

EDITH STEIN – THE PATRON SAINT OF EUROPE

*Edith Stein was born into a large, affluent Jewish family deeply attached to its religion and history in Wrocław (then Breslau, Germany) on October 12, 1891. She enrolled at the university there to study psychology, German, and history. In 1913, she went to Göttingen to study psychology under the German phenomenologist, Edward Husserl. In 1917, she defended her Ph.D. thesis, titled *On the Problem of Empathy*. In her student years, she became friends with Roman Ingarden, Hans Lipps, Hedwig Conrad-Martius, and Piotr Wust.*

She distanced herself early from Judaism and called herself, until the age of thirty, an atheist. Max Scheler and Adolf Reinach brought her into contact with Catholicism. She was baptized on January 1, 1922, taking the name Teresa. She never cut her links with the Jewish people. From 1923 to 1931, she taught German and history in a secondary school and teacher training college in Spir. She lectured in psychology and education at the Pedagogical Academy in Münster in 1932 and 1933. She entered a Carmelite convent in Cologne on October 14, 1933. When she took her vows on April 15, 1934, she took the name Teresa Benedicta of the Cross. In 1938, her mother superior decided to transfer Teresa Benedicta to the Carmelite convent at Echt in the Netherlands. Arrested by the Gestapo on August 2, 1942, she was taken to the Westerbork transit camp and deported to Auschwitz on August 7. Edith Stein died in the gas chamber on probably August 8 or 9, 1942.

Pope John Paul II beatified Edith Stein on May 1, 1987, and proclaimed her a saint on October 11, 1998.

A recollection was held at the Center for Dialogue in Oświęcim on the sixtieth anniversary of Edith Stein's death, August 6-9, 2002. The three-day program was prepared and conducted by Father Manfred Deselaers, a lecturer at the Papal Theological Academy in Cracow, and Father Romuald Jakub Weksler-Waszkinel, a lecturer at the Catholic University of Lublin. It included visits to the site of the Auschwitz camp, prayer, and lectures. The texts below are abridged versions of lectures delivered during the recollection.

The Editors

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WHY IS EDITH STEIN THE PATRON SAINT OF EUROPE?

*Greater love hath no man than this,
that a man lay down his life for his friends
(John 15, 13).*

The death by martyrdom of the first Christians was the seed from which young Christianity grew (*sanguis martyrum, semen christianorum*). It is no accident that, in the Christmas liturgy, it is precisely with the martyrs that the Roman Catholic church "decorates" the Bethlehem stable in which the newborn Emmanuel (the king of the Jews) rests. All of them, together with the martyrs of the early Church, constitute an identifying mark of the Church all over the world, and will do so until the end of time.

But not only in ancient Christianity was the blood of the holy martyrs significant. It was also significant to the Church in the middle ages, in the modern era, and in contemporary times. It is particular not only to the Church of Jerusalem and not only to the European Church. The Church always grows from the seed of the blood of the martyrs, always and everywhere – on all continents. So it is today in India, Sudan, and Indonesia.

Among the sainted martyrs of the last century and the last millennium, and indeed among the martyrs of the two thousand years of Christianity, Edith Stein – Sister Teresa Benedicta of the Cross – holds a special place. In a *motu proprio* apostolic letter of October 1, 1999, John Paul II proclaimed Edith Stein patron of Europe. She is one of six canonized persons whom the Church recognizes as patrons of Europe, but only she is a martyr.

Edith Stein lived and died in years of horrendous contempt for man and of the unprecedented trampling of human dignity. Edith Stein's youth fell

FROM THE NATIONAL JEWISH ARCHIVES
 AUGUST 12, 1942

in the first half of the twentieth century. As an educated and fully mature person, she accepted baptism within the Catholic Church on January 1, 1922. On April 15, 1934, she took the habit of the Discalced Carmelites and the name in religion of Teresa Benedicta of the Cross. On August 8 or 9, 1942, as a Jew, and together with other Jews, she was murdered in the gas chamber and burned in the crematorium of the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp.

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What prompted the Church to pick Edith Stein as patron of Europe?

It is often noted that the "Christian-Jewish dispute" is visible in all the books of the New Testament. This is not an erroneous definition, but neither does it tell the whole truth about the disputing parties, because what we find in the pages of all the books of the New Testament is, *de facto*, an internal Jewish dispute. Jesus is a Jew, recognizable in the faith of Israel: in Judaism. However, faith in Jesus divided the Jews and caused a schism. Nevertheless, at least on the part of Jesus's pupils (on the part of the Church in Jerusalem), there was no hostility towards those who did not believe in Jesus.

The Christian faith shaped the culture of the continent and wove itself inseparably into its history, to the degree that there is no way to understand that history without referring to the things that happened first in the great era of evangelization, and later in the successive centuries when, despite the painful division between the East and the West, Christianity attained its permanent position as the religion of the Europeans. In short: Europe in terms of culture is – essentially – the faith of the Bible, articulated in the language of Greek philosophy and ordering society through the norms of Roman law. Obviously, this is an extremely abbreviated formulation. As for the patron saints of Europe, we can say that they are those who fulfilled in an almost perfect way the first and most important of the commandments: the love of God and of one's neighbor.

By holding up three women as patron saints in the third millennium, the Church wants, more than it did in the past, to acknowledge the dignity of women and to highlight the nature of their gifts. In

the past, yielding to cultural influences, it did not always pay suitable attention to this. Three women. Bridget of Sweden, a saint of the fourteenth century, directs our attention towards the north of Europe, towards Scandinavia. Saint Catherine, living in the fourteenth century, earned the title of Doctor of the Church while participating in and helping to write the history of Christian Europe. She went to the rulers of Europe to convince them that, in a society guided by the values of the Gospel, no dispute is so important as to permit the rights of power to hold the ascendancy over the truths of reason. She admonished kings and clergy.

Finally, Edith Stein, Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross. In his *motu proprio* apostolic letter, John Paul II wrote: "Teresa Benedicta of the Cross... as thinker, mystic and martyr, built a kind of bridge between her Jewish roots and her commitment to Christ, taking part in the dialogue with contemporary philosophical thought with sound intuition, and in the end forcefully proclaiming by her martyrdom the ways of God and man in the horrendous atrocity of the Shoah. She has thus become the symbol of a human, cultural and religious pilgrimage which embodies the deepest tragedy and the deepest hopes of Europe."

The faith in Jesus Christ was no longer the faith of the Synagogue, but neither St. Peter, nor Paul, nor any of the Apostles, nor anyone among the Jews who believed in Jesus had to throw any kind of "bridge" between their Jewish background and faith in Christ. This is how it was at the very beginnings of Christianity! By the fourth century after Christ, however, the existence of a chasm between Judaism and Christianity was already a fact. And in order to realize how deep that chasm was in the times of Edith Stein, it is enough to glance at the Roman ritual then in use. At the baptism of an adult Jew, the priest giving the sacrament repeated the following exhortation: "*Horresce Judaicam perfidiam, respue Hebraicam superstitionem.*" This exhortation – "Abhor Jewish perfidy and spit out Jewish superstitions" – had nothing to do with the exhortation to love, the principal mission and message of the Gospel, nothing at all! I have quoted it because it can make us aware of how necessary, how downright urgent was the need for a change

in the Church's attitude towards Jews and Judaism! The extermination of the Jews in "Christian" Europe, the Shoah, was a shameful abomination. Fortunately, it also profoundly shocked many sensitive hearts, and opened people's eyes.

The Second Vatican Council brought change, and the fourth chapter of the declaration *Nostra aetate* joined in the current of thinking and acting that had been deeply marked by the memory of the persecution and slaughter of the Jews in Europe just before and during the Second World War. Despite the fact that Christianity was born of Judaism and received from it some of the principal elements of its faith and its cult, the chasm between the two faiths had deepened until it reached almost a point of mutual unfamiliarity.

Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, Edith Stein, "built a kind of bridge between her Jewish roots and her commitment to Christ" with her life's work and, ultimately, her martyr's death – and precisely here lies her extraordinary greatness; in this she remains a teacher for Christian Europe. The times in which she lived were not easy. It is highly probable that, when she accepted baptism, she heard the words written in the ritual. Those words could not but hurt; they offended and were an insult to Jews and Judaism.

After Hitler came to power and the officially organized Nazi attacks on the Jews began, Dr. Edith Stein, eleven years a Christian, a lecturer at the Pedagogical Institute in Münster, Westphalia, had no doubts that the fate of the Jews was her fate. She decided to travel to Rome and ask the pope at a private audience for an encyclical condemning anti-Semitism. In the end, she put her request into a private letter to Pius XI. She states in her autobiography: "I know that my letter was delivered sealed to the Holy Father; shortly afterwards, I received his blessing for myself and my family. Nothing more." It is difficult not to read bitterness in that "Nothing more."

She had already been dismissed from her job in 1933 because of her origins. "I took some considerable comfort," she noted, "that the universal fate of the Jews had been visited on me, as well." On October 14, she entered the Discalced Carmelite convent in Cologne.

When the Nuremberg Law of September 15, 1935 sentenced Jews to a subhuman existence, in this period when Nazism was running mad, she wrote her autobiography, *Life in a Jewish Family*, which depicts her Jewish family with pride and love. She showed to the contemporary German Church – how, even after receiving baptism (January 1, 1922), she went to the synagogue and prayed with her mother there.

When the time finally came to bear witness, she was ready to die together with those to whom, as it turned out, she most belonged. Of course, Edith Stein's greatness is more than the solidarity she showed in dying with her brothers and sisters; it is, above all, dying in the most profound union with Jesus Christ: Crucifixion and Resurrection.

A year before her death, at the Carmel in Holland, Edith Stein wrote: "No human heart has gone through such dark nights as the Son of God in Gethsemane and on Golgotha. No human mind can fathom the inconceivable mystery of the abandonment of the Son of Man in his death agony. Yet Jesus sometimes permits his chosen to taste this internal bitterness. It is something given to his most faithful friends, the final trial of their love. If they do not withdraw in fear, but allow themselves to be led into that dark night."

"The image of her holiness," John Paul II wrote of Edith Stein, "remains for ever linked to the tragedy of her violent death, alongside all those who with her suffered the same fate. And it remains as a proclamation of the Gospel of the Cross, with which she identified herself by the very choice of her name in religion."

In view of the terrible chasm between Judaism and Christianity – and the shame of the Shoah was an aching proof that this chasm existed – the Church at the Second Vatican Council "built a kind of bridge" between its own identity and its roots, or Biblical Judaism. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, the sainted martyr, is the teacher of the new evangelization. "New" means that it appeals to the Books of the New Covenant, while finding its roots in the Old. Christianity is not Judaism. But when it proclaims anti-Judaism, it becomes anti-Christianity. I believe that, in holding up Teresa Benedicta of the Cross (Edith Stein) as patron of Christian Europe, the

Church is first and foremost appealing to Christians to change their attitudes towards Jews and Judaism.

Meanwhile, especially on the occasion of the beatification of Edith Stein, some Jewish groups gave voice to their dissatisfaction. In some Jewish circles, neither the canonization nor the proclamation of our saint as the patron of Europe give rise to enthusiasm. There are accusations that, in beatifying and canonizing Edith Stein, the Church is attempting to take possession of the Holocaust, or even to divert attention from the responsibility of Christianity for what happened. Or even that, in holding up Edith Stein as an exemplary Christian (Catholic), the Church is raising the specter of proselytizing among the Jews.

At a very superficial glance and only from the outside, without noticing the changes that have taken place in the post-Conciliar Church – the accusation, as formulated, may indeed seem justifiable. But let us look deeper. Bearing in mind the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, let us attempt to penetrate the Church's intentions. The case of Edith Stein is indeed a special one, and therein lies all the greatness. It is a fact that, while remaining faithful to Christ, she was murdered because of her Jewish origins. The Nazis took only Edith Stein and her sister Rose from the Carmel in Echt to the camp in Westerbork, and then to Auschwitz-Birkenau – *because they were Jews!* Nothing more! Such are the facts. It is also a fact that *Edith Stein never concealed her Jewish roots, and was never ashamed of them.* Most important of all, she never had any doubt that she was going to her death because she was a Jew. At the moment of her arrest, she told her sister Rose, "Come, we're going with our people."

In the Westerbork camp she wrote: "I did not know that people can be like this and that my brothers and sisters must suffer this way. I really did not know it." Knowledge about relations to Jews, seen from the very bottom of the chasm, was knowledge about Christian Europe!

The direct reason for her arrest and deportation was a Nazi campaign in reprisal for a declaration in which the Christian churches of the Netherlands

condemned the deportation of Jews to the death camps. On the recommendation of the Catholic bishops, this declaration was read in all churches on July 26, 1942. The arrest and deportation of all Jewish Catholics residing in Holland was a direct consequence.

It therefore seems that the Catholic Church has the right to raise her to the altar as a martyr for her faith in Jesus – Jesus, who, as we should never forget, is a Jew! In the face of the disgrace that is the Shoah, the Church has nothing less than an obligation for Christian Europe to say very loudly that contempt for Judaism is contempt for all that is most holy in Christianity. "Whoever encounters Jesus Christ," John Paul reminded us during his apostolic pilgrimage to Germany, "encounters Judaism." The mother of Jesus, adored in many sanctuaries in Europe and around the world, is a Jew; all the Apostles are Jews; the first community in Jerusalem was made up exclusively of Jews. The Church is forcefully reminding Christian Europe of all this when it raises Edith Stein to the altar and designates her patron of Europe.

In the face of the shame that was the Shoah, the Catholic Church is therefore not attempting to lay claim to the Holocaust, but rather calling Christians to an act of penance. It is expressing regret to the Jews, its elder brothers in faith: "the Church... decries hatred, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism, directed against Jews at any time and by anyone" (*Nostra aetate*, 4). Nor can there be any talk of a rising tide of proselytizing in relation to the Jews. There is simply no place for it in the "new evangelization" that, in the version proclaimed by John Paul II, recognizes that "the New Covenant finds its roots in the Old. The degree to which the Old may find its fulfillment in the New is, of course, a matter for the Holy Spirit. We people can only try not to hamper this."

History shows that faith in Jesus became the cause of dissension within the bosom of Judaism; belief in Jesus also divided the Christians themselves. But Jesus is not to blame for the divisions that we have created. He wanted, and asked His Father for, the unity of all who believe in Him: "So that all could be as one."