

Edith Stein - A Martyr For Truth & Love

Michael Sherwin, OP

Fr. Sherwin teaches moral theology at the University of Fribourg, Switzerland. The following homily was preached during the Dominican General Chapter held at Holy Trinity Priory, Krakow, Poland, on Aug. 9, 2004, the feast of St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross.



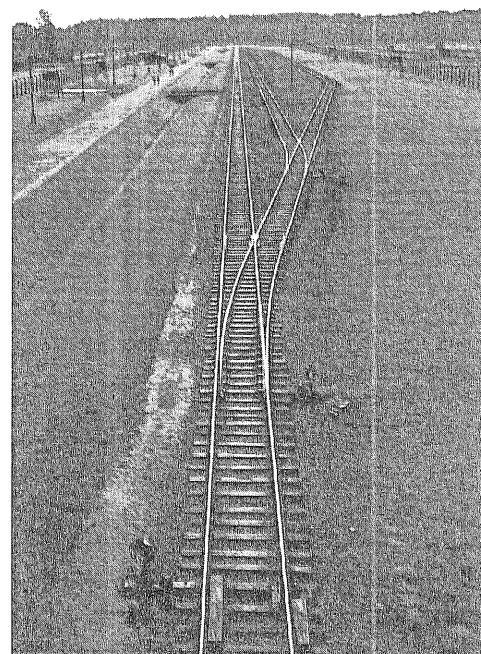
Sixty-two years ago this very day, and not many miles from this sanctuary, on a summer morning not too different from this one, Edith Stein was murdered in the gas chambers of Auschwitz. How to understand this staggering event and how to understand the almost equally staggering event of our presence here these years later celebrating her as a saint, a martyr, and as one of the co-patronesses of Europe? The contrast is almost overwhelming—enough to move

one to tears, except for the difficulty of determining whether these tears should be of joy or of sorrow.

Whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

Significantly for us as Dominicans, Edith Stein herself saw her approaching death as related to her attachment to the truth. She had come to see her whole life as a search for the truth. "My longing for truth," she tells us, "was a single prayer." Her story is by now well

known. In the face of the cruelties and uncertainties of this world and although raised in a devoutly Jewish family, by the time she was fourteen she had stopped praying and thought herself an atheist. While a student



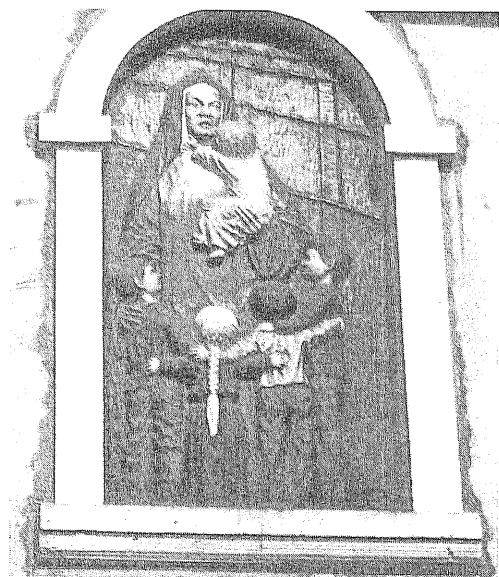
*Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration
camp - end of the line.*

of Edmund Husserl's, who had taught her to be open to the truth wherever she found it, she bumped into a book that would change her life. Staying the night in the home of a friend, she took off the shelf the autobiography of Teresa of Avila. By morning, when she finished its last page, she simply said: "Das ist die Wahrheit"—"This is the truth." She discovered in the life of St. Teresa something she already somehow knew: that truth is not what, but whom. She was searching for truth, and all the while Truth was a someone who in the quiet of her heart had been pursuing

her. She found Christ to be the way, the truth, and the life. And in this discovery, she also discovered that truth is inseparable from love and, as such, is inseparable from the cross; because true love in this life is always intertwined with suffering.

One's first encounter with truth can be like an infatuation: it is an encounter with the surface of things. One focuses on the external beauty of the beloved. One is enthralled by the fair smile of a dogmatic definition, by the twinkle in the eye of a moral truth, by the overall symmetry of Catholic faith. And yet one quickly learns that a love that stays on the surface of things becomes stale and false. True love, on the other hand, goes to the heart of things: it both penetrates the

depths of the beloved and remains open to the beloved's self revelation. This is why truth—which St. Thomas reminds us is nothing other than a certain union between the knower and the known—is also



Terra cotta image of Edith Stein & children in the camp (on wall of novitiate in Czerna).

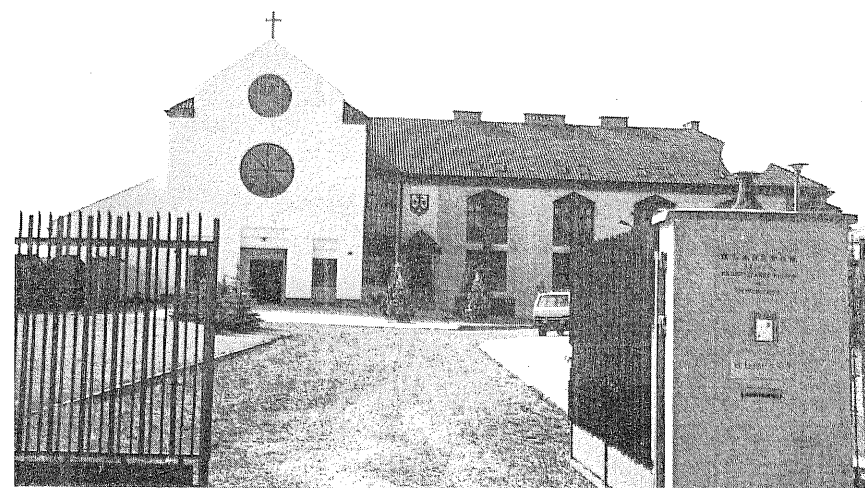
deeply linked to love. Just as faith without love is dead, so too truth without love is somehow false. The dogma, the moral teaching, and the symmetry of faith are all true; but our knowledge of them only remains true if it is ever being deepened by love—by burning, searching, empathetic love—a love that will not rest until it has grasped deeply the reality of God's presence in this pained and beautiful mess that is our world. And yet, such a faithful and concentrated love hurts.

This is why Edith Stein herself tied the study of truth with the agony of the cross. She saw it as a spiritual work that only comes at the price of suffering, a suffering that challenges the whole person. Her own faithful love of truth led her to Auschwitz. Prophetically, however, she saw this end as part of a more effective preaching. Writing to a friend, she stated: "Every time I feel my powerlessness and inability to influence people directly, I become more keenly aware of the necessity of my own holocaust."

Whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

So many in her own day were either clinging to partial truths or were stuck on the surfaces of real truths. She understood that the only way

forward was through love. Interestingly, it was just this relationship between truth and love that the Pope underlined when canonizing Edith, affirming that she "says to us all: do not accept anything as the truth if it lacks love. And do not accept anything as love which lacks truth! One without the other becomes a destructive lie." As we remember this great saint, let us ask her for the grace always to love the truth and to live the truth in love.



Monastery of the Carmelite Nuns at Auschwitz.

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Editor, Carmelite Digest
Carmelite House of Studies
PO Box 260
Mt. Angel OR 97362