

Edith Stein: Yearning for Christ

Edith Stein (1891-1942) was a convert to Christianity from Judaism. She lost her father at a young age. A brilliant mind, she studied philosophy under Husserl, later becoming his teaching assistant and a successful academic. She specialised in the subject of phenomenology. When she was staying with Lutheran friends, she read the *Life of St Teresa of Avila* and found herself saying 'this is the truth'. She became a Catholic, and soon felt called to Carmel. She delayed her entry out of fear of upsetting her Mother, and became a committed teacher in a Catholic school, until the Nazis required teachers to have an 'Aryan certificate'. With no prospect of a career in Germany, she would have had to leave the country. Perhaps, she hoped, her mother might accept Carmel as the lesser of two evils. She entered Cologne Carmel in October 1933, taking the name 'St Teresa Benedicta of the Cross'. She ended her days in the gas chambers of Auschwitz on 2 August 1942, a martyr for the faith.

Edith Stein shares in her writings four images of prayer – as talking to God and listening to Him, glancing at God, as resting in God, and as simply yearning for Him. Thus we see the family hallmark of Carmel's prayer – it is profoundly relational.

Talking and Listening

'It all depends on having a quiet little corner where you can talk with God on a daily basis as if nothing else existed... and one is to consider oneself totally as an instrument, so that you treat your most frequently demanded talents not as something you use, but as God working through you' (Letter 45 in *Self-Portrait in Letters*, p. 54).

'We need hours for listening silently and allowing the Word of God to act on us until it moves us to bear fruit in an offering of praise and an offering of action' (*Hidden Life*, p. 16).

Resting in God

She loved to pray before the Blessed Sacrament, and would spend long hours there on free days, apparently lost to time and space.

'There is a state of resting in God, an absolute break from all intellectual activity, when one forms no plans, makes no decisions and for the first time really does cease to act, when one simply hands over the future to God's will and surrenders oneself to fate. I myself have experienced this state to some extent. It came in the wake of an experience which had overtaxed my strength, drained my spiritual resources and robbed me of the ability to act. Compared to that inertia arising from lack of vital energy, 'resting in God' is something new and entirely distinct. One is a kind of 'stillness of death' whereas the other is marked by a sense of tremendous security ... which to the degree I give myself to it, fills me with life' (in Herbstrith, *Edith Stein: A Biography*, p. 60).

Yearning

'My yearning for Christ was one continual prayer' (Posselt, *Edith Stein*, p. 55).

A Loving Glance of the spirit at God who is present

'The mystic is simply a person who has an experiential knowledge of the teaching of the Church; that God dwells in the soul. Anyone who feels inspired by this dogma to search for God will end up taking the same route the mystic is led along: he will retreat from the

realm of the senses, the images of the memory and the natural functioning of the intellect and will withdraw into the barren solitude of the inner self, to dwell in the darkness of faith through a simple loving glance of the spirit at God who is present, though concealed. There he will remain in profound peace as in the place of rest until the Lord decides to transform his faith into vision' (*Final and Eternal Being* p. 157).

Prayer is God's initiative. He draws us. It is we who respond:

'You lower your gaze full of love, into my eyes
And bend your ear to my whispered words
And deeply fill my heart with peace' (*Hidden Life*, p. 136-7).

'Prayer is looking up into the face of the Eternal. We can do this only when the spirit is awake in its innermost depths, freed from all earthly occupations and pleasures that numb it' (*Hidden Life*, pp. 3-4).

Distractions

It is the images of the memory and the emotions attached to them, which she identifies as getting in the way of prayer. Her solution therefore is to silence and quiet the memory, to completely deny all the material it proposes to the soul during the time of prayer.

Atonement

She was born on the Day of Atonement, and saw her life's calling as closely connected with this mystery. Leviticus 16 describes how Aaron and his successors as High Priest, were to enter the sanctuary, the Holy of Holies, once a year to offer the blood of sacrifice (a bull and goat) in atonement for the sins of the people. This was of course the prototype for Christ's atoning self-sacrifice on the Cross. Following in the steps of her Master, Edith very consciously made to God an offering of her life on behalf of her Jewish people, her Carmel and loved ones.

She also received permission from her Prioress to prepare herself for life in a concentration camp by increasing her exposure to the cold and hunger. Her life became a total holocaust when, in retaliation for Dutch Catholic Bishops' condemnation of racism in a circular, Jewish converts to Christianity (hitherto spared) were now targeted by the Nazis for arrest.

Her whole Christian life was really a preparation for this, which she seems to have intuited lay ahead of her. At Mass she seemed to participate as if she were offering herself on the altar. That she saw her life in Carmel as an oblation is evident from these words:

'The one thing a person needs to keep doing is to try to live out his chosen vocation with an ever-increasing honesty and purity, to make it an acceptable oblation for those with whom he is united' (Letter 182 in Herbstrith, *Edith Stein: A Biography*, p. 132).

Edith was taken from her Carmel before she had time to arrange a move to Switzerland, and ended her days in the gas chambers of Auschwitz in 1942.

by Dolgellau Carmel, Wales

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