



# A life spent in love: On the 80th anniversary of Edith Stein's heavenly birthday

Cardinal Michael Czerny SJ

9 August 2022 is the 80th anniversary of the death of Edith Stein, St Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, who was killed at Auschwitz. In a homily preached on that anniversary at a Mass in the Carmelite Monastery in Auschwitz, Cardinal Michael Czerny SJ offers a powerful reflection on the ways in which Edith Stein's remarkable story resonates with that of his own family.

## I.

In the 1970s, as a graduate student at the University of Chicago, I came to know and appreciate the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl. He was born in Moravia, like I was, and with a similar Jewish background. Through Husserl, I encountered Edith Stein (1891-1942). As his student, she wrote her thesis on [empathy](#); and as his assistant, she tried to bridge the gap between his philosophy and the Catholicism she embraced in 1921 at the age of thirty.

With Edith Stein, I share Jewish origins, the Catholic faith, a vocation to religious life, and several coincidences with my maternal grandmother, Anna Hayek née Löw (1893-1945). They were about the same age and came to a similar end.

But let me begin with my own parents.<sup>1</sup> My mother, Winifred Czerny, née Hayek, was baptised and raised Catholic. During World War II, owing to her Jewish descent, she was forced to work as a farm labourer near Brno and spent twenty months in prison in Leipzig and in the Terezín concentration camp.<sup>2</sup> My father, Egon Czerny, was also a Roman Catholic. Not having Jewish ancestors, he was spared Terezín; but refusing to divorce my mother, he was subjected to forced labour at the camp in Postoloprty, west of Prague and not far from Terezín, for the last eight months of the war.



My mother's family – both parents and two brothers – were also Catholic but shared the Jewish origins that the enemy abhorred. My maternal grandmother Anna, my grandfather Hans and my uncles Georg and Carl Robert, were all interned in Terezín, where Hans died. My grandmother and uncles were transported to Auschwitz. From here my uncles were sent to labour camps and eventually murdered there.

With this background, I am very honoured and deeply moved to celebrate the 80th anniversary of Edith Stein's birth to heaven. It occurs within this year's special circumstances that invite and urge us to remember. I refer to the war in Ukraine and too many cruel wars dragging on in various parts of the world. The suffering imposed on the Ukrainian and Russian populations, the ever more numerous refugees and victims, oblige us to remember the Holocaust. The Holocaust must help us to question seriously the path taken by humanity since the end of the World War II, nearly eight decades ago.

## II.

Scrutinising the past so as better to understand the present and engage the future, we need to illuminate it with the Word of God, a lamp for our steps and light on our path (Ps 118). The Gospel of Matthew that we have just heard<sup>3</sup> presents us with one of the three parables that Jesus proclaims after he exits the Temple and is seated facing the Mount of Olives (cf. Mt 24:3).

He wants to teach his disciples about the importance of watching for the signs that accompany the coming of the Lord.

It is no coincidence that Jesus sits in the direction of the 'Beautiful Gate' (Acts 3:1-10), the entrance that led those coming from the Mount of Olives to the eastern side of the Temple esplanade. According to a Jewish tradition based on prophetic texts (cf. Ez 10:18f; 11:22f), when the Temple was destroyed, the Shekhinah (שְׁכִינָה, the *divine presence*) left the Holy of Holies. One day, when the Temple is rebuilt, the Shekhinah will return through the Beautiful Gate, for it is from the East that the Messiah will come. Passing through this very gate (cf. Mk 11:1-11), Jesus would make his triumphal, prophetic and messianic entry into Jerusalem.

All three parables on this occasion are linked by Jesus's exhortation to 'Watch' (*gregoreïte*), for you do not know the hour when the Lord will return. In particular, the parable of the ten virgins is an allegory that would have us read the deep meaning of our daily history in terms of salvation or perdition. We are drawn in to identify with the foolish virgins, so as to initiate processes of conversion that enable us to become like the wise ones. The parable is not meant to disturb or upset or induce fear; its purpose is to reveal a divine truth: the future that awaits us is the encounter with the Bridegroom!

Such an encounter must, however, be prepared. It will come about as a joyous day of celebration only for those who know how to set aside regularly a bit of that oil that endures forever. Such oil, necessary to enter the wedding feast, is God's love in us, the Holy Spirit; it is our love for God, lived as concern and care for our siblings. No one can give or lend this oil to others, because it is each one's response of love to the Lord and to our needy neighbour. My oil cannot be lent to – or appropriated by – anyone else. It is what makes and shapes each of us, each identity and soul. If one does not accumulate love and invest oneself in love, then one's life is a smouldering wick about to go out, a dying ember turning into cold ash.

We don't know the day or the hour of the Bridegroom's arrival. Jesus encourages us to celebrate the grace of each and every day as a step towards him, emerging from what we are – the selfishness of our

sins along with the good we do – in order to go out and meet him and, receiving the wedding garment from him, 'to put on Christ' (Romans 13:14). Our existence is an active waiting, an ongoing exodus as Gregory of Nyssa depicted it, 'so the one who is ascending never stops, proceeding from beginning to beginning through beginnings that never end.' Sometimes, it requires a wrenching effort and great courage to abandon our misshapen existence in the world, to dare to abandon comfort zones of selfishness, and to let God in to act in us anew.

### III.

Edith Stein exemplifies how a life spent in love can be a slow journey of opening up, of being transformed into the Son-Made-Man. The beautiful expression of *Veritatis splendor* can be applied to her pilgrimage as a woman, a philosopher, a pedagogue, a contemplative, a saint: 'The splendour of truth shines in the depths of the human spirit' (*Veritatis splendor* §2). Indeed, the search for truth characterised Edith's entire existence, and even in the years when she considered herself an atheist and seemed indifferent to questions of faith, her sensitive moral conscience and intellectual honesty led her to reject relativism and subjectivism.

Her 'first encounter with the Cross,' as she later described it, took place in 1917, in the home of her recently widowed friend, Anne Reinach. Amidst the pain of her loss, Anne tells Edith of her late husband's conversion and her own. She shares the peace and consolation she has been receiving from living in communion with Christ since the day of her baptism.

Edith is struck by the serenity that the woman maintained in spite of tragedy: no human force could account for or explain such peace. Without knowing it, the widow Reinach had opened up a crack in Edith's soul to let the light get in, as she herself wrote in her diary: 'It was the moment when the light of Christ, Christ on the cross, shone.'

But it was in the summer of 1921, at another friend's house in Bergzabern, that Edith came by chance across the *Life of St Teresa of Avila*. Perhaps she had read it before, but that night she devoured it avidly and was thunderstruck; she felt something completely new, namely, that truth is objective, it is a 'gift', it is a person, it is Christ! No phenomenological intuition had given her such intimate joy as the illuminating

epiphany of God freely offering himself to her, without effort and without merit on her part. She understood that God is always 'beyond': beyond all reasoning, beyond all phenomena, beyond all human activity. In *Scientia Crucis*, reflecting on her conversion, she wrote: 'At the moment when the soul encounters God, in the night the light of dawn begins to dawn, a prelude to the new day of eternity.'

On 1 January 1922 she was baptised. Thus began a new life, marked by both severances and new discoveries. For eight consecutive years, from Easter 1923 to Easter 1931, she taught at the college attached to the Dominican convent of St Magdalen in Speyer. She combined this teaching with study and writing, withdrawal from the world, an intense contemplative life. In this period, she met the Jesuit Erich Przywara who invited her to translate into German, Cardinal Newman's *Diary and Letters*, as well as St Thomas's *Questiones disputatae de Veritatis*.

Grace works patiently. It led her to seek a harmonious balance between faith and philosophy, and this blossomed into a sense of mission in her vocation as a teacher: to lead her students to the truth. Not only theoretical truth, but also absolute and living truth: God. These were the years in which her work *Being Finite and Infinite* appeared, an encounter between Husserl's phenomenology and the ontology of St Thomas Aquinas, both of whom she knew, studied and loved.

On 12 April 1933, Edith Stein addressed a heartfelt letter to the aging Pope Pius XI urging him to break his silence and speak out against all expressions of antisemitism. In fact, in March 1998, the Church formally apologised for failing to take more decisive action during World War II to challenge the Nazi regime about its racist and antisemitic policies and the *Endlösung* or so-called final solution to the Jewish problem.

Once converted to Catholicism, Edith was increasingly attracted by the charism of the Order of Carmel, a true garden of Christian life (the word *karmel* actually means 'garden'), with its total devotion to the Virgin Mary and contemplation of spousal love for God. On 21 April 1938, she made her perpetual profession at the convent in Cologne, choosing the religious name Sister Teresa Benedicta of the Cross.

#### IV.

Meanwhile, in Nazi Germany, persecution of the Jews was already raging. Marked in the records of Hitler's notorious Gestapo as 'non-Aryan', Sister Teresa Benedicta of the Cross exposed the entire Carmelite community in Cologne to danger. Her superiors decided to have her transferred to Holland where she found refuge at the convent in Echt. On the night of 31 December 1938, Sr Teresa hastily left Germany but first stopped for a few minutes to visit the Church of 'Mary of Peace', to kneel at the feet of the Virgin and ask for her maternal protection.

In 1942, the mass deportations to the East began. Even Holland ceased to be safe. On 20 July 1942, the Dutch Bishops' Conference issued a declaration in every parish denouncing all racist and antisemitic practices. Hitler's reaction was not long in coming. A few days later, on 26 July, he ordered the arrest of all Jews who had converted to Catholicism.

On the afternoon of 2 August, two Gestapo agents knocked on the door of the Carmelite monastery in Echt to apprehend Sister Teresa Benedicta, together with her sister Rosa. Taken to the Westerbork sorting camp in the north of Holland, on 7 August they were deported with many others to the Auschwitz-Birkenau extermination camp.

On 9 August, Sr Teresa Benedicta of the Cross entered the gas chamber and found death. She crossed the threshold and encountered the Bridegroom face-to-face, fulfilling the nuptial pact with the crucified Christ for which, as a wise virgin preserving the oil of love for God, she had prepared herself.

#### V.

Nearly three years later, with the war recently ended, with my mother liberated from Terezín but my grandfather and both uncles already exterminated, my grandmother Anna was very ill with typhus and could not make the trip back to Brno. She died on 21 May 1945. I still do not know where she was buried. So Auschwitz links the witness and dispersed ashes of St Teresa Benedicta of the Cross with my grandmother's story and spirit, wherever her remains may lie. For me it is very moving to celebrate Edith Stein's 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary and, at the same time and place, the 77<sup>th</sup> of Anna Löw, to mourn my grandmother and honour her, to think of her reunited with all our family and also with St Teresa Benedicta.

A few years before the war, Anna had done a painting on glass of the Holy Family's flight into Egypt. It turned out to be a premonition for my immediate family, as in 1948 the four of us fled from the European nightmare and found refuge in Canada. This is the image reproduced on the card commemorating my episcopal ordination and becoming cardinal in October 2019. The phrase on the card comes from the play *Dialogues des Carmélites* by George Bernanos: 'Whether we are brave or cowardly, only one thing is important: that we always find ourselves where God would have us and, for the rest, to trust in Him.'<sup>4</sup>

The expression of Bernanos seems fitting for my grandmother who bravely faced each great obstacle and danger; and fitting for Edith Stein who faithfully pursued an evolving vocation to truth and love to become Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, a patron of Europe; and indeed very fitting as our prayer for each of us and for all the Church, 'to be always there where God would have us and, for the rest, to trust in Him.'

Remembering both Edith and Anna with the six million others, we mourn and repent, 'Lest we forget ...'<sup>5</sup> Through their intercession, we pray for peace in Ukraine and throughout the world, 'Never again one against the other, never, never again!... never again war, never again war!'<sup>6</sup> And may those whose personal and family histories are both Jewish and Christian, contribute to the necessary dialogue between our faiths so as to live as *fratelli tutti*, siblings all, in our common home.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Cardinal Czerny: My family during World War II' in English:

<https://www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2019-12/cardinal-czerny-my-family-during-world-war-ii.html>

<sup>2</sup> 'Winifred Czerná,' *Tereziánské listy*, vydání 2006 - 34/2006

<sup>3</sup> Readings: Hosea 2:16-17,21-22; Psalm 44; Matt 25:1-13.

<sup>4</sup> Georges Bernanos, *Dialogue des Carmélites*, IV:8, Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1949, p. 122.

<sup>5</sup> Expression used since World War I, originally from Rudyard Kipling's poem 'Recessional', 1897.

<sup>6</sup> Paul VI, Address to the United Nations, 4 October 1965.