

The witness of Carmelite Edith Stein

Holiness beyond borders

The twentieth century had many martyrs for the Christian faith, among them: Edith Stein, the Polish Catholic Carmelite nun who had converted from Judaism and who was murdered in the concentration camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau in 1942. Her unique biographical, theological and spiritual journey, culminating in martyrdom, invites us to study and reflect on the Gospel encounter in the context of totalitarian regimes, oriented by her choice towards world peace. Giulia Iotti is director of the Theological Library of Reggio Emilia, and her husband, Roberto Ruini, is a recent graduate in interfaith theology from the Pontifical Lateran University, with a focus precisely on these three persons mentioned above.

Giulia Iotti and Roberto Ruini

Edith Stein was born on October 12, 1891, in Wroclaw (Breslau) Poland to a Jewish family, and was the youngest of eleven siblings. Her father died when she was only twenty-one months old and so she was educated in the Jewish faith by her mother. However, as a teenager she passed through a period of agnosticism and distance from her faith. After high school, she studied philosophy, Germanistics, and psychology at the University of Breslau, before moving in April 1913 to the University of Göttingen, where philosopher Edmund Husserl was on the faculty. Her childhood faith was replaced by a search for truth through studies. Author Anselmo Palini writes, "This is precisely what Edith was seeking: to gain from philosophy and science the answer to the ultimate questions of human existence."¹

After returning to complete her doctorate in Breslau, where she was the only woman, Edith became Husserl's assistant in Freiberg (Germany). She later returned to her native Wroclaw (Poland) in 1918 to begin teaching at the city's high school while working to qualify for university teaching (not an option for women then).

It was during those years that she was drawn to the Christian faith, particularly the Catholic faith. We can try to retrace some elements of this journey.²

The divine power of the cross of Christ

By age 22, Edith had already encountered people who would significantly impact her life, including Adolf Reinach and his wife Anna, both of Jewish descent and converts to Christianity. They became a point of reference for Edith in various times of difficulty. In speaking of each, she wrote: "I felt as if I had never met people who had welcomed me with such selfless goodness."³ The Reinach couple received baptism and became Protestants in 1916, but Adolf would die the following year in World War I. She writes of one episode of expecting to encounter despair and anguish in seeing Anna grieving, whereas instead she found serenity and faith:

"[...] what words of comfort could she have addressed to the distraught widow? To her surprise, however, she was not faced at all with a distraught, despairing widow, but rather, a woman who clung to the cross of Christ from which she drew the strength to bear her enormous pain. *'It was my first encounter with the cross and with the divine strength it imparts to those who carry it. I touched for the first time with my own hand the Church born from the suffering of the Redeemer in his victory over death. It was the moment when my unbelief collapsed, Judaism vanished, and Christ shone forth, Christ the mystery of the cross.'* They were Edith's words in seeing the visible witness of Anna Reinach."⁴

Eyes free from prejudice

Her eventual arrival in Göttingen would also mark her first participation in the *Philosophical Society*, where she met the noted philosopher, Max Scheler. Scheler, whose father was Jewish, had converted to Catholicism and was baptized in 1899. He then combined a life devoted to philosophy and his faith in God. This fact deeply affected and shook Edith:

"Thus it was the first time that I came into contact with a world that until then was completely unknown to me. This did not yet lead me to faith, but it opened me onto a field of "phenomena" before which I could no longer be blind. It was not for nothing that we were continually advised to consider everything with eyes free from prejudice and to throw away any kind of "blinders." The barriers of rationalistic prejudices in which I was raised without knowing it, and the world of faith suddenly stood before me. [...] I was content to accept within myself, without resistance, the stimuli arriving to me from the environment I frequented. And almost without realizing it – I was gradually transformed by it."⁵

For Edith, this was the point where philosophy left the simply academic realm and became intertwined with life: "[...] trait, this too, Jewish par excellence that privileges transcendence through the act of life."⁶ For her there continued to be a profound validity of the two religious dimensions, Jewish and Christian. She did not exclude one over the other, but sought a unified meaning of religious experience. For Edith, adherence to Christianity was a broadening of horizons because it responded to the dimension of universality, although for her it did not supplant the particularity of belonging to a people into which she was born. Edith accounts for the apparent contrasts between Judaism and Christianity, and transforms them into differences that she welcomes within a unity that is a "dual unity." Religious experience, in its multifarious nature, is justified because human persons are finite before that which is infinite and beyond itself. Such openness in faith signifies a reliance on the Other.⁷

Following St. Teresa of Avila

A significant episode for Edith also occurred in 1921 while reading the life of St. Teresa of Avila. "What she had sought and had not found in philosophy and science, namely truth, she now finds in faith", writes Palini.⁸ At 31, Edith Stein was baptized. It was a step in her life that also marked a moment of great tension with her mother and also her friends with whom she shared her phenomenological studies in Göttingen and Freiberg. To those who hinted to a lack of meaning in Edith's life in that moment, she responded: "Rather, I am the

person who least needs compassion. There is no one in the world with whom I would like to trade places. And I have learned to love life only since knowing what I live for."⁹

Soon after her conversion, Edith had the desire to enter Carmel. But her spiritual director, Joseph Schwind, insisted that she remain in the world and found her a job in Speyer, Germany, at a high school run by Dominican sisters, where she remained until she was suspended because of discriminatory laws. She was offered a transfer to South America and a teaching opportunity, but she declined: "I almost felt a sense of relief at the thought that I, too, was struck down by the common lot."¹⁰

From that moment on, all her efforts focused on obtaining consent to enter Carmel, which happened at the age of 42. On April 15, 1934, she put on the Carmelite habit, choosing the name Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, a name that for her represented a true passage of life. In fact, she wrote in a letter to Roman Ingarden in 1937: 'Would you make the decision to call me 'Sister Benedicta', as I am used to [being called] now?' When I hear 'Miss Stein,' I must set myself to thinking what that is all about."¹¹

Deportation and martyrdom in the concentration camps

On August 2, 1942, Edith and her sister Rosa, who also converted to Catholicism and joined the Carmelite order, were apprehended by the Gestapo.

Author Guiliana Kantza, in her book *Three Women, One Question*, recounts: "It is August 1942: When Edith was called out of the choir to be taken away, she went first to the parlor. The Germans said she must go outside. She replied: 'I cannot do that, we have papal enclosure.' The Germans said: 'Call your superior.' She was given ten minutes of time. Upon leaving, Edith turned to Rosa and said, 'Come, let us go for our people.'"¹²

They are immediately taken to Amersfoort camp, then Westerbork sorting camp, and finally to Auschwitz, where they died on August 9 in the gas chambers. Three days before dying, Sister Teresa Benedicta wrote from Westerbork: "[please send] ... for Rosa, all personal wool underwear and what was in the laundry. For both of us, handkerchiefs and sponges for washing. Rosa is also missing her toothbrush, cross and rosary beads. I would also like the next volume of the breviary (I have been able to pray wonderfully so far.). Our identity cards, certificates of origin, and bread cards. A thousand thanks. Greetings to all."¹³

¹ A. Palini, *Più forti delle armi. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Edith Stein, Jerzy Popieluszko*, Ave, Roma 2016, p. 136.

² Si assume come riferimento la posizione dei curatori delle *Opere complete di Edith Stein*, Angela Ales Bello e Marco Paolinelli.

³ E. Stein, *Dalla vita di una famiglia ebrea e altri scritti autobiografici*, Città Nuova, Roma 2007, p. 291.

⁴ B. Weibel, *Edith Stein, martire per amore*, Paoline, Milano 1999, pp. 22-23.

⁵ E. Stein, *Dalla vita di una famiglia ebrea*, cit., p. 306.

⁶ G. Kantzà, *Tre donne, una domanda. Hannah Arendt, Simone Weil, Edith Stein*, ARES, Milano 2012, p. 239.

⁷ A. Ales Bello, *Edith Stein o dell'armonia*, Studium, Roma 2009, pp. 7-11.

⁸ A. Palini, *Più forti delle armi*, cit., p. 259.

⁹ E. Stein, *Lettere III. Lettere a Roman Ingarden*, Città Nuova-OCD, Roma 2022, p. 190.

¹⁰ E. Stein, *Dalla vita di una famiglia ebrea*, cit., p. 489.

¹¹ E. Stein, *Lettere III*, cit., p. 347.

¹² G. Kantzà, *Tre donne, una domanda*, cit., p. 304.

¹³ E. Stein, *La scelta di Dio. Lettere (1917-1942)*, Città Nuova, Roma 1973, p. 157.