mystery of the cross.

She left valuable writings which are a great contribution to the Catholic faith. Edith was a modern woman who through many activities was able to experience life fully. She was the daughter of a woman who worked hard as a single provider to maintain her family. Edith knew the value of family life. She was an excellent student, a philosopher, a teacher and lecturer, a prolific writer, a friend, a good sister to her siblings, a loving aunt, a nun, a martyr, and a saint. Perhaps

she was meant to live intensely in this way, with many varied but focused professions and activities. Perhaps the more ecstatic mystical experiences were not as essential for the purpose and mission of her life. And perhaps through her fine poetry Edith was able to interpret for us the vision of the dimension of absolute reality—her effort to enlighten our minds.

Edith writes about the spiritual inner activity and the lived outer activity occurring simultaneously, working in synchronicity (Stein 1992, 16). Using her analysis, the movement in the experiences of her spiritual life can easily be translated from one category to another, simply because the interrelatedness is so strong. Movement does not only have to be vertical but can also be horizontal. Therefore, Edith's experiences can be applied in more than one way throughout the categories, depending on what one is studying.

Her discernment was alive and constantly giving her the perception to know that her call was near and that it was a great one. The four last categories demonstrate the consistency with which she followed her call. In "mysticism as an entirely spiritual activity," Edith's primary interest is the communion that reaches out to the community. She advises some and prays for many hours.

The "business and method of mysticism is love." What Edith does throughout her life to find and give love is seen from her basic acts of charity with patients to her total self-abandonment to assist the children in the concentration camps. Her way of achieving her goal of love is through service. Her yearning to be a complete person is expressed through love towards others in whom she sees the reflection of her true and only Love.

"Mysticism entails a definite psychological experience. Awareness of one's broken nature ignites a desire to be whole and integrated. To want



all our mental and spiritual faculties in balance is a healthy and natural inclination. The work of coming together, however, is not accomplished by one's good intentions alone. The work of letting go of the ways in which one is accustomed to function and applying new behaviors, more conducive to a sound life, require openness to grace, and a willingness to go through a life-long process of continual renewal, and believing that the hidden unconscious forces do integrate as they are liberated and become conscious to a person. Edith became more and more free from her personality traits and demonstrated a lighter and simpler heart. She changed.

"Mysticism is never self-seeking." Edith always searched for "the truth." This was her tireless journey, this was the pursuit she never gave up. She explored many sources, traveled through many stages of development, and set a pattern in her life by which she would travel towards the center of all things. Without manipulation or bargaining techniques, she surrendered and entered the process wholeheartedly without looking for self-gain except for union.

A teacher throughout her life, she was a woman who, because of her brilliant explanation of the Catholic faith, made an immense contribution to propagating and safeguarding religious instruction. Edith is a teacher of the faith, a learned and holy woman who could become a candidate for Doctor of the Church. Edith Stein lived a mystical life.

Her martyrdom unites her deeply to Jesus. We may have touched upon the surface of what her death really means but cannot know the totality of its depth and breath. So much of the mystery behind her life is yet to be revealed to us. Her faith and determination took her to this unplanned moment in her life in a distinct historical time. Her faith united to Jesus certainly is a collaboration



Icon of Edith Stein written by the Carmel of the Theotokos, Harissa, Lebanon; distributed by the Postulation General of the Discalced Carmelite Order, Rome, Italy. The icon depicts Edith Stein/Teresa Benedicta of the Cross holding the traditional Jewish prayer shawl, or *tallit*, removing her sandals before the burning bush. She is shown with her Carmelite mantle grafted onto the Jewish olive tree stock from which Jesus was born. She holds the cross, symbolic of blessing in the New Covenant, of her title in religion "blessed by the Cross," and of her own journey to the cross and resurrection through her death in the Holocaust.

with the plan of salvation through her death at Auschwitz—the Holocaust. She was Jewish (she never left her people, but brought them with her), a Catholic (the universal church that reaches to all peoples regardless of their faith or status in life) and a Carmelite (dedicated to the mission that St. Teresa of Jesus instituted in the Order, to pray for the needs of the church).

The name Edith means rich gift. Much was given to Edith. Much was expected from Edith. Edith did not disappoint God. She gave her all to God.

Mary Edith Rodriguez-Harrington, O.C.D.S.

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# Canonization: October 11, 1998

*For the honor of the Blessed Trinity, the exaltation of the Catholic faith and the fostering of the Christian life, by the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ, of the holy Apostles Peter and Paul, and our own, after due deliberation and frequent prayers for the divine assistance, and having sought the counsel of our Brother Bishops, we declare and define that Bl. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, Edith Stein, is a saint and we enroll her among the saints, decreeing that she is to be venerated in the whole Church as one of the saints. In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.*

With these solemn words pronounced in Latin on Sunday, 11 October, Pope John Paul II canonized St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, Edith Stein, a Jewish philosopher, convert to the Catholic faith, Carmelite nun and martyr at Auschwitz. The canonization took place during a solemn concelebrated Mass in St. Peter's Square. After the Gospel text (Jn. 4:19-24) was chanted in Latin and Greek, the Holy Father gave the following homily in Italian and German. "Far be it from me to glory except in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Gal 6:14). Pope John Paul II quoted St. Paul's words to the Galatians to express the human and spiritual experience of Teresa Benedicta of the Cross. He described the cross of Christ as an ever blossoming tree that continues to bear new fruits of salvation. He also spoke of believers that look with confidence to the Cross and draw from its mystery of love the courage and strength to walk faithfully in the footsteps of the crucified and risen Christ. Thus the message of the Cross enters the hearts of so many men and women and changes their lives.

The spiritual experience of Edith Stein, explained the pope, is an eloquent example of this extraordinary interior renewal. "A young woman in search of the truth has become a saint and martyr through the silent workings of divine grace: Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, who from heaven repeats to us today all the words that marked her life: 'Far be it from me to glory except in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.'" Eleven years after beatifying this generous witness to the faith in the city of Cologne, the pope, in St. Peter's Square, presented this "eminent daughter of Israel and faithful of the church as a saint to the whole world." Bowing to the memory of Edith Stein, the pope proclaimed the indomitable witness she bore during her life and especially by her death. "Now alongside Teresa of Avila and Thérèse of Lisieux, another Teresa takes her place among the host of saints who do honor to the Carmelite Order. Dear brothers and sisters who have gathered for this solemn celebration, let us give glory to God for what he has accomplished in Edith Stein."

As he recalled the past events in the history of the Jewish people, the pope spoke of the Catholic Jews who were taken to the concentration camp in Auschwitz where they died in the gas chambers. "Today we remember them all with deep respect." The pope spoke about Edith Stein's dismissal of the question regarding a possible rescue a few days before her deportation. She felt she should gain no advantage from her baptism and said that if she could not share the lot of her brothers and sisters, her life, in a sense, was destroyed. He asked that as we celebrate the memory of this new saint from year to year, we also remember the Shoah,

"that cruel plan to exterminate a people, a plan to which millions of our Jewish brothers and sisters fell victim. May the Lord let his face shine upon them and grant them peace" (Nm 6:25).

"For the love of God and man," the pope pleaded emphatically, "once again I raise an anguished cry: May such criminal deeds never be repeated against any ethnic group, against any race, in any corner of this world! It is a cry to everyone: to all people of goodwill; to all who believe in the Just and Eternal God; to all who know they are joined to Christ, the Word of God made man." He urged all to stand together because "human dignity is at stake." Acknowledging that there is only one human family, he remembered the words of the new saint who also insisted that: "Our love of neighbor is the measure of our love of God. For Christians and not only for them no one is a 'stranger.' The love of Christ knows no borders."

"The love of Christ was the fire that inflamed the life of St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross," said the pope as he explained that in the beginning Edith Stein devoted herself to freedom. She had always been a seeker whose mind never tired in searching and whose heart always yearned for hope. She traveled the arduous path of philosophy with passionate enthusiasm. "Eventually she was rewarded: she seized the truth. Or better: she was seized by it. Then she discovered that truth had a name: Jesus Christ. From that moment on, the incarnate Word was her One and All." As she looked back as a Carmelite on this period of her life, John Paul II said that she wrote to a Benedictine nun: "Whoever seeks the truth is seeking God, whether consciously or unconsciously." He reminded the audience that although Edith Stein had been brought up religiously by her Jewish mother, at the age of 14 she "had consciously and deliberately stopped praying." She wanted to rely exclusively on herself 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."

He acknowledged that Edith Stein faced the challenges of the radically changing twentieth century. "Her experience," he said, "is an example to us. The modern world boasts of the enticing door which says: everything is permitted. It ignores the narrow gate of discernment and renunciation." He emphasized this point to all young Christians, particularly to the many altar servers who were on pilgrimage by saying: "Pay attention! Your life is not an endless series of open doors! Listen to your heart! Do not stay at the surface, but go to the heart of things! And when the time is right, have the courage to decide! The Lord is waiting for you to put your freedom in his good hands."

St. Teresa Benedicta understood that the love of Christ and human freedom are intertwined, said the Holy Father, because love and truth have an intrinsic relationship. Moreover, the quest for truth and its expression in love did not seem at odds to her; on the contrary, she realized they call for one another. "In our time," the pope explained, "truth is often mistaken for the opinion of the majority." He commented on a widespread belief that one should use the truth even against love or vice versa, adding that truth and love need each other and that St. Teresa Benedicta witnesses to that reality. Not only was she a "martyr of love," but also a seeker of the truth. She once wrote: "No spiritual work comes into the world without great suffering. It always challenges the whole person." St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross says to us all: "Do not accept anything as the truth if it lacks love. And do not accept anything as love which lacks truth! One without the other becomes a destructive lie."

Edith Stein teaches us that love for Christ undergoes suffering and that whoever truly loves

does not stop at the prospect of suffering. Rather, she accepts communion in suffering with the one she loves. John Paul II quoted her understanding of her Jewish heritage in this way: "Beneath the Cross I understood the destiny of God's People. . . . Indeed, today I know far better what it means to be the Lord's bride under the sign of the Cross. But since it is a mystery, it can never be understood by reason alone."

The pope attributed the sacrifice that Edith Stein made to the envelopment by the mystery of the Cross in her life. He said that she not only wrote profoundly about the "Science of the Cross" but was thoroughly trained in the school of the Cross. He added that many of our contemporaries would like to silence the Cross "but nothing is more eloquent than the Cross when silenced! The true message of suffering is a lesson of love. Love makes suffering fruitful and suffering deepens love."

Through the experience of the Cross, the pope asserted, Edith Stein was able to open the way to a new encounter with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. He stated that "Faith and the Cross proved inseparable to her." Because she matured in the school of the Cross, she found the roots to which the tree of her own life was attached. She understood that it was very important for her "to be a daughter of the chosen people and to belong to Christ not only spiritually, but also through blood."

"God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth" (Jn 4:24). Referring to these words of Jesus spoken to the woman at the well, the pope compared them to Edith Stein's, "ascent to Mount Carmel." "The depth of the divine mystery became perceptible to her in the silence of contemplation," said the pope. "Gradually, throughout her life, as she grew in the knowledge of God, worshiping him in spirit and truth, she experienced ever more clearly her specific vocation



Contemporary rendering of Edith Stein, based on her passport photo.

to ascend the Cross with Christ, to embrace it with serenity and trust, to love it by following in the footsteps of her beloved Spouse: St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross is offered to us today as a model to inspire us and a protectress to call upon." John Paul II gave thanks to God for this gift. He prayed that the new saint be an example to us in our commitment to serve freedom, in our search for the truth. May her witness constantly strengthen the bridge of mutual understanding between Jews and Christians. He closed his address asking for the new saint's intercession, "St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, pray for us! Amen."

Agnes, Mario. CANONIZATION:  
11 OCTOBER L'OSSERVATORE ROMANO

The text from the ceremony of the canonization is an excerpt taken from the L'OSSERVATORE ROMANO, a weekly edition in English, 14 October 1998.

## Edith Stein:

# A Model for the Discalced Carmelite Secular Order

### **The Cenacle, a Framework for Carmelite Seculars**

The word "Cenacle" refers to the Upper Room where the Apostles and Our Blessed Mother would meet. It was a community gathering devoted to prayer, breaking bread, and where the teachings of Christ were shared. A Cenacle for Discalced Carmelite Seculars takes on the same significance—we set aside special space to draw in and be with Jesus and Mary asking, "what do you want of me?" From the calm of God's help, the font of life, we step toward others at our monthly community meetings, give and then share the fruits of our experience with family, friends, and strangers.

The Cenacle is a type of experience that bridges our two occupations, the interior and the public vocations. Unlike the Carmelite friars and nuns, we seculars are embracing our first vocations of marriage, family, etc., with the calm, love, and peace of God's help in a dynamic rhythm. Fr. Alzinir Francisco Debastiani, O.C.D., who is our General Delegate, states "In the word 'Cenacle' she (the Virgin Mary) begged for the gift of the Holy Spirit. In the Order's tradition, she supports and accompanies us, with maternal love and with her scapular. Despite our poverty, Holy Mary inspires us in evangelization..." (*Carmel Clarion*, 30, (October-December 2014) 25.

### **Use of the Cenacle Experience**

Discalced Secular Carmelites are primarily seeking a "Cenacle" experience when we join the Carmelite Order. We are looking for ways of dealing with

prayer, silence and solitude, and prayer in community. We seek a rhythm that leads us into the Cenacle, and then back out to secular life, e.g., from intense spiritual activity to interaction with others positively. We go away from and then back toward our usual life settings, from recollected intensity, back to our life in the world. This effects the good. We have a desire for not only prayer, but deep prayer; we set aside a space to adopt a contemplative stance. Otherwise we would be in another secular order. As Carmelite Seculars, we do not necessarily need to meditate more during the day. Our attitude is to go back and forth. That is why we prize the community meeting. We are not "do gooders" but "good influencers." The rhythm is the ideal. We are not in a contemplative "fog" at our community meetings, but are sharing with each other.

To truly benefit from being an OCD Secular, we need to perfect the Cenacle experience of establishing a rhythm, of going back and forth between resourcing (replenishing) ourselves and being an influence with those persons God has placed around us. God wants us where we are, sharing the fruits of the intensity of our prayer.

### **Why is Edith Stein a Model for OCDS?**

For almost 11 years between her entry into the church on January 1, 1922 and October 14, 1933 when she entered the Carmelite Order,

she continued her prolific writings and lectures across Central Europe while developing a deeper contemplative lifestyle. About this period in her life, Pope John Paul II said at her beatification that after intensive study of St. Thomas Aquinas she learned that it is possible “to approach science from a religious standpoint.” The majority of her life was as a lay person. The decade before entering the Order she “took vows privately and became a great and gifted woman of prayer.” (*Holiness Befits Your House, Canonization of Edith Stein—A Documentation*—Edited by John Sullivan, ICS Publications, 2000.)

### Edith Stein a Secular Carmelite

As part of contemplation, we learn from Edith Stein, that the bridge to the Cenacle is ecstasy.

Just for this reason the beautiful and the good are the same: what everything strives for and what everything shares in.

Now, that which suffers not the good to abide in itself but stirs it in an excess that rings forth all things and puts it to work is Love. For love is “ecstatic” and makes the lover the possession of the beloved, as Paul says: “no longer I live, but Christ lives in me” (Galatians 2:20).

And so we might even be so bold as to say that the Author of all things has been beside himself in the exuberance of his loving goodness; he goes out of himself without going out of himself and through his Providence care for every be-ing.

But he is called not only “Love,” but “Beloved” as well. For in the creature he brings forth love for himself. As Love he bestirs himself, as the Beloved he bestirs creatures toward himself. Therein the divine love proves beginningless and endless, an everlasting cycle, wheeling, but for the sake of the good, from the good, in the good, toward the good. (*Knowledge and Faith, the Collected Works of Edith Stein, Volume VIII,* translated by Walter Redmond, ICS Publications, 2000).



Rosa and Edith Stein, 1939. Rosa took over the work of extern sister of the monastery and helped in the garden.

Love is “ecstatic.” Going back and forth into the Cenacle is ecstatic. The word “ecstasis” means “stands out.” The Author of all things has been beside himself in the exuberance of his loving goodness and goes out of himself and cares for every being: from, in, and toward the good. It is a dance of love from Father to Son to Spirit, an everlasting cycle. This is ecstasy. The going out to spread the good. God is ecstatic because love is ecstatic.

From Edith, we have a deeper understanding of what contemplation is: “A long loving look at reality.” We are to respect that back and forth movement, to and from the Cenacle. The Cenacle is not an escape from the real world. It enables us to cope in the wider scene in which we live. We are contemplatives interested in looking at reality. The bridge of contemplation leads us back and forth. For Edith, we are not to avoid the reality God has created, but to find salvation in the midst of it. It can be redeeming. We as Secular Carmelites are called to genuine ecstasy.

In her Letter #45, (Feb 12, 1928), after she converted to Catholicism (1922), but while she was a teacher in a Dominican school in Speyer, Germany, Edith makes a reference to her spiritual development:

Of course, religion is not something to be relegated to a quiet corner, or for a few festive hours—it must be the root and basis of all life: and that, not merely for a few chosen ones, but for every true Christian (though of these there is still but a “little flock”).

Immediately before, and for a good while after my conversion, I was of the opinion that to lead a religious life meant one had to give up all that was secular and to live totally immersed in thoughts of the Divine. But gradually I realized that something else is asked of us in this world and that, even in the contemplative life, one may not sever the connection with the world. I even believe that the deeper one is drawn into God, the more one must “go out of oneself”; that is, one must go to the world in order to carry the divine life into it.

The only essential is that one finds a quiet corner in which one can communicate with God as though there were nothing else, and this must be done daily. It seems to me the best time is in the early morning hours before we begin our daily work; furthermore, [it is also essential] that one accepts one’s particular mission there, preferably for each day, and does not make one’s own choice. Finally, one is to consider oneself totally as an instrument, especially with regard to the abilities one uses to perform one’s special tasks. ... We are to see them as something used, not by us, but by God in us.

This then is my recipe... My life begins anew each morning, and ends each evening. I have neither plans nor prospects beyond it; i.e., to plan ahead could obviously be part of one’s daily duties—teaching school, for example, could be impossible without that—but it must never turn into a “worry” about

the coming day. (*Self Portrait in Letters 1916-1942*, Translated by Josephine Koeppel, O.C.D., ICS Publications, 1993).

This is the “payoff” from Edith that applies to us as Seculars and why she is a model to us; we can take consolation in that we can expect freedom of Spirit. Ecstasy is quite accessible. God gives love and takes love. This going out and coming back the movement of Trinitarian Love, is an everlasting cycle. We are in the Good, going to Good and back to Good, to effect the Good in love. We must be open to how God is working in us, how he is using us. Life has meaning because love is ecstatic. The Lord is waiting for you to put your freedom in God’s hands. This freedom is *for* something, not *from* something: freedom from restraints. True freedom leads to commitment. For Edith, love of Christ and human freedom were intertwined.

Pope John Paul II’s homily at the beatification implied that Discalced Secular Carmelites can take Edith’s teaching to heart—only the love of Christ makes us truly free. The Pope said, “Edith Stein’s entire life is characterized by an incessant search for truth and is illuminated by the blessing of the cross of Christ.” (*Holiness Befits your House, Canonization of Edith Stein—A Documentation*, edited by John Sullivan, O.C.D., ICS Publications, 2000.)

St. Teresa Benedicta said, “Truth has a name: Jesus Christ.” “God is truth. All who seek truth seek God, whether this is clear to them or not.” (*Self Portrait in Letters, 1916-1942*, ICS Publications) p. 272. Truth is not the opinion of the majority. Truth and love need each other. Do not accept anything as truth that lacks love.





At a lecture on Elizabeth of Thuringia on May 30, 1931.

### OCDS Constitutions

The Rule and Constitutions, which address the apostolates of the communities that flow from our collective life of prayer, asks the Discalced Secular Carmelites to be somewhat more active outside Carmel to make the good news better known. This happens when people see the good news in us. We don't go to Carmel to get away from the world. There is something specific we can do outside Carmel, not just do what the friars and nuns cannot do. We show a special value to other Christians, by who we are and what we do.

To sum up St. Edith's teaching, we are reminded of her meditation, "The Mystery of Christmas"

...Being a child of God means to be led by the hand of God, to do the will of God, not one's own, to lay all care and all hope in God's hands, to have no further care about oneself or one's future. Herein consists the freedom and happiness of the child of God. Yet how few, even of the most devout, even of those prepared to make heroic sacrifices, possess it! They go on as it

were bent down beneath the burden of their cares and duties. Everyone knows the parable of the birds of the sky and the lilies of the field. And yet, if they meet someone who, though without means, without a pension, without insurance, lives without a care for the future, they shake their heads as at an oddity. Of course, one who would look to God to supply a regular income and comfortable living conditions according to his individual taste would be sadly mistaken. Only then will trust in God stand firm when it includes a willing acceptance of all and anything from the hand of God. After all, he alone knows what is good for us. And if he deems need and privation more expedient at times than comfortable security, or when failure and humiliation come to us instead of honor and esteem—then we must be prepared to accept them. If one does so, then one can live without a care for the future.

This 'Thy will be done!' in its fullest meaning must be the guiding line of the Christian life. It must rule the schedule of the day from morning until evening, the whole of the year, the whole of a lifetime. In this case it becomes the one and only care of a Christian. All the other care the Lord will take upon Himself. This one remains ours as long as we live.

**This is a challenge for every Christian,  
but for Discalced Secular Carmelites,  
we must exemplify it!**

Mary Ann Abeyta-Behnke, O.C.D.S., from the Immaculate Heart of Mary Community, Fredericksburg, VA, and Barbara Sardella, O.C.D.S., from the Mary Queen of Carmel Community, Towson, MD wrote this synopsis of the retreat presented by Fr. John Sullivan, O.C.D., in Washington, DC, in April of 2016.

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Those who seek the  
***TRUTH***  
are seeking  
***GOD***  
whether they  
know it or not.



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