

A LENT REFLECTION ON ST. TERESA BENEDICTA OF THE CROSS (Edith Stein) and the COMPASSIONATE HEARTS OF JESUS AND MARY by Nicola Mason (*Companion CHJM*)

To stand with you by the cross

Today I stood with you beneath the cross
and felt more keenly than I ever did before
that you, beneath the cross, became our mother.
Even an earthly mother's faithful love
desires to carry out her son's last wish.
Yet, you are the handmaid of the Lord,
and surrendered in your entire being and life
to the Being and Life of God made man.
You have taken us into your heart,
and with the heart's blood of your bitter pains
have purchased life that's new for every soul.
You know us all: our weakness and our wounds.
You also know the spark of heaven's flame:
your Son's love longs to take it
and pour it on us – an eternal blaze.
You guide our steps with care,
no price for you too high
to lead us to the goal.
But those whom you have chosen as companions here,
surrounding you one day at the eternal throne,
we now must stand, with you, beneath the cross
and purchase, with our heart's blood's bitter pains,
this spark of heaven for those priceless souls
whom God's own Son bequeaths to us, his heirs.

Prayer poem of St Teresa Benedicta

Edith Stein (St Teresa Benedicta) wrote this prayer-poem on Good Friday 1938 during a retreat before taking her life vows as a Carmelite. She had always felt an affinity with Mary at the foot of the cross and prior to entering religious life had spent many hours each Holy Week, praying before a statue of the Pietà at the Abbey of Beuron.

When Hitler came to power early in 1933 Edith soon recognised what that might mean for the Jewish people and wrote, *'I talked with the Saviour and told Him that I knew it was His cross that was now being placed upon the Jewish people... I would [help carry it]. He should only show me how... I was certain I had been heard. But what this carrying of the cross was to consist in, that I did not yet know.'* She entered the Carmel at Cologne later that year, taking the name of Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, a sign of her deep sense of call to share in Christ's Passion. Her understanding of the vocation of enclosed contemplative life in relation to heart-deep compassion for the world deriving from the Divine Compassion, comes out clearly in these words: *'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...'* and *'Whoever enters Carmel is not lost to his own but is theirs fully for the first time; it is our vocation to stand before God for all.'*

She had long seen her life as a holocaust of intercession and atonement (by which she meant the at-one-ment of reconciliation and profound intercession) and on Passion Sunday 1939, she asked the Reverend Mother of the Dutch Carmel at Echt (where she had been offered asylum) for leave *'to offer myself to the heart of Jesus as a sacrifice of atonement.'* Two months later when making her will she wrote, *'I joyfully accept the death which God has destined for me in complete submission to his most holy will...in atonement...'* She had a sense of carrying in her heart, and offering herself for, not only the Jewish people, but also their Nazi persecutors, the Church, the concerns of Jesus and Mary, her family and *'the salvation of Germany and world peace'*. Echoing Jesus' High Priestly prayer, she concluded her self-offering by praying *'for all whom God has given me: that not one of them may be lost'*. The vastness of her prayer and her love could be seen as a reflection of the love, self-giving, and complete surrender to God's will exemplified by Jesus and Mary, her guiding inspirations and Companions. Just as Jesus carries us in his Heart to the Heart of the Father, so Edith sought to join her life and heart to His and Mary's. She had written of Mary, *'The Virgin, who kept every word sent from God in her heart, is the model for...attentive souls in whom Jesus' high priestly prayer comes to life again and again.'*

Edith had once said to a priest, *'You don't know what it means to me when I come into chapel in the morning and, looking at the tabernacle and the picture of Mary, say to myself, they were of our blood.'* And as the above poem shows, she so clearly felt a sense of tender affinity with Mary at the foot of the cross. Like Mary, however full of grief and pain, she remained totally focused on Jesus, and did not flinch when the Nazis came for her in 1942. An inmate of the transit camp at Westerbork wrote afterwards of Edith's brief sojourn there, en route to the gas chambers of Auschwitz, that as she sat and prayed she looked like *'a Pietà without the Christ'*. That was the outward appearance; within her Christ was living his Passion - and like him, she reached out in compassion to those with her, calming and quieting children and combing their hair, and, as an official at the camp was later to testify, *'walking, talking, and praying...like a saint.'*

Just as Jesus 'gave' Mary to John so, Edith suggests, Mary takes us into her heart and we can offer her a 'home' in ours, as together we journey ever deeper into the burning heart of love that is the Trinity – a heart that longs to reach out in love to a broken world.

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Lent 2017*