

Reflection on St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross (Edith Stein) 1892-1942

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Today we celebrate the feast of a German Jewess, Carmelite, poet, intellectual, and martyr. Her conversion from Judaism to Catholicism, following a period of atheism, was occasioned by her reading of the works of Teresa of Avila. Edith Stein, known in religion as Sr. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, produced volumes of philosophical and spiritual literature and poetry, before being put to death in the gas chambers at Auschwitz, in 1942.

In the preface to one of the volumes of her works, the editor comments on Edith Stein's thoughts on women and the uniqueness of women. She recognized the portrayal of the contemporary involvement of women in politics and the life of the Church.

This portrayal is summarized in various aspects: "Their efforts should not be directed toward gain but toward being; not toward possession and power, but toward community and humanity." Woman's actions should not be based on competition and self-importance ... but rather on her feminine uniqueness, on the always personal character of her participation and her interests, on her striving toward wholeness and completeness, on her personality created in the image of God.

Although the readings offered for today in the liturgy are not specific to the feast of St. Teresa Benedicta, there is a resonance. Moses speaks words to the people, which can be addressed to us all.

"And now Israel, what does the Lord, your God, ask of you but to fear the Lord, your God, and follow his ways exactly, to love and serve the Lord, your God, with all your heart and all your soul, to keep the commandments and statutes of the Lord which I enjoin on you today for your own good?" (Deut. 10)

We pray these words, not yet knowing fully what they may mean, but intending to follow them.

The Alleluia verse could have been chosen for Edith Stein:

"God has called you through the Gospel to possess the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Thes. 2:14).

Edith Stein's response to God's call flowed from Judaism, to Christianity, to Carmel, to martyrdom in Auschwitz.

In 1998, Edith Stein was canonized by P. John Paul II. Words from one of her own poems are a fitting conclusion:

"How wonderful are your gracious wonders!

All we can do is be amazed and stammer and fall silent

Because intellect and words fail."