

St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross (Edith Stein)

Academia excluded her for being a woman, her mother rejected her for following her vocation, and the Nazis ultimately murdered her for being Jewish. Edith Stein, or St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross whose feast day we celebrate Aug. 9, died what many may see as a senseless death at the hands of a merciless ideology. But through her faith in the Cross, she allowed God to transform her suffering and death into a message of love and redemption for the world.

Edith Stein was born in 1891, the youngest of 11 children, to devout Jewish parents in Breslau, Germany. Her father died when she was just 2 years old. At age 14, Edith stopped praying, rejected her family's Jewish faith, and became an atheist.

A brilliant student, she searched for truth in academics, receiving her doctorate in philosophy *summa cum laude* in 1916. Though society would not allow her to follow her dream of becoming a professor on account of her gender, she worked as an assistant at the University of Freiburg for Edmund Husserl, a renowned philosopher who established the philosophical school of phenomenology. Through her writing on philosophy, Stein quickly became one of the university's top minds.

On a summer evening in 1921, Stein stayed awake all night reading the autobiography of St. Teresa of Avila. The following morning she said to herself, "This is the truth."

She was baptized and confirmed into the Catholic faith in 1922. She wanted to immediately enter St. Teresa's order, the Discalced Carmelites, but her spiritual advisor would not allow it just yet. Instead, she taught at a Dominican school for girls living within the world but devoting her life to prayer and study. Over the years, she authored several works on philosophy marrying the school of phenomenology with her Catholic faith.

In 1933, the Nazi's Aryan Law barred Jews from teaching in Germany. After spending over a decade in academia, Stein was forced to resign. She said, "I had become a stranger in the world. ... It dawned on me that God had laid His hand heavily on His people, and that the destiny of these [Jewish] people would also be mine."

Stein's spiritual advisor finally allowed her to enter the convent in 1934. Her mother cried when she heard that her Jewish daughter was entering Catholic religious life. Even though Stein wrote letters to her mother weekly, she never received any responses.

Stein took her final vows at the Carmelite Convent of Cologne on April 21, 1938, becoming Sister Teresa Benedicta of the Cross. Over the following months, the Nazis' desire to eliminate the Semitic race became more and more apparent as they burned synagogues and forced Jewish citizens to wear yellow badges. On New Year's Eve 1938, the Carmelite prioress had Stein smuggled out of Germany and into the Netherlands to the Carmelite Convent of Etch in the hopes that this would spare her life.

But the Nazis began imprisoning Jewish citizens in the Netherlands in 1942. Not long before her arrest, the Carmelite sisters devised a plan to try and save her life, but Stein protested saying, "If I cannot share the lot of my brothers and sisters my life, in a certain sense, is destroyed."

She wanted to die with her people and offered her certain death as a sacrifice for the salvation of others. She said, "I ask the Lord to accept my life and my death ... so that the Lord will be accepted by His people and that His Kingdom may come in glory, for the salvation of Germany, and the peace of the world."

Stein and her sister Rosa, who had also converted and entered the convent, were arrested by the Gestapo on Aug. 2, 1942. Stein's last recorded words were spoken to her sister saying, "Come, we are going for our people." Several days later, they were sent to Auschwitz and killed in a gas chamber.

Pope John Paul II canonized Edith Stein, or St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, a patron saint of Europe, on Oct. 11, 1998, saying, "The mystery of the cross gradually enveloped her whole life, spurring her to the point of making the supreme sacrifice ... The true message of suffering is a lesson of love. Love makes suffering fruitful and suffering deepens love."

Edith Stein did not let hate have the final say. Through her acceptance of the Cross, she offered her suffering to God for the salvation of others, transforming her senseless death into a message of love and redemption over death and despair.