

August 9

Ave Crux, Spes Unica



THE FOLLOWING IS THE HOMILY DELIVERED AT THE CLOSE OF THE FORTY DAY FAST FOR THE TRUTH OF CHRISTIAN NONVIOLENCE AT ST. PATRICK'S CATHEDRAL, NEW YORK CITY, AUGUST 9, 1997.

I left the service (Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament) with the inner conviction that I had been heard, but uncertain as ever as to what "carrying the Cross" would mean for me.

EDITH STEIN
BEFORE ENTERING THE CARMELITE ORDER

One thing I should tell you: when I entered, I had already chosen the religious name I wanted and I received it exactly as I had asked for it. "Of the cross"... I know a little more now than I did then what it means to be betrothed to the Lord in the sign of the Cross. But, it's not something that can ever be understood. It is a mystery.

EDITH STEIN
BEFORE ENTERING THE CARMELITE ORDER

For as long as people will remember, discuss and ponder the life and death of Edith Stein, Sr. Teresia Benedicta of the Cross, they will have to remember, discuss and ponder the Cross. No religious symbol was more prominent in her life than the Cross. It was her freely chosen spiritual North Star. "Human activity cannot help us," she wrote, "Only the suffering of Christ can. To share in that suffering is my desire."

Note that in the preceding statement Edith not only says that she wants to share in Christ's suffering, but also proclaims that it is only the suffering of Christ that can be of any help. "In the sign of the Cross," she says, "we will be victorious; that is we will live our lives fully—with or without success—as a blessing for our environment, our people and our Church." Victory, fullness of life and blessings for all, is what follows from living by the truth of the Cross, she believes. Her decision to order her life in conformity to the "Sermon of the Cross" makes it clear that the Cross for her is not simply a holy representation but is, as she says, a "sign that demands discernment and decision." In other words, as long as people remember, discuss or ponder Edith Stein, they will have to face the fact that the Cross is a call from God to His chosen ones to act in history as Jesus chose to act in history. It is precisely here that God is using Edith Stein to inspire, to motivate and to command a major course correction in the direction the Churches—Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant—are heading.

Crosses, crucifixions, are commonplace at the time of Jesus. Crosses are the instruments by which horrendous pain and ultimately death are inflicted on one member of the human species by other members. There is nothing holy or salvific or worthwhile in being executed by crucifixion. It is the total, absolute, final defeat of the person. It is evil increasing itself in the human situation under the deception that it is being decreased by destroying the supposed evil one. Therefore, without Jesus, the cross is a symbol of the brutal, the ugly, the murderous, the satanic in human life. Without Jesus it is a paradigmatic symbol of pain, powerlessness, defeat and death in the human psyche.

However, over the last fifteen hundred years no symbol has been more employed by the various Churches than the Cross of Jesus Christ. Yet,

despite this fact, what has gone almost unproclaimed in most of these Churches is that, in its historical context, the Cross of Jesus is a Cross of nonviolent love of friends and enemies. So unacknowledged has this historical fact been that the Cross has regularly been employed over the last 1700 years as an ensign to lead human beings into the mass slaughter of war. This disassociation of the Cross of Jesus from its historical reality has resulted in the Cross becoming everything from a magical artifact to a motivating logo used to encourage and justify homicidal violence, oppression, brutality, enmity and the lust for power—all polar opposites of its meaning in the Gospels.

This is not to say that Christians can never grow into new understandings of the Cross. On the contrary, if the Cross points directly to Jesus and Jesus points directly to God we can expect that it will be ceaselessly revealing new dimensions of its wisdom and power to humanity, since God is of infinite depth. However, any new understanding of the Cross must be consistent with and complementary to the original historical truth left to us in the Gospels. Any interpretation of the Cross of Jesus that would subvert, supplement, distort or by-pass the historical reality of the Cross on Calvary two thousand years ago would be erroneous. In other words all mystical, theological and spiritual reflections on the Cross of Jesus Christ must be reflections grounded in the facticity of the historical Cross in order to be true. There are not two crosses: The Cross of faith and the Cross of history. The Cross of history is the Cross of faith. This is so because as John Paul II states in his Encyclical, “Redemptoris Missio,” (1990) “One cannot separate Jesus from the Christ or speak of a ‘Jesus of history’ who would differ from the ‘Christ of faith’ ... Christ is none other than Jesus of Nazareth.” Since the Jesus of history goes to His death on the Cross rejecting violence, loving His enemies and praying for those who are persecuting Him this means that all authentic Crosses of faith must include responding to evil as Jesus responded to evil. “It is good to venerate the crucifix,” says Edith Stein, “but even better than images of word or stone are living images, souls formed in the image of Christ.”

The Cross then is not a symbol of mere animal pain as a means of saving people. God is Father. God is love. It is love that saves. Identification

with Jesus suffering is identification with Jesus loving. The Cross is the ultimate expression of Divine Love made visible in a history drenched in evil. In such a history, more often than not it costs, and sometimes costs dearly, to love. Pain, the Cross, is the price one has to pay on many occasions in order to love Christically. But it is love that is the choice, not pain.

“Everything depends on love because in the end we will be judged according to love,” writes Sr. Teresia Benedicta of the Cross. The Cross for her is a Cross of love. Is it a Cross of pain? “Yes.” Is it a Cross of death? “Yes.” Is it a Cross of total worldly defeat? “Yes.” Is it a Cross of victory? “Yes.” But it is the victory of nonviolent Christ-like sacrificial love on behalf of others. “One can-not believe in Christ without at the same time following Him,” Edith says. But, to “Follow Me” means to “Love one another as I have loved you” and this love is definitely made manifest by the Cross of nonviolent love that the Gospels reveal. “Put up the sword”; “Father forgive them for they know not what they do,” “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, pray for those who persecute you” are all verbal presentations of the Cross of Christ, of the Cross of Divine Love, of the Cross that Sr. Teresia Benedicta of the Cross embraced without reservation. In essence, Edith Stein choosing to commit herself to the Cross is Edith Stein choosing to commit herself to a life of Christ-like love.

When Sr. Teresia Benedicta of the Cross was being held in the detention camp at Westerbrook on her way to Auschwitz, two men came to visit her with some supplies from the Carmelite convent in Echt. They gave this statement of their brief meeting:

We had both been smoking as she spoke, and after she finished, in the hope of relieving the tension a little, we jokingly offered her a cigarette. That made her laugh. She told us that back in her days as a university student she had done her share of smoking, and dancing too...In the camp, they had heard that either that night or the one following they would be transported back to their native Silesia to work in the mines. Wherever they were headed, they told us, whatever work they were assigned, prayer would remain their first obligation. She hoped she could offer her suffering...for the Nazi persecutors...

“The crucified Lord demands,” says Edith, “that every human being follow after Him; that we allow ourselves to be formed in the image of the Bearer of the cross, the Crucified One.”

Edith Stein is God’s prophetic instrument to inspire, to motivate and to command a major course correction in the direction the Church Universal is headed because most Churches have reinterpreted following Jesus in such a way that His historically based Cross of nonviolent love of friends and enemies is dismissed as irrelevant and totally ignored. The reason these Churches disassociate the Cross of history from the Cross of faith is that they find the weakness and the vulnerability of the Cross of history undesirable and unrealistic. Mainline and Evangelical Church leaders and their congregations do not want to live without the power of homicidal violence. The weakness, by this world’s standards, of the Cross frightens them. These Churches find it intolerable to live exclusively by the Protection that Jesus lived exclusively by. They are simply afraid to risk living by the power of the Cross alone. In this type of spiritual thinking the Cross is taken up only after the gun has been unable to deliver victory—then we will bear our Cross! The corollary of this spiritual mind set is, “If you have enough swords, who needs Crosses!” or even more blasphemous, “Picking up the gun is a way of picking up the Cross!” Sr. Teresia Benedicta of the Cross is Jesus’ prophetic gift to His Churches because she voluntarily gives up all the accouterments of worldly power and wholeheartedly embraces the “powerless,” unrealistic, vulnerable Cross of Christ-like love. She says, “Ave Crux,” “Welcome Cross,” not out of ignorance of alternatives nor out of defeatism. She exclaims with open arms, “Ave Crux” because she knows it is “*spes unica*,” “our only hope”—the only power that can help, that can save. “[I] have said with all my heart: ‘Ave Crux, *spes unica*,’” writes Edith Stein.

Mainline and Evangelical Churches to the contrary have morally neutralized the Cross so that The Way of a nonviolent love of friends and enemies that Jesus taught by His blood, sweat, pain, tears, anguish, death and love from the Cross has been all but expunged from the consciousness of their congregations. Today, as it has been for many, many yesterdays, most Christian Churches are committed to some

other understanding of power than that which is proclaimed by Jesus from His Cross of nonviolent love on Good Friday and from His empty tomb on Easter Sunday. “Ave Crux, *spes unica*” is far removed from what the leadership and laity of the Christian Churches daily desire or pursue. Edith Stein’s life, death and upcoming canonization are for those Christians and Churches, “who have eyes and will see, who have ears and will hear,” a prophetic summons to follow the Way of the Nonviolent One who is covered with His own blood and to abandon all allegiance to those philosophies, mythologies and leaders who are covered with the blood of others. By the same power that raised Christ from the dead, Edith Stein’s life, death and upcoming canonization now stand before the Church Universal as a plea, written in her own blood, for the Churches of Christianity to come together and recommit themselves without reserve to “The Power and The Wisdom of God” (1 COR 1:17-24) by saying with one heart and one mind, “Ave Crux, *spes unica*.”

Edith Stein believed in the Cross of Christ and its power. She believed that unmerited suffering responded to in a Christ-like way is redemptive. And, she knew that a Christian cannot demand freedom from the Cross of Christ-like love when it is precisely the Christian who is chosen for the Cross of Christ-like love. So on this August 9, 1997, the fifty-fifth anniversary of her death at Auschwitz, let us allow this martyr of Christic love to speak the last word to the Churches and to our souls:

Do you see the eyes of the Crucified looking at you with a searching gaze? They are asking you a question: Are you, in all seriousness, ready to enter once again into a covenant with the Crucified? What are you going to answer?

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