
Edith Stein: Talk 2



Fr. Matt Blake

Wistaston Hall Retreat Centre

Another prayer to the Holy Spirit to begin. There were seven prayers to the Holy Spirit she wrote at Pentecost in 1942. A very short time before her death, one of the last prayers that she wrote. This second one is to the Holy Spirit “Eternal Life.”

“Are you not the sweet manna, which flows from the son into mine? Food for angels and for the blessed. He who from death to life arose, has awakened me to, to new life. From the sleep of death, new life he gives me day by day. Someday his abundance will completely flow through me. Life of your life, yes, you yourself. Holy Spirit, eternal life“ Amen.

What I want to say this afternoon is, about Edith as a Carmelite. We have seen that from what she read about Teresa’s life, that’s where her heart was. I have quoted this again and again, so I will now read where she says it. It is in a book that contains a beautiful article translated by her niece entitled, “ How I came to Cologne Carmel.” This first article, an article she wrote, she tells us herself and she even dates it: “the Fourth Sunday of Advent December 18th 1938.” It’s just before she leaves Cologne for [Echt]. One of the things that Cologne Carmel has been doing over these years is, researching their history. They were the first Carmel in Germany. Their centenary was around that time. So there they were, researching and Edith was very much involved in that, being a historian herself. She presented this little article to the nuns, as she was leaving them. Her little part of the story, how she came to the Carmel. It is really the story of her vocation. Her journey to Carmel, it’s a very moving piece, only a few pages. If you haven’t read it it’s well worth reading. I will just read a few things from it. She is speaking about a situation at the time of 1933, and her teaching work coming to an end, the presence of the

Nazis and all of this. Then she went to [Byron?] on retreat, that she did regularly. Then she said, “the idea occurred to me, might not now, the time be ripe to enter Carmel? For almost 12 years, Carmel has been my goal. Since summer 1921, when the life of our Holy Mother Teresa, happens to fall into my hands, and had put an end to my long search for the true faith.” Then she goes on to recount her baptism and all of that. But it has been Carmel, that has been her goal, no doubt about that. She tell us, she is very influenced by the Dominicans and yes she lived with them for nearly ten years. She prayed with them and many of the Dominican sister says, “she was very influential on them” and so many girls and young women. Yet she could never have been a Dominican. The Benedictines of [Byron] were also very influential on her, so much so that when she entered Carmel, she took the name: Teresa Benedicta of the Cross. “Benedicta” she tells us herself is also a tribute to the Benedictines, for what they have done for her. That term can also be translated as “blessed by the Cross.” Both meanings she had in mind, but particularly she wanted to pay tribute to the Benedictines she could never have been a Benedictine. She was was a Carmelite. Though these two orders had helped her in many different ways, a Carmelite she was. Then she goes on to explain she could not enter Carmel at that time, because of her family.

Then she goes onto continue the story, of how this was to come about. A friend introduced her to the sisters in Cologne Carmel, and her first visits there and how it all come about that she would enter there. She recounts her first meeting with the nuns, when she first met her in the parlour and they were assessing her. One of the things they asked her to do was, to sing a song. She rather shyly and softly said she did. Then she said to them, that was far more difficult than addressing a thousand people. The nuns did not know what she was talking about, because they had no idea about her past life. In another book, I don’t have with me, there is an account of where the person was present, where she said she, she did address a thousand people. So we do know there was at least one time, she addressed that many people. That young teacher gave an account that, she addressed a thousand

people, for two hours on a afternoon. There wasn't a sound, everybody listening attentively to this women. So addressing a thousand people was no exaggeration. The last part of it, was the last months about being with her family and how difficult all of that was. What this really cost her and effectively it cost her everything; and the last time was so painful. The leaving the home and finally arriving and crossing the door of the Carmel. The pain of those last days. It cost her everything.

I want to read what her spiritual director said about it, "she ran to Carmel. Singing for joy, like a child to its mother's arms. Never doubting, her almost blind enthusiasm, for even an instant. It reminded me of the way St. Benedict, speaks of our journey to God: (and he quotes St. Benedict here) now we must run, and do the things that will profit us for ever." Those are the words of St. Benedict." Those are the words of Abbot [Valsa?] her Spiritual Director at this time. He is quite surprised, the author here who is a Carmelite nun, [Valta Herbstrict?] she goes on to say how surprised the then Abbot was, at how well Edith fitted in to Carmel. How well she settled there, he was genuinely worried. He worried about the work she was giving up. He worried that after a while she would become restless, but not at all. Nothing at all of that. He says that [Herbstrict] says here "that Edith's vocation to Carmel was genuine. No hidden motive obscured the purity of her intention." Certainly a genuine vocation. That didn't make it easy though, at that article she writes there, shows us just how difficult it was. It quite literally cost her everything, that is the power of vocation, when some really has to do something. When it can no longer be said. Just from the time when she read St. Teresa, she could no longer say no, to Christianity, to Catholicism. The power of vocation, the power of God's call. The power of love. Here, in a sense, it is the completion of that. The desire had always been there, that's where her heart had always been. Now she longer could say no. Whatever then obstacles, whatever the difficulties, no could not be said.

So she enters Carmel. At another level we could ask ourselves, what did it mean to her? I want to look at an article she wrote, not long after entering Carmel. Something else was going on in Cologne Carmel, you could see in so many ways. That Cologne Carmel was, we might say, the ideal Carmel for Edith, at this particular time. This is the way the providence of God works. Apart from researching their history, she fitted in so well. I've already mentioned, it was a response to all that was going on around them. As I have said earlier, contemplatives have a keen awareness of what's going on in the world. They know better than anybody does what is going on. They may not have as much external information, but they know the depths of what is happening. Edith tells us this herself so clearly. That she and the sisters were aware of everything that is going on around them, they wanted to make their contribution, to making their spirituality better known. They were doing it in various ways, making their chapel available for various things like, conferences etc. But also through writing, publishing articles and booklets. Sharing and wanting to give something to the people around them; who were living such a very difficult experience at this time, with Nazi rule and uncertainty of the future.

So this is an article, that Edith wrote not long after entering Carmel. On the history and spirit of Carmel. It really tell us so much about her understanding of Carmel. The fact she would write something like this shortly after entering, certainly tell us she had done a lot of reading and research. She couldn't not have done this in the few months she was in Carmel. This would have been done long before, she would have already read and knew the history, the tradition, and all of this very well. It could only be written by someone who had really done her homework. That's Edith, that's her.

I just want to draw a few things from this. She starts off by speaking about this renewed interest in Carmel that there was at this particular time. Of course, there are other reasons for that, not just what I have mentioned about Cologne Carmel. Even more so, in the early 1920s and early 1930s, for a number of reasons Carmel had become very

well known, the spirituality of the order. There is much more interest in it. One of the reasons is, what is known as the, Mystical Movement. There were two movements in the Church at this time, the liturgical movement, that Edith was very influenced by, particularly the Benedictine's. There was a renewed interest in the liturgy. A history of the Liturgy, the Church's Liturgical Tradition. Much of which influenced the Second Vatican Council, some decades later. [Byron] would have been very central to that. So she's very influenced by that. This interest in the Church's Liturgy. Less well known nowadays is the "Mystical Movement." That was a renewed interest in the Church's Mystical Tradition. Part of the Church's response to that is, the Doctorate of St. John of the Cross in 1926 when he was made a Doctor of the Church. Also is the influence of Therese! Edith started off her article with Therese, who made Carmel really well known. We think about 1923, when Therese is beatified. The year after Edith is baptised. Then in 1925, Therese is canonised. Then three years later she was made, Patroness of the Missions. All of these events, bringing the Carmelite tradition very much into the limelight.

Edith is very aware of all of this. These are the very early years of her Catholicism. St. Therese in particular, has a huge influence on Edith and her growing in the faith. Edith then sets out to try and give this explanation, of the history and the spirit of Carmel. A lot of the article focuses upon on Elijah. Here she is, with Jewish eyes, with the whole Jewish tradition which attracts her. Along with Mary, Our Lady of Mount Carmel. Then Edith says, "We who live in Carmel and call daily on our Holy Father Elijah in prayer, know that he is for us, he is not a shadowy figure out of the dim past. His spirit is among us, in a vital tradition and determines how we live." That's a very strong statement. The use of the term "Holy Father Elijah." That is what we might call a "technical term" in religious orders, that means the founder. Of course, we know there is a statue in St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. Where underneath it is written, "Elijah founder of the Carmelite's." We can see that Edith is aware of this, and has the knowledge of all the myths, stories and traditions of the Carmelite

Order descended from Elijah. She is not of course claiming that any of this is historic, as she has too much of a historians mind here. But she can know and see that these myths, convey truth. His spirit is certainly alive among us. It is a life giving spirit among us. We are the successors of the prophets, in the true sense of that word. There is a huge tradition behind this. Which Edith would have read and researched. The Desert Fathers and early history of monasticism in the Church. Back to St. Basil and people like that. Which very much influenced the first Carmelites on Mount Carmel; because they picked up those earlier Christian Monastic traditions. That were very much alive, the Eastern monasticism. Not well known in Western Europe, but very much known in Asia and in the Middle East. Clearly she has researched this. The roots of the Carmelite tradition, are there in the Desert Fathers and that spirituality. That took its origin from the prophet and the successors of the prophets, that goes right back to the very roots of the order. Then she goes on to speak about Elijah, and about his importance in the tradition, “Our Holy Father Elijah succinctly says, what is most important, in the first words of his, that the scripture gives us. He says to King Ahab, who worshipped idols, (and these are the words of Elijah quoted in the first book of Kings) “as the Lord The God of Israel lives, before who I stand, there shall neither dew of rain these years, except by my word.” Edith goes on to comment, “to stand before the face of the living God, that is our vocation.” That is Edith’s definition of what it is to be a Carmelite. To stand before the face of God. To live life before the face of God. It’s like a child playing and living before their father and mother, watching attentively, lovingly. That kind of sense of just being always in God’s presence, living life in God’s presence. Under God’s protection, in his environment, the atmosphere of God. Just living life before the face of God. She goes on to expand on that and what it in practice it means. To show that, that is the essence of the Carmelite rule, the Rule of St. Albert.

Now she comes to prayer and defining prayer. Edith more or less uses exactly the same words, taken from Elijah, “prayer is looking up into the face of the eternal. To stand before the face of God, that’s what

prayer is.” Her definition of Carmel and her definition of prayer are identical. They are both coming from Elijah, because Elijah is the prophet of prayer. He is prophet with a right relationship with God. She is defining what Carmel is really about. Not only prayer, but a right relationship with God. A mature relationship with God. That is what Elijah is the prophet of. She knows the scriptures so well and she has this Jewish way of seeing them. That’s what prayer is for her, looking up into God’s face, living life under his gaze. So the influence of Elijah here, is so important.

What about Mary? When she comes to speaking about Mary, she goes from Elijah to Mary. She says the link between the two, because on the feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, as it is the same today, the first reading is from the book of Kings, Elijah climbing to the top of Carmel. In Carmelite tradition, that the cloud in the form of a hand that rises above the sea, symbolises Mary. There have been three and a half years of drought, rain is coming. Life is coming back into the world. Mary is the one who brings life of the world into our world. Mary is the one who brings her son into every situation of our world. That cloud symbolises Mary, which is very important in the Carmelite tradition. That’s how Edith here speaks about that. Speaking about the feast of Our Lady Mount Carmel, “on this day we give thanks that dear our Lady has clothed us with (a quote from the psalm) a garment of salvation.” I’ve spoken about what the legend of the order tell us, I said a little bit about this yesterday, in the Mass for St. Joachim and St. Anne. Edith is very clearly aware of these legends of the order, and that close relationship with Mary and the family of Jesus.

So let’s go on a little bit here, “To stand before the face of God (she said) continues with the real content of our lives.” Then she goes on to continue the story, with St. Teresa and St. John of the Cross, their contribution and little bits of the history of it. I want to pick up at the end, what her conclusion is. She sums up so much here of the spirit of the order. She starts with Therese. We might like to think that St. Therese and St. Edith Stein are so different, in every sense of the

word, these women are so different. In reality though, St. Therese has a huge influence on Edith Stein.

Edith has clearly studied St. Therese in depth. No doubt about that. She is affected by that influence that St. Therese has. So she has studied carefully why St. Therese is so influential. What is it with St. Therese, that has enabled her to reach so many people? Undoubtedly, Edith has watched and studied that carefully. This is what she says about Therese, “this little white flower, that bloomed so quickly, captivating hearts far beyond the boundaries of the order. Not only a worker of miracles for those in need, but also as a director of “little souls” on the path of spiritual childhood.” That’s Therese language. Edith goes on to say, “many people came to know this path through her, but very few know that, really this is not a new discovery, but the path in which the life in Carmel pushes us.”

So what Therese speaks about in her spiritual childhood, speaks to little souls. It’s not something new, but where life pushes all of us to. The life of all Carmelites. It’s the Carmelite vocation, St. Therese little way. It’s the essence the core of Carmelite vocation. Edith goes on to say, “the greatness of the young saint, was that she recognised this path, with ingenious deduction. That she followed it with heroic decisiveness to the end.” That’s a great statement. What’s she is saying there? She’s saying that Therese, discovered this intuitively, nobody taught her. From a very young age she discovers this. Discovers this from within herself. Discovers we might say that she is a Carmelite, within herself in, the depths of her being. The essence of the Carmelite calling. What it is to be a Carmelite. Then the important thing, is to follow that with heroic decisiveness to the end she lived by it. She wasn’t taught it, she hasn’t discovered it in books or research, it was there. Discovering it she lived it the very end. So that’s the genius of St. Therese as Edith understood her. What everything that Carmel speaks about and bears witness to, she has discovered this, and lives it. She is able to communicate this, with a simplicity and an authenticity.

Going on a bit further, Edith now takes this into their daily lives, and her own experience. She said, “our daily schedule, ensures us with hours of solitary dialogue with the Lord, and these are the foundation of our life.” Then she goes on to say, “together and along with the priests and the orders of the Church, we pray the Liturgy of the hours. This Divine Office is for us and for them, our first and most sacred duty. But is not for us the supporting ground.” She is making a very clear distinction between herself and the Benedictines, let’s say. She has so much personal experience of both. The foundations, the supporting ground for us as Carmelites, is the silent prayer.

We pray the Divine Office office yes, like the rest of the Church, the prayer of the Church. The next article in this book is Edith writing about the prayer of the Church. But for us it is the silent prayer. That’s the supporting ground. Here is how she describes that, “no human eye can see, what God does in the soul during hours of inner prayer. It is grace upon grace, and all of life’s other hours are our thanks for them. Just think about that for a moment. No one can see what God is doing, in the hours of silent prayer. The persons themselves can’t and others can’t. “and all the rest of the hours in the rest of our lives” she said, “are our thanks to God for what he does in us, when we are in silent prayer.” It’s a beautiful way of seeing all of our lives; and the relationship of seeing all of our lives and the times we spend in prayer.

Wherever life takes us, whatever we are doing, whatever our duties and responsibilities are, they are way of thanking God, for what he does in us. Silently, deeply, hidden deep within us. That’s how she sees it. I should perhaps clarify this a little bit, from Edith’s own experience. One of the paradoxes of Edith entering into the Carmel convent in Cologne, is, she now has less time for silent prayer, than before when she entered there! When she was in with the Dominicans, she was in [Byron], if she so wanted, she could spend hours and hours, as she used to, in silent prayer. She could spend hours and hours in interrupted study as well. She could choose for herself. She would often spend hours and hours in prayer. Now of

course, she's got her hour, she's got her work, and she's got something else and something else. The whole day is regulated. There's time for this time for that. That applies both to her prayer and to her study. She can't study for six or eight uninterrupted hours. She might get an hour and she might have to do the housework or do something else. This both helped her prayer and her study. She needed the discipline. She needed that regulation. Her prayer goes deeper. In her writing, there is a greater freedom. A greater depth to it. Somehow the discipline of Carmel she needed, a paradox of less time, but this was no longer in her hands.

Then she goes on in this final paragraph, to go a back to the purpose of all of this, she said, "Carmelites can repay Gods love, in their everyday lives, in no other way, than by carrying out their daily duties, faithfully in every respect." Somehow she seemed to have grasped the detail of life, the service of God.

"All the little sacrifices that are regiment in structure, day after day in all its details, demands of an active spirit. All the self control of living daily, with different types of people, continually requires, and is achieved with a loving smile, letting no opportunity go by, for serving others in love." We know that was very difficult for Edith, from many different sources, how difficulty that was for her. Yet, she needed it and sees the value of it. Perhaps, it is best expressed in the first biography of Edith. Written by Sr. Teresia Renata Posselt, Edith's novice mistress and became prioress and the first biographer of Edith. There she expresses this, what entering into Carmel actually meant for Edith, and she mentions that though Edith didn't see it like this, and she didn't either at the time. She said, "this was the descent from a very successful career, she went to the depths of nothingness "

She's no longer Dr. Stein. She's an ordinary postulant in the Carmel and not a very good one either. She tries her best, but she's not able to do any of the things, the normal postulant of novice would be able to do, like housework and sewing and all of these things, because she never done them in her life. She has no idea how to do them but tries. It was a really enormous come down and enormous sacrifice. But at

another level it was a setting free that she needed. She needed to be set free from being Dr. Stein.

Perhaps, we see it in the case of Jesus in the letter to the Philippians, St. Paul, says “that though he was in the form of God, he did not cling to his equality with God” but became like all human beings, even to accepting slavery. He came down to all human beings in order to rise again. In someways, Edith is going on that type of spiritual journey. That is what set her free. The real Edith Stein is seen in Carmel. Friends of hers, some of whom are were not Christian and have no Christian background and no understand of what she was doing; who visited her in Carmel, remarked how happy she was and how young she looked, she became a different person. At some deep level, Edith needed this. This was her becoming who she really is.

Despite all that, it cost her cost her everything. To return now to what Edith said, she goes on now to the importance of this. The person who now has to make all of these sacrifices. Never losing the opportunity to serve others in love, that of course is coming from St. Therese. Almost the exact phrase from St. Therese. Edith said, “finally, crowning this is a personal sacrifice, that God may impose on individuals. Some how there is the individual life that is being lived, but there is each individual cross. Each individual has their own story. Deep hidden in everyone of us, there is a personal journey. A personal sacrifice that others don’t see. That is incomprehensible to others. She call it again this little way, of St. Therese. A book here of insignificant little blossoms, that are daily placed before the almighty. Perhaps, a silent, life long martyrdom, that no one suspects. That at the same time, a source of deep peace and hearty joyousness. A fountain of grace that bubbles over everything. We do not know where it goes, and the people it reaches do not know whence it comes.”

So all of this hidden sacrifice is doing good. The grace bubbles out from it, reaching people that have no idea. Those who live this calling, those who live this vocation, are benefiting others. The people benefiting do not see, and neither do the people who are benefiting

them. Elsewhere she writes, coming up towards the end of her life, in a letter she writes, “if I was a nurse, I could help some people, if I was a doctor, I could help some, if I was a teacher, I could help some people; prayer is what help reaches everyone. There is no limit to whom one can help. There is no life that can do more good, there is no life that can help more people, than then life of prayer.” Edith is so aware of this, in her whole understanding of her Carmelite vocation. That sense of it being for others, for the benefit of others, that the whole world needs this, is foremost in her understanding. We see it more so when she writes her article, On the Prayer of the Church. That is the next article in that book, the prayer of the church, the contemplatives and the contribution that they make to the world.

So Edith Stein this women, who people said that she can’t become a Carmelite nun because she can do so much good as she is. The world needs her to lecture and to teach and do the things that she can do. It would be a waste for her to go into the cloister and live there. For her, she see the opposite way to that. All the work she was doing before hand, could benefit some people and help in particular situations. Now her spirit is free, her life is of benefit to everybody. The good coming from her life can go everywhere. There is no limit to where the good can reach. There is no limit to where the grace of this way of life can go. because what brings about real good, is love, is self-giving. That is the teaching of St. John of the Cross, of St. Teresa, of St. Therese. It is the giving of oneself. That love, that love with no self interest, whatsoever. That’s what does real good, thats what transforms our world. That’s Edith’s conviction and that’s Edith’s real value. The real worth of the Carmelite life.

