

Some Guiding Reflections on the Icon of the Servant of Yahweh

Edith Stein—St. Teresia Benedicta of the Cross*

THE ICON

An icon is meant to be a manifestation of the living God. It is a presentation to human consciousness of the mysterious activity of God in history in light of the Incarnation and Redemption of humanity in Jesus Christ. It is meant to bring forth a reverent awe of God through contemplation of his inscrutable mercy at work in the life of a person or of persons for the benefit of all humanity.

Icon is the Greek word for ‘image.’ An icon is a symbol system, a set of images that points the human mind and heart in two directions simultaneously: towards humanity in its present pain and towards God in His eternal Glory. All icons are fundamentally communications about Christ-God, who shares in this agony of humanity in time, but who also is God from all eternity.

We human beings are historical creatures. We live in time. To know a person is to know his or her history, to know the events of his or her life. The more we are aware of another’s history, the more deeply we can know them. The more cognizant we are of the details of another’s historical existence, the more possible it is to sense God acting on the invisible side of that existence. It is, therefore, in the history of a person and in the histories of people that the invisible God reveals His nature and His will to us. The God of the Judeo-Christian tradition is a God in history, working in each soul individually and with all humanity collectively. The God of Judeo-Christian tradition is Emmanuel—God with us—in history and beyond.

Therefore, we ponder an icon, not only with the mind, which, however brilliant, can only observe the surface, but with a heart of faith and a spirit of gratitude for the ceaseless workings of Divine Mercy among us. A photograph is but an image of passing time. An icon is an image of eternity touching time. The icon is an awareness of the ‘Kingdom come’ and of the ‘Kingdom coming.’ It is alive with hope and expectation. It presents past events from ‘the perspective of a Merciful Eternity’ in order to reveal a Divine Pattern for the purpose of persuading humanity to choose the Way of Divine Mercy Incarnate, Jesus. Sr. Teresia Benedicta of the Cross once wrote: ‘Events have a meaning beyond what can be immediately known.’ It is

this meaning that an icon is meant to draw us into if we will but ponder it with the heart of faith.

The meaning of which St. Benedicta speaks is ultimately the patient, hidden, yeast-like energy of Omnipotent Love in the human dough. When it is seen, the heart catches a glimpse of the Heart of God. It is the ‘duty’ of the icon



to give us that glimpse. Such a glimpse, if we catch it, will lead us from despair to hope, from indifference to love, from doubt to faith, from argument to adoration. The icon is then a salvation device.

THE DAY OF ATONEMENT

Let us now ‘come and see’ this icon of Saint Teresia Benedicta of the Cross. In the mystery of the plan of God, Edith Stein was born in 1891 on Yom Kippur. Yom Kippur is the Day of Atonement, the holiest day of the Jewish year. This original event in her history had an immediate meaning

for her Jewish family. When her entire life is viewed from 'the perspective of a Merciful Eternity,' it had a meaning 'beyond what could be immediately known.'

In the book of Leviticus, chapter 16, the ritual for Yom Kippur is prescribed. It requires the sacrifice of two goats, a bullock and a ram. Hence, the place of the animals in the icon. After the animals are sacrificed, blood is sprinkled on the altar in the center of the Holy of Holies in the Temple and then this whole burnt offering is placed upon a gold plate, the Mercy Seat, like the paten at the Holy Eucharist, and offered to God. Edith Stein, therefore, stands on a gold plate, the Mercy Seat.

One of the two goats on Yom Kippur is not sacrificed in the Temple, but rather, through the mediation of the High Priest, is laden with the sins of all Israel for the previous year and driven out into the desert. This is the scapegoat. So we see in the icon the grey-black-colored goat turned away by the others. In a Christian context, Jesus is the suffering scapegoat who bears the sins of all humanity unto death. By being a member of the Body of Christ, Edith Stein shares in this mission of mercy that suffers so that others may have forgiveness, peace and life.

THE SKULL

Golgotha was the place of skulls. It was the place where atonement was made by Jesus for the sins, not only of Israel, but of all humanity. It was the place of His total non-violent offering of self in love. The oven is a symbol of Auschwitz, the place where Sr. Teresia Benedicta of the Cross completed her life of sacrificial love in union with Christ's offering. The SS, who ruled Auschwitz, wore a black uniform. Their symbol, which was sewn on all the SS uniforms, was the skull. Auschwitz was Edith Stein's Golgotha, where she participated as a member of the Body of Christ in the atoning Messianic sacrifice of love. Auschwitz was for her a place of skulls.

THE RAILROAD TRACKS

The symbolic meaning of the crossed railroad tracks is obvious. Auschwitz was selected by the Nazis as the place for an extermination camp because it possessed extensive railway facilities. Edith Stein arrives at her Golgotha in a freight car. It is in a freight car that she completes her life in the Way of Christ—the Way of the Cross of sacrificial love for all, friends and enemies.

Auschwitz is her last station. One set of tracks leads the body to destruction and death at the hands of yet another of the

passing Caesars of this world. The other set leads the soul into a cloud, into the presence of the Holy One.

THE CLOUD

The cloud is the symbol in Hebrew and Christian Scripture of the presence of God. In the New Testament the cloud is also a symbol of those who since Abel and Abraham, Isaac and Jacob have persevered in faith and been approved by God. They are called the 'cloud of witnesses.' A witness (Greek *martyr*, English *martyr*) is one who attests to truth by the commitment of his or her life, even unto death if necessary. His or her life bears witness to the Way of Jesus, which is the Way of Truth and the Way that leads to Life Eternal—God. Edith is such a martyr. Finally, the incensed cloud of smoke is also a Biblical symbol of prayer rising to God. Sr. Teresia Benedicta of the Cross physically did rise towards the heavens in a cloud of smoke—a cloud spiritually fragrant by a life of prayer and love, by a life lived to the end in union with the Prayer of the High Priest that rose from Golgotha for the salvation of all.

THE NUMBERS

At Auschwitz on 9 August 1942, Edith Stein was just another 'nobody' being destroyed by the homicidal power of a state. At Auschwitz she was never numerically tattooed since she was shipped directly to the extermination section of the camp (Birkenau), but her records with the Nazis carry the number 44074. To her captors, she was, like millions of others in Auschwitz, only a number or a thing to be disposed of like billions of other disposable 'numbers or things' who have existed throughout the history and who are considered as only junk to the high and mighty of their time. In her 'disposability,' Edith Stein shared in the Passion of the Messiah. Jesus at the time of His death was just one among tens of thousands of 'nobodies' crucified in that part of the world. The numbering of human beings at the time of Edith Stein's death, like the stripping, beating and mocking of human beings at the time of the death of Christ is demonic. It is the way that other human beings, who have been deluded by Satan, have of reducing their brothers and sisters in God to objects, to 'nobodies.' The assignment of a number to a human being creates in that person a psychological pain which can be devastating. It is the pain which is always experienced by God's little ones, the *anawim*, at the hands of the powerful. It is the pain of being told 'You are nothing,' 'You are nobody,' 'You are worthless,' and 'The world will be better off without you.' Edith Stein in death and Jesus Christ in death are not separated by a millimeter from all God's 'little ones' who are

viewed as irrelevant by their fellow human beings and indifferently disposed of in a mechanical fashion.

THE CHILD

In her left arm St. Teresia Benedicta of the Cross is holding the Child Jesus dressed in striped pajamas, the uniform of the Auschwitz prisoner. There is no question that the child is the Christ. 'IC' and 'XC' are the first and last letters of 'Jesus' and 'Christ' in Greek and always appear in an icon that contains the image of the Second Person of the Holy Trinity. In the twenty-fifth chapter of the Gospel of Saint Matthew, Jesus announces for all time the standard by which people—all people—will be judged at the end of history. The standard is Mercy: 'I was hungry and you gave me to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me to drink...' He then goes on to say with the authority of the Messiah that whatever acts of mercy one did or did not do to 'the least' he or she did or did not do 'to Me.' In a statement that goes beyond comprehension the Messiah, Christ-God, announces that somehow when a person is suffering He Himself is suffering and when mercy is chosen and a person is relieved He Himself is relieved. This means that in some hidden, but real manner, Christ-God is united in suffering with all who were tormented and died in Auschwitz. In being with suffering humanity at the end, Edith Stein is, in fact, with Jesus Christ in 'the least.' Hence, the Messiah Jesus is at her side in striped pajamas.

THE COMB

The comb in her hand is intimately related to this great theme of the twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew, that the Messiah-God suffers with all who suffer and that the smallest act of mercy for the most 'insignificant' person is a choice to show mercy towards the Source of Mercy. In the memorable words of a Jewish man, Julius Marcan, who was a prisoner at Westerbrook Detention Camp at the same time as Sr. Benedicta, we see the faith and commitment of Edith Stein to the Messiah, to His truth, to His people:

There was a spirit of indescribable misery in the camp. The new prisoners especially suffered from extreme anxiety. Edith Stein went among the women like an angel—comforting, helping and consoling them. Many of the mothers were on the brink of insanity and had sat moaning for days, without giving any thought to their children. Edith Stein immediately set about taking care of these little ones. She washed them, combed their hair and tried to make sure they were fed and cared for.

When she could no longer live the way of Messianic Mercy

through prayer in the Carmel, she lived the way of Messianic Mercy by combing children's hair in a concentration camp. One is as noble as the other. It is Divine Love in actions, whether they be prayers or the combing of hair, that gave them genuine nobility and eternal significance (1 COR. 13). John Paul II says in his Encyclical *Dives in Misericordia* that Merciful Love is the supreme attribute of God revealed by Jesus Christ. Sr. Benedicta herself wrote: 'The being of God, the life of God, the essence of God, they are all love.' The combing of hair in a concentration camp is an absurd activity if it is meant to keep up a pretense of cultural normality and acceptability for oneself. If, however, it is an act of love towards the unloved, and an act of caring towards those who are ignored or despised, then it is the most meaningful act that a person can perform in history.

THE BOOK

In the holy icon the Child Jesus sits on a book entitled 'Veritas,' i.e., Truth. Jesus is the Truth and Edith Stein's commitment to truth is, perhaps, the most formative dynamic in her life. It leads her to finding Jesus, her Messiah, Savior and God. She has written, 'My anxious desire for truth was a continual prayer.' And we know the famous words with which she concluded her 'accidental' all-night first reading of St. Theresa of Avila's Autobiography, 'This is the truth.' We also know she went to Mass that very morning and purchased a catechism that very day. Hence the word 'Veritas' appears in the icon of Dr. Edith Stein, *summa cum laude* philosopher and lover of Truth.

THE SCROLL

Christ, in the Least, Truth Incarnated, holds in His hand a scroll on which is written in Hebrew the introductory words of the forty-second chapter of the Book of Isaiah: 'This is my servant.' These words open the mysterious and profound hymn of the Suffering Servant (ISAIAH 42). This chosen Servant of God is one who is gentle and innocent—and yet suffers a terrible fate and is thought to be rejected by God. But in the end, it is through his wounds that all humanity is healed.

References to the Suffering Servant in the New Testament are so numerous as to be uncountable. From the first moment of His public ministry, when Jesus emerges from the waters of Baptism in the Jordan and the voice from Heaven uses the words of this poem of Isaiah to identify Jesus and His mission, to His last breath on the Cross, Jesus is the Suffering Servant. He is the Chosen One, who through obedient, gentle, nonviolent, sacrificial love of all—friends

and enemies—brings salvation and peace to Israel and to all humanity. For the Christian identification with Jesus requires identification with Him as the Suffering Servant. To be baptized into Christ is to be baptized into the baptism into which He was baptized (MARK 10:38). The Church is the community of the Suffering Servant. The Eucharist is the celebration of the community of the Suffering Servant. The very words used at the most sacred moment of Christian prayer, the Consecration of the Holy Eucharist, are a direct reference to Jesus as Suffering Servant. The day of atonement for all people of all times is the Day of the Cross—re-presented at the Holy Eucharist—when the Suffering Servant carries out His Divine Mission of gentle, nonviolent, sacrificial love of friends and enemies in the face of diabolical forces trying to destroy Him and trying to invalidate His Way of love. Identification with Jesus suffering is always identification with Jesus loving.

SR. TERESIA BENEDICTA OF THE CROSS

There is no doubt that Sr. Teresia Benedicta of the Cross identified her life and destiny with Jesus, the Suffering Servant, Messiah of Israel and Saviour of the world. The very name she selected upon entering the Carmelites testifies to this: *Benedicta a Cruce*, Blessed of the Cross. She explicitly says 'It is not human activity that can save us, but the sufferings of Christ. To have part in these: this is my aspiration.' There is also no doubt that His mission—the salvation of all people—was the mission, in union with Him, for which she offered her life. Before her death, this child of the Day of Atonement who saw Blessedness in the Cross of Messianic Love wrote of the great hope in her life, indeed, the great hope that should energize each Christian and the Church Universal to follow evermore faithfully and diligently the way of Messianic Love:

For even if we cannot close our minds to the fact that temporal death comes for countless people without their seemingly ever having looked eternity in the eye and without salvation's ever having become a problem for them; that, furthermore, many people occupy themselves with salvation for a lifetime without responding to grace—we still do not know whether the decisive hour might not come for all of these somewhere in the next world and faith can tell us that this is the case...

All-merciful love can thus descend to everyone. We believe that it does so. And now, can we assume that there are souls that remain perpetually closed to such love? As a possibility in principle this cannot be rejected. In reality, it can become infinitely improbable...

Faith in the unboundedness of Divine Love and grace also justifies hope for the universality of redemption.

In the mystery of union with Christ the smallest act of suffering love can be eternally salvific. To pick up a pin in Messianic Love can save a soul—or more. To say a prayer in Messianic Love can save a soul—or more. To die in Messianic Love can save a soul—or more. Again, identification with Jesus suffering is identification with Jesus loving—but the ultimate consequence of this unity with Christ is a fruitfulness that affects eternity.

THE CONCLUSION

To contemplate a holy icon is to ponder, with the heart of faith, God who is love. It is to see Divine Mercy acting in ways that are as far above our ways as the heavens are above the earth. It is to feel infinite Love creating some great end which is quite beyond human comprehension. It is this God, made flesh in His Word, Jesus, to whom a person shows reverence, love and gratitude when he or she bows down before or kisses an icon. It is this God to whom people say 'Yes' when they cross themselves in front of an icon. St. Teresia Benedicta of the Cross is the instrument of this God, made in His image, born into His Chosen People, baptized into His Chosen Servant. This icon is an image of her within her patently Providential history, revealing to 'those who have eyes to see' the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, One God, now and always and unto ages of ages.

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Auschwitz

*THE ORIGINAL OF THIS ICON RESIDES AT THE CARMELITE CONVENT AT AUSCHWITZ. HOWEVER, SINCE THIS MEDITATION WAS DELIVERED AT AUSCHWITZ, EDITH STEIN HAS BEEN CANONIZED, AND THEREFORE IS NOW SAINT TERESIA BENEDICTA OF THE CROSS.

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