

S6



Priests for Scotland

Vocations Awareness Week

Edith Stein: The Door Keeper

Introduction

This week the Catholic Church in Scotland celebrates Vocations Awareness Week. 'Vocation' means calling, specifically a calling from God. During this week we're going to consider the lives of six people – three men and three women who responded to God's call with generosity, courage and determination.

In S6 we consider the life, vocation and legacy of Edith Stein.

Prayer

Prayer of abandonment written by Edith Stein

Lord, let me follow your paths.
You are the one
Who Guides me through the night.
Lift me up to you Lord,
Time is yours.
Realise in me what in your wisdom you have planned:
If you call me to offer myself help me to respond.



Background

Yom Kippur

Edith Stein was born in 1891 in Wrocław. Wrocław is now in Poland but in 1891 it was part of Germany. The youngest of eleven children, Edith's family were observant Jews. The day of Edith's birth was *Yom Kippur*—the Day of Atonement—the holiest of holy days for the Jewish faith.

Atheism

By the time, she was a teenager Edith had abandoned the Jewish faith and become an atheist. An extremely intelligent young woman, Edith struggled to reconcile the teachings of her religion with her growing interest in philosophy and science. Biographers also tell us that the sudden death of her father made Edith question her religious beliefs.

The Brightest and the Best

After leaving school, Edith attended Gottingen University. While she was there she was taught philosophy by a Professor called Edmund Husserl. Husserl, at the that time, was recognized as one of the leading thinkers in Europe. Impressed by Edith's intelligence and hard work, Husserl appointed her as his teaching assistant. Edith excelled in this role and was soon appointed as a full time member of the teaching faculty. She was considered one of the brightest young philosophers in Europe.

What's your philosophy?

Edmund Husserl was primarily interested in how the human mind perceives and understands the outside world. He was intrigued by how things like 'experience' and 'awareness' are structured. Technically speaking he was a 'phenomenologist' (yes we know its hard to say!).

Edith Stein's approach was different. She was less interested in how much we perceive and understand the outside world and more interested in how we can live with meaning and purpose.

Edith Stein would be described as an 'existentialist philosopher'. Existentialist philosophy is still very popular and elements of 'existentialist thought' can be seen in many different places from books by Albert Camus to films like 'Fight Club' and 'The Purge'. Existentialist philosophers like Nietzsche and Keirkegaard are also often quoted on Twitter!

Edith's particular interest was the idea of 'empathy'. Empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of another. Edith was interested in how 'empathy' gives meaning and focus to our lives.

For Reflection/Discussion

Yom Kippur: Yom Kippur is possibly the most important day in the Jewish calendar. Can you find out more about it?

Atheism: By the time she was a teenager, Edith had become an atheist. What do you think makes people question belief in God?

The Brightest and the Best: Edith was considered as one of the most intelligent students in Europe. She chose to study philosophy at University. Do you know much about philosophy? What kind of skills and aptitudes do you think would make a good philosopher? What's your philosophy? Can you find out more about Existentialist philosophy?

Conversion and Call

Nursing

Undoubtedly inspired by her interest in 'empathy', Edith became a nurse during the First World War. She chose to work with soldiers with infectious diseases – thereby putting her own health at some considerable risk! Her biographers report that her mother constantly worried about her giving up a comfortable academic life to work in a military hospital. While she was working as a nurse, Edith had two experiences that made her think once more about religious faith:

An encounter with faith

In 1916, one of Edith's friends was killed in combat at Flanders. Edith went to visit his widow. His widow was a deeply religious Catholic. Edith was amazed at the young woman's profound faith and her faith-filled resignation. Edith remarked:

"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 began to collapse and Christ began to shine His light on me— Christ the Mystery of the Cross."

An encounter with prayer

Around the same time, Edith began to visit the Cathedral in Frankfurt. At first she simply went there to escape the hustle and bustle of the Hospital in which she was working but as time went on she began to notice the demeanor of those who visited the Church to pray. They seemed serene, fulfilled and happy. Edith began to be convinced that there was to life than could be seen or touched.

The Saints

After the War, Edith returned to teaching philosophy. Now thoroughly unconvinced by Atheism, she began to look into the teachings of the Catholic Church. She became particularly interested in the life and writings of Saint Teresa of Avila. On the 1st January 1922 she was baptised.

The Call

After becoming a Catholic, Edith considered becoming a nun. She felt drawn to the Discalced Carmelite Order, but delayed an immediate move toward religious life, out of respect for her mother who had been deeply hurt by her conversion to Catholicism. In 1933, however, Edith lost her teaching position when the Nazis sought to purge the civil service of all non-Aryans. She then entered the Carmel in Cologne and took the name Sister Teresa Benedicta of the Cross.

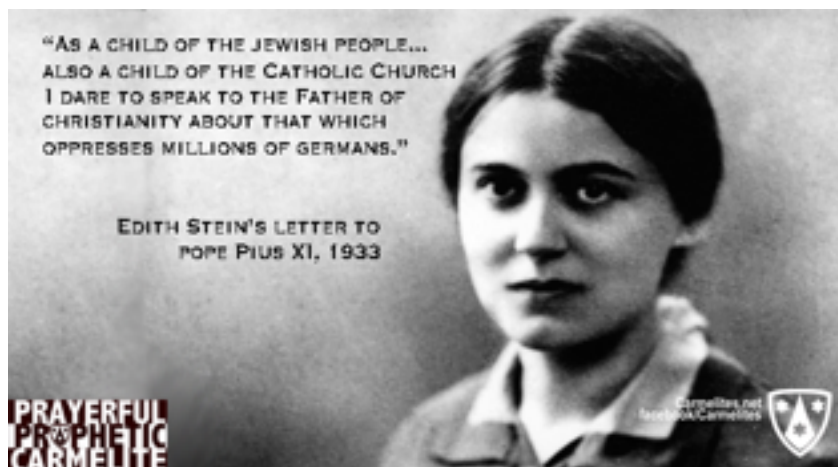
For Reflection/Discussion

An Encounter with faith: Edith was amazed at the depth of faith demonstrated by her friend's widow. Whose faith impresses you?

An Encounter with prayer: Edith was greatly impressed by the conduct of people in Church. What do you think when you see someone in deep prayer? What do you think when you see someone lighting candles in Church?

The Saints: Edith was inspired by the life of Saint Teresa of Avila. What Saint's name did you pick when you were confirmed? Why did you pick the name of that Saint?

The Call: The religious order Edith joined had limited contact with the outside world. They are encouraged to spend most of their time in silent prayer. Do you think this would be difficult? If so, why?



The Call Answered

Speaking the truth with courage:

Prior to entering the convent, Edith was involved in anti-Nazi activities in Germany. In 1932, she wrote an open letter to Pope Pius XI asking him to condemn the Nazi regime:

“As a child of the Jewish people who, by the grace of God, for the past eleven years has also been a child of the Catholic Church, I dare to speak to the Father of Christianity about that which oppresses millions of Germans. For weeks we have seen deeds perpetrated in Germany which mock any sense of justice and humanity, not to mention love of neighbour. For years the leaders of National Socialism have been preaching hatred of the Jews.... But the responsibility must fall, after all, on those who brought them to this point and it also falls on those who keep silent in the face of such happening”

In response to this and with growing alarm at the behaviour of the Nazi regime, Pius XI issued an encyclical written in German, *Mit brennender Sorge* (*With Burning Anxiety*), in which he criticised Nazism and condemned antisemitism.

Escape to Echt

To avoid the growing Nazi threat, Edith's Order transferred her and her sister, Rosa, who was also a convert to the Discalced Carmelite monastery in Echt, Netherlands.

Even prior, however, to the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands, Edith believed she would not survive the war. She made a will and told her religious superior that she hoped her death would help bring peace to the world.

Matyrdom

Ultimately, Edith was not safe in the Netherlands. The Dutch Bishops' Conference had a public statement read in all the churches of the nation on 20 July 1942 condemning Nazi racism. In a retaliatory response, the Nazi SS ordered the arrest of all Jewish converts who had previously been spared.

Along with two hundred and forty-three baptised Jews living in the Netherlands, Edith was arrested by the SS on 2 August 1942. Stein and her sister Rosa were imprisoned at the concentration camps of Amersfoort and Westerbork before being deported to Auschwitz. A Dutch official at Westerbork was so impressed by her sense of faith and calm, he offered her an escape plan. Edith vehemently refused his assistance.

On 7 August 1942, 987 Jews from Holland were deported to the Auschwitz concentration camp. Edith and her sister were killed in a mass gas chamber on 9th August 1942.

For Reflection/Discussion

Speaking the truth with courage: Edith criticised the Nazis with full knowledge that this would have made her a target for revenge. Would you have the courage to speak the truth no matter the consequences?

Escape to Echt: Edith's Superiors ordered her to leave Germany to escape the Nazis. Edith's biographers report that she was very disappointed when she received this order. Can you think why?

Martyrdom: Edith decided to go to Auschwitz even when she was offered the chance to escape. What do you think her decision? Is it difficult to understand?

Sainthood

Becoming a Saint: Edith was beatified as a martyr on 1 May 1987 in Cologne, Germany by Pope John Paul II and then canonised by him 11 years later on 11 October 1998 Rome.

The miracle: The miracle that was the basis for her canonisation was the cure of Benedicta McCarthy, a little girl who had swallowed a large amount of paracetamol (acetaminophen), which causes hepatic necrosis. The young girl's father, Rev. Emmanuel Charles McCarthy, a priest of the Melkite Greek Catholic Church, immediately called together relatives and prayed for St. Teresa's intercession. Shortly thereafter the nurses in the intensive care unit saw her sit up completely healthy. Dr. Ronald Kleinman, a paediatric specialist at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston who treated the girl, testified about her recovery to Church tribunals, stating: "I was willing to say that it was miraculous." McCarthy would later attend St. Teresa's canonisation.

Patron of Europe: Edith Stein (St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross) is one of the six patron saints of Europe, together with Sts. Benedict of Nursia, Cyril and Methodius, Bridget of Sweden, and Catherine of Siena.

For Reflection/Discussion

Becoming a Saint: Are you aware of the steps the Church takes before recognising a Saint? Can you research these?

Miracle: What is your opinion on miracles? What miracles have you heard about?

Patron of Europe: What aspects of Edith's life would make her a suitable Patron Saint of Europe?

Extension Activities

#gomeet Edith Stein had a remarkable vocation story. Why don't you invite a priest or religious sister to come into your class and speak about their vocation.

#goprayer Edith Stein often described herself as a 'doorkeeper'. She described her vocation as being to 'open the door of faith' to people who didn't believe in God or had little time for religion. A former atheist and professor of philosophy, she was convinced that there was no conflict between faith and reason or science and religion.

Who are the people in your life who have 'opened the doors of faith' for you? Can you think of a Priest, a religious Sister, a relative or a teacher who helped you grow in your faith?

How would you 'open the doors of faith' for other people? How could you show them that faith makes a real difference in your life? How could you witness to your faith by serving your school, your community and those in need both at home and abroad?

Are you involved in the Caritas project? What do you want to achieve?

#gosee Watch Bishop Robert Barron's video on Edith Stein on youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jyInEuYZM-c>

#goreflect Edith Stein was an 'existentialist philosopher'. What does that mean? Existentialism is a philosophy that emphasises individual existence, freedom and choice. It is the view that humans define their own meaning in life, and try to make rational decisions despite existing in an often irrational universe. Some existentialist philosophers come from a Christian background - Soren Keirkegaard (Protestant) Blaise Pascal (Catholic) and Jacques Maritain (Catholic). Others come from an atheistic background e.g. Friedrich Nietzsche and Jean - Paul Sartre.

No matter their background, existential philosophers celebrate things like individuality, creativity, self-determination, relationships and the simple joys of everyday life. They are always suspicious of political, economic or social systems (such as communism, Nazism and some forms of capitalism) that treat people as simply nothing more than part of a group, a social class or a nation.

Below are a few quotes from famous 'existentialist philosophers' that give some indication of their key ideas. After reading the quotes, take some time to reflect on their meaning and how they speak to you!

Soren Keirkegaard: "Life is not a problem to be solved but a reality to be lived"

Blaise Pascal: "Happiness can't be found in people or things but only in God and in our union with Him"

Jacques Maritain: "Some truths are better seen through tears"

Friedrich Nietzsche: "To forget one's purpose is the commonest form of stupidity"

Jean-Paul Sartre: "Commitment is an act not a word"