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SAGGI | Tradition and innovation in the Icon of Edith Stein from the monastery of Harissa, Lebanon

Eleonora Simonato. Edited by Elizabeth Thomson

Description of the Icon

The image that was used as the cover for the 1999 liturgical calendar of the Theresian Carmelites in Italy is a written icon portraying Saint Theresa Benedetta of the Cross, namely Edith Stein. Information regarding the icon is scant, so date, dimensions and whereabouts are unknown. It is known, however, that the painting was produced recently at the Atelier du Carmel de la Theotókos at Harissa, in Lebanon, a town famous for its production of icons.

Why was Edith Stein, a Carmelite nun and contemporary saint who was also a highly cultured Jewish woman, an acknowledged philosopher and university lecturer, and therefore a representative of a typically western and modern culture, portrayed as an icon, an expressly oriental form of artistic and cultural representation?

The figure of the saint wearing the habit of a Carmelite nun appears at the centre of the icon, with an olive tree on a hill on the left at the feet of which appears a skull and a dark abyss. The hem of the white cloak is caught in the tree. The saint stands at the foot of a mountain which appears on the right, close to a watercourse which flows from an altar placed at its peak; at the highest part of the mountain behind the river appears a burning bush.

The saint is portrayed in three-quarter view engaged in looking at the countryside to her right with her head slightly lowered, her legs lightly bent and her right foot devoid of sandal. Her scapular flutters very slightly. Between the finger of her right hand, raised in a gesture of blessing, she holds a cross. With her left hand she clutches to her breast a **taled**, the Jewish prayer shawl, (a white and blue striped cloth with tassels), and a wide halo frames her face.

The gold background is covered in dedications written in Hebrew and Greek. In the upper part of the image, at the centre and in line with the face of the saint a **lunette** appears in various shades of blue. It is bounded by a **rainbow**, and in it appear a **menorah** (a seven-branched candlestick) and an **altar, table or throne**, on which a book, towered over by the dove of the Holy Spirit, is placed.

The use of Greek for the upper inscription in the gold field, rather than French, English or Lebanese (the official languages of Lebanon), can be explained by the use of the icon in the catholic communities of Greek Rite, of which the nuns of Harissa are part. The icon, which also bears her name written in Jewish characters, therefore, propagates the votive image of the saint whilst also indicating her Jewish origins.

BIOGRAPHY, AESTHETIC PHILOSOPHY AND MYSTICISM OF EDITH STEIN

12/10/1891 Edith Stein, the child of Siegfried and Auguste Courant, was born in Breslaw on the day of Yom Kippur, the Jewish festival of Atonement.

1913 After showing interest in the problems and methods of psychology, she studies at the University of Gottingen and attends the courses of Edmund Hesserl, founder of the Philosophy of Phenomenology. She serves as a voluntary Red Cross nurse at Mährisch Weisskirchen's hospital for infectious diseases.

1916 She moves to Frieburg and completes her degree course.

1917 She visits the widow of A. Reinach, killed during the war, and finds her calm in the face of death, and fortified by her Christianity. This is her first contact with the Christian faith and the cross.

Summer 1921 During a visit to Mr. and Mrs. Conrad-Martius, she reads St. Theresa's Life of Jesus, endorsing her desire to convert to the Catholic faith.

1/1/1922 She is baptized and receives the First Communion.

1923-1932 She teaches German language and literature at the Dominican College of Saint Madeleine at Spira. She also pursues an extremely active career as a lecturer.

1932-1933 She becomes a free-lance lecturer at the Higher Institute of Scientific Pedagogy at Münster

1933 She leaves her teaching post as a result of racial discrimination.

4/10/1933 She enters the Carmelite Convent of Cologne.

15/4/1934 She assumes the name of Teresa Benedetta of the Cross, acknowledged-

ging her conversion to the Catholic faith, but also her theological affiliation with Christianity as the fulfillment of Judaism.

31/12/1938 She leaves the Carmel of Cologne and takes refuge in the Dutch Carmel of Echt.

2/8/1942 Sister Teresa Benedetta of the Cross is captured by the SS. Because she is Jewish, but chiefly because of her outrageous conversion, she is deported with Sister Rosa to the concentration camp at Amersfoort, later to Westerbork and finally to Auschwitz.

9/8/1942 She dies at Auschwitz and her body is cremated.

1/5/1987 She is beatified.

1987 The Vatican announces her canonisation.

12/10/1998 Pope John Paul II declares her Saint. Her canonisation arouses protests and controversy on behalf of the Jewish community.

During the presentation of the sanctification of Edith Stein in Venice on 17 November 1998 at the church of Saint Mary in Nazareth, Massimo Cacciari defined her as the greatest Christian philosopher since Thomas Aquinas. The works of Edith Stein pose the question of whether there really is a Christian philosophy, and what relationship exists between faith and reason. She describes the purpose of Christian philosophy as:

“The ideal of a *perfectum opus rationis* that manages to bring together all that is made accessible to us by natural reason and by the Revelation”.

Philosophy is therefore open to theology, and can become part of it. However, the purpose of Christian philosophy is to prepare the path to pure faith, which cannot be resolved by exploring individual truths about God. Rather, it seeks a profound point of encounter with Him who is the first and final Truth. Her focus on the Truth, and her persistent search for it, forms a consistent part of Edith Stein's intellectual journey, leading her to formulate her original theory of *empathy*, and bringing her close to the experience of faith. Defining the essence of the empathic process, she states:

“In my own non-original lived experience, I feel as though guided by an original lived experience, which has not been lived by me, which is yet de-

clared within me, and is manifest in my non-original lived experience. In this way, by empathy, we acquire a unique range of experiences”.

Edith Stein was also significantly concerned with the problem of art and aesthetics. In her introduction to *Scientia Crucis*, she expresses her reflections on art in relation to philosophy, faith and the ultimate and complete sense of Being: “Every artistic creation [is] a form of duty to God”. Of the representation of the cross she writes:

“The cross requires from the artist, too, something more than a portrait. It demands of him, as of every man, imitation, and that he should conform with and allow himself to be formed by the image and likeness of Him who bears the cross and is nailed to it [...]. The exterior aspect of his artistic production can serve the artist as a continuous stimulus to work on himself and his mind in order to reflect the model. The example of the crucifix is not one of many, but the essential one, because every act of creation has Christ has its model”.

It is easy to interpret these words as the phenomenological perception of art. The role of the icon-portrait, according to Stein (who in this is in perfect accord with orthodox theory), is to aid the contemplation of the archetype, (ablaze with the beauty of the Divine). It bridges the distance between the reality of existence (which is subject to decay) and the duty to exist (with the full consciousness of existence, and therefore of sense, whilst fulfilling this purpose). In this she echoes the very specific spirituality of icons. More specifically, Truth acquires two meanings which have affinity. Edith Stein recognises that a work of art contains artistic truth when it is “what it should be”, a truth which consists in conforming to the pure idea (the prototype of God), the core of the work itself, whilst also revealing artistic truth and the essence of the artist. But it is also the truth sought by Edith Stein through her philosophical enquiry and found in the revelation of faith. Stein compares the coherence of the intelligence of the Logos with a work of art in which every element finds its place in the harmony of the entire painting, in accordance with the purest and most rigorous of laws. What painting techniques and styles are the most appropriate for an icon in order to express such perfection?

In *Being Finite and Being Eternal* Edith Stein defines the work of art. She underscores that although not a living thing, and therefore in itself unable to generate the driving forces necessary for an objective, it is “loaded with potential energy and unleashes itself when entering the vital connections

of a spiritual being”, and is consistent with the serene motionlessness of the icon.

But who loads them with meaning if not the artist, in this case divine? And who is imbued by it if not he who contemplates the image? (Hatem 1998). Whether believer or not, every one experiences a mystical experience in the presence of an icon.

Every authentic work of art is also a symbol, whether or not it is the intention of the artist, and whether or not he is a symbolist or a naturalist. A symbol is something understood and expressed in a formula, by the infinite fullness of feeling on which all human intellect draws, and of which it speaks. This fullness of feeling, like all human intellect, is inexhaustible, and is mysteriously echoed within the authentic work of art. All artistic creation is a form of duty to God. In 451 the Council of Chalcedony clarified that:

“The icon does not represent either the Divine nature or the human nature of Christ alone, but his person, the person of God-man who unites within himself without fusion and without division his two natures”.

Icons of saints, that is to say representations of men, are also permitted because man is redeemed by the incarnation of God’s son who seeks to recreate the original image of his father, present in man yet lost with original sin (Gen. 1). In blessing an icon the Church acknowledges its affinity with Him who is represented (the prototype). It chooses that an icon should not be realistic, because the duty of an icon is to enable man to take part in the mystery of God. As Pavel Evdomikov states:

“The icon declares itself to be independent of the artist and observer, and induces not emotion but the presence of the transcendent. The artist conceals himself behind the tradition that speaks”.

(AA. VV. 1977)

The content of the icon is therefore dogmatic and not artistic, and is beautiful because it represents the Truth. Sister Maria Donadeo states:

“Perhaps we will be led by the strength of the Spirit into the light of the icon to contemplate not only the face of Jesus, but also the light of divine truth”.

The concept of light in icons is explained by the French orthodox lay theologian, Olivier Clément:

“Light in an icon symbolises divine glory, uncreated, veiled by its own profusion, generated from its own superessential origins. For this reason the light in an icon comes not from a point within the cosmos that produces the phenomenon of shadows in which the obscurity and duplicity of man are expressed. God of all and everything is our light. And this light does not project shadows because it comes from all sides at the same time, and nothing is opaque. Iconographers call the background of an icon ‘light’; the colour applied in thin layers, dark tones over light, gives the icon a kind of translucence. The darker design of the first layers shows through the luminosity of the upper layers. The spiritual aesthetics of the icon are therefore a kind of music representing the ubiquity of light”.

(Clément 1978).

From this perspective, the light of the icon purifies, transfigures and deifies man clothing him in the incorruptible beauty of God, whose image and living likeness he is. Icons become the topos of contact with the eternal. The serene motionlessness that characterises them bears witness to the presence of eternity, and according to Evgenij Trubeckoji, is a symbol of human existence made silent because the flesh lives not of its own but of superhuman life.

Interpretation of the icon representing Edith Stein

The olive tree

An iconographic description of the icon has unveiled the multiple layers of meaning attached to it. From a religious point of view the olive tree possesses many symbolic meanings. The oil with which kings, priests and prophets are consecrated is produced from its fruits. The olive tree also recalls the Garden of Gethsemane to where Jesus withdrew himself before his arrest (Mast. 26.30). The skull at the base of its trunk seems to recall Mount Calvary, also called the place of the skull, but certainly refers too to the skull of Adam above which the Christ’s cross was raised. In conquering original sin, Christ assumes the symbolic title of the New Adam. One can therefore interpret the olive as a symbol of the cross or indeed as Christ himself.

The olive as cross

In order to strengthen this interpretation, it is worth analysing the Crucifix in the church of Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari, in Venice. The wood of the cross is in three shades of brown, arranged in such a way as to exclude a purely spatial arrangement. The restorer of the cross explains that it is part of the early spirituality of the Franciscan order which aimed to represent cypress, vine and olive, the various woods with which it was said the true Cross was made (Savio 1996-7).

The olive as Christ

In his letter to the Romans (Cap.11) Paul the Apostle refers to Christ as the Good Olive. In John (Jn 14,6), Christ is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, symbolised by the tree, which with its seasonal cycle, conquers death as it returns to life. In the Middle East, the tree of life is seen as rising up to the heavens with its roots in the kingdom of the dead.

An official document of the Catholic Church dated 1965 — the encyclical — *Nostra Aetate* of the Second Vatican Council — confirms the ambiguity of this interpretation, and observes of the Jewish faith that it feeds off the roots of the good olive on which the branches of the wild olive, the pagans, have been grafted. (Romans 11, 17-24). The Church believes, in fact, that Christ, our peace reconciled the Jews and the pagans by means of his cross, and made them both one.

Christ is saviour via the cross. This notion is strengthened by the hill on which the olive tree grows, and which can be related to the hill of which the Crucifix is raised. The mountain is placed in juxtaposition with the hill. It is where heaven and earth meet, a symbol of Edith Stein's mystical journey, and a privileged place for the manifestation of God. The hill is to the left, the side which represents the earth, and the mountain is to the right, the side that represents heaven. In **Isaiah** (2,2ff) the mountain is the **Mountain of Alliance**, symbolised by the **rainbow** (Gen 9,11). At the peak of the mountain there are stones arranged in the form of an altar, a symbol that lends itself to many meanings. It is the body of Christ placed in the grave, the steps of which recall the martyrs of Christ (Edith died in a concentration camp), and is also the place of sacrificial rites. The altar is also the heart of every man in which the divine fire burns. Saint Augustine interprets the steps as virtues, and the route to perfect union with God. The divine fire is also present in the burning bush, which Edith observes beyond the cross - it was via the cross that she was united with the love of God when

she became a Carmelite nun. The altar in the icon recalls a sacrificial altar, similar to the one raised on mount Carmel by Elia, considered the father of the Carmelite order (Kings 18, 31-40).

And Elijah took twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes of the son of Jacob, unto whom the word of the Lord came, saying, Israel shall be thy name. And with the stones he built an altar in the name of the Lord: and he made a trench about the altar, as great as would contain two measures of seed. And he put the wood in order, and cut the bullock in pieces, and laid him on the wood, and said, Fill four barrels with water, and pour it on the burnt sacrifice, on the wood. And he said, Do it the second time. And they did it the second time. And he said, Do it the third time. And they did it the third time. And the water ran round about the altar; and he filled the trench also with water. And it came to pass at the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice, that Elijah the prophet came near and said, Lord God of Abraham, Isaac, and of Israel, let it be known this day that thou art God in Israel, and that I am thy servant, and that I have done all these things at thy word. Hear me, O Lord, Hear me, that this people may know that thou art the Lord God, and that thou hast turned their heart back again. Then the fire of the Lord fell, and consumed the burnt sacrifice, and the wood, and the stones, and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench. And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces: and they said, The Lord, he is God; the Lord he is God.

The passage is crucial to the interpretation of the landscape to the right of the saint: **mountain**, **water**, **altar**, and **fire** are here to be interpreted together.

Water has a vital, purifying function associated with salvation. The fountain, which is directly associated with salvation, rises from the altar and submerges the mountain and collects in a stream. The **fire**, represented here by the burning bush, lends itself to many readings. It is the sign of Christ, of divine love, of sacrifice, and it represents the vocation of Moses and symbolises the virginal conception of Jesus. The superimposition of both readings makes it possible to interpret the complexity of the content of the icon, in which notions of sacrifice and suffering are prevalent. The suffering endured by Edith is assimilated in the suffering of Christ during her journey of Christification. Her persecution, suffering and her death during the holocaust are redeemed by Christ, the bringer of salvation. The truth she sought is revealed to Edith, called as a witness to God through her mar-

tyrdom, which is matched by the example of Christ's sacrifice that redeems all mankind.

The saint is not portrayed hieratically frozen in one of the meditative poses sanctioned by tradition. She interacts with the landscape and makes symbolic gestures. Like the Baby Jesus in the *Pathousa* icon, frightened by the sight of angels bearing the instruments of his passion, Edith Stein loses a sandal as she is shaken by the fear of the mission that awaits her. Edith's foot is not unshod by chance: it is also a reference to a judicially symbolic gesture according to which the removal of a sandal signifies the surrender of one's rights to self-determination. Edith surrenders herself, her career as a philosopher and intellectual, and surrenders all her rights to Christ, allowing herself to be moulded by His example. In Mark 8, 34-35 one reads:

“Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel's, the same shall save it”.

The foot also alludes to a state of transition: to choose to serve God is the one of the most important decisions one can make. Nor should it be forgotten that God, when speaking to Moses from the burning bush, asked him to remove his sandals because the place on which he was walking was sacred. Edith was Jewish. The hem of her cloak is hooked on the olive tree: grafted on to the good olive tree of St. Paul (Romans 11), Edith becomes one of its living branches. However, the olive tree is also a symbol of the Jewish race, the chosen people. Edith does not deny her Jewish heritage but carries it to its natural culmination. Indeed, she wrote that it was important for her to be a daughter of the chosen people and also to belong to Christ, not only in spirit but also in blood. In the icon that portrays her she holds the **taled**, the prayer shawl worn by Jewish males, closely to her. For Edith it is a symbol not only of her race, but also of the reverence of her contemplative soul, and of the new eternal Alliance with Christ sanctioned by love, an alliance which brings to a culmination the mission of Edith, who was Jewish and born on the day of Yom Kippur.

By superimposing the two readings one can arrive at a full understanding of the icon's significance. The image contains a multiplicity of perspectives which cannot be resolved in a unequivocal interpretation. It is therefore necessary to account for the icon's complexity, which is indeed the source of its wealth. It carries strong associations with sacrifice and pain, which assimilate the personal suffering of Stein during the holocaust with the

sufferings of the Church expressed by the posture of her body conforming with the configuration of the cross of Christ, a conformation crowned by martyrdom. Death, suffering and sacrifice are not ends in themselves. They provide the promise of salvation by being redeemed by the blood of Christ and his resurrection. The journey in imitation of that of Christ's, even phenomenologically, can end only when the truth that is sought is found. Hence the mountain, the burning bush, but also the sacrifice of Elijah as a locus of theophany in which God manifests himself on the one hand to the Jewish people of whom the Saint feels part, and on the other to Edith herself, calling her, as He did with Moses, to carry out a particular mission. Christification entails that each and every faithful bears his own cross, burdened with pain, which inevitably causes a shudder of fear (acknowledged in the lost sandal). The flesh, however, whose weakness is tested, is sustained by the strength of the spirit in the certainty that taking part in the glory of the mystical body of Christ — the Church — will triumph over the blood-letting of martyrdom.

The **cross** signals a profound association with Christ and is the mediator between man and God. Edith becomes Saint Theresa Benedetta of the Cross, transcribed on the icon in Greek characters, but she remains Edith Stein, transcribed in Hebrew characters. Her devotion to the cross transforms her; it does not annihilate her.

In the lunette appear several references to the Old Testament: a Rainbow, the Menorah, a book and a dove. There are problems of interpretation relating to the substantial object to which they are linked. It could be an ark but a typological comparison excludes this possibility. The close connection with the book and the dove, which it supports, recalls a very similar composition which can be seen in the mosaic in the vaulted ceiling of the western wing of St. Mark's cathedral in Venice. It is in fact an *hetimasia*, an oriental image associated with the Trinity in as much as it combines **throne** (the power of the Father), **book** (the logos of the Son) and **dove** (the love of the Holy Spirit). The Atelier, in its presentation of the icon, states:

“In the upper part of the icon we can see a semicircle surrounded by a rainbow. This is intended to evoke the mystery of the Alliance sealed in the blood of Christ. It is an *hetimasia* (the presence of the Holy Spirit on the Scriptures) in which the Spirit is portrayed as a dove. The soul at prayer is placed with Christ under the bridal canopy represented by the cloud of glory which is enclosed in the semicircle, and which represents nothing less than the Holy Spirit. The seven-branched candlestick symbolises the

Church which is nourished on virgin oil sprinkled by the Holy Spirit over her sons”.

A further problem of interpretation concerns the fields of sky-blue in six different tones enclosed within the rainbow with the menorah at the centre. The circles represent the various degrees of being, the seven rooms or houses of Saint Theresa of Avila which find parallels in the seven phases of Stein's life, also given prominence by the director Marta Mészáros in her film *The seventh room*.

In the first room, which corresponds with Edith's childhood, the journey towards interior knowledge is only just beginning. In the second room the soul is in conflict with the attractions of the outside world. This signals her inner crisis when Edith also gives up her studies. The third room allows the soul to purify itself through meditation and corresponds with the phase of her phenomenological search for the Truth. In the fourth room knowledge, intelligence and memory weigh upon her soul. Edith wishes to enter the Carmelite Convent and feels the burden of her intellectual activity which has been protracted as a result of her obedience. In the fifth room her soul is freed of all worldly temptation and she enjoys the peace of the Carmelite Convent. The sixth room is the room of suffering, persecution and the holocaust. The final room, the seventh, (the rainbow) represents perfect union with God, which Edith, now Saint Theresa Benedetta of the Cross, has achieved through her martyrdom. From Judaism (the menorah), and via the long spiritual journey in search of the Truth, she has returned to God. Edith Stein has become Saint Theresa Benedetta of the Cross, and her new condition is the fulfilment of her life. The Jewish Edith Stein has become the Christian Saint Theresa — she has been transformed not annihilated. This is the reason why below the dedicatory inscription the name of EDITH STEIN the woman is transliterated in Hebrew characters. The icon, in all its complex symbolism, and with its wealth of Marian references, contains and expresses her life's journey. The icon presents us with the fulfilment of Edith's search at the convent, but it also represents the fulfilment of Judaism in Christianity, the fulfilment of earthly life in divine glory, the fulfilment of God's design.

It was my first encounter with the Cross, my first experience of the strength of God which emanates from the Cross and which is communicated to those who embrace it. For the first time I was able to contemplate in all its luminous reality the Church that was born of the salvational passion of Christ, and his triumph over death. That was the moment in which my

inability to believe crumbled, Judaism faded and Christ, in the mystery of his Cross, rose up resplendent before my eyes.

Nothing is more permanent than an iconic representation, and nothing is more all embracing than this icon portraying Edith Stein.



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