

# Celebrating Women Witnesses

## A Project to Rediscover Women Leaders in the Catholic Church

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### Introduction

Saint Edith Stein is one of the most well-known and much-revered German women of the last century. She was an internationally celebrated philosopher, author, lecturer and women's advocate. Many streets and public institutions are named after her, and a postage stamp was issued in her honor. Edith's life is distinguished by fullness and fruitfulness, despite being marked by many contradictions. Born into an Orthodox Jewish family, she converted to Catholicism and eventually became a Carmelite nun. She applied strict scientific methodology to her philosophical research, yet she was very intuitive and had an empathetic ear for those in need. Edith had a public persona (until entering Carmel), while living an intense inner life. She raised a loud voice against injustice, especially when directed toward women and the Jewish people, yet she herself was the victim of discrimination and ultimately, extermination.

### Early Life

In 1891 Dr. Stein was born in Breslau, Germany, the youngest of seven living children. Her father died when she was two years old. Her mother not only efficiently raised her children, but also managed the family timber business, providing a powerful role model for Edith. Strong-willed and possessing a firm concept of justice at an early age, Edith searched tenaciously for truth. In her early teens, she discovered that she no longer believed in God, although she continued to accompany her mother to synagogue, a practice she continued throughout her life. Despite being an excellent student, school no

longer seemed to nourish her, so she quit and moved in with her sister to help manage her household of children. She returned to school two years later and began tutoring her classmates. This led to her decision to pursue a teaching career.

In college, Edith discovered the field of philosophy. It resonated with her inner quest for truth and justice. She pursued her studies in a methodical, scientific way. At this time she was reintroduced to religion, which she now saw as an integral facet of an individual's personality. Through Christian friends, she witnessed the power of faith to overcome the sadness and loss of death.

During World War I, Edith interrupted her research to volunteer in a military hospital for infectious diseases. She was assigned to care for soldiers of the Austrian army and humbly helped to relieve their suffering from typhus, cholera and dysentery. She said it was the least she

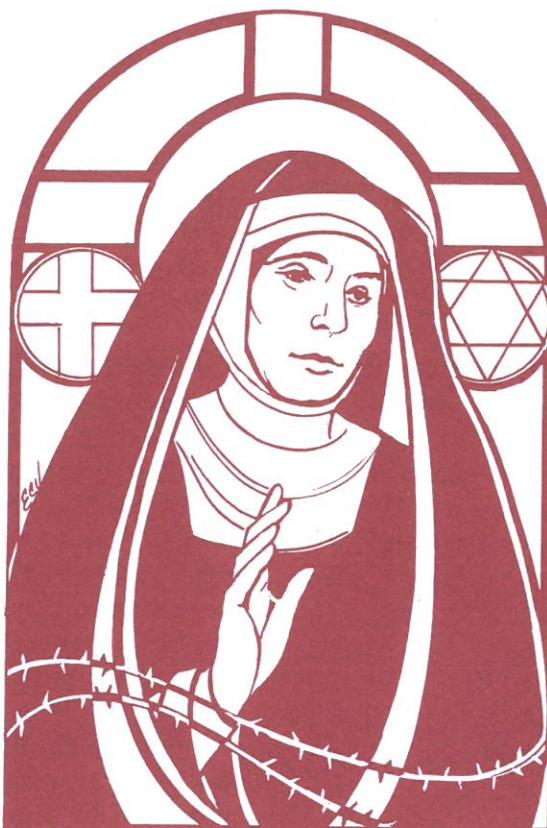
could do to help the war effort when so many friends had been drafted into service.

### Philosopher, Seeker, Contemplative, Teacher

While completing her doctoral research, Edith became the graduate assistant of renowned philosopher Edmund Husserl. In 1917 she received her Ph.D. in philosophy summa cum laude. When she left Husserl's employ early the following year, he praised her profound philosophical knowledge and research techniques, and promised to recommend her if careers in academia ever became open to women. Despite impeccable qualifications, Edith was never granted a professorship because of her gender. Later in her career in academia she would be forced to relinquish an even lesser

## EDITH STEIN

### Seeker of Truth



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position because of anti-Semitism.

By 1921, Edith suffered from depression and exhaustion. While at a friend's home, she picked up the autobiography of Teresa of Avila. She became enthralled, and was amazed at the author's insights about love and truth. Teresa witnessed to the possible depths of interior prayer—far different and more profound than Edith's intellectual inquiry. This discovery gave her life new direction. She purchased a catechism and missal and then asked the parish priest if she could join the Catholic Church. On New Year's Day in 1922, Edith was baptized. She wished to enter the Carmelite Order founded by Teresa, but was advised against it. Her spiritual director felt her public life would be more beneficial to the Church's mission. He also hesitated knowing of her mother's opposition to her conversion. Edith believed her Jewish background prepared her for Christianity. She felt blessed to be united to Christ as a blood relative not just an ancestor in faith. Although Edith always considered herself a Jew, the Jewish community and her family no longer recognized her as such.

Later that year, Edith became a teacher at a Dominican women's college. Her spiritual director suggested she translate Cardinal John Henry Newman's letters and diaries from English to German, as well as Thomas Aquinas' *Disputed Questions on Truth* from Latin to German. Despite a demanding and exhausting teaching schedule, Edith was able to balance all these endeavors, as well as continue her ministry to the poor and distressed. She explained:

*The only essential is that one finds, first of all, a quiet corner in which one can communicate with God as though there were nothing else, and that must be done daily...One is to consider oneself totally 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.1*

She was now powerfully drawn to prayer, yet her interior prayer life was inseparably connected with her exterior actions. By her own definition, Edith was a mystic: "Simply a person who has an experiential knowledge of the teaching of the Church—that God dwells in the soul."<sup>2</sup> After her morning prayer, Edith describes:

*My soul...will be filled with holy joy, courage and energy. Because my soul has left itself and entered into divine life, it has become great and expansive. Love burns in it like a composed flame which the*

*Lord has enkindled, and which urges my soul to render love and inflame love in others.3*

## Advocate for Women

Edith was in great demand as a speaker at teacher's organizations and professional women's associations throughout Europe. She lectured on the fullness of women's roles and the importance of their well-rounded religious-centered education. Edith described a holistic, fruitful, maternal femininity regardless of one's marital status. She challenged individuals to infuse their lives with love, to be open to God's call, and to embrace all they encounter with love. She believed an ability to give love was integral to women's nature. For Edith, Mary is the ultimate female model of love, and she imaged the Mother of God courageously standing by the side of Christ, the heart of the Christian community. Edith believed, since the beginning of time, women have been given the responsibility to fight against evil and to educate children to do the same. Edith recognized the disaster threatening the Jewish people in the Holocaust. She asked Pope Pius XI to write an encyclical in their defense, but she went unheard.

While never identifying herself as a feminist, Edith opposed a male dominated curriculum taught solely by men. She lobbied for an educational system more supportive of women's distinct nature and quest for wholeness. After the First World War in Germany, most women worked outside the home, usually in response to economic need. In opposition to the encyclicals of Pope Pius XI, Edith supported women's right to full employment. As a philosophical pioneer in the nature of women's psyches, she lectured extensively on women's vocations, affirming their unique gifts as greatly beneficial to society. Edith believed that there was no profession that could not be practiced by a woman, and that the "natural" vocation of wife and mother could not be considered her only vocation, since all are called to be perfect in the image of God. Even in the most mundane job, Edith asserted, women can have an impact using their interpersonal skills, creativity, and capacity for service.

Edith reminds us that women have always been called to the religious state and to active involvement in ministry. In the early Church, they were confessors of the faith and ordained to the diaconate. She stated that women's ordination to the priesthood can not be forbidden by dogma, and that in present canon law, equality between man and woman is impossible. She held out the hope that attitudes would change. She said that the church needs the strength of Catholic women: "The Church

as the kingdom of God in this world should reflect changes in human thought. Only by accepting each age as it is and treating it according to its singular nature can the Church bring eternal truth and life to temporality.”<sup>4</sup>

Edith critiqued several of Paul’s letters regarding the relationship between men and women, saying that while some things may have been true for the culture of the communities of Paul, that does not mean that they are binding for all times. She took issue with his statements of man’s sovereignty over women, his prohibition of women as teachers, his admonition for women to be silent and especially his view of the role of man as mediator between Christ and women (I Cor. 11:3-16; I Tim. 2:8-15). She believes that Paul “contradicts too strongly the words and the whole custom of the Lord who had women

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among his closest companions and who showed at every turn in His redemptive work that he was concerned about the soul of women as the soul of man.”<sup>5</sup>

### **Teresa Benedicta of the Cross**

At age 42, with no dowry other than her many reference books, Edith joined the Carmelites in Cologne, fulfilling a long-sought dream. During her novitiate, she began her great work, *Finite and Eternal Being*, in which she argued against St. Thomas’ distinction between theology and philosophy. Tragically, the anti-Jewish laws in Germany caused the printing plates for her book to be destroyed. Edith realized that her work could only be published posthumously.

When Edith joined Carmel, she took the name “Teresa Benedicta of the Cross.” The burden and mystery of the cross had deep personal meaning for her. She believed that “of the cross” referred to the fate of the people of God. Those who recognize the Cross of Christ have a responsibility to bear it in the name of all. By 1938, she came to believe that God accepted her life as a sacrifice for peace and for preservation of the Jewish people. “It has always been far from me to think that God’s mercy allows itself to be circumscribed by the visible church’s boundaries.

God is truth. All who seek truth seek God, whether this is clear to them or not.”<sup>6</sup>

Beginning with Krystallnacht on November 8, 1938, the persecution of Jews in Germany intensified. Under cover of darkness on December 31, Edith was transferred to the Carmel in Echt, Holland. She began writing a book about St. John of the Cross and the mystery, suffering and victory of the Cross. When the political situation worsened with the Nazi invasion of Holland, Edith was given permission to transfer to a convent in neutral Switzerland. However she was unwilling to go without her sister Rosa, who had joined her in Echt, to work as a portress at the convent.

On July 26, 1942, in a pastoral letter read from every pulpit in the country, the Catholic Bishops of Holland denounced the Nazis, asking for justice and peace for the Jewish people. One week later SS officers arrested Edith and her sister Rosa and all other Jewish Catholics. Eyewitness accounts of Edith’s final days recount that her Carmelite habit, emblazoned with the Star of David, and her calm exterior distinguished her from other detainees. She was seen comforting and consoling the anxious women and ministering to the needs of children. Edith and Rosa were among the hundreds put to death at Auschwitz on August 9 of that year.

Edith Stein, Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, was canonized a saint in the Catholic Church in 1998. The following year Pope John Paul II designated her as a co-patroness of Europe, reflecting her wide-reaching influence throughout the Continent. On the occasion of Edith’s canonization, the pope hoped to “strengthen the bridge of mutual understanding between Jews and Christians.” However, there was controversy about her canonization because the Jewish community felt it was an attempt to Christianize the Holocaust, and to evangelize Jews. For Catholic Christians seeking to emulate the truth, love and justice that Edith espoused, we are called to acknowledge the guilt of Christianity’s role in the Holocaust, express our deep sorrow and repent.

### **Lessons for Today**

Edith’s life contains many lessons. Like her, we should listen to the call of the Spirit within us. We should take pride in being women, develop our individual gifts and cultivate an awareness of our inner life which nourishes intimacy with God. We are called to reach out in love to others and to use our talents for the betterment of the community. We must speak out courageously against injustice in our day—protesting, witnessing and writing to legislators and bishops alike. We must be open to exploring new perspectives and we should always search for and speak the truth!



Eileen Cantlin Verbus

#### End Notes:

1. Edith Stein, *Self-Portrait in Letters*, ICS Publications, Washington DC, 1993, pp. 54-55.
2. Waltraud Herbstrith, *Edith Stein-A Biography*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, p. 157
3. Edith Stein, *Essays on Women*, ICS Publications, Washington DC, 1996. p. 144
4. Ibid, p. 169
5. Ibid, p. 69
6. Edith Stein, *Self-Portrait in Letters*, ICS Publications, Washington DC, 1993, p. 27

#### References:

Waltraud Herbstrith, OCD, *Edith Stein, a Biography*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1992.

Kathleen Jones, *Women Saints Lives of Faith and Courage*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll NY, 1999.

Edith Stein, *Essays on Woman*. Translated by Freda Mary Oben, PhD, (The Collected Works of Edith Stein Volume II), ICS Publications (Institute of Carmelite Studies, Washington DC), 1996.

Edith Stein, *The Hidden Life: Hagiographic essays, Meditations, Spiritual Texts*, Translated by Waltraud Stein, PhD, (The Collected Works of Edith Stein Volume IV), ICS Publications (Institute of Carmelite Studies, Washington DC), 1992

Edith Stein, *Selected Writings, With Comments, Reminiscences and Translations by her niece*, Suzanne M. Batsdorff, Templegate Publishers, Springfield IL 1990.

Edith Stein, *Self-Portrait in Letters 1916-1942*, Translated by Josephine Koepfel, OCD, (The Collected Works of Edith Stein Volume V), ICS Publications (Institute of Carmelite Studies, Washington DC), 1993.

#### Resources

Poster and cards of Edith Stein in her Carmelite habit emblazoned with the Star of David at Auschwitz (artwork by Sr. Marie Celeste McFadden) are available from the Reno Carmel Printshop which can be reached at 775 332-5006.

**The feast day for Edith Stein is celebrated on August 9. Please use the enclosed prayer service in your parish or small faith community on that date or at another appropriate time.**

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# Prayer Service Celebrating Edith Stein

*The feast day of Edith Stein is August 9th. This is also the anniversary of the day the United States dropped a nuclear bomb on Nagasaki. Today it is appropriate to remember not only Edith, but all victims of war and violence. From 1930, Edith began all of her letters with the word "Pax" which means peace in Latin. In 1933 after entering Carmel, this changed to "Pax Christi."*

*You will need three candles and holder(s) to display them. The Paschal candle should be lit to provide the flame for the candles. A crucifix should also be displayed. Prepare name tags in the shape of crosses, about four inches across, for the anticipated number of attendees and attach straight pins. A bulletin board or mat board on a tripod will be needed to eventually display the crosses. (You may prefer a poster of Saint Edith Stein and then, during the liturgy, affix the crosses around the image). As each person arrives, have them sign their first name on a cross and pin it onto their clothing.*

Presider: "Our love of neighbor," states Edith Stein, "is the measure of our love of God. For Christians—and not only for them—no one is a 'stranger.'" Let us greet each other by name!

Gathering Rite

*Group 1:*

Let the glory of God be extolled.  
May God's great name be hallowed  
in a world whose creation God willed.  
May God's eternal kingdom soon prevail  
in our own day, our own lives,  
the life of all Israel and the entire world,  
and let us say: Amen.

*Lighting of first candle*

*Group 2:*

Let God's great name be blessed  
forever and ever.  
Let the name of the Holy One, blessed is God, be  
glorified, exalted, and honored, though God is  
beyond all the praises, songs and adoration that  
we can utter, and let us say: Amen

*Lighting of second candle*

*All: For us, for all Israel and the entire world, may the blessing for peace  
and the promise of life come true, and let us say: Amen.  
May God who causes peace to reign, in the high heavens, let peace descend on us,  
on all Israel and the entire world, And let us say: Amen.*

*Lighting of final candle*

Song: *Dona Nobis Pacem* (© 1994, OLA. Publications #528 in *Gather*)

Scripture: "Far be it from to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me and I to the world." (Galatians 6:14)

Presider: "Ave Crux, spes unica!" proclaimed Edith in 1939: "Hail Cross, our only Hope! The world is in flames. But high above all flames towers the cross. They cannot consume it. It is the path from earth to heaven. It will lift one who embraces it in faith, love, and hope into the bosom of the Trinity." Edith was led to Catholicism by the power of the cross. Through personal experience she realized that each of us has to share in Christ's suffering, and only faith can transform it into joy. The crosses we bear are not always as burdensome as Edith's certain martyrdom. Every life follows different paths, so our own experience of the cross is unique. Remove your name tags and meditate now on the different manifestations of the cross in our lives. We are a world at war, a world suffering from famine, disease and poverty which influences us all; are we acting responsibly to cure these ills? Our neighborhoods can be crime and drug ridden; domestic violence can rupture our homes. Death of a loved one, chronic illness, depression, and caregiving can exhaust and devastate us. Problem relationships, isolation and loneliness, loss of employment or an unfulfilling job can challenge us. What in our individual lives calls us to oneness in Christ's suffering? Ponder this and then consider the confidence that we as Christians, have knowing we do not endure these afflictions alone; there will be a day of resurrection when all obstacles are surmounted. *(After reflecting for several minutes, each person is invited to share his or her personal "cross." All are then asked to affix their name tags to the board as a sign of union with the cross and with each other in faith. Soft music can be played as the assembly processes forward; perhaps "Ubi Caritas.")*

Song: *Dona Nobis Pacem* (© 1994, GIA Publications #528 in *Gather*)

Scripture: Sirach 4:20,22-31

Reflection: (*Preacher might consider Edith's faith journey, her quest for truth, her productive life rooted in humble action, her sharing of intellectual gifts, as well as her martyrdom. 10-15 minutes.*)

Song: *Dona Nobis Pacem* (© 1994, GIA Publications #528 in *Gather*)

And I remain with you: (From *A Pentecost Novena*, Edith Stein, Summer 1942)

*Group 1:*

Who are you, sweet light that fills me and illumines the darkness of my heart?

You are die space  
That embraces my being and buries it in yourself.

You, nearer to me than I to myself  
And more interior than my most interior.

*Group 2:*

You lead me like a mother's hand, And should you let go of me, I would not know how to take another step.

Away from you it sinks into the abyss  
Of nothingness, from which you raised it to the light.

And still impalpable and intangible  
And beyond any name:

*All:* Holy Spirit, Eternal Love!

Presider: Even though close to the end of her life, Edith remains confident in her surrender to God's loving embrace. Let us likewise trust in God's mercy:

### **Intercessions:**

For Edith and all victims of war, violence and extermination:

*AU:* O Loving God, give us courage to combat evil in our day.

For peace in our world and peace in our hearts:

*All:* O Loving God, help us dedicate ourselves to work for justice.

For diversity of peoples, religions, races and sexual orientation:

*AU:* O Loving God, guide us to respect others and rejoice in the gifts of their differences.

For those oppressed and suffering:

*AU:* O Loving God, assist us to joyfully accept the crosses that we bear.

For all who are searching for truth in our lives:

*AU:* O Loving God, enlighten us to recognize that it is You we seek.

For women who yearn to discern their innate gifts:

*All:* O Loving God, teach us to bring to birth unconditional love toward all.

For those who confront the end of their earthly lives:

*All:* O Loving God, grant us the confidence of your compassionate embrace.

Prayer: O Loving God, we rejoice in the life of Edith Stein: As a feminist philosopher, she helped women to live with fullness and grace. As an educator, she encouraged improvements in the Catholic curriculum for girls. As a scholar, she clarified intellectual inquiry making it understandable and relevant to all. As a victim of discrimination, she raised her voice in protest. As a humble servant, she was energized by a deep prayer life. As a seeker of truth, she discovered your mysterious love. As a martyr, she was a witness of steadfast faith and came to know the transformational mystery of the cross. May her life be for us, a model of love in action and may we too be filled with your compassionate grace, [in the name of Jesus, we pray.

Sending forth: *Canticle of the Turning* (Rory Cooney, © 1990, GIA Publications, Inc.)

*I. This inclusive adaptation of the Jewish mourner's Kaddish is prepared with all due reverence to our Jewish brothers and sisters who recite it daily for eleven months after the death of a parent or loved one. This beautiful prayer of praise and hope is said to be the model for our Christian "Lord's Prayer." Pope John Paul II asks that as we remember Edith Stein, "We must also remember the Shoah, that cruel plan to exterminate a people—a plan to which millions of our Jewish brothers and sisters fell victim." Adapted from J. Frank Henderson, Liturgies of Lament, LTP, 1994.*

*Prayer service developed by Money Flaherty who is a liturgy planner at St. Joseph Catholic Parish in Rock Island, Illinois. She is also Co-Founder of "Wisdom Weavers,"*