

*Saint  
Edith  
Stein*



*A Spiritual Portrait*

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## CHAPTER 2

# Searching for the Truth: Edith Stein's Spiritual Quest

**E**dith's childhood began with a prediction of greatness—one that she herself made. She was convinced she would have a great future, though she did not know how that greatness would unfold or what form it would take. This optimism stayed with her as she journeyed into her teens, even as she surrendered the one anchor that could strengthen her steps and enlighten her journey—the anchor of prayer. In her midteens, she “gave up praying.... I took no thought of my future although I continued to live with the conviction that I was destined for something great.”<sup>1</sup>

Throughout the rest of her teenage years and most of her twenties, Edith did not embrace religious matters. After returning from Hamburg, she had a lot of spare time, and she threw herself into reading, loving every minute of this solitary endeavor. Shakespeare became her “daily bread.”<sup>2</sup> Following the example of her sister Erna, she now desired to go back to the classroom. In

preparation for that return, she needed extensive tutoring, an opportunity she relished. It was as though her intellectual life had been put on hold and suddenly had taken off at full speed. Easily losing herself in her books, she became “totally oblivious of all the world outside....”<sup>3</sup> She was particularly fond of Latin, considering it fascinating, even entertaining. “It was as though I were learning my mother tongue. That it was the language of the Church and that later I should pray in this language never even occurred to me at the time.”<sup>4</sup>

After finishing her tutorials and passing her exams, Edith returned to formal schooling. Questions about her future became the focus of family gatherings. What should Edith do with her life?

Enthusiastic and insistent input came from her mother and siblings, as well as extended family members. They suggested such varied fields as photography, art, journalism, and medicine. Her mother suggested law, a fascinating proposition considering that women were not permitted to pursue the legal profession in Germany at that time.<sup>5</sup> Frau Stein gave Edith “full freedom of choice” in her decision and seemed perturbed by how family members were forcefully weighing in on the topic. She assured Edith: “No one has a right to tell you what to do. After all, no one’s making us a contribution toward it. Do whatever you think is right for you.”<sup>6</sup> The range of possibilities revealed the depth and breadth of Edith’s interests and abilities. Edith rejected all these ideas and decided to pursue philosophy, a choice that seemed, in the disapproving opinion of many of her relatives, to “give no thought at all to the practical side of life!”<sup>7</sup>

Even as she focused on her education, Edith was attuned to her surroundings and to the problems and struggles of friends and relatives. When Edith was nineteen, her cousin Walter died, and Edith was particularly sensitive to the grief of his young Christian widow. During the funeral, Edith noticed that the widow was “inconsolable.... When the rabbi had said the final prayers and the whole group of mourners turned to leave, the young woman knelt down at the grave and, in her grief, prayed the Lord’s Prayer aloud.” Edith found herself touched by the expression of faith. “Naturally, that was something totally unheard-of in a Jewish cemetery but, instead of being offended by it, all were deeply moved.”<sup>8</sup>

This would not be the last time Edith was moved by seeing a woman in prayer or by the grief of a Christian widow. In a few years, Edith would be profoundly impressed by observing two women of faith—one a grieving widow, and the other a complete stranger. Still years away from returning to prayer, she did, indeed, mourn, but not the same mourning experienced by her cousin’s widow. Rather, her grief was for the state of the world. She felt saddened and helpless in the face of societal ills, frivolous pursuits, and superficial living.

She experienced a period of depression that was triggered, at least in part, by reading the popular novel *Helmut Haringa*. Horrified at its portrayal of student life as one of alcohol abuse, wild parties, and immoral behavior, Edith, now twenty-one, found no joy in life, and she began to distance herself from her friends. Her depression eventually began to lift when she attended a Bach concert at which she heard the hymn, “A Mighty

Fortress Is Our God.” Inspired by the theme of truth conquering evil, Edith instantly realized that “the world might be evil; but if the small group of friends in whom I had confidence and I strove with all our might, we should certainly have done with all ‘devils.’”<sup>9</sup>

Clearly, Edith was sensitive to the reality of the evil in the world and appreciated friendship’s role in overcoming that evil. She also was convinced of the victory of truth. Although she was still without faith, she later would say that searching for truth was a prayer in itself.

At this time, Edith would emphasize human power. Her group of friends would strive with all their might to conquer “all devils.” She did not rely on God; indeed, she still did not believe. As a student of philosophy, she remained apart from the world of faith, even as she became friends with many Christian converts who showed great enthusiasm for their religion.

Persons with whom I associated daily, whom I esteemed and admired, lived in it. At the least, they deserved my giving it some serious reflection. For the time being, I did not embark on a systematic investigation of the questions of faith; I was far too busy with other matters.<sup>10</sup>

Busy with philosophical work, Edith sought to quench her thirst for knowledge, but she mostly ignored another search—the spiritual longing that seemed, at times, to disturb and even haunt her. Many years would pass before she would understand that “The way of faith gives us more than the way of philosophic knowledge. Faith reveals to us the God of personal nearness, the loving and merciful God....”<sup>11</sup>

Most of the questions that plagued her mind and heart remained unarticulated, but she once broke the silence to ask a friend if he believed in a personal God. When he replied, "God is spirit; nothing more could be said on the subject," she felt as though she "had been handed a stone instead of bread."<sup>12</sup>

As she continued to experience spiritual confusion and emptiness, Edith became friendly with a number of Catholic converts who attended daily Mass. She respected the faith she herself lacked. When a fellow student asked her if she belonged to this group going to daily Mass, she replied with a simple "No." She later confessed that she had wanted to add, "unfortunately."<sup>13</sup>

Edith kept her struggle a secret. Even as she considered the theme of "connectedness" for her doctoral dissertation on empathy, she embarked on a solitary path of searching for the truth, at times working herself into "a state of veritable despair."<sup>14</sup> Her university years continued to be plagued by restlessness and frustration, yet her friendships multiplied and deepened as she spent time hiking, sightseeing, and conversing about literature and current events. She also engaged in scholarly and lively conversations about philosophy, joining fellow students in the Philosophical Society.

In her early twenties, Edith listened with rapt attention to the well-prepared and powerfully delivered lectures of the philosopher Max Scheler.<sup>15</sup> Finding him "ingenious," "dazzling," and "handsome," Edith was captivated by his every word.<sup>16</sup> She was particularly inspired by Scheler's talks on faith and holiness, although his words did not serve immediately as catalysts for conver-



sion. Edith admitted, however, that the lectures shook the “barriers of rationalistic prejudices” as she encountered “the world of faith.”<sup>17</sup>

Scheler’s influence, Edith said, “affected me...far beyond the sphere of philosophy...he was quite full of Catholic ideas at the time and employed all the brilliance of his spirit and his eloquence to plead them.”<sup>18</sup> Awestruck yet unconvinced, Edith continued to search for the truth and “almost without noticing it, became gradually transformed.”<sup>19</sup> More than a decade later, she realized that great beginnings in the spiritual journey do not necessarily begin with trumpet blasts, but with soft whispers, not “chisel blows” but “quiet finger stroke[s].”<sup>20</sup> Scheler’s lectures were like those soft whispers and gentle strokes, serenely leading her to embrace the Christian faith.

Scheler was not the only philosopher who inspired Edith’s gradual transformation. Adolf Reinach and his wife, Anna, both converts to Lutheranism, played pivotal roles in Edith’s conversion. During Christmastime, 1915, while the First World War was raging, Reinach returned home for a short leave from his military service. Edith, now twenty-four years old, was invited to spend some time with the couple and their family and close friends. Like Reinach, Edith had spent many months away from Göttingen serving the war effort. Reinach had impressed Edith at the very start of the war with his immediate resolve to fight for his country. When one student asked him, “Must you go, also, Doctor?” he replied, “It’s not that I *must*; rather, I’m permitted to go.”<sup>21</sup> Edith had not anticipated seeing Reinach until the end of the war, so she was delighted at the opportunity to reconnect with him and with many of her other college friends.

Arriving in Göttingen a few days before Christmas, Edith enjoyed meeting old friends and acquaintances. On Christmas Eve, one friend invited Edith to attend midnight Mass, and Edith readily agreed. She recalled in detail that trip to the Catholic Church:

So we went to the Kurze Strasse that dark winter night. But there was not a soul in sight anywhere, and when we arrived at the church we found the door securely locked. Apparently the Mass of Christmas was to be celebrated only in the morning. Disappointed, we had to go home.<sup>22</sup>

Did Edith feel again as though she had received a stone rather than bread?

On Christmas Day, she and many of her philosopher friends, including the Reinachs, enjoyed a festive gathering at the home of Edmund Husserl and his wife, Malvine. Edith appreciated the jovial reunion, though she did not embrace the religious significance of this holy day.<sup>23</sup> She joined in conversation about philosophy and even the origin of the Christmas tree.

In subsequent months, Edith took a break from her doctoral studies and visited Frankfurt, where she walked through the old part of the city with Reinach's sister, Pauline Reinach. During their walk, they decided to enter the imposing Frankfurt Cathedral. They stepped into the cathedral just for a few minutes—a brief time that would leave an indelible memory:

...[W]hile we looked around in respectful silence, a woman carrying a market basket came in and knelt down in one of the pews to pray briefly. This was something entirely new to me. To the synagogues or to the Protestant churches which I had visited, one went only for services.<sup>24</sup>

The incident awakened Edith's natural curiosity:

... [H]ere was someone interrupting her everyday shopping errands to come into this church, although no other person was in it, as though she were here for an intimate conversation. I could never forget that.<sup>25</sup>

The stranger surely had been carrying more than a market basket; she carried her faith and the witness of her prayer life. Although the two women never spoke, the incident introduced Edith to the life of faith and to friendship with God himself. The woman did not need to say a word to be inspiring, for her silent prayer conveyed a mysterious, hidden relationship with God. Edith would carry the sight of this stranger with her throughout her life. The experience seemed to foreshadow what would become Edith's own understanding of prayer: an intimate conversation with God. It foreshadowed, too, Edith's role in inspiring others as she knelt for hours before the Blessed Sacrament.

Edith's trip to Frankfurt also included a visit to the Liebig Museum, where she again found herself awestruck. Pausing silently before a sculpture of the Mother of God and John, along with Mary Magdalene and Nicodemus, Edith found it difficult to move on, for the sight had "an overpowering effect" on her.<sup>26</sup> She never elaborated on the particulars of that experience, but clearly Edith's day away from her studies enriched her spiritually. On that day, she also saw the Castle of Heidelberg and other famous sites, but "something ... made a deeper impression" on her—a church with a dividing wall down its center so that Protestants and Catholics could worship under the same roof.<sup>27</sup>

With these spiritual images planted deep within her, Edith returned to her studies. For the young philosopher seeking the truth and growing more spiritually restless each year, the world of faith seemed to be drawing near, and becoming a part of her life, even without her specific assent. For now, she simply would ponder. She pondered why the woman with a market basket would seem to be talking with someone in the cathedral, though “no one” was present. She pondered why her newly baptized friends radiated happiness; she envied their daily reception of the Eucharist. Indeed, the Eucharistic Lord seemed to be drawing Edith to him like a magnet.

Perhaps Edith saw a transformation in the new converts who attended daily Mass. Perhaps she noticed a sense of peace in her friends and the prayerful woman. Perhaps it was their joy. Perhaps, above all, Edith sensed their intimacy with God. Hunger for an intimate relationship with God: perhaps this is the key to understanding Edith's spiritual journey. Indeed, she expressed as much when she asked her friend about the existence of a personal God. Edith was looking for a relationship such as her friends and the stranger seemed to have with God. Could it be that Edith sensed their lives were shaped by a relationship with the Eucharistic Lord? Did she begin to re-examine her teenage decision to stop praying? Did her search for the truth intensify?

For the time being, Edith would immerse herself in her doctoral studies, earning her degree *summa cum laude* in 1916. She still lacked faith, but not for long. The following year would prove to be spiritually momentous for the young philosopher.

In January, Edith noticed how Adolf Reinach seemed to have deepened his religious outlook as he continued his military service. Edith's own service had not had the same spiritual impact. As she drew close to the suffering soldiers, Edith seemed to journey no closer to God. Reinach, on the other hand, "discovered, at the front, that he has no talent for philosophy... [and was] totally engrossed in religious questions...."<sup>28</sup> Only a few months after this religious awakening, Reinach died on the battlefield.

The loss of her friend overwhelmed Edith, and she knew that Reinach's widow, Anna, must be grieving even more. When Anna invited Edith to her home to sort out Adolf's philosophical papers, Edith hesitated, but ultimately obliged. Crossing the threshold of that home would become not only a gesture of friendship, but also a significant step toward faith in Jesus Christ. Immediately, Edith was struck by Anna's courage, her ability to stand tall in the midst of grief. Here was a woman who, in her own way, carried divine life as she carried the cross of Christ. Edith's encounter with such living faith signified a new beginning, an encounter with the great destiny she once predicted. Through Anna, Edith was introduced to the living person of Christ.

Perhaps Edith now could apply her praise of Reinach to his wife: "I felt as though I had been rescued from distress by a good angel."<sup>29</sup> Edith had once said that Reinach had helped her so much in her progress in philosophical studies that she had felt "reborn." Now, she was experiencing more than an intellectual rebirth; she stood on the threshold of a spiritual epiphany.

The world of Christian faith suddenly overpowered her:

This was my first encounter with the cross and the divine strength that it inspires in those who bear it. For the first time I saw before my very eyes the Church, born of Christ's redemptive suffering, victorious over the sting of death. It was the moment in which my unbelief was shattered, Judaism paled, and Christ radiated before me: Christ in the mystery of the cross.<sup>30</sup>

Just as the woman kneeling in a quiet, seemingly empty church inspired Edith, now Anna Reinach, a woman who stood strong in her time of grief, inspired the young philosopher. In an instant, Edith discovered the power of the cross. As years passed, that surprise discovery would grow into a firm conviction. Edith seemed to have become one of the people she had described in her doctoral dissertation when she wrote: "There have been people who thought that in a sudden change of their person they experienced the effect of the grace of God..."<sup>31</sup> Now Edith found herself changed, and she knew that the grace of God had changed her. She would never be the same.

Although Edith's "unbelief shattered" in 1917, she did not embrace Catholicism until 1921. During the intervening years, she still seemed to experience a spiritual uncertainty, and she turned her attention to religious books, including the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius. She stumbled upon the *Exercises* in a bookstore, and soon found herself not only reading the book, but also making a thirty-day Ignatian retreat on her own.<sup>32</sup> At the time, she probably told no one of her interest in

Catholicism or her prayer experience. The *Exercises* seemed to prepare Edith for another book she would later discover: The *Autobiography of Teresa of Avila*.

Before finding the autobiography in a friend's library, Edith continued to give much studious attention to philosophical works. She pursued her passion for philosophy with relentless energy, but not without setbacks. Despite graduating with highest honors, she could not obtain a teaching position at the university level because she was a woman. For approximately two years after graduation, she worked as an assistant to her mentor, Edmund Husserl, organizing and editing volumes of his philosophical writings.

Because she did not secure a permanent position at a university, Edith returned to her mother's house, where the parlor was converted into Edith's office. There, Edith engaged in scholarly research and writing. Inwardly and secretively, an intense trial assailed her. "I was passing through a personal crisis," she explained, "which was totally concealed from my relatives, one I was unable to resolve in our house."<sup>33</sup>

Though she did not express her spiritual journey in words to her family, she did give them a major clue in the form of a portrait. Above Edith's desk hung a picture of St. Francis of Assisi by Cimabue, the thirteenth-century Italian artist who portrayed Francis with the stigmata.<sup>34</sup> Could Edith have prayed for the intercession of St. Francis as she struggled with questions of faith?

That picture of St. Francis hung in the parlor when Edith's sister Erna, now a medical doctor, was married there in the winter of 1920. This filled Edith with consolation and inspiration. "At that time my health was very

poor, probably as a result of the spiritual conflicts I then endured in complete secrecy and without any human support.”<sup>35</sup> Her suffering was so acute “that the slightest sound made me cringe....[Erna] said she could not stand it any more, and gave me a small dose of morphine.”<sup>36</sup>

Edith enjoyed the wedding, and when the day ended she made a firm resolution to take care of herself. It was time to discern her religious identity and vocation. Before she said good-bye to her sister and brother-in-law, she gave them a wedding present, a poem she had written for the occasion. It demonstrates her creativity and humor, but perhaps it also foreshadows her own transition to a new life. In the poem, a stork encounters babies who have yet to be conceived and says:

Here you simply cannot stay.  
This Camp ain't forever, no, it's not,  
From here you must go to another spot...  
Look through my spyglass, and don't tarry.  
You'll see a couple who just did marry...<sup>37</sup>

If Edith could have looked through a “spyglass” on the day of her sister’s wedding, she would have seen that she, herself, was going “to another spot.” In a few short months she would experience a spiritual epiphany.

### *Beginning of a New Life with Christ*

In the summer of 1921, Edith visited her friend Hedwig Conrad-Martius, a fellow philosopher and a student of Husserl’s. Conrad-Martius had recently converted to Lutheranism and she had a well-stocked library of Christian books. Alone in her library one night, Edith



happened upon the *Autobiography of St. Teresa of Avila*, a title she may have heard of in Husserl's lectures.<sup>38</sup> She read the entire book quickly, devouring it as if she urgently needed nourishment. Finishing the last page, Edith excitedly realized, "This is the Truth!" Perhaps in Teresa she saw a strong woman of faith and courage similar to Anna Reinach, who had introduced Edith to the mystery of the cross. Now Teresa introduced her to the whole mystery of a lived relationship with Christ, the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Immediately, Edith bought a prayer book and a catechism. After studying both, she met a parish priest and asked to be baptized. He hesitated but quizzed her (as she requested), and was duly impressed.

January 1922 signaled not only the beginning of a new year for Edith, but of a new life with Christ. Joyfully receiving Baptism on January 1, and first Holy Communion the following day, Edith seemed to exemplify words she later wrote about a Carmelite Sister's youthful reception of Communion: "She was like the deer that has found water, like a child in the arms of its mother."<sup>39</sup>

The years of wandering and searching had come to an end; now a blissful sense of security enveloped her. Years later, from the depths of her experience, Edith advised a young friend preparing for Baptism about her own journey to the sacraments and the way that had led her to such inner contentment. She explained:

One should be able to prepare oneself in peace. I was lucky in that way. It is in the nature of such an event that before the decisive step is taken, you see before you once more all you will be renouncing and risking. That

is how it ought to be...you place yourself totally in God's hands, then all the deeper and more beautiful will be the security attained.<sup>40</sup>

In many ways, Edith now personified her description of the wise men before the Incarnate Truth:

Because God is Truth and because he wants to be found by those who seek him with their whole hearts, sooner or later the star had to appear to show these *wise men* the way to truth. And so they now stand before the Incarnate Truth, bow down and worship it...<sup>41</sup>

Edith was shown the way to truth—Incarnate Truth, Jesus Christ himself—and would spend the rest of her life worshipping God by prayer, sacrifice, and a life of committed love.

Years after her Baptism, Edith wrote a fictional dialogue between St. Augustine and St. Ambrose. In it, Augustine's words sound so similar to Edith's difficult journey to the Christian faith: "I sought truth.... My spirit brooded in unrest." Edith also conveyed Ambrose's appreciation of Monica's tears shed for her son's conversion: "...she now weeps sweet tears of joy, And she is richly rewarded for all her suffering."<sup>42</sup>

Edith's own mother was weeping over Edith's conversion, but not "sweet tears of joy". A few friends and family members were confused and hurt by her decision, but none as strongly as Frau Stein. Edith described the situation to her friend, Gertrud von le Fort, explaining that her mother

...declines anything that is beyond her Jewish faith. For that reason, too, it was impossible at this time to say anything to her that might have somewhat explained the step I have taken. She particularly rejects conversions.

Everyone ought to live and die in the faith in which they were born.<sup>43</sup>

To be the cause of her mother suffering so much pain was a difficult cross for Edith to bear. It broke Edith's heart to break her mother's heart. Considering her mother's heart-wrenching reaction to her conversion, Edith took great care not to inflict a second blow; she put aside, for the time being, her wish to enter a cloistered Carmelite convent.<sup>44</sup> Her spiritual director, Father Joseph Schwind, vicar general of the Diocese of Speyer, shared her concern for Frau Stein. He encouraged Edith to pursue her teaching career instead of entering Carmel, convinced that her many scholarly talents could benefit the Church and society.

Although Edith found Father Schwind's guidance difficult to hear and all the more difficult to follow, she listened respectfully and did not take any steps toward Carmel. She came to appreciate his role as her spiritual director, as well as a father figure and friend who inspired her with "his pure love of God."<sup>45</sup> As she later shared with a friend, she learned that one's vocation "cannot be solved merely through self-examination plus a scrutiny of the available possibilities. One must pray for the answer... and, in many cases, it must be sought by way of obedience."<sup>46</sup>

Edith took seriously Father Schwind's advice and realized the wisdom of his words, particularly when she met with her mother for the first time after receiving the sacraments. She was certain that Frau Stein

would not be able to withstand this second blow for the time being. She would not die of it, but it would fill her with such bitterness that I could not take the responsi-

bility for that. I would have to wait patiently. My spiritual counselors assured me of this over and over.<sup>47</sup>

Although the waiting period would be longer than she anticipated, as the years passed, Edith realized that “one may not set a deadline for the Lord.”<sup>48</sup> Her own advice to a new convert makes it clear that Edith was at peace with the delay:

For the moment I would say: remain patiently at your job as long as you do not receive a definite hint from above to undertake something else. Use your free time to get to know and to love God and the Church better: the doctrines of the faith, the liturgy, our saints; but also the religious institutions and Catholic life in the present time, along with its shadows, which will not remain concealed from you in the long run.<sup>49</sup>

This was the way Edith spent the beginning of her life as a Catholic; she immersed herself in the Catholic faith, studying Church history, reading Scripture and the lives of the saints, participating in daily Mass, and praying daily for long periods of time. She came to understand:

God leads each of us on an individual way; one reaches the goal more easily and more quickly than another. We can do very little ourselves, compared to what is done to us. But that little bit we must do. Primarily, this consists before all else of persevering in prayer to find the right way, and of following without resistance the attraction of grace when we feel it. Whoever acts in this way and perseveres patiently will not be able to say that his efforts were in vain.<sup>50</sup>

Consistent with these words, Edith continued to persevere patiently as she humbly submitted to God's plan. She seemed to be living out her words to a friend:

...[L]ay all care for the future, confidently, in God's hands, and allow yourself to be led by him entirely, as a child would. Then you can be sure not to lose your way. Just as the Lord brought you into his church, so he will lead you to the place in it that he wants you to have.<sup>51</sup>

### *Living the Catholic Faith in the World*

Having grown in humility, Edith was able to encourage others to surrender their self-will and to allow God to direct their life's journey. Edith urged an old friend who was struggling with faith and his path in life:

Become like a child and lay your life *with* all the searching and ruminating into the Father's hand. If that cannot yet be achieved, then plead; plead with the unknown and doubted God for help in reaching it. Now you look at me in amazement that I do not hesitate to come to you with wisdom as simple as that of a child. It *is* wisdom *because* it is simple, and all mysteries are concealed in it. And it is a way that most certainly leads to the goal.<sup>52</sup>

With such humble surrender, Edith embarked on her new life as a Catholic, ready for new paths and adventures, including a new teaching career and a new home. With Father Schwind's help, she obtained a teaching position at an all-girls school, St. Magdalena's, in Speyer, and found a place to live at the Dominican convent attached to the school. Keeping to the nuns' schedule, she rose early every morning to pray alone, and then joined the Sisters for community prayer and Mass.

During these teaching years, Edith confessed to "living behind the sheltering walls of a convent, at heart...like a real nun, even though I wear no veil and

am not bound by vows or enclosure.”<sup>53</sup> Considering the Dominican convent a prelude to Carmel, Edith savored the time of preparation while looking forward to the day when her spiritual director would permit her to apply to enter the Carmelites.

In addition to praying, researching, and teaching, Edith was busy translating the letters of John Henry Cardinal Newman from English into German, and St. Thomas' *Disputed Questions on Truth* from Latin into German. While she embarked on this tedious task, she made a discovery that would help her to be at peace about time spent away from formal prayer. She realized that her time outside of Church, even her academic work, could glorify God. She explained to a colleague: “That it is possible to worship God by doing scholarly research is something I learned, actually, only when I was busy with [translating].... Only thereafter could I decide to resume serious scholarly research.”<sup>54</sup>

Edith's faith was an integral part of her identity, touching and making its mark on everything she undertook. She knew, as she once advised:

Religion is not something to be relegated to a quiet corner or for a few festive hours, but rather, as you yourself perceive, it must be the root and basis of all life: and that, not merely for a few chosen ones, but for every true Christian....<sup>55</sup>

In the little spare time Edith had, she engaged in lively conversation with her students, listening to their problems and their dreams, and encouraging them on their unique journeys. She strove to give her students a moral foundation so that they could enter the “real world” grounded in Christian virtue.

One of Edith's pupils later remembered:

With very few words—just by her personality and everything that emanated from her—she set me on my way, not only in my studies, but in my whole moral life. With her you felt that you were in an atmosphere of everything noble, pure, and sublime that simply carried you up with it.<sup>56</sup>

She impressed not only her young students, but also her larger audiences of notable scholars, priests, religious, and lay men and women who packed lecture halls to hear Dr. Stein's wisdom. Within only six years of her conversion, Edith had become a popular speaker on the topic of Christian spirituality, particularly on the vocation of women. Her lecturing career hit her "like an avalanche."<sup>57</sup> Almost overnight, she became esteemed as an expert on matters of faith. One of her first talks, "Ethos of Women's Professions," received such high acclaim that she was showered with many more invitations to speak to various Catholic audiences. She was highly praised for the substance of her talks, as well as the manner of her delivery. She appeared confident yet humble. Perhaps the audience detected Edith's authenticity, the consistency between her words and her actions. She could speak of humility because she was humble; she could speak of the importance of doing God's will because she strove daily to know and follow his will.

At a time when Edith was earning rave reviews for her inspiring lectures and good works, she responded faithfully to God's call to be self-forgetful and self-giving. She had come a long way from the young student who was chastised for thinking too highly of herself and for being too proud of her talents and accomplishments. She had

grown from the young woman who dismissed her mother's advice to one who remembered God's hand in life's successes. She humbly acknowledged God's presence and power in her life and work.

Occasionally, some people criticized Edith's lectures. One of her friends took exception to how pious her talks seemed. Edith's response was unequivocal. She would continue her public speaking with the same emphasis: "*How to go about living at the Lord's hand.*"<sup>58</sup>

Another friend noted that all the attention and praise that Edith received caused her to "become" someone—a comment that Edith strongly disavowed: "...I cannot agree.... It does appear as though the orbit of my daily duties is to expand. But that, in my opinion, does not change anything about me. It has been demanded of me, and I have undertaken it...."<sup>59</sup>

Many demands continued to encroach on Edith's time, including requests from numerous friends and strangers seeking her counsel. One of the Dominican Sisters remembered:

God alone can know to how many people she gave her help, advice and direction, how often she came as an angel of charity to the relief of spiritual and bodily need. The pressure on her was often great.<sup>60</sup>

Edith did not succumb to the pressure; indeed, she continued to project a sense of dignified tranquillity. She explained, "...I have to budget my time so carefully.... Many people come to me and everyone who comes, hoping to find some help from me, is heartily welcome."<sup>61</sup>

At the same time, she had no illusions that she alone could solve everyone's problems:



I am only a tool of the Lord. I would like to lead to him anyone who comes to me. And when I notice that this is not the case, but that the interest is invested in my person, then I cannot serve as a tool and must beg the Lord to help in other ways. After all, he is never dependent on only one individual.<sup>62</sup>

Helping to lead others to the Catholic faith, Edith recognized that she was never the primary reason for their conversion, just the *causa secunda*, that is, the secondary cause. With deep humility, Edith considered it a joy and a privilege to collaborate with God. She realized that God's

greatest creative joy...is  
 That under his hand the image stirs,...  
 The life that he himself has placed in it  
 And that now answers him from within  
 To chisel blows or gentle finger stroke.

Beautifully capturing the privilege of collaborating with God in his work on an individual soul, Edith poetically wrote:

...often a person does not hear  
 The soft voice that speaks within.  
 Perhaps she hears the soft beating of the wings  
 Of the dove, but does not understand where its flight  
 Is drawing her. Then someone else must come,  
 Gifted with a finer ear attuned and keener sight,  
 And disclose the meaning of the obscure words.  
 This is the guide's wonderful gift,  
 The highest that, according to a sage's word,  
 The Creator has given to the creation:  
 To be his fellow worker in the salvation of souls.<sup>63</sup>

These fellow workers, Edith noted in an essay on spirituality, are needed in a society thirsting for God, to be

used "as instruments to awaken and nurture the divine spark." 64

Those who allow God's hands to shape and nurture their lives "exert a mysterious magnetic appeal on thirsty souls." She explained that

streams of living water flow from all those who live in God's hand.... Without aspiring to it, they must become guides of other persons striving to the light; they must practice spiritual maternity, begetting and drawing sons and daughters nearer to the kingdom of God. The history of the Church reveals that many persons...went this way "in the world."<sup>65</sup>

As Edith continued her path "in the world," that is, outside religious life, she regularly received spiritual direction from Father Schwind; he encouraged her in her prayer life and in her spiritual reading, recommending books and later discussing them with her. He introduced her to his family and invited Edith to family gatherings. With Father Schwind's help, Edith delved deeply into Catholicism and learned how to live out the faith in daily life. She received his fatherly advice and instruction, but, even more, she learned by his holy example.

One day, while hearing confessions in the local cathedral, Father Schwind suffered a heart attack. A friend who witnessed the priest in distress summoned Edith. She immediately hurried to be at his side. By the time she reached the cathedral, however, she learned that Father Schwind, the person who had guided her steps as she journeyed into the Catholic Church, had passed away. Edith prayed next to him and accompanied the medical personnel as they carried her dear friend from the cathedral.

Though she found it difficult to put into words the loss she felt, Edith wrote a powerful, heartfelt obituary. She praised Father Schwind's brilliant mind, compassionate heart, and ability to give advice well suited to each person as he bowed in humility before God, respecting God's relationship with the individual soul. Edith explained: "He relied upon his deep knowledge of human beings and his years of apostolic experience, yet his penetration remained gentle through utter reverence before the workings of God's grace in the soul."<sup>66</sup>

Soon after Father Schwind's death, Edith came under the direction of Archabbot Raphael Walzer of the Benedictine Monastery of Beuron, a place Edith had come to love as a silent refuge for her private retreats, particularly during Holy Week. Like Father Schwind, Archabbot Walzer discouraged Edith from entering a cloistered convent.

During the eleven years she waited for her religious vocation to become a reality, Edith followed the advice of her spiritual directors as she also learned to listen quietly to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. She knew that

the divine light, the Holy Spirit, has never ceased to illumine the darkness of the fallen world.... The silent working of the Holy Spirit in the depths of the soul made the patriarchs into friends of God. However, when they came to the point of allowing themselves to be used as his pliant instruments, he established them in an external visible efficacy....<sup>67</sup>

Edith treasured her friendship with God and was happy to be his "pliant instrument," allowing herself to be led by him into a deeper relationship with the Trinity and into closer relationships with others. It seemed that

the more she grew in her love of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the more she grew close to friend and stranger alike.

Gifted with a great capacity for making friends and sustaining relationships through various stages and challenges, Edith showered others with loving concern. In her early twenties, Edith was prompted to consider friendship's role in the battle against evil. Now she would focus on its role in the journey toward intimacy with God. Her circle of friends was like a symphony, each one bringing different gifts and all working together to the glory of God, helping one another along a spiritual journey of joys and sorrows.

Realizing that she could not keep up with all her friends and acquaintances, Edith relied on prayer to keep her connected with them:

The circle of persons whom I consider as connected with me has increased so much in the course of the years that it is entirely impossible to keep in touch by the usual means. But I have other ways and means of keeping the bonds alive.<sup>68</sup>

Even when she was in the convent, Edith was aware of the troubles and trials facing her friends. She could share her gift of presence with them, though she was not physically present, by pouring out her concern and understanding in letters and praying for their intentions. With characteristic compassion and self-sacrificial love, Edith once explained how badly she felt that she could not spend more time commiserating with a troubled friend:

...I could do nothing more than to offer for you all that the rest of the day brought. Only at night did I have

time and quiet to think back upon your affairs; since then they have not let go of me; maybe in that way I am being allowed to share in the weight of your burden.<sup>69</sup>

“Allowed to share” in another’s suffering? For Edith, it was a privilege to be able to enter into another’s suffering, and she therefore allowed her heart to remain open to another’s grief. Continuing on her way in the world, she drew ever closer to God and to so many people she knew God had brought into her life. She was convinced that they were in her life so that she could introduce them to divine life. Her efforts would not succeed without fervent prayer and the grace of the sacraments, particularly the Eucharist. Just as the Eucharistic Lord drew her like a magnet during her days of searching for the truth, so, too, was he drawing her to his Real Presence. As Edith allowed herself to be led to this presence and nourished by God himself, she worked to make his presence known in a world that seemed lost, drifting from his life and love.