

Edith Stein, whose religious name was Theresa Benedicta of the Cross, was born in 1891 in Breslau, Poland. She was the youngest of 11 children. She was born as her family was celebrating Yom Kippur, or the Feast of Atonement. Her father died when she was only two years old.

At the age of 14, Edith readily admitted that she gave up praying and lost her faith. She studied under a famous philosopher, Edmund Husserl. Needless to say, as a young woman, Edith was deeply involved in the cutting edge of new philosophical ideas.

After obtaining her doctorate and graduating with highest honors, she had an encounter with a woman when visiting the Frankfurt Cathedral. The woman had a shopping basket and went into the Cathedral to say a brief prayer. This was new to Edith because people from the synagogues or Protestant world simply went to services. This woman, however, took time out of her busy day to pray – to have an intimate conversation with God. Edith said she never forgot this.

A second defining moment in her life was when she picked up an autobiography of St. Theresa of Avila (1921). She stayed up all night reading the book. When she finished reading it, she said, "This is the truth." On January 1, 1922, Edith was baptized into the Church. She was confirmed a month later. She remarked that upon returning to God, she felt Jewish once again.

Over the next ten years, she worked in higher education and produced philosophical works. In 1933, with the rise of the Nazi party and its anti-Semitic policies, Edith could no longer continue teaching. She sensed that the fate of her people would be her fate. At this time, she felt called to join the Carmelite Order and pray for her people.

In 1938, the prioress of the convent tried to protect Edith by sending her to a Carmelite Convent in Holland. On August 2, 1942, the Gestapo found her and arrested her while she was in the chapel praying with her sisters. Her last words to her sisters were, "Come, we are going for our people." Along with her ethnic brothers and sisters, she was deported to Auschwitz where she was put to death in the gas chamber on August 9th, 1942. Pope John Paul II canonized her on Oct. 11, 1998.

A couple of years ago, a seminarian and I watched a movie called, "Edith Stein, The Seventh Chamber" (2010). It is excellent. Without question, she is a remarkable model of faith and someone who deeply experienced the Cross of Jesus Christ. For Edith, the Cross was her only hope. Like her, may it be our only hope as well. St. Theresa Benedicta of the Cross, pray for us!