

immolation of this victim<sup>10</sup>. It is not difficult to see that the prophecy presents an exact parallel in this with the drama of Calvary which it foreshadows. The Servant of Yahweh offers himself voluntarily, he does not kill himself, others are the instruments of his death, but he offers his life to his God for his brethren. The Vulgate '*Oblatus est quia ipse voluit*' underlines this notion of a voluntary sacrifice which is warranted by the wording of the original. He died for other men to bring them back to life: '*ut vivificaret populum suum*'.

But the Innocent Man, bowed under so great misery, will receive a splendid reward. After his Resurrection he will be raised up, glorified. And not he alone will triumph: 'that Lamb will clothe us truly in his coat of wool, and lead us into the dwelling-place of eternal salvation'<sup>11</sup>.

We who live under the new Economy, who have seen the Desired of the Nations and who know him, are in a position to understand the ancient Scriptures with a clearness far surpassing anything possible to the people of the old Covenant. We walk still in darkness, it is true, but we walk guided by the Torch which goes on before. Our Torch is the One to whom David prayed: 'In thy light we shall see light'; who said of himself: 'I am the light of the world'; whom Tertullian, in a supreme flash of genius, calls: '*Illuminator antiquitatum*'.<sup>12</sup>



## EDITH STEIN

PHILOSOPHER, CARMELITE AND MARTYR

BY

DONALD NICHOLL



HE 'Science of the Cross' could never be an easy discipline, for each stage of learning brings us face to face with a demand which seems more impossible than the last. One of these lessons is repeated so insistently and frequently that we should become weary of it, did we not acknowledge in the depths of our heart that we had never really learnt it; it is that

which teaches us our uselessness. There are always a certain number of ardent souls who surrender themselves so fervently to the 'Science

<sup>10</sup> *Summa Theol.* III, xlvi, 3.

<sup>11</sup> St Ambrose, *De Abraham* II, viii, 52.

<sup>12</sup> *Adversus Marcionem*, IV, 40.

of the Cross' that their own uselessness is quickly made clear to them; they gladly give back their whole personality and their gifts to God, confident that he will use them in his good time and in his way; faced with the choice of 'all or nothing' they choose nothingness and receive all. Two such heroes of the spiritual life were Père Jacques de Jésus, a French Carmelite, and Sister Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, a Carmelite from Regina Pacis Carmel in Cologne, stories of whose martyrdom, movingly told by members of their communities, have now been published.<sup>1</sup>

Neither Père Jacques nor Sister Teresa was lacking in natural gifts, Père Jacques being a brilliant teacher and preacher before abandoning his apostolate as a secular priest for the silence of Carmel, while Sister Teresa had been well known in philosophical circles throughout the world as Edith Stein, as the friend and assistant of Husserl, the great phenomenologist. There must have been much shaking of heads amongst the friends of these two striking personalities at such a burying of talents, so many qualities which the world needed being hid in the useless desert of Carmel; in human eyes, reading through these books, as they watch Père Jacques and Sister Teresa offering their lives in sacrifice as they see the hand of God sweep down to accept their offerings from the holocaust of the Nazi concentration camps, as they obscurely perceive the radiance of Christ, crucified in his brother and sister from Carmel, even a limited human vision can recognise how God used Père Jacques and Sister Teresa in his good time, and in his own way. Like great mountains, sensed rather than plainly observed, through the mists, their rock-like achievements overshadow the principalities and powers of this world, but the mist never clears entirely and, in the end, one is left wrapt in the mystery of it all. Vaguely one knows it to be the mystery of Israel; Père Jacques was arrested by the Gestapo for sheltering Jewish boys; Sister Teresa, who had deliberately offered up her life for the conversion of the Jews, was herself of Jewish race. Only to the company of the blessed is the connection between their fates intelligible, and for the present we must rest content with telling the straightforward story of Sister Teresa.

Breslau was the home of the Stein family, a family rooted in strict observance of the Jewish faith, whose members were devoted to each other with the traditional steadfastness of that people. Covering the walls of their rooms and hanging in the large hall

<sup>1</sup> Père Jacques de Jésus, *Martyr de la Charité*. By Philippe de la Trinité. (*Études Carmélitaines*). Edith Stein—*St Teresa Renata de Spiritu Sancto*. (Glock und Lutz Verlag).

were pictures illustrating Biblical scenes, a constant reminder to the young Edith of Israel's bitter destiny; but the impressionable girl did not need to look around the walls in order to appreciate her racial heritage, for a living image of that tradition was beside her all the time in the person of her mother. Widow Stein never spared herself in the effort to provide for her large family, and single-handed she managed the timber business which had been her husband's; it was this business which enabled her to give all her children a first-class education, and it is to their credit that they repaid her devotion with a devotion of their own in later years.

A first-class education was the only kind of education to satisfy Edith's eager and enquiring mind since she seems to have been something of an infant prodigy, if we may judge by the stories of how her uncles and aunts at family gatherings used to try to trip her up on literary questions when she was only five. It was no use their pretending that Goethe wrote *Maria Stuart*; any baby knew that it was Schiller! School-days brought out one trait in her character which frequently marks the early years of those who subsequently find their vocation on Carmel; she was full of ambition, she could never be content with anything lower than first place and she worked for that place with determination and even obstinacy. It was 'all or nothing' for her, just as it was for St Thérèse of Lisieux, for Sister Elizabeth of the Trinity or for Père Jacques, all of whom conquered their obstinate wills only by hard fighting. Carmel has no room for mediocrities.

By the time that she was twenty-one, in the year 1912, Edith appeared to have liberated herself from her unquestioningly orthodox home atmosphere, as we see from her statement to her student friends that she had never been anything but an atheist; in view of her later work on 'woman's vocation' it is perhaps not irrelevant to point out that this avowed atheism went hand-in-hand with an equally resolute feminism; there was a common note of revolt. But God seems to enjoy an occasional revolt, for he led Edith in 1912 to study philosophy under Husserl at Göttingen. The determined young atheist and feminist walked straight into a company of philosophers, the phenomenological school, which has given notable names to the Catholic Church in Germany. Included in this circle were Hans Lipps, Adolf Reinach, Koyré, Hedwig Conrad-Martius, Dietrich von Hildebrand, Hamburger and Erika Gathe; most of them were Jews and many of them became Catholics. Even among this distinguished circle Edith Stein's philosophical ability was so outstanding that when Husserl in 1916 was called to the Chair of Philosophy in Freiburg he asked her to go with him as his assistant; she joined

Husserl at Freiburg after two years of voluntary service with the wounded in the war-hospitals.

As yet there was no indication of her future vocation, and when friends asked her whether she had prayed during this period, she replied, 'My longing for the Truth was my only prayer'. An answer to this ardent prayer was soon to come, however, towards the end of a holiday with her friend, Frau Conrad-Martius; as Edith was getting ready to depart her friend led her across to the bookshelves and told her to take any book she wished. 'Choosing quite haphazardly I took out a bulky volume entitled, *The Autobiography of Saint Teresa of Avila*. When I began to read it I became so absorbed in it that I never stopped until I reached the end. As I shut the book I said to myself, "that is the Truth".'

The grey dawn was already breaking, but Edith scarcely noticed it. God's hand was upon her and she did not try to escape. In the morning she went into the town to buy two things, a Catholic catechism and a Missal. These she studied until she had mastered their contents, and then, for the first time, she went into a Catholic church, the parish church of Bergzabern, to assist at Holy Mass. 'None of it was strange to me; thanks to my previous reading I understood even the smallest details of the ceremony. A venerable old priest went up to the altar and devoutly celebrated the Holy Sacrifice. After Mass I waited for the priest to finish his thanksgiving and then followed him to the presbytery to ask him for Holy Baptism. He looked at me in astonishment, replying that some preparation was necessary before anyone could be received into the Church. "How long have you been under instruction, and who is doing it?" All that I could say was, "Please ask me some questions, your reverence, to test me".' The theological conversation which followed left the good priest amazed at the working of God's grace in Edith's soul, and all that remained was to fix a date for the baptism. After spending the whole of the previous night in prayer the overjoyed catechumen was baptised on the feast of the Circumcision and on the same day received the Holy Eucharist, which was to be her daily bread from now on.

Exiles that we are, our joy on earth is always mingled with sorrow. Edith Stein's conversion was no exception to this rule; for the lonely widow in Breslau it was a dark day. Realising that to tell her mother by letter would only increase her suffering Edith took the train to Breslau; she went home and knelt before her mother. Looking straight into her eyes she said gently, 'Mother, I am a Catholic'. Never before had her daughter seen this strong old woman weep, but she wept now; of all calamities this was the

worst, that one of her children should desert their ancestral faith. Tears also ran down Edith's cheeks and one may indeed say that neither of them ceased to weep for the other during the rest of their days. The sorrow which they caused to each other was never overcome on this side of the grave, but a striking incident years later gives ground for believing that God looked with favour upon their common sacrifice. It occurred in 1936 on the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross; this is a day in Carmel when the great fast begins and when the Sisters renew their vows; after Sister Teresa had done so, along with the rest of the community, she said to one of the other Sisters, 'Whilst I was in my place waiting to renew my vows my mother was beside me. I distinctly felt her presence.' On the same day a telegram was received announcing that Frau Stein was dead; she had died in the same hour that her daughter was renewing her vows.

But this is to anticipate, for Edith Stein had still to live another eleven years in the world before she found her home in Carmel. Not that her vision failed to discern the Carmelite Order as her final goal; from the first she had it in mind, but God was preparing a rich dowry for her to take with her when she came to marry Christ; for eleven years she was like an industrious bee collecting experience both of the world and of the Church, experience which included an intimate acquaintance with the foremost philosophers in Europe, a strong draught of worldly fame and, on the Church's side, a firm friendship both with the Benedictines at Beuron and the Dominican Sisters at St Magdalena in Speyer. It was as if God had chosen her person for distilling all that is noblest in the world's history. She was a member of his chosen people, she had been baptised into Christ, celebrating the Church's great feasts with the Beuron community had moulded her liturgical life and her profound studies upon modern philosophers had been fertilised by her discovery of St Thomas Aquinas.

Industrious she may have been, she never made a noise about it. During the eight years following her conversion she lived with the Dominican nuns at St Magdalena, almost like a nun herself; the community provided her with a quiet, modest room and her meals, in return for which she taught in their school. But she gave more than her intellectual gifts to the community, she was even an inspiration to them in their religious life; always to be seen kneeling in chapel before anyone else in the morning, glad if she could assist at two or three Masses, ascetic in the highest degree, this frail young woman seems to have found a deep-seated joy in the Dominican atmosphere. Nor is that surprising, since the Order's motto is

'Veritas' and she had consecrated her own life to truth; it was equally fitting that her first large work as a Catholic, her translation of St Thomas's *De Veritate*, should have been produced in the solitude and peace of this convent in Speyer. Her method of working—and of praying—is perhaps best illustrated by a quotation from Maria Schäfer, who was helping her to correct the proofs of the book, 'We used to sit side by side at the desk in her little room. Whenever any difficulties suggested themselves to my mind she was only too eager to answer them. And how clear the answers always were! On the desk lay an old, hand-carved crucifix, which caught my gaze over and over again—or was my attention fixed upon it by the loving glances which Edith Stein used to direct towards it from time to time?'

The overwhelming praise which greeted the translation (Mgr Grabmann and Fr Przywara were two of the most enthusiastic in their praise) was but a prelude to a whole series of successful essays and lectures on Edith's part. Whether lecturing on 'woman's vocation' in Zurich or dominating the Thomist Congress on phenomenology, or contributing essays on prayer to a Benedictine monthly, her efforts were hailed with delight by German Catholics, and it was only her humility which prevented the loss of her integrity through these successes. Yet the danger was small, because the young philosopher had already begun to prepare for Carmel; she had chosen the way of nothingness where 'even the very skin' is left behind for Christ.

It was the coming-to-power of the Nazis and their persecution of her people which eventually determined Edith to seek her way of the Cross in Regina Pacis Convent, Cologne. Let her describe how she made up her mind, after she had been relieved of her post at Munster because she was non-Aryan. 'I spoke to my Saviour and told him that I knew it was his Cross which was now being laid upon the Jewish people. Most of them would not understand this, but those who did understand it had to take it upon their own shoulders, voluntarily in the name of the whole people. That is what I wanted to do, and all I asked was to be shown how. When I came to the end of my prayer I had an interior conviction that I had been heard. But how I was to carry the Cross I did not know.' Some three months later Edith was seeking admittance to Regina Pacis. The process of admitting her was not without amusement since one of the things which she had to do, as she stood on one side of the grille and the community on the other, was to sing a little song. This she did somewhat nervously, saying immediately afterwards that it had been harder for her than lecturing in front of one

thousand men. The remark was lost upon the good Sisters who had never heard of Dr Edith Stein, and their next question was, 'Can she sew nicely?' As it turned out, Dr Stein could not!

To an outsider it would seem as though Sister Teresa can scarcely have found Carmel very different from the kind of life which she had been living in the world, and yet there was one change at least which is equally obvious both from her novice-mistress's account and from comparing her photographs before and after her entry. Sister Teresa had tapped a source of happiness which Edith Stein had never quite discovered; now she is gay, she laughs until the tears run down her cheeks, the world has taken on a new transparency. Nor is the reason far to seek: in the world she had starved herself of food and sleep and had slaved away at her work, but she did so of her own free will; now she is under obedience to sleep sufficiently, to eat enough and to take recreation, in everything doing God's will, and not her own. It is a lesson for those who are trying to follow their spiritual calling outside the cloister.

For the next five years Sister Teresa continued her work at Regina Pacis until the threat from the Nazis drove her to the Carmel at Echt in Holland. During all this time her superiors allowed her to carry on with her philosophical writing and she managed to complete her great treatise on 'Eternal and Finite Being', though the anti-Jewish laws at the last moment prevented it from being published. At Echt she was able to devote herself to what promises to be the crown of all her work, 'The Science of the Cross', a meditation in which the lessons learnt from St Thomas and St John of the Cross are interwoven with the lessons of her own deep sufferings. 'Sister Teresa applied herself to this work whole-heartedly as if she had some kind of premonition', which may well have been the case since she was still writing the last few pages on 2nd August, 1942, when the Gestapo came to arrest her.

The moving incidents which occurred during these days when she and her sister (who had also been received into the Church and was living at Echt) were transported to the gas-chambers of the East are too precious to be roughly summarised here. In her cell the Echt Carmelites came across a holy picture on the back of which Sister Teresa had written a beautiful poem, entitled, 'Surrender'; it expresses her longing to surrender her life for the conversion of her people. No other commentary upon it, or upon her whole life, could surpass the few lines she wrote to her Prioress as she awaited the end. 'I am full of joy. We can only learn the "Scientia Crucis" if we feel the Cross in ourselves. From the very first I have realised this, and with all my heart I have said, "*Ave Cruz, spes unica!*".'