

Memorial of Carmelite Martyr, St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross (August 9, 1821-1942)

Homily of Bishop Barres

St. Agnes Cathedral

August 9, 2023

Today we celebrate the Memorial of the great Carmelite martyr, St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross who lived from 1821 to 1942.

Edith Stein was born the eleventh child of Orthodox Jewish parents who declared herself an atheist at the age of 13.

She was a German woman philosopher who apprenticed with the philosopher Edmund Husserl.

She came into the Catholic Church by reading the autobiography of St. Teresa of Avila, the great Carmelite mystical Doctor of the Church. As a philosopher and as a Carmelite mystic, she is a great witness in history that objective truth is the foundation of progress in mental prayer.

Edith then followed in St. Teresa's path by entering a Carmelite monastery and becoming St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross.

Catholic writer Robert Ellsberg describes the holocaust experience of this philosopher mystic Carmelite nun.

He writes: "In 1940 the Nazis occupied Holland. Despite her cloistered status, Stein was required to wear the Yellow Star of David on her habit. Soon the deportations began. All the while Stein hurried to finish her study of the mystical theology of St. John of the Cross. She was consoled by the presence of her sister Rosa, who by this time had also converted and joined her in the convent as a laywoman.

The Germans had indicated a willingness to spare Jewish-Christians, provided the churches kept silent. When on July 26, 1942, a statement by the Catholic bishops of Holland denouncing the persecution of the Jews was read from pulpits through the country, the Nazis retaliated in rage. Within a week all Jewish Catholics, including members of religious orders, were under arrest. For Stein and her sister the end came on August 2, when the Gestapo arrived at their convent. Rosa was distraught, but Edith reassured her: ‘Come, Rosa. We’re going for our people.’

Survivors of the following days describe the nun’s courage and composure despite her clear certainty of the fate that awaited her. She occupied herself with prayer while caring for the terrified children and consoling mothers separated from their husbands. Someone described her as a ‘Pieta without the Christ.’

From a detention camp in Holland she followed the same route as millions of others: the wretched journey by sealed boxcar, the arrival half-starved at a strange camp amid snarling dogs and cursing guards, the infamous ‘selection,’ then the stripping, then the brisk walk to the shower room, from which none emerged.

Edith Stein died in the gas chamber of Auschwitz on August 9, 1942. In 1998 she was canonized as a martyr of the Church by Pope St. John Paul II...What is remarkable about Stein is not the manner of her death but her understanding of that death – in solidarity with her people, as an act of atonement for the evil in her time, and as a conscious identification with the cross of Christ.”¹

St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross is one of the six patron saints of Europe with St. Benedict, Sts. Cyril and Methodius, St. Bridget of Sweden and St. Catherine of Siena.

In his 1998 canonization homily, Pope St. John Paul II said: “St Teresa Benedicta of the Cross was able to understand that the love of Christ and human freedom are intertwined, because *love and truth have an intrinsic relationship*. The quest for truth and its expression in love did not seem at odds to her; on the contrary she realized that they call for one another... The mystery of the Cross gradually enveloped her whole life, spurring her to the point of making the supreme sacrifice. As *a bride on the Cross*, Sr Teresa Benedicta did not only write profound pages about the “science of the Cross”, but was thoroughly trained in the *school of the Cross*. Many of our

¹ Robert Ellsberg, *All Saints*, (New York: Crossroad, 2001), 344-345.

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.*"

**HOMILY OF JOHN PAUL II
FOR THE CANONIZATION OF EDITH STEIN**

Sunday, 11 October 1998

1. *"Far be it from me to glory except in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Gal 6:14).*

St Paul's words to the Galatians, which we have just heard, are well suited to the human and spiritual experience of Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, who has been solemnly enrolled among the saints today. She too can repeat with the Apostle: Far be it from me to glory except in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Cross of Christ! Ever blossoming, the tree the Cross continues to bear new fruits of salvation. This is why believers look with confidence to the Cross, drawing 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 has entered the hearts of so many men and women and changed their lives.

The spiritual experience of Edith Stein 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".

2. On 1 May 1987, during my Pastoral Visit to Germany, I had the joy of beatifying this generous witness to the faith in the city of Cologne. Today,

11 years later, here in Rome, in St Peter's Square, I am able solemnly to present this *eminent daughter of Israel and faithful daughter of the Church* as a saint to the whole world.

Today, as then, we bow to the memory of Edith Stein, proclaiming 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 honour 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.

3. I greet the many pilgrims who have come to Rome, particularly the members of the *Stein family* who have wanted to be with us on this joyful occasion. I also extend a cordial greeting to the *representatives of the Carmelite community*, which became a "second family" for Teresa Benedicta of the Cross.

I also welcome *the official delegation from the Federal Republic of Germany*, led by Helmut Kohl, the outgoing Federal Chancellor, whom I greet with heartfelt respect. Moreover, I greet the representatives of the states of North Rhine-Westphalia and Rhineland-Palatinate and the Mayor of Cologne.

An official delegation has also come from my country, led by Prime Minister Jerzy Buzek. I extend a cordial greeting to them.

I would particularly like to mention *the pilgrims from the Dioceses of Wrocław (Breslau), Cologne, Münster, Speyer, Kraków and Bielsko-Zywiec* who have come with their Cardinals, Bishops and pastors. They join the numerous groups of the faithful from Germany, the United States of America and my homeland, Poland.

4. Dear brothers and sisters! Because she was Jewish, Edith Stein was taken with her sister Rosa and many other Catholic Jews from the Netherlands to the concentration camp in Auschwitz, where she died with them in the gas chambers. *Today we remember them all with deep respect.* A few days before her deportation, the woman religious had dismissed the question about a possible rescue: "Do not do it! Why should I be spared? Is it not

right that I should gain no advantage from my Baptism? If I cannot share the lot of my brothers and sisters, my life, in a certain sense, is destroyed”.

From now on, as we celebrate the memory of this new saint from year to year, 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. *May the Lord let his face shine upon them and grant them peace* (cf. Nm 6:25f.).

For the love of God and man, 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. We must all stand together: *human dignity is at stake*. There is only one human family. The new saint also insisted on this: “Our love of neighbour 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”.

5. Dear brothers and sisters! *The love of Christ was the fire that inflamed the life of St Teresa Benedicta of the Cross*. Long before she realized it, she was caught by this fire. At the beginning she devoted herself to *freedom*. For a long time Edith Stein was a seeker. Her mind never tired of searching and her 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. Looking back as a Carmelite on this period of her life, she wrote to a Benedictine nun: “Whoever seeks the truth is seeking God, whether consciously or unconsciously”.

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 and was concerned to assert her freedom 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*.

This woman had to face the challenges of such a radically changing century as our own. Her experience 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. I am speaking especially to you, young Christians, particularly to the many altar servers who have come to Rome these days on pilgrimage: *Pay attention! Your life is not an endless series of open doors!* Listen to your heart! Do not stay on 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.

6. St Teresa Benedicta of the Cross was able to understand that the love of Christ and human freedom are intertwined, because *love and truth have an intrinsic relationship*. The quest for truth and its expression in love did not seem at odds to her; on the contrary she realized that they call for one another.

In our time, truth is often mistaken for the opinion of the majority. In addition, there is a widespread belief that one should use the truth even against love or vice versa. But *truth and love need each other*. St Teresa Benedicta is a witness to this. The "martyr for love", who gave her life for her friends, let no one surpass her in love. At the same time, with her whole being she sought the truth, of which she 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.

7. Finally, the new saint teaches us that love for Christ *undergoes suffering*. Whoever truly loves does not stop at the prospect of suffering: he accepts communion in suffering with the one he loves.

Aware of what her Jewish origins implied, Edith Stein spoke eloquently about them: "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 mystery of the Cross gradually enveloped her whole life, spurring her to the point of making the supreme sacrifice. As *a bride on the Cross*, Sr Teresa Benedicta did not only write profound pages about the "science of the Cross", but was thoroughly trained in the *school of the Cross*. 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, 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. Faith and the Cross proved inseparable to her. Having 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".

8. "God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth" (*Jn 4:24*).

Dear brothers and sisters, the divine Teacher spoke these words to the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well. What he gave his chance but attentive listener we also find in the life of Edith Stein, in her "ascent of Mount Carmel". The depth of the divine mystery became perceptible to her in the silence of contemplation. Gradually, throughout her life, as she grew in the knowledge of God, worshipping him in spirit and truth, she experienced ever more clearly her specific vocation 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.

We give thanks to God for this gift. May 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*.

St Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, pray for us! Amen.

