

Edith Stein's Journey to Sainthood

Sarah Gallick

I am going to start this story at the conclusion: I will tell you something about Edith Stein's canonization process, and then I will return to her early life and her personal journey to sainthood.

The Catholic Church counts Edith Stein among the illustrious company of canonized saints. These are individuals who have been singled out for special recognition or "canonization." The Church proposes them as models and intercessors. The earliest saints were mostly martyrs and many of their stories have been lost in the mists of time or obscured by pious legends. Since the tenth century the process has been formalized and centered in Rome. Since the twelfth century, the pope has been the Church's sole authority for canonizing saints. But not even a pope can make a saint. As Pope Paul VI explained, "We do not create, we do not confer saintliness, we recognize it, we proclaim it."

This proclamation comes only after a rigorous investigation by the Congregation for the Causes of the Saints (CCS). A committee of judges, canon lawyers and other high-ranking religious, the CCS studies the life and death of the candidate in great detail. They pore over her writings and scrutinize any miracles said to have been worked by God through her intercession. This process used to take many years, even centuries. Among those canonized in recent years by Pope Francis, are Angela of Foligno, a 14th century mystic still studied by theologians, and Peter Faber, a co-founder of the Jesuit order who died in 1546. Edith Stein's cause moved at a relatively brisk pace and took a mere 56 years.

Edith Stein was executed at Auschwitz in 1942, and by 1947, those who had known her personally were giving serious thought to her canonization. Sister Teresia Renata Posselt, O.C.D., her former novice mistress, prepared her first biography in 1947. Posselt did not even consider her work a biography, but rather, "a wreath of memories."¹ It was published in Nuremberg at Christmas 1948, and a few years later it was published in England where Evelyn Waugh reviewed it favorably for the Christmas 1952 edition of *The Catholic Mother*. The English edition had an introduction by Professor Martin Grabmann², who wrote:

¹Posselt, Teresia Renata, O.C.D. *Edith Stein: The Life of a Philosopher and Carmelite*. Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 2005, p. x.

² Martin Grabmann (1875-1949) has been called "the greatest Catholic scholar of his time," *Medieval Scholarship: Philosophy and the Arts*, 2000, ed. Helen Damico, Joseph B. Zavadil, Donald Fennema, Karmen Lenz, 55, , cited in Wikipedia, "Martin Grabmann," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martin_Grabmann, accessed April 27,2017.

“The desire arises spontaneously that [Edith Stein] may radiate through beatification and canonization as a shining example of knowledge and love of God, and one may ask for her intercession.”³

Posselt writes that at the time the Cologne Carmel considered Grabmann's call for canonization, “purely a private statement.” They had lost their monastery in the war, they lived in rented quarters and they could not even dream of tackling the extra work that such a process would involve. Only in 1962 did Cardinal Frings,⁴ responding to the requests of many Catholics and especially the Association of Catholic German Women Teachers, open the first part of this process with interviews of witnesses.⁵

Edith's cause was submitted to the CCS in Rome in 1986. On January 13, 1987 the CCS issued a decree recognizing her heroic virtues and martyrdom and she was declared Venerable. The next step is Beatification. Usually, this requires that the CCS recognize that a miracle has occurred through the intercession of the Venerable, but this requirement is waived in the case of a martyr. Shortly after that, on May 1, 1987, Pope John Paul II, while on a pastoral visit to Germany, declared Edith a Blessed.

A miracle is still required for even a martyr, and it must occur after the beatification. Edith's miracle is a particularly interesting one to us since it took place in Brockton, Massachusetts and the beneficiary was the youngest of twelve children of a married Catholic priest.⁶ In 1987, two year old Benedicta McCarthy, who was named for the martyr had been left in the care of her siblings. She managed to help herself to some sixteen Tylenol samples she mistook for candy. When the children realized something was wrong, they brought their little sister to an emergency room. By the time her parents⁷ arrived, Benedicta was in a coma, her liver and kidneys failing and her body racked by a staphylococcus infection.⁸

According to a *New York Times* article about the miracle,

³ Posselt, ix

⁴ Josef Cardinal Frings (1887-1978), Archbishop of Cologne 1942-1969, elevated to Cardinal, 1948, was an early and outspoken critic of the Nazi regime.

⁵ Posselt ix. According to Posselt, it was only in March 1948 that the Carmel received confirmation from Echt “that a group including Edith Stein had, with certainty, been killed in a camp in Poland soon after their deportation. When the Red Cross of the Netherlands confirmed the murder of the missing on August 9 or 10 (today the 9 is accepted as the most reliable date) we arranged for a solemn requiem to be sung and the Office of the Dead to be recited in the temporary chapel of our interim Carmel in [Cologne].”

⁶ Laurie Goodstein, “Child's Close Call Aided Nun's Way to Sainthood,” *The New York Times*, October 11, 1998, accessed online at <http://www.nytimes.com/1998/10/11/world/child-s-close-call-aided-nun-s-way-to-sainthood.html> April 27, 2017. According to the Goodstein article, Emmanuel Charles McCarthy had left the legal profession to become a Catholic priest in the Melkite Church, which allows priests to marry. Mary McCarthy schooled her children at home. They had a room of their house turned into a chapel and when the children were young the family had said the rosary together every day.”

⁸ *ibid*

“With Benedicta deathly ill, a chain of people praying to Edith Stein spread across the country. Within days, Benedicta walked out of the hospital totally recovered, carrying a red balloon.”⁹

Miracles can be difficult to understand, especially for those of us in the 21st century. And yet, how else to explain a recovery like this? The *Times* quoted Dr Ronald Kleinman, a Professor of Pediatrics at Harvard Medical School, who treated Benedicta at Massachusetts General Hospital for Children: “I’m not saying it was a miracle. I’m saying it was miraculous. I’m Jewish. I don’t believe per se in miracles, but I can say I didn’t expect her to recover.”

As part of the investigation process, the CCS brought Dr. Kleinman to the Vatican where, he told the *Times*, Italian doctors and members of the CCS interrogated him for nearly five hours.

The Rev. Kieran Kavanaugh, a Carmelite priest who helped investigate the proposed miracle, told the *Times* that it was fortunate Kleinman was Jewish and a skeptic: “If it was a Catholic doctor, people would think it was just something he dreamed up. Dr. Kleinman’s willingness to give testimony and witness, to me that was a miracle in itself. He had to go and convince all these Italian doctors and it wasn’t an easy case.”

Edith’s canonization miracle was recognized on April 8, 1997. Benedicta and her parents and eleven siblings attended the canonization Mass at St. Peter’s on October 11, 1998, as did Dr. Kleinman and the three nurses who had cared for her at Massachusetts General.

Now I’ll return to the making of this great saint, Edith Stein. Pope John Paul II often referred to the family as the “domestic church,” and although Edith’s was a Jewish family there is no doubt that her family and especially her mother formed the character of the saint. Edith herself writes beautifully about these early years in her memoir, *Life in a Jewish Family*.¹⁰

The journey began with her birth into a Jewish family in Breslau, Germany (now Wroclaw, Poland), on Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement, October 12, 1891.¹¹ Both Edith and her mother regarded this date, possibly the most important of Jewish holy days, to be significant throughout her life. Edith was the youngest of seven surviving children of Auguste and Siegfried Stein. Auguste also had a large extended family of fifteen brothers and sisters.

Siegfried died suddenly when Edith was two. Forty-six year old Auguste resisted pressure from her well-meaning brothers to come and live with them and instead she stepped in to run her husband’s failing lumber business. She built the business, while her oldest daughter

⁹ Goodstein

¹⁰ Edith Stein, *Life in a Jewish Family: Her Unfinished Autobiographical Account*, 1891-1916. Lucy Gelber and Romaeus Leuven, editors. Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1986.

¹¹ There is some disagreement among surviving family about just how orthodox Auguste’s household was. Some insist that the Stein home was actually quite secular. Writing about Edith’s early education, her nephew Dr. Ernest Ludwig Biberstein (son of her sister Erna) was emphatic: “unfortunately, nothing existed [in the home] to combat her adolescent atheism or thereafter the Catholic Church.” See Posselt, p. 282

Else looked after the two youngest girls, Erna and Edith. But Auguste was always just a few steps away from the home.

According to Edith, her first encounter with Christianity was reading the Lord's Prayer, in Gothic Old High German. It was included in her basic German linguistic course and years later, when she discussed this text with her own students, she would always speak of the deep impression it made on her.

The Stein family combined a serious approach to education with a dedication to service. Auguste was regularly dispatching her younger girls to visit her far flung relatives. They might be nursing an ailing aunt, assisting a new mother or just providing company for a lonely newlywed. These visits were also an opportunity to learn about the world outside Breslau. There were also frequent hikes in the mountains. Edith loved the outdoors.

By the time Edith was ready for university, she had made one of the most important decisions of her life: She would concentrate on phenomenology, a branch of philosophy that asks us to strip ourselves of preconceptions and belief systems in order to examine objectively all areas of human life. The quest to see things as they really are, to uncover the truth behind ordinary perceptions, would motivate Edith throughout her life. It would ultimately lead to her conversion.

Edith abandoned Judaism entirely in college and became an atheist. Then, in November 1917, she attended the funeral of a colleague. His Lutheran widow showed surprising strength, which she credited to her Christian faith. This stirred Edith's intellectual curiosity and she spent the next three years studying Christianity. She also prayed, asking God to show her the truth.

In 1921 she read the autobiography of Saint Teresa of Avila and was deeply moved. Edith later wrote, "This was my first encounter with the Cross and with the supernatural strength it gives. For the first time I saw the redemptive sufferings of Christ overcoming death. This was the moment when my unbelief broke down and Christ appeared to me in the mystery of the Cross." The next day, Edith bought a Catholic catechism and began studying in earnest. A year later, she was baptized.

Meanwhile, the Nazi government had begun its plan to exterminate the Jewish race. In spite of Edith's brilliant academic record, she was barred from Germany's state universities because she was of the Jewish race. She supported herself by teaching at a Dominican college for women. Even with a heavy schedule, Edith always found time to pray. "Heaven has a special kind of economy," she explained. "I do not lengthen my working hours by any tricks. All I need is a quiet corner where I can talk to God each day as if there were nothing else to do. I try to make myself a tool for God. Not for myself, but only for him."

But Edith Stein's journey was not yet complete. At forty-two she entered the Carmelite convent in Cologne. (Their convents are called Carmels.) She took the name Teresa Benedicta

of the Cross and chose as her motto, "Ave Crux, Spes Unica" (Behold the Cross, Our Only Hope"). Soon Edith's sister Rosa was also baptized and joined her at the convent, although Rosa never took religious vows. In November 1938, after Cologne was rocked by two nights of anti-Semitic riots, Edith feared that her presence was endangering the other nuns. Friends drove her to the Dutch border and she entered a Carmelite convent in Echt, Holland. Rosa joined her and lived outside the enclosure as she had in Cologne.

But time was running out. Shortly before her death, Edith wrote to a friend:

"I have an ever deeper and firmer belief that nothing is merely an accident when seen in the light of God, that my whole life down to the smallest details has been marked out for me in the plan of Divine Providence, and has a completely coherent meaning in God's all-seeing eyes. And so I am beginning to rejoice in the light of glory wherein this meaning will be unveiled to me."

The German army soon marched into Holland, however, and in 1942 Catholic bishops there issued a pastoral letter condemning Nazi persecution of Jews. In retaliation, the Nazis rounded up all priests and religious of Jewish ancestry. On August 2, 1942, they came for Edith and Rosa Stein. The sisters were given ten minutes to pack, then taken to a holding camp along with members of fifteen other religious orders. On August 7th they were put on trains for Auschwitz. A week later, Edith Stein was martyred in a gas chamber there.

Fifty-six years later, in Rome, Pope John Paul II declared Edith Stein a saint. In his canonization homily, he summarized her journey:

"A young woman in search of the truth has become a saint and martyr through the silent workings of divine grace: Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, who from heaven repeats to us today all the words that marked her life: "Far be it from me to glory except in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ". . . We give thanks to God for this gift. May the new saint be an example to us in our commitment to serve freedom, in our search for the truth. May her witness constantly strengthen the bridge of mutual understanding between Jews and Christians."¹²

¹² Homily of John Paul II for the Canonization of Edith Stein, October 11, 1998. Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, accessed online at http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/1998/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_11101998_stein.html, April 27, 2017.

Sources

Gallick, Sarah. *The Big Book of Women Saints*. New York: Harper Collins, 2007.

Goodstein, Laurie. "Child's Close Call Aided Nun's Way to Sainthood," *The New York Times*, October 11, 1998, accessed online at <http://www.nytimes.com/1998/10/11/world/child-s-close-call-aided-nun-s-way-to-sainthood.html> April 27, 2017.

Oben, Freda Mary. *The Life and Thought of St. Edith Stein*. New York: Alba House, 2001.

Posselt, Teresia Renata, O.C.D. *Edith Stein: The Life of a Philosopher and Carmelite*. Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 2005.

Stein, Edith. *Life in a Jewish Family: Her Unfinished Autobiographical Account, 1891-1916*. Collected Works of Edith Stein, Volume 1. Lucy Gelber and Romaeus Leuven, editors. Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1986.

Stein, Edith. *Self Portrait in Letters 1916-1942*. Collected Works of Edith Stein, Volume V. Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1993.

Waugh, Evelyn. Untitled Review of *Edith Stein* by Sister Teresia de Spiritu Sancto, O.D.C. Published in the Christmas 1952 edition of Catholic Mother Magazine (published by the Union of Catholic Mothers). Read online at http://www.baltimorecarmel.org/saints/Stein/evelyn_waugh's%20book%20review.htm, April 27, 2017.