

When Edith Stein was only two years old, her father died. She was the youngest of 11 children, and the responsibility of raising the children and running the family business fell upon her mother. With the heavy demands of these responsibilities, the Jewish faith of the family fell to the wayside. Edith lost her faith in God. She said, “I consciously decided, of my own volition, to give up praying.”ⁱ

As a young adult, Edith studied philosophy at Gottingen University. She admired her Christian classmates whose spiritual lives helped to rekindle the flames of faith in her own life. During World War I she served as a nurse in Austria and witnessed the high cost of war on the young soldiers who suffered lifelong injuries if they were fortunate enough to escape death. When she returned to school to pursue a doctoral degree, she directed her empathy for the suffering of others into a highly regarded thesis on empathy.

Edith continued to be impressed by the simple witness of Christians. At the Frankfurt cathedral, she saw a woman go in to kneel for a brief prayer while she was out for her morning shopping at the market. “This was something totally new to me. In the synagogues and Protestant churches I had visited, people simply went to the services. Here, however, I saw someone coming straight from the busy marketplace into this empty church, as if she was going to have an intimate conversation. It was something I never forgot.”ⁱⁱ

“In 1921, while visiting friends, Edith spent an entire night reading the autobiography of the 16th century Carmelite nun St. Teresa of Avila. ‘When I had finished the book,’ she later recalled, ‘I said to myself: This is the truth.’ She was baptized into the Catholic Church on the first day of January, 1922.”ⁱⁱⁱ The Lord had spoken to her heart and she in turn wanted to give her entire life back to him.

Although she wanted to become a Carmelite at the same time of her conversion, the local bishop wanted her to further discern a calling. With her educational background, she taught and lectured. As the Nazi’s rose to political power in Germany, her Jewish background was held against her eliminating her options to teach.

In 1934, she entered a Carmelite convent, taking the name Teresa Benedicta of the Cross as a symbol of her acceptance of suffering. “She saw it as her vocation ‘to intercede with God for everyone,’ but she prayed especially for the Jews of Germany whose tragic fate was becoming clear.”^{iv} On April 21st, 1938, she took her perpetual vows as a Carmelite and had the words of St John of the Cross printed on her devotional picture: “Henceforth my only vocation is to love.”^v

Sister Teresa prayed and studied on the power of the cross to transform the world and completed her final scholarly work on St. John of the Cross entitled “The Science of the Cross.” As the Dutch Bishops spoke out against the atrocities against European Jews, the Nazis retaliated. Sister Teresa Benedicta was arrested on August 7, 1942 along with other members of the religious community and her own sister Rosa who had also converted to Catholicism.

St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross died at the Auschwitz concentration camp receiving the crown of martyrdom as a bride of Christ on August 9, 1942. The Nazis took her life and stripped her of every dignity. However, they could not take her faith away nor her devotion to suffer and die for Christ and his holy people.

“O my God, fill my soul with holy joy, courage and strength to serve You. Enkindle Your love in me and then walk with me along the next stretch of road before me. I do not see very far ahead, but when I have arrived where the horizon now closes down, a new prospect will open before me and I shall meet with peace.”^{vi}

ⁱ ewtn.com/catholicism/saints/teresa-benedicta-of-the-cross-edith-stein-779

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ catholicnewsagency.com/saint/st-teresa-benedicta-of-the-cross-edith-stein-557

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Ibid, EWTN

^{vi} carmelitedcj.org/carmel/saints-of-carmel/162-st-teresa-benedicta-of-the-cross