

Saint Stein

By Grace Terry

Author Bio: Grace Terry is working towards her M.A. in Theology and Ministry at Boston College's Clough School of Theology and Ministry, with a concentration in Religious Education. After teaching middle school, she turned to theology. Her main interests are interreligious dialogue and religious identity. Coming from a background that includes the three Abrahamic faiths, Grace brings a unique comparative perspective to her research, allowing her to engage questions of development and loss with greater nuance. She holds an M.Ed. from Boston College Lynch School and previously served as a Teach For America corps member.

How do we honor the memory of the people we love? Whatever the Catholic Church does to correct the wrongs of the past, its own or those of others, will never be enough on this side of eternity; such is the nature of power and leadership. Edith Stein, a leader, embodies many interreligious and intercultural claims. Born a German Jew in 1891, Stein became agnostic in her teen years, converted to Catholicism at thirty, and eventually entered a Carmelite convent where she took the name Teresa Benedicta of the Cross. Before becoming a nun, Stein was the second woman to receive a degree in philosophy from a German university.¹ She was shaped by early twentieth-century European academia and Carmelite mysticism and was influenced by several European cultures. Her life and death are claimed by Jewish memory, Catholic theology, European identity, and postwar reconciliation efforts alike. Today, holy sites in the Middle East, Nazi concentration camps, and World War II more generally—completely distinct from one another, yet notably similar—carry interreligious and intercultural claims of their own. Amid such immeasurable losses, past and present, Edith Stein stands as a unique, minority figure and a majority one.

¹ Oliva M. Espín, “‘The Destiny of This People Is My Own...’: Edith Stein’s Paradoxical Sainthood,” *CrossCurrents* 58, no. 1 (2008): 120, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1939-3881.2008.00008.x>.

Stein is a minority and majority figure as a *German Jew* who died in the Shoah. German-born Jews were a minority of the total Jewish deaths. While approximately six million Jewish people were murdered under Nazi rule,² between 160,000 and 180,000 German Jews were killed.³ By September 1939, over half of Germany's Jews had left, leaving approximately 202,000.⁴ In December 1938, after Kristallnacht, Stein escaped from Germany to the Netherlands before being arrested by the Gestapo.⁵

Stein is already in a minority of people whom the Catholic Church recognizes as Blessed, but she is in an even smaller community as a recognized saint. The majority of saints are not martyrs. According to the Catholic Church, Stein is a martyr. Stein is also one of Europe's six patron saints, placing her within an especially small group of saints entrusted with patronage of the continent.⁶ Stein is in the majority as a *European Catholic* saint. Stein is also a majority figure as a saint and a martyr because she has a miracle attributed to her. She is in a minority as a *female* academic in her time.

As someone born Jewish, Stein is in a minority among her Jewish people as a convert to Catholicism, but she is not alone. There is a long history of Jewish conversion to Christianity and Catholicism. There is also a long history of suspicion of Jewish converts. In her 1998 *New York Times* article covering Stein's canonization, Alessandra Stanley observes, "By singling out a Jewish convert . . . the Pope is reopening the Vatican to questions about the role of the Roman Catholic Church during the Holocaust and how the Vatican views that clouded history."⁷ The article depicts a Vatican that is fully comfortable with canonizing

² United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Documenting Numbers of Victims of the Holocaust and Nazi Persecution," *Holocaust Encyclopedia*.

³ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "German Jews during the Holocaust," *Holocaust Encyclopedia*.

⁴ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "German Jewish Refugees, 1933–1939," *Holocaust Encyclopedia*.

⁵ Espín, "Destiny of This People," 119.

⁶ Michel Remery, "The Patron Saints of Europe and Their Inspiring Stories," *Catholic Truth Society*, July 22, 2020.

⁷ Alessandra Stanley, "A Jew's Odyssey From Catholic Nun to Saint," *New York Times*, October 11, 1998.

Edith Stein as an extension of Saint John Paul II's efforts at reconciliation between Catholics and Jews.

Stein is one of *many* Catholics who were killed in Nazi-occupied Poland. In her article, Stanley discusses the criticism surrounding Stein's canonization from a leader in the Jewish community. Abraham Foxman, the national director of the Anti-Defamation League in New York at the time, said, "It's another step towards Christianizing or universalizing the Holocaust. By saying everybody was a victim, it's a way of saying the church had no role or responsibility."⁸ This sentiment echoes Rabbi Daniel Polish's 1994 thoughts on the beatification process: "All official discussion of the beatification seemed to make a point of conjoining Stein's Catholic faith with her death with 'fellow Jews' in Auschwitz. This conjunction seems cut of the same cloth as various more blatant evangelistic outreaches to Jews."⁹ Stanley, Foxman, and Polish address important issues about tokenism and Jewish erasure, but also risk reducing Stein's legacy to appeasement. To Polish's point, Stein is a majority figure as one of six million Jews killed by Nazis and, to Foxman's point, part of the two-thirds majority of European Jews killed in the Shoah.¹⁰

Stein's conversion was shaped by intellectual searching and also the particular barriers the Jewish tradition placed on women. As Oliva M. Espín notes, citing Rabbi Nancy Fuchs-Kreimer, Stein's being a woman likely had something to do with the direction of her spiritual journey. The women-centered intellectual and spiritual life drew Stein to Catholicism. Stein pursued the Carmelite convent reformed by Teresa of Avila because there was no real parallel within Judaism of her time. There was no female author of equivalent authority celebrated within Judaism, and the synagogue practice Stein had grown up with

⁸ Alessandra Stanley, "A Jew's Odyssey From Catholic Nun to Saint," *New York Times*, October 11, 1998.

⁹ Daniel Polish, quoted in Thomas A. Idinopulos, "The Unnecessary Problem of Edith Stein," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 35, no. 2 (1998): 302.

¹⁰ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Jewish Population of Europe," *Holocaust Encyclopedia*

literally placed women behind a screen, distanced from full participation.¹¹ Catholicism, for all its own limitations, offered Stein a tradition in which she could be a publicly recognized intellectual and spiritual figure.

Stein was not alone among Jewish intellectuals of her generation in turning toward Christianity. The early twentieth century saw what historian Alan Levenson has called a “conversionary impulse” sweeping through Jewish Germany. Several figures in Stein’s own phenomenological circle converted: Edmund Husserl had converted to Lutheranism in 1886; Adolf Reinach, Stein’s teacher and close friend, became a Lutheran with his wife before departing for the front in World War I; and Stein’s close friend Hedwig Conrad-Martius and her husband were also converts. Most of these conversions were to Lutheranism, the dominant and socially prestigious religion in Prussian Germany, which makes Stein’s turn to Catholicism notable.¹²

Stein’s scholarship expands beyond her hallmark work on phenomenology and empathy. After her conversion, she undertook a major project of synthesis between her phenomenological training and the Catholic scholastic tradition, emerging as a prominent interpreter of Thomas Aquinas. She translated and commented on his philosophical works, helping to bring Thomistic philosophy to a German-speaking Catholic audience. Her most ambitious philosophical work, *Finite and Eternal Being*, was an attempt to bridge Thomistic ontology with Husserlian phenomenology, demonstrating a sustained engagement with, and response to, Heidegger’s *Being and Time*. The book was not published during her lifetime because of the Nazi prohibition on publications by Jewish authors, and because of Stein’s

¹¹ Levenson quoted in Espín, “Destiny of This People,” 122.

¹² Espín, “Destiny of This People,” 121.

refusal to publish under a false name.¹³ That her masterwork was suppressed and then obscured by the circumstances of her death is one of the more painful ironies of her legacy.

Edith Stein's 1916 doctoral thesis, *On the Problem of Empathy*, demonstrates how faith develops in fractured times. Stein describes empathy as "the basis of intersubjective experience," making it the condition for knowledge of the world beyond the self.¹⁴ Catherine Cornille stresses a similar necessity—recognizing boundaries as a way of recognizing the world beyond the self—in her 2019 book *Meaning and Method in Comparative Theology*. For Cornille, comparative theology requires a moratorium on a priori judgments "for greater attention to the particularity of other religions." The meeting place of these insights and Stein's conversion is the role of appropriation, which Cornille describes as "some recognition of truth in difference."¹⁵ Even in this recognition, Stein and Cornille uphold the importance of engaging without erasure.

For Stein, empathy is the path for a Christian form of hope in times of crisis. Her conversion is in slight tension with Cornille's category of appropriation. Edith Stein's recognition of more than some truth in difference speaks to the transcendence of empathy, allowing her to recognize the fullness of truth in another tradition. Stein defines empathy as access to another's experience as foreign.¹⁶ This is what allows Stein to convert without expunging her Jewish identity. As Espín puts it, "[Stein] never denied her Jewish background and consistently reminded other Germans of it—including the nuns in her convent. Rather than hiding behind her conversion, she prepared herself to share the fate of her people."¹⁷ Stein's life and work on empathy reveal that Christian hope is nurtured by learning how to

¹³ Espín, "Destiny of This People," 137.

¹⁴ Edith Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, trans. Waltraut Stein (Martinus Nijhoff, 1964), 60.

¹⁵ Catherine Cornille, *Meaning and Method in Comparative Theology* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2019), 127.

¹⁶ Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, 4.

¹⁷ Espín, "Destiny of This People," 119.

belong across differences, by viewing the self and others as distinct subjects. Cornille develops this vision through her call for attentiveness to the distinctiveness of other traditions.

The Church's designation of Stein as a martyr has been among the most contested aspects of her canonization. The Roman Catholic Church has no fixed dogmatic definition of martyrdom, but the traditional model holds that a martyr is an innocent person who dies at the hands of a tyrant specifically because of their faith; the martyr's fidelity to that faith "provokes the tyrant" into murdering them. Stein's case complicates this framework. She was arrested and killed in direct retaliation for the Dutch Catholic bishops' public condemnation of Jewish deportations.¹⁸ Stein occupies an ambiguous space within the traditional framework of martyrdom: she was targeted in response to Catholic resistance, yet murdered within the Nazi campaign of extermination against the Jewish people.

In pressing her canonization forward, John Paul II used the occasion to expand the Church's understanding of martyrdom to include those who died under totalitarian, pseudo-Christian regimes. This same logic would later open the way for figures like Archbishop Romero. For Stein, however, the expansion created a paradox. She was killed as a Jew, recognized as a Christian martyr, and mourned by two communities, neither of which had fully claimed her in her lifetime. Espín notes that John Paul "used" the lives of those he beatified and canonized to make deliberate theological statements as well as statements about world history and politics.¹⁹ Stein's canonization was, in part, an institutional act of apology for the silence of the Church during the Shoah. This acknowledgment was complicated by the

¹⁸ Espín, "Destiny of This People," 134.

¹⁹ Espín, "Destiny of This People," 139.

irony that the one act of Catholic resistance that directly precipitated her arrest was what qualified her for martyrdom in the first place.

How, then, do we honor the memory of the people we love? Stein's life and work suggest that we should have empathy. Stein's work posits that if persons are constituted through their bodies and through the experience of empathy, we become more human as we become more empathetic. Additionally, we validate the humanity of others through empathy. For both her time and ours, Saint Edith Stein provides an invaluable framework for how to treat each other. Stein also answers the question "How do we honor the memory of the people we love?" by her own testimony. In her 1933 letter to Pope Pius XI, she identified herself as "a child of the Jewish people" and "a child of the Catholic Church" and warned of rising persecution, equating the atrocities to an affront against Christ and Christianity and calling for justice.²⁰ The offenses she witnessed violated her understanding of others' humanity in addition to her own.

Simone Weil is a "foil" figure to Stein. Both were ethnically Jewish women, both were philosophers, and both lived in roughly the same period. Weil, the French political activist, accuses Christianity of a preoccupation with suffering and conflates Christian empathy with affliction. In "Edith Stein and Simone Weil," Marian Maskulak describes Weil's notion of affliction as an imposition "against one's will" that "destroys the personality, producing a state of anonymity."²¹ Where Stein sees the recognition of others' humanity as a predicate to the subjectivity of the self and others, Weil sees empathy, or "affliction," as a corruption. Weil's critique of Christianity is dangerous, especially given the context in which she wrote. Failures of intersubjectivity and empathy can facilitate

²⁰ Edith Stein, "Letter to Pope Pius XI," 1933, Council of Centers on Jewish-Christian Relations.

²¹ Marian Maskulak, "Edith Stein and Simone Weil: Reflections for a Theology and Spirituality of the Cross," *Theology Today* 64, no. 4 (2008): 448, <https://doi.org/10.1177/004057360806400403>.

dehumanization and the denial of others' full humanity, processes implicated in atrocities such as the Shoah and other forms of mass violence.

Edith Stein was murdered at Auschwitz on August 9, 1942.²² In a world still marked by war, religious tension, and confusion about identity and belonging, Stein remains uniquely instructive and applicable to many. Perhaps the irony of Edith Stein is how controversial she is for someone who championed empathy. That controversy is why her legacy needs to be remembered. Stein's life unsettles easy ownership and challenges every community that claims her to examine its own history. Stein's scholarship on empathy demonstrates that the recognition of difference and the recognition of shared humanity are fundamental to intersubjectivity. This wisdom remains relevant in contexts marked by persecution. Whether in a minority or a majority position, Stein's account of empathy presents a rich understanding of humanity where all persons are irreducible because of their relationship to others and their own sense of self.

²² Espín, "Destiny of This People," 117.

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