

SAINT EDITH STEIN CHALLENGES CATHOLICS

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INTRODUCTORY REMARKS ON A MULTI-FACETED GIFT OF GOD

Edith Stein, like any declared saint, is first and foremost a gift of God for the Church. "In crowning their merits, you crown your own gifts" is the praise the Preface for the Saints directs to God. They are gift because they have allowed the gifts of God seen in them to predominate throughout their lives.

Each saint displays different facets of the holiness of God, and the diversity is perhaps one of the most interesting aspects to them. No standard mold type sanctity rules in the company of the saints; they manifest, as Paul says, "many different gifts" (1 Co 12:4; Ro 12:6). Stein, in this vein, was different from others and she also was a very multi-faceted holy one of the Most High. Examples abound in her spiritual biography. Just one instance suffices to show her at her multi-faceted best. During the decade or so she served at the Sankt Magdalena teachers' college in Speyer she was a lay teacher, yet she took private vows; she spent long hours preparing and conducting lectures in class rooms, but found time to draft and give a radio address; she advised many a troubled student in need of encouragement, but she also travelled to other countries on lecture tours; she went West to Juvisy near Paris to delight a group of Neo-thomists with her knowledge of mainline Phenomenology and St. Thomas Aquinas, but she also faithfully returned eastward to her home town of Breslau during school vacations to visit her Jewish mother.¹ In life she impressed people by her all-around competence and diligence.

¹ Cf. Maria Adele Herrmann, *Die Speyrerer Jahre von Edith Stein: Aufzeichnungen zu ihrem 100. Geburtstag* (Speyer: Pilger Verlag, 1990), 212pp.

More recently, in the process of discernment the Church conducted to establish her worthiness for beatification she impressed her posthumous examiners considerably. She became the first person ever to be approved for beatification on two counts: she received the "honors of the altar" because of 1) her heroic virtues, but also because of 2) her martyrdom. Usual practice makes either one or the other sufficient grounds to open the door to beatification for a "Servant of God."² Stein's cause demonstrated extraordinary signs of maturity and exemplarity in the convert from Breslau who entered Cologne Carmel and equally in her who was chased from there to Holland by what the Pope termed the "insane ideology" of Nazism which eventually deported her to die in Auschwitz.³

Most definitely Bl. Teresa Benedicta or Edith Stein is not merely a new, modern face among saints, or just an off-beat name to be chosen for new Christian children. Much more, as an intellectual light for the Catholic women's movements in German-speaking countries, proficient and prolific writer, and finally one of the millions the Nazis wiped out, she is someone who "connects" with our situation in the waning months of the twentieth century.

Though gassed and cremated in the first half of this century, the range of her interests and accomplishments reaches to this end of it. Granted, she was born over a hundred years ago, in 1891; still her life's arc shows features close in tone and tempo to our own. She can call us to account, challenge us.

To prove she does offer positive challenges I would adopt the following approach to this talk: taking my cue from her as a talented writer, I prefer to let one of her incisive *texts* speak to a key issue facing our times. I will link to the text (wherever it seems suitable, but without going into too many details) suitable references to life details that do show parallels to conditions today. Much of what she wrote and did offers good advice for us to come to grips with the world around us, contribute to it, and

² Ambrosius Eszer, "Edith Stein, Jewish Catholic Martyr," *Carmelite Studies* 4 (1988), 314: ". . .an event without precedent in the centuries-old history of the Congregation [for the Causes of Saints]."

³ Pope John Paul II, "Homily at the Beatification of Edith Stein," *Carmelite Studies* 4 (1988), 299.

thus prepare a richer future. As the conclusion will show, these are the major areas of church life that she calls to and not the only areas her heritage can affect.

CHALLENGES

1) *Connected, non-Abstract Spirituality*

The stress of contemporary living with depleted resources, ever-increasing competitiveness for wealth, and fundamentalist interpretations of reality frequently induce withdrawal tendencies. People care intensively for their own small group, with ever vigilant concern for its survival. They become less and less open to persons of other persuasions, the ones they fear will make them lose their own well-being and even identity. They tend to be especially fearful and defensive in their religious life, and thus satisfy themselves by mere rote repetition of old truths. Stein never gave into such parochialism. Her example calls us instead to a spirituality open and connected to our surroundings. That is challenge number 1.

Just in time for the canonization, a helpful new book provides us with an introduction to her philosophical thought. It is the posthumous work of an American Stein expert, Sr. Mary Catherine Baseheart, and bears the apropos title "*Person in the World*."⁴ Those four words house a deep truth about Saint Edith. Stein always strove to craft accurate descriptions of the nature of our human person, and she always considered it in direct relation to the world, our home—a temporary home perhaps (Heb 13:13) but our current home nonetheless. One would not be abstracted from the other; both the human person and the world go together in Stein's thought and spirituality. That little word "in" of Baseheart's title is quite important.

Consistent with her thought Stein maintained a vigilant eye on evolving reality precisely to keep the two together and avoid artificial opposition. She applied her gifts of acute observation to take the pulse of events, and did a good job of scrutinizing

⁴ Mary C. Baseheart, *Person in the World: Introduction to the Philosophy of Edith Stein* (Dordrecht/Boston/London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1997), 300pp. "Contributions to Phenomenology," 27.

what Our Lord called “the signs of the times.” (Mt 16:3) From the many challenges she presents, this is a primary guiding principle of all the others: never lose contact with the real world. Never underestimate the salvific content planned by God for the creation (cf. Gen 1:31). Detecting them, establishing contact with their God-given value is not necessarily easy. Nevertheless, they are the theatre where the drama of God’s designs for our happiness and sanctification takes place. Because of its key importance for understanding Saint Edith I will devote a little more time to it.

One cannot help admiring how she went on practically discerning those “signs of the times” and thus kept in touch with the ups and downs, the ins and outs of salvation history’s current moment running through her life. Many a disappointment and contretemps encountered along the way had offered her ample reason to disconnect from the flow she was in or to close in on herself: employment was denied her for the sole reason she was a woman, then unemployment was thrust upon her by the Nazi racist regime in pursuit of its “final solution.” And yet, she went on seeking to observe and plumb the hidden meaning of it all. The motivational force that led her to remain open is described in a letter she wrote to a friend while still a laywoman. That letter proves Stein is a shining example of that admirable being Pope John Paul II calls “The Acting Person.”

The following passage went to Sr. Callista Kopf on 12 February 1928:

Immediately before, and for a good while after my conversion, I was of the opinion that to lead a religious life 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.⁵

⁵ Letter 45. We cite here the English-language edition, *Self-portrait in Letters, 1916-1942*, tr. Josephine Koepfel, ocd (Washington: ICS Publications, 1993), p. 54. Vol. 5 “The Collected Works of Edith Stein.” Subsequent reference will be “*Letters*”.

Several pairs of words indicate the depth of her thought: “secular—Divine,” “sever—connection,” “drawn into—go out.” The context helps us understand why she describes her feelings in this healthful tension-filled fashion.

She was writing to a Dominican teaching sister from her residence at Speyer, among teachers and students at St. Magdalena normal school. Just a little over six years had passed since her baptism, and that was preceded a few months earlier in the summer of 1921 by the “conversion” she was alluding to.

A night-long reading of the *Autobiography* of St. Teresa of Jesus, ending with the exclamation “That is the truth,” was her conversion experience.⁶ She felt immediately attracted to a contemplative calling in order to live out the divine life that had finally broke through the defenses of her atheism. (One ought to keep in mind that Stein did not pass to the Church through a renunciation of Judaism: she had abandoned practice of her Jewish faith years earlier, and often said that in embracing Catholicism she rediscovered the riches in Jewish religious teachings.⁷)

The great St. Teresa had opened the door to her; she felt a resultant desire to seek out a life like Teresa’s. She did not account, however, for an experienced old spiritual director, Canon Schwind, who convinced her to place her great intellectual gifts in the service of other Catholic women and wait for sometime later in her life to enter Carmel.⁸ Now she is saying to Sr. Callista that “in this world” we shouldn’t break our links to the world even if “thoughts of the Divine. . . in the contemplative life” are so admirable and desirable. On the contrary, closer

⁶ Cf. Teresia Renata Posselt, ocd, *Edith Stein*, tr. Cecily Hastings and Donald Nicholl (London/New York: Sheed & Ward), p. 64. Stein wrote that the decisive night’s reading at Bad Bergzabern “put an end to my long search for the truth” in her narrative “How I came to the Cologne Carmel,” tr. Susanne Batzdorff, *Edith Stein: Selected Writings* (Springfield, IL: Templegate Publishers, 1990), p. 19.

⁷ See the Pope’s comment on the day of her beatification: “For Edith Stein her baptism as a Christian was by no means a break with her Jewish heritage. Quite the contrary, she said ‘I had given up my practice of the Jewish religion as a girl of 14. My return to God made me feel Jewish again’ in “Homily at the Beatification,” no. 7, *Carmelite Studies* 4, p. 303.

⁸ See Joachim Feldes, “Edith Stein und ihr Seelenführer Joseph Schwind,” *Edith Stein und Schifferstadt* (Schifferstadt: Stadtparkasse Schifferstadt, 1998), pp. 9-24.

proximity to God or “the deeper one is drawn into God” invariably leads a person “out of oneself” and “to the world in order to carry the divine life into it.” We do not turn away from the world, not shun it, nor do we act as if it does not exist. Rather, we draw upon our relationship with God (she was known to spend long hours late at night before the tabernacle in St Magdalena’s chapel) to “carry” or spread its fruits wherever they will do so much good.

For me the high point of this passage is the expression she puts purposely within quotation marks, viz., “go out of oneself.” I am convinced she has in mind the Greek term *exstasis*, laden, as it is, with mystical overtones. She broadens the usually introverted connotation evoked by the word “ecstasy” and goes way beyond any notion of visionary delights to create the idea of an ecstatic act of *sharing*. We do not stay transfixed solely where and when we feel most uplifted, rather we allow ourselves to be impelled to reassure others God does in fact lift us up. God is present and concerned with us. We establish contact with others in this kind of ecstasy because God wishes us to do so. We are sent from contact with the Divinity to proclaim that the “divine life” can be reached because we, with our experience, will speak to others about it. A little further on in her letter, Stein confirms this by advising that “. . .one is to consider oneself totally as an instrument, especially with regard to the abilities one uses. . . .We are to see them as something used, not by us, but by God in us.”⁹

At a time when “flight from the world” or *fuga mundi* was the safe recipe for any Catholic ardently searching for the perfection of a holy life, Stein is saying we can find God *in* the world by bringing God to the world. Adapt your abilities to the people and the situation, and God will take over as God wields the instrument His grace has finely tuned. Stein’s corrective to what had become a classic principle of religious life slipped deftly between the opposed dangers of mere passivity on one hand and spiritual hubris on the other.

This is practical advice since it avoids the expected (for those times) exhortation to heavenly considerations of an altogether ethereal sort. “Something else is asked of us in this world,” she writes, and we thus willingly leave the time for

⁹ Letter 45, *Letters*, pp. 54-55.

endless delights to the next world. The proper forum for spiritual exchange between humans and God is right here. We court a great risk by thinking we can find it in a refined atmosphere devoid of real-life situations.

In canonizing Edith Stein the Church points us in the direction of a spirituality that includes new forms "beginning with people as they are. . . in ways they can understand." It is not by asking them to abandon their nature for some pretense of a higher realm that you reach them (thereby creating a dichotomy between the spiritual and the ordinary), but by interacting in ways they recognize because found close to hand. Not an easy task, but Stein would hardly have recommended this unless she thought it possible. We can make it possible in our time too, by sharing what God has given us and let the Lord guide the transmission.

The Church of late has called for a "new evangelization": it now has in Saint Edith Stein a valid promoter of a spiritual vision that breathes life into an evangelization that should both spring from contemplative prayer and eventually find its completion there, but which never sacrifices spiritual realism. Two weeks into World War II Stein restated her earlier advice to Sr. Callista Kopf in the following words addressed to the nuns of the Echt monastery on the feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross. By them she invites us to avoid turning in on ourselves but rather to go about discovering the signs of God at work in our times:

Bound to him [Christ] you are omnipresent as he is. You cannot help here or there like the physician, the nurse, the priest. You can be at all fronts, wherever there is grief, in the power of the cross. Your compassionate love takes you everywhere, this love from the divine heart.¹⁰

¹⁰ Edith Stein, "Elevation [= Exaltation] of the Cross, September 14, 1939," *The Hidden Life: Essays, Meditations, Spiritual Texts*, tr. Waltraut Stein (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1992), p. 96. "The Collected Works of Edith Stein," 4.

2) *Compassion for Hesitant Pilgrims*

Tendencies toward fundamentalist zeal on the contemporary scene lead to hard-hearted disregard for those who suffer and are in dire need. People are convinced they have all they can do to assure the basic dignity of their own clan or societal group. They cannot be bothered by the "troubles" others are in, because they feel overburdened with their own. Edith Stein followed another way, the way of compassion for worried and harried fellow travellers; and she reminds us we ought to exercise compassion in our times.

A text she wrote four years after the 1928 text just examined captures her awareness and concern over the burdensome problems of the young women she taught and who wanted to be teachers themselves.¹¹ As a teacher of young laywomen as a laywoman herself, she was well attuned to the life problems of her students. Many hours of counseling troubled individuals led her to write these golden lines that any teacher would be happy to own:

The most important thing is that the teachers should really have Christ's spirit in themselves and really embody it in their lives. But it is also their duty to know the life into which the children are going. Otherwise there is a great danger that the girls will say to themselves: 'The Sisters have no idea of what the world is like, they couldn't prepare us for the questions we now have to solve' — and that then the whole thing will be thrown overboard as useless.... You have the personal advantage that you did not enter too early and were in the Youth Movement. This means that approaches are open to you which others miss. But also you must keep your feelings ever open. The younger

¹¹ Biographical excursus/reminder: Due to discrimination against women in German universities earlier this century she was unable to obtain a university teaching appointment commensurate with the academic achievement of the *summa cum laude* thesis that Husserl directed. She served for a time as his assistant but was denied employment on the faculty in her own right. Her conversion to Catholicism in 1921 brought with it the project of forming the hearts as well as the minds of young women: she became an instructor at the teacher's college of the Dominican sisters of Sankt Magdalena in Speyer. Cf. B. H. Reifenrath, *Erziehung im Licht des Ewigen: Die Pädagogik Edith Steins* (Frankfurt: 1985).

generation of today has passed through so many crises that they cannot understand us any more. But we must try to understand them, and then perhaps we shall be able to help them a little.¹²

Stein wrote this letter in October of what we call "the Year of Our Lord 1932," but for the young German women of whom she speaks it was one of those "between-the-wars" years when Germany lurched back and forth under the pressure of the social and political upheaval that only increased when the Nazis took power.

To invoke the phrase coined by W.H. Auden (who was staying in Germany at about this time) to describe our century, it was truly an "Age of Anxiety." Edith was taking the proper measure of the raw material fed into her classroom when she claimed on their behalf the presence of "problems which we now have to solve." Every generation has shifting matrices for its growth pains, only the perceptive educators like Edith Stein have both the insight and the courage to declare candidly what they are. And yet, beyond the shifts, Edith's words designate well what used to be called a "generation gap," and they call for a compassion toward the alienated that requires extra efforts to ease communication, to take the initiative toward them.

Underscoring, as I have, Stein's great concern about the troubles of the people she taught is just another way of saying she sincerely wanted to help younger persons, children included. The very final stage of her life was no exception and she cared for little ones in the following poignant manner.

Arrested on August 2, 1942 by the Gestapo, she died one week later not very far from her home city of Breslau in the Auschwitz extermination camp. In that last week of her life she was pushed through the infernal network of Hitler's "final solution," thus visiting two intermediate transit camps in Holland, first Amers-foort, then Westerbork. In Westerbork her stay coincided with the tenure of ETTY HILLESUM, the Dutch Jewish woman who has left behind a diary and some Letters from Westerbork that have made her a subject of recent discussion in some Christian circles.¹³ Hillesum devotes a lot of

¹² Letter 123, *Letters*, p. 122-23.

¹³ ETTY HILLESUM, *Letters from Westerbork* tr. Arthur J. Pomerans (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), esp. pp. 28-30 where she notes the arrival of

space in her writings (published posthumously because she too was killed by the Nazis) to the deep sense of despair which overcame women with children in the camp. Understandably, the children were neglected, and an eyewitness account informs us that Edith Stein did much to look after them. Julius Marcan, a survivor, testified that:

It was Edith Stein's complete calm and self-possession that marked her out from the rest of the prisoners...Many of the mothers were on the brink of insanity and had sat moaning for days, without giving any thought to their children. Edith Stein immediately set about taking care of these little ones. She washed them, combed their hair and tried to make sure they were fed and cared for.¹⁴

From Westerbork Edith was able to send back a compelling message to the nuns at her monastery in Echt:

... we place our trust in your prayers. There are so many persons here in need of a little comfort, and they expect it from the sisters.¹⁵

The religious nuns were not nursing personnel (also referred to as "Sister" in Europe), so Edith had no medications to dispense, nor could she deal with the other detainees from a nurse's position of authority. She had only herself to give: her attentiveness, the time she took away from her own worries, and her sense of religious hope. She gave all that she had, because she was fully present with, present to the others, and she was willing to do as much as she could to share their burden of suffering so as to lighten the load. The freeing effects of her compassionate "comfort" did not go unnoticed. Mr. H. Wielek, a Dutch official who spoke with her in Westerbork left a description which can serve as an eloquent epilogue to what she

the "Catholic Jews or Jewish Catholics" and describes several religious among them.

¹⁴ Waltraud Herbstrith, *Edith Stein, A Biography*, tr. Bernard Bonowitz (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), p. 105.

¹⁵ Letter 342, *Letters*, p. 353.

wrote, said and did to add to this poor world's reserve of humor and compassion:

I knew: here is someone truly great.

For a couple of days she lived in that hellhole, walking, talking and praying ... like a saint. And she really was one. That is the only fitting way to describe this middle-aged woman who struck everyone as so young, who was so whole and honest and genuine.

At one point she said to me, 'I never knew people could actually be like this...and I honestly had no idea of how my brothers and sisters were being made to suffer...I pray for them continually.'

...then I saw her go off to the train with her sister [Rosa] praying as she went, and smiling the smile of unbroken resolve that accompanied her to Auschwitz.¹⁶

3) *Loving Knowledge of the Faith*

Anyone currently involved in the formation of seminarians or religious quickly comes upon a disquieting realization: they do not have the kind of grasp of the fundamentals of their faith that previous generations of candidates had. A further realization arises: if the ones who show such good will and desire to serve the Church and extend its outreach to a world in need of the Good News are so ignorant of the fundamentals, how much more ignorant must their brothers and sisters be who probably do not care much about Church life at all?¹⁷ A postulant for a typical religious order in my country told his confrères back home about his confusion when, receiving the "Hail Mary" as penance in the confessional, he had to go look for a printed text of that prayer since he did not know it by heart(!). A good deal of the efforts put into devising *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* probably aimed at helping remedy the situation underlying that and similar stories. Edith Stein invites us to work to correct such a glaring deficiency, no matter—and no doubting—the good intentions of the persons who suffer from it.

¹⁶ W. Herbstrith, *A Biography*, pp. 107-08.

¹⁷ Cf. Avery Dulles, "Orthodoxy and Social Change," *America* 178 (20-27 June 1998), 8-17.

a. Preface to *Science of the Cross*

Her last major work was to be a commentary on the great mystic and collaborator of St. Teresa of Avila in the reform of Carmel, St. John of the Cross. He was declared a Doctor of the Church in 1926 and this book was her contribution to the 4th centenary celebrations of his birth in 1942. Unfortunately, like Schubert's fourth symphony, it remained incomplete, due to her arrest by the Gestapo. She had the following trenchant remark to make in the unfinished manuscript's Introduction entitled "Meaning and Basis of the Science of the Cross":

There are naturally recognizable signs indicating that human nature as it actually exists is in a state of depravity.

This includes the inability to assimilate and react to facts according to their true value. . . This lack of sensibility is particularly painful in the religious sphere. Many Christians feel depressed because the events of the Gospel do not—or do no longer—impress them as they ought and fail to affect and shape their lives. The example of the saints shows how it ought to be: where there is truly living faith there Christian doctrine and the mighty deeds of God are the content of life which shape everything and before which everything else must give way. . .

If a saintly soul thus assimilates the truths of faith they become the science of the saints. If the mystery of the Cross becomes its inner form it grows into the science of the Cross.¹⁸

Such a beautiful and timely, I would underscore, passage deserves careful analysis.

From a sanguine estimate of the generalized world situation Stein moves deftly to the religious sphere. Christians are depressed because they do not "react to facts according to their true value." Unfortunately, they share in a "lack of sensibility" to reality because they show less than a "truly living faith."

This estimate of the situation does not flow from pessimism. Stein was writing her study on Saint John of the Cross during World War II, and our generation is painfully aware of how paralysis among believers in the face of that war's atrocities has

¹⁸ Edith Stein, *Science of the Cross*, tr. Hilda Graef (Chicago: Regnery, 1960), p. 2.

spawned other problems in our midst. One need only reread the Vatican's recent declaration "We remember" on the *Shoah* to appreciate how sad a break-down in morale occurred among Catholic believers back then.¹⁹

It is not a pessimistic vision of things for another important reason because, in assigning a cause for why Christians are "depressed," Stein gives the reader an antidote. She claims that if "Christian doctrine and the mighty deeds of God. . . [were] the content of [their] life" they would react to events most differently. What is lacking is assimilation on the part of those who by the rebirth of baptism are expected to take an active part in the Church which has engendered them to eternal life.

In fact, Stein uses the word "assimilate" twice, and here is the nub of the question and her challenge. She would call upon the Church today to give more effective ways to assimilation of the riches of the faith. Ever an alert pedagogue, the former "Fraülein Doktor" who now as Saint Edith will give added credibility to an intellectual apostolate among Catholics, reminds us that effective catechetical methods and outreach is essential to vibrant participation by Catholics in all happenings of life, be they directly related to their church or be they found in the mainstream of secular life. But, if believers die of hunger for want of proper understanding of the teachings transmitted to them from Christ and his preaching of the Good News of Salvation, the world will lack the proper leaven Christianity can give. In parallel fashion, Stein tells us the reserves of holiness in our world will diminish too: there will be no science of the Cross at work because those who are called to be saints will hardly craft it into that "inner form" she would educe out of the "truths of the faith." The blockage they suffer and the lost contact with Gospel values will stunt their growth. In this connection it is very suitable to delve into the life of a true saint of our times, Stein, to see some of the ways she tried to take seriously knowledge of the faith and to transmit her grasp of it to her contemporaries.

¹⁹ Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, "We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah," *Origins* 27 (26 March 1998), 669, 671-74. See also Victoria Barnett, Part III "Resistance and Guilt," *For the Soul of the People: Protestant Protest Against Hitler* (New York/Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1992), pp. 197-235.

b. How, in other words, did Stein invest in a deepening process of her faith, or how did she delve into valid explanations of the proclamation of salvation offered by the Church? An answer to this question is all the more interesting for the fact she had become a Catholic by abandoning an atheistic world view. Put another way, she always considered assimilation of the faith an extremely precious element of her life.

Being the type to insist on acquaintance with the best exemplar of a particular field of knowledge, she turned to the system of reflection most popularly acclaimed by Catholics at that time, viz., Thomism. She translated an important work of St. Thomas into German, the "Questions on the Truth," and as she did it she devised fine linguistic rendering of the medieval genius' teaching in contemporary German. But she did not stop there. She worked at building bridges between Thomism, the then reigning Catholic expression of the *philosophia perennis* and Phenomenology as a cutting edge trend in modern philosophical thinking.²⁰

Her second teaching post, just before entering the monastery, was at Münster in the Catholic Institute for Scientific Pedagogy. There she sought inspiration from major proponents of tradition by reading the Church Fathers. She took to translating one of St. John Chrysostom's works, *The Education of Children*, from the original Greek with the help of an eminent Patristic scholar, Fr. John Quasten (later Professor at Washington's Catholic Univ. of America).²¹ In doing so she sought out ideas of catechetical import that would help her form the future teachers she was instructing.

A final point: not even monastic life kept her from handing on lessons for growth in the knowledge of the faith. The first few years in the monastery at Cologne she wrote up small articles about spiritually significant persons or themes from Carmelite history and placed them in various German newspapers, not all of them necessarily Catholic newspapers.²² One such study

²⁰ Cf. Ralph McInerny, "Edith Stein and Thomism," *Carmelite Studies* 4 (1987), 74-87.

²¹ Cf. John Sullivan, "Liturgical Creativity from Edith Stein," *Teresianum* 49 (1998,1), 182-3.

²² Cf. M. Amata Neyer, "Verzeichnis der von Edith Stein in Köln und Eicht verfaßten Schriften," in Edith Stein, *Wie ich in den Kölner Karmel kam mit Erläuterungen und Ergänzungen* von Maria Amata Neyer (Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 1994), pp. 139-140.

appeared in a Sunday supplement to an Augsburg newspaper.²³ What she did showed she would not just lament poor knowledge of the faith in others, she tried to supply for the deficiencies. One would hope Catholics today will be equally alert to remedy flagging knowledge and appreciation of their faith.

4) *Respect for Riches of the Spirit in Those seeking God with "Sincere Hearts"*

A new book from ICS Publications, in its ongoing series Carmelite Studies," is likely to cause a stir among English-language readers. It is a collection of statements by both Christians and Jews about Edith Stein.²⁴ The name of the volume is *Never Forget* and it appeared in another form originally in Germany as *Errinere dich-Vergiß es nicht* (1990). One important issue discussed is the relationship of Stein to her people and their religion. For Stein herself there was no root incompatibility between being a Christian and Jew. Her basic way of explaining it came in the form of words to her mother: she told her pious Jewish genetrix that now as a Catholic she had come to appreciate as never before the grace-bearing elements that Judaism offers. Only, it was the discovery Christ and his Cross that opened the door to those well-springs of grace.

My choice of her explanation to her mother is neither casual nor opportunistic. The way Edith related to Auguste Stein is paradigmatic for the way she related to her former religion.²⁵

²³ Sr. Teresia Benedicta a Cruce, "Über Geschichte und Geist des Karmels," *Zu neuen Ufern*, Sonntagsbeilage der *Augsburger Postzeitung* (n. 13, 31 März 1935).

²⁴ Cf. *Never Forget: Christian and Jewish Perspectives on Edith Stein*, tr. Susanne Batzdorff, ed. Steven Payne ocd (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1998). xvi + 304pp. "Carmelite Studies," 7.

²⁵ See the prophetic words of John Donohue, "Edith Stein's Early Years," *America* 151 (1987), 9:

If Edith Stein is beatified, her picture of Auguste Courant, by a divine and tender irony, is likely to rank first in the gallery of portraits drawn by saints of their mothers. It is more complete and memorable than the image of Monica in Augustine's *Confessions* or of Zélie Martin in Thérèse of Lisieux's *Story of a Soul*.

Her mother was an alter ego for her in so many ways, not only as she was growing up but in all the phases of her life; so much so that one would apply the old saying to the two Stein women that "the apple does not fall far from the tree." Tenacity, devotion, and honesty were three precious values Edith derived from Auguste Courant Stein. That is why her attitude to her mother's death clarifies extremely well for us Stein's respect for the way God works in other religions. Respect for the traces of God's presence beyond the borders of our own faith system is yet another challenge that Edith Stein makes to Catholics.

In all, Stein mentioned the passing of her mother on September 14, 1936 in nine letters, the last of which she sent as late as Feb. 17, 1939. Every one of them shows Edith admiring the faith of Auguste and the fruits of her life with God. An excerpt or two will suffice to show how the Carmelite Nun, former teacher of Catholic girls vindicated the ability of living Jewish faith to transform those who lived up to its demands. Although Edith surely was not writing a treatise about her mother, one notes a definite crescendo in her occasional remarks penned over a two-year period beginning soon after the death that took place on the Christian feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross.

The earliest mention of her mother's death was in Letter 226 sent on Oct 3, 1936 to Mo. Petra Brüning: she refers to the way (and I quote) "...God took her to Himself very quickly."²⁶ So her mother was called by God, but there is more. The day the letter is written was the eve of Auguste C. Stein's birthday. Her daughter goes on to state in this very inclusive fashion: "...today she is able to celebrate her 87th birthday with our dear Sr. Thérèse."²⁷ Significantly, "Sr. Thérèse" is none other than the latest Doctor of the Church, Saint Thérèse of Lisieux whose feastday was celebrated by the Church calendar on October 3 in the 30s. Stein places her mother in heaven in the company of a canonized saint; no reticence on her part about the blessed destiny of her Jewish parent.

The next letter is perhaps more significant still, because it alludes to the reason why Stein feels her mother has gone to heaven. Writing on Oct 4, 1936 to Sr. Callista Kopf in Letter 227

²⁶ Edith Stein, *Letters*, p. 237.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

she casts aside any possibility her mother might have converted to Christianity in the following words:

The news of her conversion was a totally unfounded rumor. I have no idea who made it up. My mother held to her faith to the very last. The faith and firm confidence she had in her God from her earliest childhood to her 87th year remained steadfast, and were the last things that stayed alive in her during the final difficult agony. Therefore, I have the firm belief that she found a very merciful judge and is now my most faithful helper on my way, so that I, too, may reach my goal.²⁸

It was by being always faithful and true to her own belief in her own God that Frau Stein found a “very merciful” judge at the end of her days. Fidelity to the faith of her ancestors saw her through, and crowned her perseverance even in spite of that final “agony” caused by a stomach tumor. In referring to the trust her mother had in the Lord Stein notes it was the “firm confidence she had in *her* God. . .” Perhaps Stein was echoing the expression she used in a previous letter on the last day of her mother’s life as she awaited the end:

. . . she truly loved “her” God (as she often said with emphasis). And, with confidence in him, she bore much that was painful and did much that was good.²⁹

The important thing that confirms Edith’s sense of religious respect is not so much the presence of the good deeds her mother did (indicated in the second part of her sentence) but that her mother continued to insist on the validity of devotion for the God of Israel, her God and not the God Edith had lately embraced. In spite of the difference her mother wished to underscore, Edith esteems her tenacious devotion and would not think to criticize it in the least.

Edith goes beyond just accepting the efficacy of Jewish devotion for her mother, however; she attributed intercessory powers to the late Frau Stein in a subsequent missive. In letter 280

²⁸ Edith Stein, *Letters*, p. 238.

²⁹ Cf. Letter 225, *Letters*, p. 235.

sent on Oct 31, 1938 to Hedwig Dülberg she commented on the sad departure of her older brother from Germany in these terms:

On the 14th my brother <Arno> said goodbye to me before his departure for America. On All Souls Day we will both remember our mother. This remembrance is always very comforting for me. I have the firm conviction that my mother now has the power to help her children in these great afflictions.³⁰

There is a highly provocative mixture of religious devotions in this passage: while Edith pays tribute to the very Catholic reliance on prayer for the dead connected to November 2nd's All Souls Day, and at the same time believes interceding for her mother then will be worthwhile, she goes on to state her "firm conviction" that Mother is in a position in the afterlife to actually "help her children" in what they are now suffering from family break-up due to Nazi antisemitic persecution. Once again, Edith the Carmelite nun who would offer many a fervent intercession for the "intentions" recommended to her prayers is seen assigning the same role to her mother before the Lord. One can hardly derive any condescending attitude of Stein vis-a-vis the religion, zealously observed and cherished by Frau Stein. Surely, this did not mean Edith would have wanted to trade places; no, she remained faithful for a score of years to the tenets she formally embraced at baptism on New Year's day of 1922. But the way she acknowledged the transforming power of Jewish faith for a devout Jew like her mother (who wasn't even Orthodox, for the record) leads me to conclude she would want us to show similar respect for valid Jewish commitment.

Much light is shed by these written remarks about her mother. They ought to be kept in mind when one proceeds to an exegesis of some of the "hard sayings," if I may call them that, of Stein about the Jewish religion. On balance (and someone will one day do a balanced study of this point), she adopted an "enlightened" stance toward interreligious relations between Catholics and Jews. As a convert she oftentimes stirs up harsh, hurt feelings; but deeper knowledge of the "spiritual ecumenism" she cultivated would defuse many an emotional

³⁰ Edith Stein, *Letters*, p. 290-91.

reaction when her name is mentioned.³¹ A suitable concluding remark comes from what she wrote about the second most cherished adult influence on her life, i.e., about her revered “Master” Edmund Husserl. As the Protestant founder of Phenomneology lay dying she penned a letter to her sister phenomenologist Adelgundis Jaegerschmid that contained these future-oriented thoughts:

I am not at all worried about my dear Master. 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.³²

5) *Integrated Vita Devota*

Near century’s end the Catholic Church is in some countries is experiencing stress among groups that take divergent stances on content and rate of renewal. Even though Vatican II remains the reference point and rich watershed of moves toward revitalized Church life, it has received a “bad press” in some circles, as individuals prefer a return to practices that held sway before that greatest ecclesial event of our century.³³ Charles E. Miller, “Conservatism, not Regression, in Liturgy,” *America* 179 (4-11 July 1998), 14-16 wisely suggests that “especially in matters liturgical we must conserve the best of our tradition, *including* change.” (Italics mine) The American founder of a new group of religious, who established it in the Franciscan tradition after he left the Capuchins, wrote a book that is symptomatic of a wish for a much slower pace, entitling it *The Reform of Renewal*.³⁴ This contains advice from the author that it’s high

³¹ Cf. Harry J. Cargas ed., *The Unnecessary Problem of Edith Stein* (Lanham, NY/London: University Press of America, 1994). xii + 85pp. “Studies in the Shoah,” 4.

³² Letter 259, *Letters*, p. 272.

³³ Charles E. Miller, “Conservatism, not Regression, in Liturgy,” *America* 179 (4-11 July), 14-16 where the supertitle wisely suggests that “especially in matters liturgical we must conserve the best of our tradition, *including* change.” (Italics mine)

³⁴ Cf. Benedict Groeschel, *The Reform of Renewal* (San Francisco:

time proponents of new ways of doing things in the Church get hold of themselves and stop embracing even more renewal.

The liturgy installed by express directive of the Council and the Vatican organisms entrusted with implementation of the Council decrees does not escape the strictures of those who dream of the apparent serenity of former days. With longing for a "golden age" of liturgical practice (something that never actually existed, anyway, but they won't grant you that), they want no more changes in liturgical practice and even flirt with temptations to reinstall abandoned rituals (that never enjoyed the status of long-standing traditions, anyway, but they won't admit that). In this area of mystagogy and liturgical piety one can find a way forward by taking up the fifth challenge to Catholics from Edith Stein.

The year 1937 marked a mid-point in Stein's growth in her vocation as a Catholic contemplative nun. She had entered Carmel late in 1933 and would die in the summer of 1942 at Auschwitz. As already indicated she was delving into Carmelite spirituality and forming herself in the mold of monastic life.³⁵ This did not mean, as some feared, she was losing contact with usual church life around her. Quite the contrary, she kept keenly in tune with the ebb and flow of events and even surges in disagreement that can occur.

One such disagreement concerned the liturgy, the "prayer of the Church" that she had found so important and nourishing to her spiritual life. Without going into too many details, the situation can be summed up as follows: a clash over the parameters of proper balance between liturgical piety and individual piety was brewing from the mid-thirties on, primarily in Germany. Some felt that renewed liturgical practices would be suitable-enough sources of inspiration to do away with devotional practices of later date. But those who favored the latter opposed the liturgical party and branded liturgical practices as "externalist" and "activist" with harmful consequences for individual spiritual progress. A solution suggesting coexistence between the two concerns, i.e., between ritual participation and interiority, would be the obvious answer,

Ignatius Press, 1990), 227pp.; and Annabel Miller, "Special Report: The Pain of Renewal," *The Tablet* (13 June 1998), 793.

³⁵ See note 22, *above*.

but when controversies move toward a flash point they tend to invite extreme formulations that only widen the breach.³⁶

Edith knew well the mentality of the liturgists: she had frequent contacts with the Archabbot of the famous Benedictine monastery in the Black Forest, Beuron Abbey, and had worshipped there during school vacation time. On the other hand, but not in opposition to the Benedictine vision of worship in common, she also had opted to join the Carmelites, an order known for its promotion of silent, meditative prayer with a mostly austere devotional style.³⁷

She decided to offer ideas from her own experience to ease the rising tension at that time. The result was a small essay/treatise called *The Prayer of the Church*, published in 1937 in a book that offered other essays weighing some of the factors involved in the growing debate in Germany. Her reflection was a clear attempt to strike a balance, and the following passage demonstrates how successful she was in doing so:

. . .the monks “resembling angels” surround the altar of sacrifice and make sure that the praise of God does not cease, as in heaven so on earth. The solemn prayers they recite as the resonant mouth of the church frame the holy sacrifice. They also frame, permeate, and consecrate all other “daily work” so that prayer and work become a single *opus Dei*, a single “liturgy.”³⁸

As in so many other significant passages of Stein’s works the very terminology she adopts gives precious keys to understanding. Three points will suffice to lay out her helpful and creative insight.

³⁶ Authoritative help to sort out the divergences and to bring deeper unity would come later in 1947, on the universal church level: see Pius XII, *Mediator Dei*, esp. Part 4 “Acts of Piety are not to be neglected,” and Part 1, sec. 2 “Liturgy is external and internal worship.”

³⁷ Cf. Josephine Koepfel ocd, *Edith Stein, Philosopher and Mystic* (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier Book, Liturgical Press, 1990), chs. 12-18, “The Way of the Christian Mystics,” 12 where this practitioner of cloistered Carmelite life illustrates how Stein shared community living; while the more recent reworked (Roman) doctoral thesis of Francisco J. Sancho Fermin ocd, *Edith Stein Modelo y Maestra de Espiritualidad, en la Escuela del Carmelo Teresiano* (Burgos: Ed. Monte Carmelo, 1998), pp 89-96 deals with the very topic of “Devociones.”

³⁸ Edith Stein, “The Prayer of the Church,” *The Hidden Life*, p. 28.

She mentions the two major axes of public worship, namely, the Eucharist and the Liturgy of the Hours. They are described in non-pragmatic terms, too, so Stein avoids what is sometimes called the “service station” model of liturgy, or one that subordinates worship to the moral effects it produces after worship time is over: note the word “praise of God” and “resonant mouth of the church.” The monks are granted by vocation a holy leisure (*otium sacrum*) that allows more time and thus it is easier for them to embellish praise by the beautiful cadences of their singing. Still, all liturgy, wherever it is celebrated, needs to stress gratuitous praise of God, and Stein reminds us of this. Her text takes us further, all the same.

She then links the prayers of the monks to activities outside the worship area, because those prayers are also a setting for (they “frame”) daily work, and they both permeate and consecrate that work. Our faith vision of things says there is a difference between cultic and non-cultic activities but no gap between them. Benedictines themselves take for inspiration the motto “Ora **et** labora.” The same can be said for differences between cultic acts and acts of piety by individuals or smaller prayer groups: they might take place according to different rhythms, but they do not call for a choice of one over the other, certainly not one over against the other.

Thirdly, Stein claims there is a unified notion embracing both worship and non-cultic acts: prayer and work, she writes, “become a single ‘*opus Dei*,’ a single ‘liturgy.’” Once you base your individual prayer on the Mass and the prayer of the Hours, once you infuse your daily work with them both, you notice your work acquiring a spirit of service of God (*opus Dei*). To the extent you direct your work toward praising God in the Mass and in the Hours your work becomes “liturgy” whose root meaning is, after all, “work of the people.” It seems Stein is trying to bridge the gap between worship and work in themselves, as much as the gap that was widening between the liturgical enthusiasts and the piety people. In our own days we would gain from adopting her insight so that our worship might flow over easily into daily tasks and the fulfillment of those tasks can itself prove to be worshipful activity. This requires vigilance in our hyper-busy world, so full of temptations to stray from any form of Godly activity, but Stein reassures us her challenge is worth accepting. No Christian spirituality can survive without the integration of liturgy and devotion her vision promoted,

CONCLUSION

By no means are the previously mentioned “challenges” the only invitations we can receive from Edith Stein/Teresa Benedicta. My choice is admittedly subjective, and influenced by my own perception of Church life. They do not exclude other challenges.

It seemed to me, also, that other important areas of her thought which apply to on-going concerns today were due to be treated by other speakers on the program of the current International Congress here in Rome. The topics they have handled, such as, Men—Women, Contacts between philosophy and the theological enterprise, empathy and faith, religious experience are as most important. To them could be added others like care for children in both developed and developing countries; individual and communal rights/obligations; peace and violence; co-responsible living in society, especially in the face of a quickly expanding stultifying consumerism; the role of the church in the protection of the persecuted.

One can hope that the intense attention paid by the canonization on the holiness of “kluge Edith” will draw more and more thoughtful persons to mine her thought for new lessons of hope for our contemporaries. She would be busy doing that very thing if she were still with us, and her own inherent tendency to come to grips with reality as a fully-human person, as she sought for the truth, will surely lead others to follow in her footsteps.

As I express my appreciation for the chance to join the distinguished speakers of this Congress in praising Saint Edith Stein, I want to express my thanks, after a fashion, to Stein herself for having joined our Order and given us the opportunity to feel so proud of her as a sister Discalced Carmelite. We are, indeed, in great company.