

Pondering a Miracle and The Living Mystery Beyond It: The Canonization of Edith Stein

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VOCATIONS AND PRAYER TODAY | APRIL/JUNE 1999 | #36 VOL. 7 NO. 2

Things were in God's plan which I had not planned at all. I am coming to the living faith and conviction that—from God's point of view—there is no chance and that the whole of my life, down to every detail, has been mapped out in God's divine providence and makes complete and perfect sense in God's all-seeing eyes.

—EDITH STEIN

On August 9, 1981 His Beatitude, Patriarch Maximos V Hakim, ordained me a Catholic priest in a small Melkite Church on the outskirts of Damascus, Syria. This took some courage because while I was a Melkite, I was also an American who was married with ten children.* However, it took more than courage for His Beatitude to say to me, “Come to Damascus during the first week of August and I will find a time and place to ordain you.”—it took serious spiritual discernment and a trust in that inner voice that says, “This is the right thing to do. This is God’s will.”

Three years later in January, 1984, I was conducting a retreat for the seminarians at St. Gregory the Theologian Melkite Greek-Catholic Seminary in Newton, Massachusetts, where I was the Spiritual Director. During the retreat a fact that I had never noticed before caught my attention: Edith Stein, the Jewish convert to Catholicism, who was a significant philosopher in her time and who later became a cloistered Carmelite nun, died at Auschwitz on August 9, 1942. The August 9 date, because it was the same day as my ordination, struck me in a way that seemed to almost compel me to look more deeply into the life of this person. It was as if a communication were made that said without words, “Look at this woman’s life. There is something important here for you.”

Before the moment when the August 9 date “jumped out” at me, Edith Stein was for me just another star in the Catholic galaxy of whom I had no particular knowledge. However, over the next five months I read everything I could find in English about her, including her major philosophical work,

Finite and Infinite Being and her spiritual **magnum opus**, *The Science of the Cross*. Her depth and her holiness and her sense of truth made such an impression on my wife and me that we decided to name our new baby girl, “Teresia Benedicta,” after Edith Stein, whose chosen Carmelite religious name, was Sister Teresia Benedicta Cruce (of the Cross). We did this despite the fact that Edith Stein was not even beatified at the time.

On March 20, 1987, Teresia Benedict was rushed to the hospital with inexplicable spasms and a loss of normal consciousness. Three hours later she was diagnosed as having ingested sixteen times toxicity rate of Tylenol. She had found a box of Tylenol that a physician’s wife had given to us from his free samples. The box contained little packets of the drug that could easily be ripped open. The box was hidden but evidently Teresia Benedicta saw one of the college or high school-aged children go to it to get some Tylenol for a flu that was going through the family. Unknown to anyone, she began opening the little packets and eating the Tylenol, thinking, I suppose, that it was candy. The first day she started consuming the Tylenol the children said she appeared sick but it was thought at the time that it was only the flu. On March 20, she was taken to the hospital because it was now apparent that her deteriorating condition was far more than just a bug that was going around.

Her medical condition in the hospital spiraled down dramatically. Every piece of news was bad. The look on the doctors’ and nurses’ faces when they spoke with us told the whole story. They were doing the best they could but she was losing ground

every hour. Finally, they told us that her only hope was a liver transplant and that there was only a 50/50 chance of success because of the snowballing destruction that was occurring in other parts of her body due to the highly toxic dose of Tylenol. Because of the severity of her situation, Teresia Benedict was made the number one priority on the liver transplant list for a liver in her category. But no liver could be found!

Late Saturday on March 21 a decision was made. Since Teresia Benedicta was named after Sister Teresia Benedicta (Edith Stein) we would make an all out effort to get as many people as possible to pray to Edith for her recovery. Since I had been directing retreats for over twenty years there were plenty of names to telephone. So we started a "telephone-prayer tree" where one person would phone a few people and they in turn would call others.

hour. On the other hand teaching Christians about the Nonviolent Jesus and His Nonviolent Gospel had been my primary vocation for all of my adult life. This was not just another retreat on a spiritual subject, it was a retreat on a truth that twenty years earlier I had discerned that God wanted me to use my life to proclaim to all the Churches of Christianity.

I was paralyzed as to what to do. A little after midnight I walked into my bedroom to try to get some sleep after being up for more than forty-eight hours. A book was opened on the floor by my bed. I picked it up to put it in the bookcase. Just then I looked at the open page and one sentence stood out as if it were written in neon letters. Jesus was talking to St. Teresa of Avila, one of the greatest mystics in Church history and the founder of the modern Discalced Carmelites (O.C.D.), the order to which Edith Stein



Rev. Emmanuel Charles McCarthy and Pope John Paul II at the concelebration of the Canonization Mass of St. Edith Stein, October 11, 1998.

On Sunday, March 22, I was supposed to begin directing a three day retreat for about eighty people in North Dakota on the Nonviolent Jesus and His Way of Nonviolent Love of friends and enemies. North Dakota was 1,500 miles west of Boston. The question was whether to go or not. On the one hand, Teresia Benedicta was dying. Her condition worsened by the

belonged. In a passage that struck my eye, Jesus said to St. Teresia, "You take care of my business and I'll take care of your business." I had my answer! The decision was made, "I'll go to North Dakota to do Jesus' business."

At 3:45 a.m., after only about three hours of sleep, the phone rang. It was the hospital; Teresia Benedicta

had taken a serious turn for the worst. The choice whether to go or to stay had to be reexamined. After consideration, the choice was again to give the retreat on Gospel Nonviolence in faith and trust that Jesus would take care of my business if I took care of His.

That Sunday morning I went directly to the airport knowing I would never have left the hospital if I went there to see Teresia Benedicta. The retreat on the Nonviolent Jesus began Sunday evening as scheduled. I did not tell the participants what was happening in Boston. Every phone call to Boston was worse than the one before—no good news. The retreat concluded on Tuesday, March 24, 1987 at 1 p.m. North Dakota time, 2 p.m. Boston time. At that point I told the retreatants what was going on. They were stunned. There were gasps, there was silence, there were sobs, there were prayers.

About ten months later at the request of the Carmelite Order I procured from the hospital every page of Teresia Benedicta's medical records. I found that on March 24, 1987, at 2 p.m. Boston time, 1 p.m. North Dakota time, the doctor wrote on her chart, "This child has made a remarkable recovery!"

After nine years of scientific study and investigation the Medical Board of The Congregation for the Cause of Saints unanimously voted in February 1997 that there was no scientific explanation for this healing. Dr. Ronald Kleinman of Harvard Medical School and Massachusetts General Hospital, who was the physician in charge of Teresia Benedicta's case in March of 1987 said the same thing: "There is no scientific explanation for her recovery."

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, my ways not your ways—it is Yahweh who speaks. Yes, the heavens are as high above earth as my ways are above your ways, my thoughts above your thoughts" (ISAIAH 55:8,9). This is not only incontestably true, it is unimaginable in its implications. However, it is also incontestably true that sometimes when we look back over history we can literally see the all powerful but infinitely delicate Hand of God acting through a soul who is truly trying to discern and do His will. The person acts here and now as he thinks God desires him to act here and now. Then a year or a decade or a century or a millennium later that mustard seed of fidelity to God's truth results in a vital piece of the mystery of God's plan of redemption being accomplished. As Mother Teresa says, "My business is fidelity. God's business is success."

If His Beatitude Maximos V did not discern that it is God's will that this married American Melkite with ten children should be a priest or if he did not have the courage to be faithful to his discernment, then the miracle for Edith Stein's canonization could not have taken place since it was the August 9 date of her death, which was the date His Beatitude chose for my ordination, that initially attracted my attention to her. And, what about Edith's date of death? None of what had happened is possible if she had not been executed at Auschwitz on August 9.

Could it possibly be that when Edith Stein was born on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, in 1891, the holiest day of the Jewish year, the God of Love who desires that all be saved, knew exactly where and when she was going to die—and why? In Sr. Teresia Benedicta's final testament, composed in 1939, she wrote, "I joyfully accept in advance the death God has appointed for me, in perfect submission to His most holy will. May the Lord accept my life and death for the honor and glory of His name, for the needs of His holy Church...and for peace throughout the world."

The options in front of us when we consider and ponder the above realities are stark: Either everything is mindless, purposeless, meaningless, unguided chance or all is grace: purposeful, meaningful, divinely guided activity meant to communicate God's love, God's truth and God's plan for the salvation of humanity. There is no middle ground between these options. To choose one is to exclude the other. Mere chance or Providence—which is it?

If as we Christians believe, God is "Father Almighty" who acts purposefully and meaningfully, then what are we to discern from the fact that God chose to grant the miracle for the canonization of the most famous Jewish convert to Christianity in the Twentieth Century by way of a Melkite Church that is predominantly an Arab Church? What are we to discern from the fact that He granted this miracle to the child of a married Melkite priest in America with ten children? Finally, what is God trying to say to us by the fact that this miracle was granted through the daughter of a Catholic priest who is internationally known for his life long work of trying to communicate to the Christian Churches Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant—that Jesus' Way of Nonviolent Love of friends and enemies cannot be bracketed out of an authentic proclamation of the Gospel because it is the

only way to peace—temporally and eternally? What does this Divine choice of persons, place and time mean in light of the historical fact that Sr. Teresia Benedicta of the Cross, after the most serious discernment and with the full knowledge and consent of her Carmelite superiors, chose on Passion Sunday, 1939, to formally and freely offer herself to God, “as a sacrifice of atonement for true peace?” God accepted this offering on August 9, 1942. Was this day of death accidental or providential? Does it have meaning or is it meaningless?

Is the God of history trying to communicate in and through history His truth, His love, His plan of salvation? Or, does history—and by extension all existence—just communicate the cold silence that bespeaks of a meaningless, purposeless random interaction of atoms? Are miracles meant only to be moments of celebration or are they moments of communication? Can miracles be authentically prophetic, that is, can they show humanity what is radically wrong and what needs to be done to correct it? Is a miracle only meant to be analyzed or should it be pondered? If Edith Stein was not murdered in Auschwitz on August 9, 1942 and if His Beatitude Maximus V did not ordain me in Damascus on August 9, 1981, then this miracle could not have been. So is a miracle something that happens spontaneously in one moment or is it something that began on August 9, 1942 or on Yom Kippur, 1891, or before the Big Bang exploded into a Universe? An authentic miracle confronts us with an inescapable situation in life: We must choose between: “All is accident.” and “All is grace!” When Edith Stein said after she became a Catholic that she desired only to, “live at the hand of the Lord,” she made her choice: “All is grace.”

Personally, when I see my daughter Teresia Benedicta today and reflect on all the seemingly unconnected, minute and arbitrary events that had to take place for her to be healed and for Edith Stein to be canonized, I cannot help but say to myself what the pagan Romans said about the early Christians when they walked by “There goes the glory of God!”

*O Lord, I have heard of the mystery of
your plan of redemption, and I have
meditated upon your works:
that is why I give glory to your Divinity.*

PARACLISIS

*THE MELKITE BYZANTINE CATHOLIC CHURCH IS AN EASTERN CATHOLIC CHURCH IN FULL COMMUNION WITH THE CHURCH OF ROME AND THE POPE. IT HAS ALWAYS HAD A MARRIED PRIESTHOOD. HOWEVER, THIS FORM OF PRIESTHOOD IS RARE IN THE UNITED STATES. REV. EMMANUEL CHARLES MCCARTHY IS A MARRIED MELKITE BYZANTINE CATHOLIC PRIEST WITH CHILDREN AND IS CURRENTLY THE ACTING RECTOR OF ST. GREGORY THE THEOLOGIAN MELKITE BYZANTINE CATHOLIC SEMINARY IN BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS.

NOTE: A MEDITATION WRITTEN BY REV. EMMANUEL CHARLES MCCARTHY ENTITLED: *SOME GUIDING REFLECTIONS ON THE ICON OF THE SERVANT OF YAHWEH: EDITH STEIN—ST. TERESIA BENEDICTA OF THE CROSS*, CAN BE DOWNLOADED FROM: [HTTP://WWW.CENTERFORCHRISTIANNONVIOLENCE.ORG/RESOURCES/RESOURCES.PHP](http://www.centerforchristiannonviolence.org/resources/resources.php)