



Woman of Israel: Authentic Femininity at the Foot of the Cross

In 1939, shortly before the Nazi invasion of Poland that would spark the Second World War, Sr. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross (St. Edith Stein) penned her final will and testament.

I joyfully accept in advance the death God has appointed for me, in perfect submission to His most holy will. May the Lord accept my life and death for the honor and glory of His name, for the needs of His holy Church—especially for the preservation, sanctification, and final perfecting of our holy Order, and in particular for Carmel—for the Jewish people, that the Lord may be received by His own and His Kingdom come in glory, for the deliverance of Germany and peace throughout the world, and finally for all my relatives living and dead and all whom God has given me; may none of them be lost.¹

In a certain way, Edith Stein's last will and testament is a culmination of all she had written and taught before. It is a true model of her understanding of feminine receptivity as well as self-gift. Most particularly, it is her understanding of femininity as she saw it in Mary, who, being the Mother of us all in the faith, was seen especially by Edith Stein as her mother and model in their common Jewish heritage. In Mary, Edith Stein would take her Jewish heritage and draw it to its fullness in her embrace of Mary's Gift. But she did not limit her Marian imitation to embracing the Son of Israel; Edith Stein would follow Mary with every step to the Cross of the Jew.

I. *Fiat*

Woven throughout the writings of the gifted philosopher Edith Stein is the compelling message of woman's inherent dignity and her desire to give herself by way of her feminine heart. Edith Stein, howev-

er, understands the dangerous fault which lies close to a woman's heart—namely, to attempt to possess the one to whom she gives her love and to pay for or force, if necessary, a reciprocal love by giving her very soul. “The deepest longing [of woman is] to give herself lovingly to belong to another and to possess this other completely”, but she must never “lose her soul in the process”.² Who of us has not known a woman who sold her dignity in the false hope of buying a commitment from the one she thinks loves her?

But God created one woman whose immaculate goodness provided His Son with a fleshly home in which to assume a human body in the likeness of all humanity. The coming of Christ through Mary would be the fulfillment of an age old promise carried through the generations of the Chosen People. Edith Stein would, in the likeness of that earlier Jewish maiden, eventually give her feminine “yes” to God. After her conversion to the Catholic faith when she was thirty years old, Edith Stein began to see womanhood in terms of Our Lady, speaking of Mary, the new Eve, as the prototype of pure womanhood.

The soul of a woman must therefore be *expansive* and open to all human beings; it must be *quiet* so that no small weak flame will be extinguished by stormy winds; *warm* so as not to benumb fragile buds; *clear*, so that no vermin will settle in dark corners and recesses; *self-contained*, so that no invasions from without can imperil the inner life; *empty of itself*, in order that extraneous life may have room in it; finally, *mistress of itself* and also of its body, so that the entire person is readily at the disposal of every call.³

A woman's soul must be expansive—thus a type of universal motherhood that

knows no bounds. It must be quiet and warm because it is holding the life of another within itself and providing the security and peace for the other's growth. A woman's soul must be self-contained and yet empty of self—it must be entrusted to God so that it may be entrusted with God.

Brilliant German priest, theologian, and cardinal-elect, Hans Urs von Balthasar, also used this theme in his teaching:

The Church is feminine because her primary, all-encompassing truth is her ontological gratitude, which both receives the gift and passes it on. . . . The Church . . . will always let the Lord give her her own meaning and will penetrate it ever more deeply in a humble love that says Yes to service: “*Respexit humilitatem ancillae suae*” [He has regarded the lowliness of his handmaiden].⁴

Our Heavenly Mother's Magnificat is a song whose music echoes throughout the history of Christianity. Edith Stein would sing it, too, in her own words, that “the deepest longing of woman's heart is to give herself lovingly, to belong to another, and to possess this other completely”.⁵ She continues: “Only God can bestow Himself upon a person so that He fulfills this [other] being completely and loses nothing of Himself in so doing. That is why total surrender which is the principle of religious life is simultaneously the only adequate fulfillment possible for woman's yearning.”⁶

Edith Stein loved to contemplate Mary as *virgin* spouse—a title in which she herself would participate upon receiving the woolen Carmelite habit and large crucifix: “There was woven between the soul of the divine Child and the soul of the Virgin Mother the bond of the most intimate unity, which we call betrothal.”⁷ Mary could do

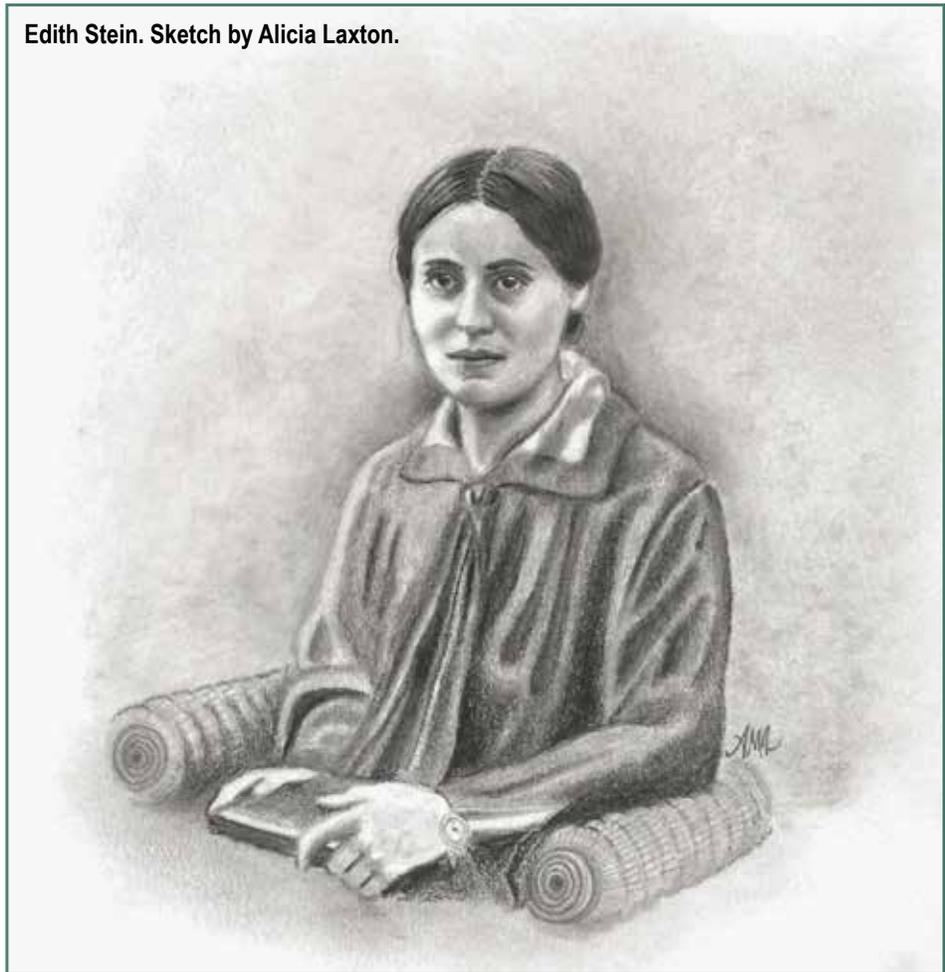
this because she, being the new Eve, imitated the original Eve in standing “by the side” of her “Adam” and becoming “the mother of all the living”, at the steep cost of radical vulnerability before God.⁸ As Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger teaches: “The grain of wheat does not remain alone, for it includes the maternal mystery of the soil—Mary, the holy soil of the Church, as the Fathers so wonderfully call her, is an essential part of Christ . . . [who] became man in the ‘soil’ of his Mother.”⁹

II. Motherhood

While Mary’s *fiat* was primarily a source of joy, as was Edith Stein’s, their experiences of motherhood would be their first steps on the way to the cross. Edith Stein was born into a Jewish family, and her mother was particularly devout. Indeed, throughout her life, Edith Stein’s mother cherished a particular love for this youngest of her children, who was born on the Day of Atonement, “the most solemn of all Jewish holidays”. This was the day on which, in divine foreshadowing, “the high priest entered the Holy of Holies, taking along the sacrifices to be offered in atonement for himself and all the people”.¹⁰

From this filial closeness of spirit between Edith Stein and her mother flows Stein’s teaching that a woman should look to her own mother for insight into what it means to be woman.¹¹ In Frau Stein, whom I believe to have been a Marian image for her daughter, Edith Stein glimpsed her ideal of womanhood. In her, Edith Stein also saw the maternal vocation which was already being handed over by many women of that time in exchange for the lure of glamor and fame. To counter this, Edith Stein taught that “the work of a mother is hidden for the most part, and even its rewards are intangible”.¹² Elsewhere, she continued: “Our neighbor’s spiritual need transcends every commandment. Everything else we do is a means to an end. But love is an end already, since God is love.”¹³

However, this close relationship between mother and daughter was to be torn apart. Upon reading St. Teresa of Avila’s entire autobiography in one night, Edith Stein calmly exclaimed, “This is Truth”—and her heart ached for the baptismal waters and the Eucharistic union.¹⁴ She possessed, in the words of Cardinal Ratzinger, “a longing for God”.¹⁵ Like Mary, the mother she had so recently come to cherish, Edith Stein had become “an open vessel of longing, in which life becomes prayer



and prayer becomes life”.¹⁶ Mary was indeed leading her daughter along their Jewish road to fulfillment—but in direct opposition to her Jewish family’s desires for her. As Susanne M. Batzdorff, Stein’s niece, wrote: “In following her conscience on the road to Christianity she felt that her honesty pursued her Jewish path to its ultimate goal.”¹⁷ However, she quickly adds: “It remains impossible, from the Jewish perspective, to see a Jew’s conversion to Christianity that way.”¹⁸

A modern Jewish convert to Catholicism explains the familial reaction in this way:

When a family member leaves the faith, that family member is considered dead. Prayers for the dead must be said for the person abandoning the faith and the orthodox Jew must sit *shiva* (mourn for 7 days) in the same way a physical death of a close relative would involve. . . . Such a statement gives an idea of the intensity of the response that is *required*, even as mirrored by a reform Jew who doesn’t follow most of the laws and precepts. [Edith Stein’s] family was, however, much more culturally Jewish than

observant in an orthodox way, but we need to understand [her] actions . . . in the context of the requirement that she be considered dead.¹⁹

Since her own Jewish mother would never come to understand the deepest part of her heart, Edith Stein turned to Christ’s Mother, who rewarded her with an encompassing personal intimacy. Like Mary, Edith Stein would have faithfully prayed the *Shema Yisrael* each morning upon opening her eyes, and again at the close of each day.²⁰ With Mary, Edith Stein would build an ontology of woman which would later be taken up and disseminated to the world by Pope St. John Paul II. Thus it had to be from Mary that Edith Stein would learn the universality of woman’s heart. She writes: “Women’s soul is present and lives more intensely in all parts of the body and it is inwardly affected by that which happens to the body—this is closely related to the vocation of motherhood.”²¹

Edith Stein’s heart was carrying a cross that others did not yet fully grasp. If she was to be faithful to woman’s calling in the spousal dimension, she willed to share in the life—and death—of Christ. Though

Edith Stein had always shone with woman's "special genius for friendship", it was at this time that she would pledge her heroic fidelity to this Divine Friend, to all her brothers and sisters in the Jewish faith, and to all held in the Catholic embrace.²² She would now begin to live what she had promised Our Lord on Holy Thursday of 1933 when she had attended the Liturgy in Cologne at the Carmelite convent:

I told our Lord that I knew it was His cross that was now being placed upon the Jewish people; that most of them did not understand this, but that those who did would have to take it up willingly in the name of all. *I would do that.* And at the end of the service, I was certain that I had been heard.²³

III. The Way of the Cross

A few years before her conversion, Edith Stein visited the widow of a dear friend, Adolf Reinach, who had died in combat in Flanders. She was stunned by the young widow's faith-filled acceptance and remarked later: "This was my first encounter with the Cross and the divine power it imparts to those who bear it . . . it was the moment when my unbelief collapsed and Christ began to shine His light on me—Christ the Mystery of the Cross."²⁴ Anyone who arrived at such a depth of Christian understanding was hardly far from surrendering self and following this Christ.

In a matter of a few years, Edith Stein would convert and also enter Carmel, fully aware that her family would see this as a double betrayal. Both her conversion and her entrance into the convent came at a time when Christians were intensifying the persecution of Jews. Frau Stein would ask in desperation: "Why did you have to come to know [Christianity]? I don't want to say anything against *him* [Jesus]. He may have been a very good man. But why did he make himself into God?"²⁵ We might ponder which caused Edith Stein the greatest suffering—the effect her conversion to Catholicism had on her mother, or her own martyrdom in the Auschwitz-Birchenu camp. But each suffering she accepted as Mary would have, Mary, to whom it was told: "a sword will pierce through your own soul, also."²⁶ Except for Edith Stein's sister, Rosa, who converted after their mother's death, the Stein family would never grasp that it was the very sufferings of the Jewish people that had led Edith Stein, as the sacrificial lamb, into Carmel. Indeed, she would

suffer twice over: as a Jew for her people, and as a Christian in imitation of Christ.

As a Carmelite novice, Edith Stein received the name Sr. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, which means "Teresa, gifted by the Cross". One dark night, in the confines of her convent, Sr. Teresa Benedicta wrote out the following prayer: "All who want to be married to the Lamb must allow themselves to be fastened to the cross with him. Everyone marked by the blood of the Lamb is called to this, and that means all the baptized."²⁷ A bit later she would add, "I felt that those who understood the Cross of Christ should take it upon themselves on everybody's behalf. . . . Beneath the Cross I understood the destiny of God's people."²⁸ A question might arise: how *do* we suffer for and with others, and what makes such suffering *transformational*? Edith Stein's answer is found in empathy or the process by which "human beings comprehend the psychic life of others."²⁹ It forms an unflinching encounter with alterity (otherness) by which we refuse to reduce the "other" to the "same". Edith Stein gives two ways by which this reduction might occur.³⁰ The first involves assimilation by *imitation*, wherein I negate my own experience and replace it with the other person's experience. The second is suppression or negation of the other's experience by *appropriation*, or reinterpretation of the other's experiences with "self" as the standard. Let us look more closely at these two cases.

In the first, I deny my first love of, say, classical music to replace it with your personal cravings for pop or jazz. In the second, I take your valid appreciation of jazz and attempt to explain it away as a distortion or ignorance of what I label "good music". Thus I come away with the belief that you actually prefer classical works whenever you hear them. Obviously, neither of these experiences reflect truth. At best, we might consider them a form of "false empathy" or certainly a manhandled manipulation of truth.

Empathy, rather, is that Marian embrace of the entire world which disallows my judging others while also gifting me with grace to comprehend others, even as I remain solidly grounded in my individual self. In the shadows of her own looming oblation, Edith Stein knew that "the mystery of the Cross is to take someone else's suffering as your own, *even while knowing that it is not your own.* . . . It is to affirm that our common bond is in God and hence, [so is] our universal human dignity."³¹

If, being a "support" to others was commensurate with being a "companion", and to "help another develop" was the maternal empathy she had learned from Mary, then Sr. Teresa Benedicta, now exuded maternal sympathy.³² She poured it out unconditionally in prayer, in her study and writing, in the pensive facial expression that her Sisters noticed.³³ Baroness Gertrud von le Fort, the distinguished author and defender of authentic womanhood, would later write that "to have seen the face of Sister Teresa Benedicta of the Cross was to remember it always; only twice in her life had she experienced the impression of looking at a saint—with Edith Stein and with Pope Pius X".³⁴

The Second World War had begun shortly after Sister Teresa Benedicta took her final vows, and the nuns in Cologne feared for Edith and Rosa Stein's lives—Rosa had entered the faith and the convent after the death of their mother—and they were transferred to the Carmel in Echt, Holland. Shortly after they arrived, however, Holland, too, fell into the hands of the Nazis, thus placing the Stein sisters once more in imminent danger. Before they could escape, the Dutch bishops issued an official letter attacking the anti-Semitic atrocities of the Nazi regime. In retaliation, the Gestapo rushed to round up all Roman Catholic Jews and send them to the death camps. Edith and Rosa Stein were arrested on August 2, 1942. While Rosa seemed disoriented as they were being led away from the convent, Edith Stein gently encouraged her, "Come, Rosa. We go for our people."³⁵

After being abducted from their convent, during that first week of August, the two sisters were put on trains crowded with other Jews and taken to two concentration camps in the Netherlands: Amersfoort and Westerbork. Witnesses have testified to the great love which Edith Stein exercised among the prisoners struck down by their misery. Described as an "angel", she calmed and comforted the women and washed and fed the children while radiating serenity.³⁶ A woman who survived the death camp later gave evidence of Edith Stein's witness:

Maybe the best way I can explain it is that she carried so much pain that it hurt to see her smile. . . . In my opinion, she was thinking about the suffering that lay ahead. Not her own suffering—she was far too resigned for that—but the suffering that was in store for the others. Every time I think

of her sitting in the barracks, the same picture comes to mind: a Pieta without the Christ.³⁷

A few days later, Edith and Rosa Stein were deported to Auschwitz. It is believed they were executed on the same day they arrived.

IV. In Memoriam

In June of 1994, my own sister, Sr. Mary Theresa Bogdanowicz, and I were given the unique gift of being able to trace our heritage back to our native Poland—a search which led us to visit the death camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau. As the Iron Curtain had only recently fallen, this camp retained its visible memory of horrific sufferings. Flea-infested straw remain stuffed between boards that had served as beds. Dried blood was still smeared on the wall of execution and throughout the room that held an assemblage of torture instruments. The escalation of the war exceeded the capacity of the camp's two crematoriums, and the prisoners were made to dig pits so that their own bodies could be burned in these massive graves. These pits still dotted the landscape over half a century later. Walking up to one such pit, my friend, Father Czeslaus Banaszkiwicz, motioned me to “step in . . . rub the soil between your hands”. Fragments of human bone became visible as the sand dispersed between my fingers.

As I stood in silent awe, he whispered, “Look at the sign which displays the Star of David. It marks the pit wherein all Jews were cremated. Edith Stein, her sister Rosa among their people . . . their ashes are scattered here. Are you able to translate the Polish words under the Jewish Star?” I looked. Painted in red over the white background were the words attributed to Edith Stein at this camp: “Love will be our eternal life.”³⁸

By my return trip to Auschwitz in 2000, the museum curators had removed much of the gruesome, and yet sacred, reality. Birkenau's pits had been filled, and the Jews' sign was no longer. But their suffering had become meaningful in the light of the Cross—a meaning I saw because a woman, whose very ashes I may have held in my hands, had transformed the dehumanizing atrocities of the Nazis' machine into love.

On the feast of St. John of the Cross, 1934, Sister Teresa Benedicta of the Cross (St. Edith Stein) highlighted the age-old battle between good and evil, sin and death:

The sight of the world in which we live, the need and misery, and an abyss of human malice, again and again dampens jubilation over the victory of light. The world is still deluged by mire, and still but a small flock has escaped from it to the highest mountain peaks. The battle between Christ and the Antichrist is not yet over. The followers of Christ have their place in this battle, and their chief weapon is the cross.³⁹

This reflection is written in honor of all those engaged in the battle between good and evil; therefore, in honor of us all. Our culture is no more the result of the sins of previous ages than the result of original sin. In attempting to redefine the “good, the true and the beautiful” as the practical, utilitarian, and lustful cravings of inordinate desire, women suffer through the distortion of the divine plan for their maternal nature: to love and, by this love, to bring forth life.

If, as this reflection has pondered, “the sight of the world in which we live, the need and misery, and an abyss of human malice, again and again dampens jubilation”,⁴⁰ if the world tempts women to trade their authentic beauty for the cravings of inordinate desire, then we are indeed embroiled in a war, as we seek authentic goodness, truth and beauty. Edith Stein reminds us: “The followers of Christ have their place in this battle, and their chief weapon is the cross.”⁴¹ But this concept has never been a foreign one to those who believe in Christ, nor to those who imitate Our Lady. Indeed, we can speak as one voice with St. Edith Stein: “One can only gain a scientia crucis (knowledge of the cross) if one has thoroughly experienced the cross. I have been convinced of this from the first moment onwards and have said with all my heart: ‘Ave, Crux, Spes unica’ [I welcome you, Cross, our only hope].”⁴²

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narians.

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14. Herbstrith, p. 65.
15. Ratzinger and von Balthasar, p. 15.
16. *Ibid.*
17. Susanne M. Batzdorff, *Edith Stein: Selected Writings* (Springfield: Templegate Publisher, 1990), p. 117.
18. *Ibid.*
19. Steve Block, email to author, 2014; original emphasis. Mr. Block is the father of one of our Sisters, who is, by the way, appropriately named Sister Teresa Benedicta.
20. You may remember this prayer being said in Aramaic in Mel Gibson's film: *The Passion of the Christ*.
21. Stein, *Woman*, p. 95.
22. Garcia, pp. 32–35.
23. Posselt, *Edith Stein*, p. 100, qtd. In Garcia, pp. 32–35. Author's emphasis.
24. Herbstrith, p. 56.
25. Batzdorff, p. 28.
26. Luke 2:35, Revised Standard Version.
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New Voices

New Poetry in English

William Fahey



The following poems are cinquains. The cinquain or quintain is a poem structured around five lines. Cinquains in Europe date back to at least the late middle ages. Sir Philip Sidney, John Donne, and George Herbert were masters of the cinquain, which normally followed a ABABB rhyme scheme in iambic meter. The American poet Adelaide Crapsey (1878–1914) was attracted to the tight focus and seasonal or natural imagery of oriental haiku and tanga poetry. Out of her marriage of western and eastern traditions came the "American cinquain," which makes use of stress (1-2-3-4-1) and syllable patterns (2-4-6-6-2). The Scottish poet William Soutar (1898–1943) further developed the form. The following offer several examples of the Scottish-American modern cinquain—two simple cinquains, and a longer "mirror cinquain" formed by the normal five-line pattern and then its reverse.

Petitio Peri Paschon Microti pennsylvanici Prayer of the Meadow Vole at Passover

Be Still
Darkling hunter
And by Minerva's grace
Execute not thy night office
Of blood.

Northern Healing

Bone broth
Breaks the Death-bound
Man from Winter's cold combe.
Lean Lent lessens Sin's lease upon
The sad.

At Ithaka: A Dog's *Nunc Dimittis*

Argos—
Mule dung and filth,
Man's disrespect marks you.
Know this is the crown of being
Loyal.

Faithful
In keeping your foul-long vigil,
Forgotten by a master
Who only now
Comes home.