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FitzGerald, Constance.

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REREADING SPIRITUAL CLASSICS

Passion in the Carmelite Tradition: Edith Stein

CONSTANCE FITZGERALD, OCD

The Carmelite tradition transmits a legacy of profound passion. While the *Carmelite Rule* (1206) cautions moderation in everything, in all the major texts and personalities of the tradition beginning with its basic Elijah myth in the *Institution of the First Monks* and moving through the life and writings of Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Therese of Lisieux, Edith Stein and others, one encounters magnificent passion bordering on excess.¹ The way the Carmelite prayer tradition helps and educates is by showing us how passion for God matures, that is, how desire grows in ardor, how communion and being God's partner in love comes about in our lives.

In *Webster's Dictionary* passion is defined, first of all, as suffering or agony (from the Latin to suffer) and secondarily, as compelling emotion, specifically, enthusiasm, strong love and desire. Taken together these meanings show the complexity and richness of my understanding of the word passion as I use it in this essay.²

The ardor of their desire to love and be transformed in love and the intensity of their experience of, reflection on and appropriation of human suffering is precisely what characterizes those marked by the Carmelite ethos. In fact, nothing is so expressive of the passion we find in the Carmelite prayer tradition as this simultaneous intertwining emphasis on love and suffering which we see elegantly portrayed, for example, in the poetry of John of the Cross and more simply demonstrated in the writings of Therese of Lisieux. John sings:

O living flame of love
that tenderly wounds my soul
in its deepest center! Since
now you are not oppressive,
now consummate! if it be your will:
tear through the veil of this sweet encounter.³

When Therese, in her turn, writes that, "she had but one desire, that of being taken to the summit of the mountain of love,"⁴ she is echoing the aspiration of Carmel through eight hundred years.

Love, how well our heart is made for that! . . . Sometimes, I seek for another word to express love, but on this earth of exile words are powerless to express all the soul's vibrations, so we have to keep to this one word: (love!).⁵

If we study *The Story of a Soul* we are not only awed by the magnitude of Therese's love, but also perplexed by the way she seems actively to pursue suffering, unable to learn the borderline between acceptance of the human condition and actually precipitating suffering. This is a danger she poses to those who do not read her work critically, who do not interpret her text. In this she is probably as 'dangerous' as her Carmelite mentor, John of the Cross, who realizing that "love consists not in feeling great things but in having great detachment and in suffering for the Beloved" seems to counsel us to deny all human desires and choose what is most difficult, that is, make ourselves suffer.⁶

Edith Stein, the actual focus of this study, in her turn attempts to fathom the significance of this attitude toward suffering in John and in her own Carmelite life in an essay written around 1934 in which she explores "the burden of the cross."⁷ I suspect, moreover, that this is so important to her that in her last written and unfinished work, *The Science of the Cross*, composed during the year before her death in the gas chambers of Auschwitz in August 1942, she uses her own philosophical theory of empathy, initially developed in her doctoral dissertation, as a hermeneutic to trace the inner experience and processes of prayer John goes through in his life and writing to reach his convictions about love and suffering. By means of this profound, original analysis she, herself, connects with and lays claim to his meanings which empower and energize her life, motivation and ultimately her death. One conclusion stands out: the more important loving becomes for John, Therese and finally also Edith, the more significant or "desirous" suffering is. It is an expression of their passion; it becomes a proof of love, a medium of solidarity and a threshold to depth and transformation.

We, on the other hand, in the repudiation of a spirituality which seemed to stress an excessive and sometimes unhealthy self-sacrifice and love of suffering, have perhaps lost passion as evidenced by a certain spiritual fatigue, softness and malaise. Modernity, with its often one-sided emphasis on the development and realization of the autonomous self without adequate concern for the common good or multipersonal community, has left us bereft of passion, and herein, I suggest, lies a radical call to self-transcendence.⁸ Our passionless, "so-what" society needs a new language of selflessness or of the Cross that describes and supports the loss of possessive selfhood. Such a forfeiture is indispensable in the contemporary quest for the transforming love, universal communion and cosmic consciousness that seem today beyond the achievement of human ability.

This is why I want to concentrate on Edith Stein, a victim of the Holocaust who literally disappeared with six million other people into the hell "where God died." I intend, first, to follow in some measure the mysterious faith/prayer process

whereby the rejections, exclusions and marginalization she experienced were transmuted into the Way of the Cross. Second, I hope to discover how her understanding of atonement and expiation together with her convictions about community shaped this entrance into and appropriation of the mystery of the Cross. Third, I desire thereby to see how the energy of her powerful love and singular perception of suffering, particularly as this was mediated to her through her mentor, John of the Cross, seeps into and enlarges or distinctly marks the passion of the Carmelite tradition and in so doing possibly points to a meaningful spirituality of selflessness, solidarity and communion that pierces through the limitation of accustomed boundaries.

EDITH STEIN—PASSION FOR GREATNESS

In sharp contrast to the obvious revelatory character of both Therese of Lisieux's and Teresa of Avila's writing, Edith Stein did not leave us a personal journal or autobiographical account of her prayer or spiritual experience. While her letters and autobiography certainly provide insight into her inner life, yet she bore witness to her desire for anonymity by keeping secret the depth of her soul life. We are left to discover the footprints of her soul from her more "objective" writings, her intellectual passion and her life. Her message, however, is not less powerful for this reason since in studying her spiritual writings, one cannot doubt that she knew whereof she spoke.

From her youth, long before Edith became a Catholic, we see in her a raw passion for greatness that could only be assuaged by the absorption of self into an overwhelming plan beyond her own personal life.⁹ She could not really know what a step-by-step immersion in anonymity and sacrifice would ultimately cost her nor imagine where the final focus of her love and devotion would be directed. Nevertheless, her employment of a phenomenological methodology to observe her own passionate behavior, emotion and absolute convictions concerning "German-ness" provides us with an entry point for tracking, in depth, a movement of displacement that began in a total, extreme, chilling dedication to the German State and evolved into complete, unconditional commitment to God and the Cross in radical solidarity with her own Jewish People.

In 1917 when she was 25 years old, Edith looked back on her experience of her country's "mobilization day" for World War I. At that time it became crystal clear to her that her individual life with its private affairs and concerns had ceased and that, by her own free desire, all that she had and was belonged to the state, to be used up completely in the service of "the fatherland." She agonized continually because she could not find "the right place in which [she] could live up to this conviction."¹⁰

This woman, who struggled in young adulthood to give her life in passionate self-forgetfulness to an ultimate cause in the German state, who could not bear

being at any one person's disposition, even the great Edmund Husserl's,¹¹ would by 1935 write that the real content of her life, of the Carmelite vocation, was "to stand before the face of God . . . looking up [in prayer] into the face of the Eternal," believing that a fountain of grace would bubble up over everything, without her knowing precisely where it would go and without those whom it would reach ever knowing from whence it came.¹² By 1938, on the eve of her departure from her cherished "fatherland" to escape the extreme exclusionary policies of Nazi Germany and guarantee the safety of her community in Cologne, in a poem entitled *I Will Remain With You*, Edith wrote with simple poignancy: "Heaven is my glorious homeland [now]."¹³ She revealed, moreover, the completeness of the displacement of her extravagant desire and capacity for dedication by the very manner in which she explains "the highest stage of personal life" in *The Science of the Cross*:

. . . When [the soul] has reached [this inmost sphere] God will work everything in the soul, itself will have to do no more than to receive. Yet its share of freedom is expressed in just this receiving. Beyond this, however, freedom is involved even far more decisively, for in this state [mystical marriage] God works everything only because the soul surrenders itself to God perfectly. This surrender is itself the highest achievement of its freedom. St. John [of the Cross] describes the mystical marriage as the voluntary mutual surrender of God and the soul [in love] and attributes to the soul at this stage of perfection so great a power that it can dispose not only of itself, but even of God.¹⁴

MARGINALIZATION AND ANONYMITY

Her passion notwithstanding, mutual surrender did not come easily to Edith Stein. She learned slowly in her experience, undoubtedly by the revisioning of her own life, that this union with God is "bought by the Cross, accomplished on the Cross, and sealed with the Cross for all eternity."¹⁵ Little of what this truly brilliant Jewish woman philosopher aspired to or was capable of reached fulfillment. Caught in the confluence of personalities, an inflexible German, male, academic structure and pervasive anti-semitism, she was effectively marginalized as an intellectual not only because she was a woman, but specifically because she was a single woman. Although she attempted several times over a period of years to follow her *summa cum laude* doctorate in philosophy with a normal university appointment, no one, not even her mentor Husserl, would put his life on the line to sponsor her second thesis to obtain habilitation, that is, the license to lecture necessary for a university position.¹⁶ Limited, therefore, in what she was allowed to do as a woman and a Jew, she spent her professional career, following her conversion to Catholicism, at a Dominican teachers' college for women and as a well-known and sought after lecturer, principally in Germany, Austria and Switzerland. Her

competency included theory of pedagogy, women's education, equality of sexes' abilities for professions and scholarship, and broad work with Thomastic themes.

Edith's recurring doubts about her ability as a scholar must undoubtedly be traced in large part to her cumulative experience in the academic arena. In 1932 she wrote to Sr. Adelgundis Jaegerschmid expressing the inadequacy she felt as a scholar created by her ten-year exclusion from the continuity of academic work and her isolation from the contemporary intellectual scene.¹⁷ Her very next extant letter, written to a Thomist scholar who had found fault with her translation of Thomas Aquinas, again cited her deficiency and lack of resources.¹⁸ Even more poignant is the correspondence with Hedwig Conrad-Martius in which Edith admitted to her own limitations in philosophizing and to the fear she had lost connection with technical thoroughness and was generally incompetent to function in the world of academia, that is, in the classroom, the lecture hall or as a philosopher.¹⁹ She asked, nevertheless, for a radical critique of her writings in the hope that Hedwig might mediate for Edith the meaning of her life's task and assure her that she was not overreaching her own capabilities in the philosophical work she had undertaken.²⁰ But running through all her doubts was the realization that anything she could now accomplish would be far more fragmentary than she had dreamed.²¹ Her losses were irreversible and would never be recouped. What remains significant in terms of her spiritual evolution is the fact that throughout this especially ambiguous, bleak time she delivered some of her most effective lectures verifying the presence of a hidden power not her own.

With her conversion to Catholicism in 1922 Edith was isolated on another level by the serious separation it created, first of all, between her and some of her close friends with whom she had felt there existed an unshakable bond.²² Even more distressing was the deep misunderstanding between her and her family, particularly her dearly loved and greatly admired mother whose youngest child she was. Seen by her family initially as a rejection of her Jewishness and later as an effort to save herself from the fate of the Jews in Nazi Germany by entering Carmel, Edith's conversion and vocation effected further alienation in her life. With the rise to power of Hitler's National Socialism in 1933, her marginalization became even more acute. The "fatherland" pronounced her an outcast, specifically because she was a Jew—something unimaginable to Edith at the time of World War I when she had described what being German meant to her.²³

It is ironic that her very German-ness and Jewishness, along with her intellectual life, the once thought solid parts of her identity, would be so challenged and so thoroughly stretched. A displacement and even forfeiture of identity, which she was helpless to protest effectively, was forced upon her. One supposes she was attempting to deal with all these various facets of exclusion, personal and social, when, prior to her entering Carmel, she gathered together the memories of her family experience, intellectual life and cultural milieu in *Life In A Jewish Family*. Not only

was she attempting, as a phenomenologist, to educate German youth to see the similarities between the lives of assimilated, German Jews and their own, thereby making hatred of Jews (other I's) impossible, she was also, in accordance with her own philosophical convictions about human solidarity, freely taking her stand with her own persecuted people and publicly recognizing herself as one of them, an outcast. This autobiographical self re-creation as a Jew was, as Rachel Felday Brenner rightly suggests, absolutely essential to Edith's evolving self-understanding prior to entering Carmel.²⁴ It was the expression of a solidarity that drew meaning from her phenomenological understanding of the devoted individual who is a "carrier" of the communal life insofar as her personal being is faithful to a particular community and remains steadfastly planted within it even if she has been excluded from or, in fact, excludes herself from the communal life.²⁵ Whereas Edith's family and friends believed she was distancing herself from the Jewish community, and the state was attempting to ostracize her from her Germanness, she was, in fact, more deeply associating herself with both. In her Carmelite life of prayer this perception would expand into a desire to bear the burden of the cross in communion and expiation and would reach its "logical" consummation in her final words as she left Carmel for the extermination camp: "Rosa, come, let us go for our people."²⁶

PRAYER DEVELOPMENT AND THE MYSTERY OF THE CROSS

But how did the path of the outcast become the Way of the Cross? If we try to follow the intimate trail of her spirit, the pathway of her prayer, it leads to the Cross so that no one can doubt that the passion and death of Jesus became her inner mystery and the suffering and destruction of her people the preoccupation of her Carmelite life. Her spiritual writings provide ample evidence that she understood clearly by experience and education how growth in prayer works. She had learned well the tradition of contemplation from her Carmelite teachers, John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila, but she also comprehended the process as a phenomenologist, as a scholar. In *The Science of the Cross*, after describing faith and meditation with amazing clarity, she explained:

St. John [of the Cross] also knows a higher form of meditation: a naturally lively and highly gifted mind may deeply penetrate into the truths of faith, consider them in all their aspects, converse about them with itself, develop them to their intellectual conclusions and discover their inner connections. This activity will become even more lively, easy and fruitful if the Holy Spirit inspires the human mind and raises it above itself. Then it will feel to be in the hands of a higher power enlightening it, so that it seems no longer to be active itself, but to be instructed by divine revelation. Anything the spirit has acquired by meditation in one of these forms becomes its permanent possession . . . Through its constant occupation with God, the spirit—and this means here not only the understanding but also the heart—

becomes familiar with him [sic], it knows and loves him. This knowledge and love have become part of its being; the relation between God and man [sic] at this stage may be compared with that between two people who have lived together for a long time and are on most intimate terms.²⁷

I believe Edith learned to pray in Speyer. Following her conversion to Catholicism she resided there with the Dominican Sisters who ran St. Magdalena's training institute for women teachers. During the eight years she taught there she lived like an enclosed nun dedicating herself to prayer and rarely going out except to lecture. She immersed herself totally in Christ through daily Eucharist, the Liturgy of the Hours, theological study and the intimacy of silent prayer, thereby learning "how to go about living at the Lord's hand."²⁸ Meditating on the gospels, she grew to know Jesus and discovered what God wanted of her by "learn[ing] from him [sic] eye to eye."²⁹ At the end of this period she wrote to a friend:

God leads each of us on an individual way . . . We can do very little ourselves, compared to what is done to us. But that little bit we must do. Primarily this consists before all else of persevering in prayer to find the right way.³⁰

In the same year, 1931, in an essay on St. Elizabeth of Hungary, she painted what was likely a mirror image of her own soul:

Mighty was the tug of war in the soul of the child Elizabeth. It set her on fire, and the flame of the love of God flared up, breaking through every cloak and barrier. Then this human child placed herself in the hands of the divine Creator. Her will became pliant material for the divine will, and, guided by this will, it could set about taming and curtailing her nature to channel the inner form. Her will could also find an outer form suitable to its inner one and a form into which she could grow without losing her natural direction. And so she rose to that perfected humanity, the pure consequence of a nature freed and clarified by the power of grace.³¹

During these years, her spiritual guide described her as

. . . filled with grace, rich in the love of God and men [sic], filled with the spirit of the scriptures and the liturgy, from which she draws, in which she prays and meditates, and by which she lives.³²

Later Edith, anonymously bearing witness to her own growth, would acknowledge that "no human eye can see what God does in the soul during hours of inner prayer. It is grace upon grace."³³

Inasmuch as consulting human experience is an identifying mark of phenomenology, we must assume Edith consciously brought into her prayer all her physical, emotional and intellectual experiences of exclusion along with the increasing suffering of her people. Then her own precise, internalized understanding of the

science of “empathy,” so fundamental to her own identity, had to lead her so to follow in her meditation the suffering (emotional and mental) of Jesus that her spirit quite literally connected or “ported” to a transcendent source of energy, of “motivation,” beyond herself in the passion and death of Jesus.³⁴ “Before you hangs the Savior on the Cross . . . The arms of the Crucified are spread out to draw you to his heart. He wants your life in order to give you his . . . Look at the Cross . . . Look at the Crucified,” she wrote.³⁵ Edith’s commentary on John of the Cross’ dark night communicates the power of the energy she received:

. . . Faith offers [the soul] Christ, poor, humble, crucified, forsaken on the Cross even by his divine Father. In the poverty and desolation the soul recognizes its own. Aridity, distaste and pain are the “purely spiritual Cross” presented to it. If it accepts this, the soul will find that the yoke is sweet and the burden light; the Cross will become its staff by which it quickly mounts upward. For Christ accomplished his greatest work, the reconciliation and union of mankind [sic] with God, in the utmost humiliation and annihilation on the Cross. When the soul realizes this, it will begin to understand that it, too, must be led to union with God through annihilation, a “living crucifixion . . .” As, in the desolation of his death, Jesus surrendered himself into the hands of the invisible and incomprehensible God, so the soul must enter the midnight darkness of faith, which is the only way to God.³⁶

For the realist phenomenologist there was no way to experience *as her own* Jesus’ physical death, the material body broken, the blood poured out—this would come for her—but from the quality of Jesus’ attitudes of loving surrender for others, of giving up his life freely in complete selflessness, of loving his friends, his people, even to death, of prizing truth and fidelity to his mission to the end above his own safety, of absorbing violence and evil while refusing to hate, of forgiving his killers and sending back love, she assimilated an intrinsic infinity of meaning. From his suffering her spirit accessed a profound explosion of energy in the realm of significance that could never be spent down. When Edith encountered such meaning in prayer, as a phenomenologist she “owed” it reception. Her attitude toward such “value” became non-optional. It tugged at her and demanded to be let in. She willingly, therefore, opened the gates of her inner spirit, the vestibule to the spiritual realm—like letting down the drawbridge into a castle—to soak up suffering from the Jewish Jesus by connecting or “porting” to his feelings and attitudes which empowered her toward love and impelled her “to take up the burden of the Cross,” in what she called “expiation.”³⁷ This is how Edith Stein, the philosopher, the Carmelite, became a passionate “lover of the Cross.”

COMMUNITY

To comprehend better, however, both the complexity and congruence of her passion for the Cross and the resulting inner movement toward expiation, we need to stress how integrally they grew out of the soil of an already existing sensibility

that pervades her philosophical work and can be traced back to her early schooling at the University of Breslau (1911–1913). At that time she admitted to a feeling for the solidarity not only of all humankind but also of smaller social groupings.³⁸ The singular attention Edith gave to the study of the essence of community and mutual communication between human beings in her doctoral dissertation, *On the Problem of Empathy* (1916), and in *Individual and Community* (1920) was an expression of and enlargement upon this initial intuition. But community solidarity was far more than just a major theoretical concern for her, as her friend, Roman Ingarden, points out. Belonging to a community was a personal necessity; solidarity a requisite for her life.³⁹

But precisely what convictions about community were so foundational in Edith's thought that they remained a bedrock influencing her spiritual experience and development as a Carmelite? First, she believed that the very essence of community is the union of free persons who are connected on the deep level of their innermost personal lives and, therefore, have a vital influence on each other. Each one feels responsible for herself and for the community. Second, a community like a person can be said to have a spirit, a character, a soul. Third, some community members are "carriers" of the communal life. Their personal being is so totally given to the community that they are its "core" from which its spirit or character or soul is shaped and which guarantees its enduring reality. The further their devotion extends the more secure are the values and outward face of the community. Fourth, some individuals with higher sensitivity, often these carriers of community, function as the open eyes with which their community (or communities) looks at the world.⁴⁰

Grasping Edith's prophetic perception concerning the truly faithful person who is a carrier of the communal life and a shaper of its spirit, and realizing the different communities to which she passionately belonged, we are in a better position to understand the manner in which four particular experiences were unfolding simultaneously in her prayer life: first, a typically Carmelite intimacy with "the Crucified" was constantly maturing; second, as their oppression mounted, a more profound identification with the Jewish people was developing that paralleled her growing communion with Christ; third, some kind of responsibility for the violence of the German Nazi state pressed in upon her; fourth, she was integrating her long held philosophical convictions about human community with both a theological understanding and experience of the "body of Christ" and the "prayer of the church." As these four realities coalesced in her life, a deep unitive experience of solidarity took hold of her.⁴¹

EXPIATION

From the perspective of Carmelite prayer growth, this development was to be expected. In her specific time and place in history, however, she named it the desire

for “voluntary expiatory suffering” or the willingness to commit herself to “the works of expiation” which, she observed, only served to bind her even more closely in love to Christ in a powerful exchange of energy, meaning and direction.⁴² Some of Edith’s most passionate spiritual writing is expressed in the language of expiation.

What many find difficult to interpret today is not that Edith voluntarily desired to share the suffering of her people in intimate union with the Crucified—Oscar Romero, for example, and numerous others have done that in our own time—but that she did so depending on the theological categories of sacrifice, satisfaction, substitution and expiation. These classical salvation theories have a long history in theology.⁴³ Particularly since the early Middle Ages, it has been said that Christ, the God-man, offered through the sacrifice of his death infinite satisfaction and expiation to his Father and that in our place he atoned for the limitless offense inflicted on God through human sin. Even if Augustine’s hypothesis on sacrifice, satisfaction and substitution and Anselm’s lucid interpretation of salvation in terms of satisfaction and substitution, especially in their vulgarized forms which penetrated the public consciousness of the Church, appear extravagant to us inasmuch as they seem to contradict New Testament statements and no longer fit with the way we postmoderns think about God and Christ, in the 1930s and 1940s before and after Edith entered Carmel, substitution and satisfaction were operative, viable theological constructs in soteriology and expiation profoundly influential and inspiring in the spiritual life of Carmelites.

Clearly, however, Edith’s evident appropriation of an attitude of expiation/atonement—she differentiated between the two—was not only a function of Carmelite devotion nor simply a consequence of a Christian theological theory of salvation. It was also rooted in her Jewish origins and her scholarly work. Pivotal for Edith’s self-understanding as a Carmelite nun was her birth on the Day of Atonement, the highest of the Jewish festivals “when the High Priest used to enter the Holy of Holies to offer the sacrifice of atonement for his own sins and the sins of all the people,” after which the scapegoat was driven out into the desert with the sins of all upon his head.⁴⁴ Not through mere nostalgia, but with passionate purpose and identification did Edith repeatedly refer in her spiritual writings to the significance of this scapegoat ritual and the offering of expiation for sin.⁴⁵ Furthermore, as long as she lived she celebrated Yom Kippur each year by fasting throughout the entire day. Thus she could not fail to see the scapegoat mechanism in operation as the violence and hatred within the Nazi soul was projected upon her people. Such sin demanded an offering of expiation!

Even as an academic, as far back as 1921, prior to her conversion, Edith pursued the topic of expiation in a very technical essay, *On the State*, in which she analyzed the distinction between legal guilt or crime, which demands punishment, and moral guilt or sin, which requires atonement or expiation. Expiation, she

explained, is born of contrition which has its effects “in the soul.” Expiation is, accordingly, carried out interiorly, as is atonement, but expiation is characterized by the free taking upon oneself of a quite definite suffering or punishment to “offset” or balance a concrete sin (*peccatum actuale*). Atonement, on the other hand, is directed against the sinful state of the soul and not a specific sin.⁴⁶

Edith’s powerful reflections on suffering and the Cross written during the last years of her life are clearly marked by the distinctions in this very early study. For her, therefore, it was “logical” that the extreme violence of Hitler’s Germany had to be balanced or blotted out by a greater measure of suffering freely borne in expiation. This is apparent in a meditation inspired by John of the Cross’ love of suffering. He was the guide of Edith’s desire, the person whose life and teaching undoubtedly had the most profound influence of all on her desire for voluntary expiatory suffering.⁴⁷ Edith’s words bear the mark of John’s passion for the way of the cross:

The entire sum of human failures . . . must be blotted out by a corresponding measure of expiation. The way of the cross is this expiation . . . Typical of those who submit to the suffering inflicted on them and experience his blessing by bearing it is Simon of Cyrene . . . Christ the head effects expiation in these members of his Mystical Body who put themselves body and soul at his disposal for carrying out his work of salvation . . . The meaning of the way of the cross is to carry this burden [of sin] out of the world [like the scapegoat and like Jesus].⁴⁸

Edith Stein was concerned about the body of Christ, her own people, the human community, and as an authentic carrier of the communal life, she was squarely, and some would say audaciously, placing herself in the battle going on between good and evil in that community, striving to shape its spirit. Is it blasphemous to suggest that, in a prophetic critique of the idolatrous and barbarous plans of her own German people, she, like Jesus in his death, wanted to absorb the evil energy of hate and violence of the Nazi regime, throw down the drawbridge to receive the evil abroad in the world and carry it out into the desert to its death in her own body, like Jesus, on the shoulders of a love that could not be spent down? Even though she knew it would kill her? Like a scapegoat, in a collective transfer of energy to a victim, she desired to soak up the violence of the German state, ultimately of humankind, and thereby be a cause of harmony and peace, to surrender herself like Jesus so that men and women could be freed from their hate by unloading their wickedness on her.⁴⁹ Only love could bear the freight of such suffering, and yet she yearned to give back in love more than was being taken away in hate.⁵⁰

I believe Edith knew God needs no human expiation or atonement, but rather human persons must be extricated from their own prison if they are to be capable of opening their hearts to God’s freely offered love and thereby be liberated from their resentment. Her theology, on some issues, manifests such a surprisingly close affinity with the thought of German theologian Raymund Schwager that his

theology actually throws light on hers. Writing some thirty seven years after Edith's death, Schwager insists, in his analysis of violence and redemption in the Bible, that it is not God who must be appeased, but humans who must be delivered from their hatred, resentment and will to kill.⁵¹

We must remember that Edith's personalist phenomenology was built upon the certainty that no human being is a mere individual; we all tap into a kind of energy from other persons and especially from the common reservoir of the community.⁵² Because we are all connected in a vast network, whether we send love or hate along the energy currents is critical for the healing and evolution of human consciousness.⁵³ If we take into account Edith's strong assertion of woman's superior destiny to be educator and empathic redeemer of humanity, that is, to bring true humanity in herself and then in others to more mature development,⁵⁴ her words in 1939 for the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross, the day vows are renewed in Carmel, pierce our hearts in all their poignant passion and strong critique of immediate consciousness:

Will you remain faithful to the Crucified? . . . The world is in flames, the battle between Christ and the Antichrist has broken into the open. If you decide for Christ, it could cost you your life . . . Before you hangs the Savior on the cross . . . obedient to death . . . Your Savior hangs naked and destitute before you . . . Do not be concerned with your own body . . . The Savior hangs before you with a pierced heart . . . It is the loving heart of your Savior that invites you to follow . . . From the open heart gushes [his] blood. This extinguishes the flames of hell. Make your heart free . . . then the flood of divine love will be poured [concretely ported, hardwired] into your heart until it overflows and becomes fruitful to all the ends of the earth . . . If you are nuptially bound to him . . . your being is precious blood. Bound to him, you are omnipresent as he is. You can be at all fronts wherever there is grief, in the power of the cross. Your compassionate love takes you everywhere, this love from the divine heart. Its precious blood is poured everywhere soothing, healing, saving.⁵⁵

"*Your being is precious blood.*" We are stunned by such a forfeiture of selfhood, such a transparent premonition of her physical death and so profound a consciousness of her vocation to carry compassionate love, the fruit of mature contemplative prayer, out of the very circumscribed space of the cloister into the depths of the abyss, "to walk on the dirty and rough paths of this earth . . . and [to] cry with the children of this world,"⁵⁶ to be, in fact, a carrier of helpless compassionate divinity into the bowels of hell and to answer the conspiracy of hatred with an outpouring of love. The cross revealed to her that God is to be found in the midst of pain and violence, with Christ and with crucified people; so would she be and thus could she write:

The more powerfully God woos the soul and the more completely it surrenders to him [sic], the darker will be the night and the more painful the death.⁵⁷

SOLIDARITY

Edith Stein could not intellectually unravel the scandal of suffering and human violence, the mystery of the cross, anymore than we can. As her union with God deepened, she could only enter more and more radically and even joyfully into solidarity with the Crucified Christ and those who suffer after the pattern confirmed by John of the Cross toward the end of the *Spiritual Cantic*:⁵⁸

. . . it will be a singular comfort and happiness for her [the one united to God] to enter all the afflictions and trials of the world, and everything that might be a means to this, however difficult and painful, even the anguish and agony of death, all in order to see herself further within her God.⁵⁸

Clearly, during the nine years Edith lived in Carmel, what carrying the cross really meant for her evolved in tandem with Germany's escalating hatred of the Jews. Even before she entered Carmel, however, she sensed their fate would also be hers. This premonition is not altogether surprising, but what is profoundly disturbing, at first reading, is her interpretation of the Jewish oppression.⁵⁹

I talked with the Savior [she remembers] and told him I knew that it was His Cross that was now being placed upon the Jewish people; that most of them did not understand this, but that those who did, would have to take it up willingly in the name of all. I would do that. He should only show me how. At the end of the service I was certain that I had been heard. But what this carrying of the cross would consist in, that I did not yet know.⁶⁰

What reading do we give to Edith's experience? As early as 1933, she seemed to grasp by a kind of prophetic intuition that both in Jesus' death on the Cross and in the Nazis' torturous, evil repression of the Jews we see the same unmitigated violence and hatred of "the other," the same sin, we see the same projection of violence onto a scapegoat, the same sins of the many placed upon the innocent. The Jews were not sinless as Jesus was—they were human, they were not flawless—but in their innocence as a collective racial scapegoat, they were like Jesus in bearing the sins of the many. Like Jesus they were, Edith may have been suggesting, dying for all because all had already turned against them, rejected them, concretely transferring to them their resentment against God and their will to kill.⁶¹ In this sense, the gas chamber was like the Cross in that the same burden of hatred and exclusion was placed upon the Jews as had been placed upon Jesus. What had killed Jesus, Marianne Sawicki suggests, also killed the Jews: hatred of humanity.⁶² In both cases, in fact, we detect the rejection of the full, overflowing humanity of the Jew Jesus and by implication the presence of the divine in every human person. Manifested in the extermination of the Jews and all Jewishness from the human gene pool was also, therefore, the real hatred and ultimate rejection of God. Edith apparently recognized this deep-seated human resentment against God that showed

itself in the repudiation of the reality of Incarnation and God-likeness in which every kind of degradation becomes possible.

In the last analysis, what the systematic dehumanization and death of the Jews signified for Edith was the abhorrence and denial of humanity's fundamental, intrinsic, unbreakable interconnectedness, solidarity and communion in God beneath all socially constructed differences. This amounted to a radical rejection of the life-long pillars of her intellectual and spiritual life. I am convinced that the pronounced orientation of her spirituality toward voluntary expiation in identification with Jesus Crucified must be interpreted in terms of solidarity and its central significance as "a value" coming out of her particular work as a phenomenologist and her prayer development as a Carmelite. Here, I believe, we find the contemporary key for accessing her passionate language of expiation and intentional suffering.

CONCLUSION: CONTEMPLATIVE CONVICTION AND PROPHETIC VISION

Edith was one of those persons, whom she herself described in 1920, who with special sensitivity serves as the open eyes with which the community looks at the world. She knew even then that when the failure of the masses stands in the way of the receptivity of a true vision of values, it is crucial for those who possess eyes open to the world of spiritual values not to be closed in on or concerned about themselves, but rather turned outward to permit the wealth of their inner life to become visible in the community, even if the community at large is not receptive or succumbs to collective delusion.⁶³

Twenty years later, having been educated by Carmelite tradition, life and prayer, her early insight matured into a prophetic, contemplative conviction. Thus she explained only a year and a half before her death:

The deeper a soul is bound to God . . . [The silent working of the Holy Spirit made them into friends of God.] the stronger will be its influence on the form of the church. Conversely, the more an era is engulfed in sin and estrangement from God the more it needs souls united to God . . . The greatest figures of prophecy and sanctity step forth from the darkest night. But for the most part the formative stream of the mystical life remains invisible. Certainly the decisive turning points in world history are substantially co-determined by souls whom no history ever mentions . . . Hidden souls do not live in isolation, but are a part of the living nexus and have a position in a great divine order, we speak of an invisible church. Their impact and affinity can remain hidden from themselves and others for their entire earthly lives. But it is also possible for some of this to become visible in the external world . . . [e.g., Mary, Joseph, Anna, Zechariah, Elizabeth, etc.] all of these had behind them a solitary life with God and were prepared for their special tasks before they found themselves together in those awesome encounters and events and, in retrospect, could understand how the paths left behind led to this climax.⁶⁴



Photo from *Edith Stein: A Life in Documents and Pictures* by Maria Amata Neyer (ICS Publications, 2000). Reprinted with the kind permission of Sister Josephine Koepfel.

Edith was a carrier of the communal life and consciousness of Carmel, of the Jews, of the Church, of the Germans, of humanity, into the belly of hell. Her voluntary going—“Rosa, come, let us go for our people”—signalled her deliberate desire to stand in the face of communal blindness for an unbreakable love and solidarity, for a defiance of the conspiracy of hatred, of exclusion and marginalization, of reprisal, of evil for evil. Ultimately, she witnessed, like Jesus, to God’s salvation to humanity in overflowing love. She took the mystical stream of the church, its deepest life, beyond the confinement of cloister and the boundaries of Carmel into the horror of Auschwitz. Words from her last letter on the way to the gas chamber—“So far I have been able to pray gloriously”⁶⁵—epitomize with peaceful simplicity an earlier expression of her belief:

When the mystical stream breaks through traditional forms, it does so because the Spirit that blows where it will is living in it, this Spirit that has created all traditional forms and must ever create new ones . . . [Then the carriers of the mystical stream] can do nothing but radiate to other hearts the divine love that fills them and so participate in the perfection of all into unity in God which was and is Jesus’ great desire.⁶⁶

I sense that in her life as an intellectual, in her death in the Holocaust as a voluntary scapegoat, Edith broke through the traditional form of the Carmelite nun, a stone rejected and yet destined to become, in the twenty-first century, a cornerstone in Carmel. This is why we dare not minimize the extent of the influence of her passionate intellectual life upon her equally passionate contemplative prayer life nor the radicality of her total involvement in the social situation. Neither may we spiritualize the brutality and anonymity of her death: one among six million, stripped naked, violated at the very least by the eyes of the guards, herded into the gas chamber, murdered, reduced to smoke billowing into Polish skies, with only vague memories of her peace and care of the women and children remaining. With an unspeakable, fathomless forfeiture of possessive selfhood, she took the life of Carmel, of the Carmelite nun, to a new frontier far beyond the familiar.

If, as many pray, our civilization with its dying totalitarian systems, its holocausts, its destruction of life, its mass tortures, rapes and murders, its rampant ethnic hatred, its oppression of the poor and marginal, its response to terrorism, even its struggle over the death penalty, is the last long gasp of a vengeful society, it will be because people like Edith have dismantled hatred by refusing to imitate evil with corresponding vengeance and have injected love into the energy current connecting humankind and everything living in the universe in a vast network of interdependence. Edith Stein offers a key to the passion of the Carmelite prayer tradition today. She is an inspiration and teacher in fashioning a healthy, though demanding, contemporary Carmelite spirituality of selflessness and cosmic communion that makes a place for a very real, inescapable dispossession of selfhood in the service of love and solidarity.

The way Edith described John of the Cross at the end of *The Science of the Cross*, after following him through his life and writings, I want to apply to her because it summarizes and completes this study:

[Her] soul had, indeed, attained to perfect detachment, to simplicity and silence in union with God. But this was the fruit of an interior purification in which a richly gifted nature burdened itself with the cross and surrendered itself to God to be crucified, a most powerful and lively spirit made [herself] a prisoner, an impassioned fiery heart found peace in radical resignation. The accounts of the witnesses confirm this result . . .⁶⁷

NOTES

1. For me three questions form a background for this essay. First, where do we really find passion or excess in the Carmelite tradition? Second, how does the passion of the Carmelite tradition meet the hunger of our own time for spirituality and even mystical experience, the thirst for the divine and for community? Third, how does the Carmelite tradition move out from the familiar, from an enclosure of language and esotericism

into new social and cultural situations? I am deeply indebted to Leah Hargis, OCD, for formatting the endnotes for me and helping me with the Edith Stein sources which she knows extremely well. My discussions with her were invaluable. This article will appear in the forthcoming volume *Carmelite Prayer: Essays by the Carmelite Forum*, Keith J. Egan, ed., to be published by Paulist Press, 2003.

2. *Webster's Twentieth Century Unabridged Dictionary*, 2d ed., s.v. "passion." It is instructive to note synonyms for passion such as: ardor, rapture, vehemence, zeal, devotion, pathos and attachment.
3. John of the Cross, "Living Flame of Love" *Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, trans. (Washington, D.C.: ICS, 1973), 578.
4. Therese to Sr. Agnes of Jesus, 30–31 August 1890, *Saint Therese of Lisieux: General Correspondence, volume 1*, trans. John Clark (Washington, D.C.: ICS, 1982), no. 110.
5. Thérèse, *General Correspondence*, Thérèse to Marie Guerin, 27–29 July 1890, no. 109.
6. John of the Cross, The Sayings of Light and Love, *The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross*, rev. ed., trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1991), no. 115, 93.
7. Edith Stein, "Love of the Cross: Some Thoughts for the Feast of St. John of the Cross," *The Hidden Life: Hagiographic Essays, Meditations, Spiritual Texts*, eds. L. Gelber and Michael Linssen, OCD, trans. Waltraut Stein (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1992), vol. 4, *The Collected Works of Edith Stein*, 91.
8. I am aware that some have difficulty with a call to "self-transcendence." They see it as a denial of the human, of the need for a strong, well-developed sense of self. This is especially threatening and even unfair for women, many of whom have come so belatedly into full selfhood. Nevertheless, the summons to a cosmic consciousness is so urgent and the spiritual experience of some women so compelling that I think we must speak of self-transcendence until we have another word that expresses the real radicality of the challenge today.
9. See Patricia Hampl, *I Could Tell You Stories: Sojourns in the Land of Memory* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999), 104–5.
10. Edith Stein to Roman Ingarden, 3 & 9 February 1917, *Self-Portrait in Letters: 1916–1942*, trans. Josephine Koepfel (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1993), vol. 5, *The Collected Works of Edith Stein*, nos. 6, 7.
11. Stein, *Self-Portrait in Letters*, Edith to Roman, 19 February 1918, no. 19.
12. Stein, "On the History and Spirit of Carmel," *The Hidden Life*, 1–6.
13. Stein, "I Will Remain With You . . ." *The Hidden Life*, 135.
14. Edith Stein, *The Science of the Cross: A Study of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Hilda Graef (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1960), 122.
15. Stein, *Science of the Cross*, 207.
16. Edith Stein, *Life in a Jewish Family: Her Unfinished Autobiographical Account*, trans. Josephine Koepfel (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1986), vol. 1, *The Collected Works of Edith Stein*, note 86, 185. And Edith to Fritz Kaufmann, 8 November 1919, *Self-Portrait in Letters*, no. 31.
17. Edith to Sr. Adelgundis Jaegerschmid, 9 June 1932, *Self-Portrait in Letters*, no. 116.
18. Stein, *Self-Portrait in Letters*, Edith to P. Petrus Wintrath, 12 June 1932, no. 117.
19. Stein, *Self-Portrait in Letters*, Edith to Hedwig Conrad-Martius, 13 November 1932, no. 126.
20. Stein, *Self-Portrait in Letters*, Edith to Hedwig, 24 February 1933, no. 135.
21. Stein, *Self-Portrait in Letters*, Edith to Hedwig, 5 April 1933, no. 139.
22. Stein, *Self-Portrait in Letters*, Edith to Fritz Kaufmann, 13 September 1925, no. 38a.
23. Stein, *Self-Portrait in Letters*, Edith to Roman Ingarden, 9 February 1917, no. 7.
24. Rachel Felday Brenner, *Writing as Resistance: Four Women Confronting the Holocaust* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 80–84.

25. Edith Stein, *Philosophy of Psychology and the Humanities*, ed. and trans., Marianne Sawicki (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 2000), vol. 7, *The Collected Works of Edith Stein*, 273–283.
26. This statement was supposedly the last one made by Edith Stein to her sister Rosa upon their arrest and departure from Echt Carmel and is widely quoted. There is no reliable source for this quotation.
27. Stein, *Science of the Cross*, 85–86, see also 137.
28. Stein, *Self-Portrait in Letters*, Edith to Sr. Adelgundis Jaegerschmid, 28 April 1931, no. 89.
29. Stein, *Self-Portrait in Letters*, Edith to Rose Magold, 20 August 1931, no. 103.
30. Stein, *Self-Portrait in Letters*, Edith to Anneliese Lichtenberger, 17 August 1931, no. 102.
31. Stein, “The Spirit of St. Elizabeth As It Informed Her Life,” *The Hidden Life*, 28.
32. Hilda C. Graef, *The Scholar and the Cross: The Life and Writings of Edith Stein* (London: Longmans, Green and Company, 1955), 100.
33. Stein, “On the History and Spirit of Carmel,” *The Hidden Life*, 6.
34. I was greatly assisted toward a more thorough comprehension of phenomenology as Edith understood it by a lengthy conversation with Dr. Marianne Sawicki in the spring of 2000. She introduced the notion of “porting” and defined “motivation,” “demand” and “value” as Edith would have understood them. This paragraph and the one that follows have been influenced by Dr. Sawicki’s explanations.
35. Stein, “Elevation of the Cross, September 14, 1939: Ave Crux, Spes Unica!” *The Hidden Life*, 94–6. Edith Stein would have understood those contemporary Christologies which see the suffering Christ as “the paradigmatic locus of divine involvement in the pain of the world.” See Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 263.
36. Stein, *Science of the Cross*, 89.
37. Stein, “Love of the Cross,” *The Hidden Life*, 92.
38. Stein, *Life in a Jewish Family*, 190.
39. Mary Catherine Baseheart, *Person in the World: Introduction to the Philosophy of Edith Stein* (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1997), vol. 27, *Contributions to Phenomenology*, 69.
40. Baseheart, *Person in the World*, 62–66. See also Stein, *Philosophy of Psychology and the Humanities*, 278–79.
41. Stein, “Love of the Cross,” *The Hidden Life*, 93.
42. Stein, “Love of the Cross,” 92.
43. I have drawn in this paragraph from the excellent synthesis of Roger Haight, *Jesus: Symbol of God* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1999), 223–243 and also Raymund Schwager, *Must There Be Scapegoats?: Violence and Redemption in the Bible* (New York: Crossroad, 2000), 206.
44. Stein, *Life in a Jewish Family*, 71.
45. See, for example, Stein, “The Prayer of the Church,” and “The Marriage of the Lamb,” *The Hidden Life*, 12 and 97–98.
46. Edith Stein, “Eine Untersuchung über den Staat,” *Jahrbuch für Philosophie und phänomenologische Forschung* 7(1925): footnote, 103–108. (Reprinted Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1970).
47. Edith spent her retreat for her “clothing” in the Carmelite habit with *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, her retreat for first profession with *The Dark Night*. *The Science of the Cross* is her study of John’s complete works. She referred several times in her letters to her ongoing reading of and meditation on John’s writings.
48. Stein, “Love of the Cross,” *The Hidden Life*, 91–2.
49. It is worthwhile noting that Roger Haight points to Raymund Schwager’s soteriology as one theological view of “how Jesus saves.” Schwager employs the anthropological

- theory of Rene Girard regarding violence as a hermeneutical framework for interpreting the manner in which the death of Jesus mediates God's salvation. Haight, *Jesus: Symbol of God*, 349; see also Schwager, *Must There Be Scapegoats?*, 212, and 190–214.
50. See Roger Haight's explanation of Anselm's theory of satisfaction in *Jesus: Symbol of God*, 229: "Satisfaction presupposes injury done. It consists not in rendering to God what is owed God . . . but in making up to God for an injury done and repairing damage . . . This means going beyond restitution . . . It entails that one 'give back more than one takes away'." Edith uses Anselm's exact words in *Cur Deus Homo*.
 51. Schwager, *Must There Be Scapegoats?*, 209.
 52. Marianne Sawicki, "Edith Stein and the Prospects for Jewish-Catholic Dialogue" (Comments prepared for the panel discussion at Holy Cross College, 20 October 1999), 3.
 53. Stein, *Self-Portrait in Letters*, Edith to Erna Stein, 6 July, 1918, no. 24
 54. See Brenner, *Writing As Resistance*, 164–173. In words closer to Augustine we could say the real sacrifice of her life in an inner act of total devotion was motivated by an overwhelming desire to make visible or bring closer to fulfillment humankind's unity through Christ in God. See Haight, *Jesus: Symbol of God*, 224–25.
 55. Stein, "Elevation of the Cross, September 14, 1939: Ave Crux, Spes Unica!" *The Hidden Life*, 94–6.
 56. Stein, "Love of the Cross," *The Hidden Life*, 93.
 57. Stein, *Science of the Cross*, 207.
 58. John of the Cross, SC.36.11–13. I have described this kind of spiritual maturity in my essay, "Transformation in Wisdom: The Subversive Character and Educative Power of Sophia In Contemplation," *Carmel and Contemplation* (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 2000), 334–35.
 59. Sawicki, "Edith Stein and the Prospects for Jewish-Catholic Dialogue," 4.
 60. Stein, "How I Came to the Cologne Carmel," 18 December 1938, *Edith Stein: Selected Writings with Comments, Reminiscences and Translations of Her Prayers and Poems by Her Niece*, trans. Susanne M. Batzdorff (Springfield, Illinois: Templegate Publishers, 1990), 17.
 61. Although the application to the Jews is mine, I am clearly indebted to Schwager's interpretation of Jesus' suffering and death in *Must There Be Scapegoats?*, 205–14.
 62. Sawicki, "Edith Stein and the Prospects for Jewish-Catholic Dialogue," 4.
 63. Baseheart, *Person in the World*, 62.
 64. Stein, "The Hidden Life and Epiphany," *The Hidden Life*, 109–11.
 65. Stein, *Self-Portrait in Letters*, Edith to Mother Ambrosia Antonia Engelmann of Echt Carmel, 6 August 1942, no. 342.
 66. Stein, "The Prayer of the Church," *The Hidden Life*, 14–16.
 67. Stein, *Science of the Cross*, 223.