

Saint of the Week

We continue our Pastor Column series “Saint of the Week,” and our Saint of the Week this week is Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross. She is a 20th-Century martyr of the Nazi concentration camps, a convert to Catholicism from Judaism whose former name prior to her conversion and her full profession as a Carmelite was Edith Stein.

She born in 1891 in Breslau, Poland, and was the youngest child of a large Jewish family. However, in her adolescence, she completely lost interest and faith in her Jewish heritage and surrendered to a totally secular lifestyle. She was fascinated with philosophy and was an outstanding student, proving to be well versed in philosophical discourse and demonstrating a particular interest in that particular sub-theme of philosophy known as phenomenology.* She earned her doctorate in philosophy and quickly grew in prominence and renown.

During this time, began to notice several of her friends who displayed a great passion and zeal for the Catholic faith, and inspired by their witness, she began to read the catechism. Eventually, she read herself into an intellectual conversion, which led to her spiritual conversion and entrance into the Catholic faith. She was baptized into the Catholic Church in 1922 in the Cathedral of Cologne, Germany. In 1933, she was admitted into the Carmelites in Cologne and became a Carmelite nun the following year, taking the religious name Teresa Benedicta of the Cross. After her profession, she was sent to the Carmelites in Echt, Holland.

When the Nazis invaded and conquered Holland, Edith (now Sister Teresa) was arrested, along with her sister Rose (who had also converted to Catholicism), and they both were sent to the Auschwitz concentration camp. Teresa was killed in the gas chambers in 1942 at the age of fifty-one.

In 1987, she was beatified in the large outdoor soccer stadium in Cologne by Pope Saint John Paul II, who remarked that from the unspeakable human suffering caused by the Nazi regime in western Europe in the 1930s and 1940s, there blossomed a beautiful life of dedication, consecration, prayer, fasting, and penance in the life of Blessed Teresa. And even though her life was snuffed out by the satanic evil of genocide, her memory stands as a light undimmed in the midst of evil, darkness, and suffering. She was later canonized by the same pope on October 11, 1998.

Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross...pray for us.

* Phenomenology is a specific branch of philosophy having to do with the structures of experience and consciousness. (“Phenomenology” is derived from the Greek *phainomenon*, which means “that which appears” and the Greek *logos*, which means “word” or “study.”) Phenomenology began as a philosophical enterprise in the earliest years of the 20th Century by Edith Stein’s mentor and friend, Edmund Husserl (himself also a Jew). Ironically, another famous phenomenologist was a German philosopher, Martin Heidegger, who was a member and supporter of the National Socialist Party in Germany (the Nazis) and whose philosophical tenets, it is commonly argued, have inspired (maybe even directly contributed to) the Nazi ideology.

It is fitting that Edith Stein would be canonized Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross by Pope Saint John Paul II; he himself was a known philosopher who had a particular interest in phenomenology, and both Edith Stein and her mentor-friend Edmund Husserl were influential inspirations for his own system of philosophical thought.