

## EDITH STEIN AND JOHN OF THE CROSS

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My assigned topic, "Edith Stein and John of the Cross," is certainly an important one for Stein studies. John of the Cross appears frequently in her later writings; she turned to him for reliable spiritual guidance during her years in Carmel. As everyone knows, Edith Stein's last and most famous work, *Kreuzeswissenschaft*, is itself a detailed overview of John's life and doctrine. I must confess that, with only a few weeks to prepare this talk, I was not able to explore the connection between these two great Carmelite figures as thoroughly and deeply as the subject deserves. Fortunately, other scholars (including some of the speakers at this symposium) have already done significant research in this area. Especially helpful are Francisco Javier Sancho Fermín's recent book, *Edith Stein: Modelo y Maestra de Espiritualidad* (Burgos: Monte Carmelo, 1998) and several earlier articles he published in the journal *Teresianum*. I have listed these and other studies at the end of this essay in a select bibliography of previous research.

### *Edith Stein's First Acquaintance with John of the Cross*

As many commentators have observed, there seems to have been a mysterious and providential link between Edith Stein (1891-1942) and the man she called "holy Father St. John of the Cross" (1542-1591), Teresa's collaborator in the work of establishing the reformed branch of Carmel that Stein joined. Even their dates strangely mirror each other; Edith Stein was born during the third centenary of John's death, and died during the fourth centenary of his birth. And although she was presumably unaware of modern speculation about John's possible "converso" ancestry, her comments on John often suggest a sense of kinship, even identification, with him. In the biographical sections of *Science of the Cross*, for example, she

stresses John's early loss of his father, John's work as an orderly and his care for the sick, and John's close ties to his family, especially his mother Catalina. Some of her comments on John's experience in the monastic prison of Toledo are eerily prescient of her own final days: "To be helplessly delivered to the malice of bitter enemies, tormented in body and soul, cut off from all human consolation and also from the strengthening sources of ecclesial-sacramental life — can there be a harder school of the cross?"<sup>1</sup>

Yet we do not know for certain when Edith Stein first came into contact with the Mystical Doctor. Given her linguistic skills and the breadth of her reading, perhaps she had already encountered his name before her conversion. During her university studies, did she perhaps glance through Henri Delacroix's *Etudes d'Histoire et de psychologie du mysticisme* (Paris, 1908), for example, which circulated widely and had a few pages on John of the Cross? Did she peruse William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York, 1902) or Rudolf Otto's *Idea of the Holy* (Breslau, 1917), both of which mention John of the Cross?<sup>2</sup> At this point we can only speculate. In any case, we know that her interest in religious matters evolved only gradually, nor does she ever mention any prior acquaintance with the Mystical Doctor before her conversion. We can safely assume, therefore, that if she had seen references to John of the Cross in her earlier reading and research, they had not made a significant impression upon her.

Her interest in John of the Cross would have quickened, however, at the time of her conversion in 1922, after reading Teresa of Avila's *Life*. Since she later dates her desire to enter Carmel from this moment, she surely would have wanted to know more about John, who was such an important founding figure and guiding spirit of the community she hoped to join.

Her interest, like that of many other Catholic scholars, would have been further stimulated by Pius XI's declaration of John as Doctor of the Church. As Sancho Fermín has shown,

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<sup>1</sup> EDITH STEIN, *Science of the Cross*, trans. Josephine Koepfel (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1998), p. 25.

<sup>2</sup> She cites another of James's works, *Principles of Psychology*, in her *Beiträge* essay. Before he finally settled in Marburg, Rudolf Otto had held academic posts at Göttingen (1904-1914) and Breslau (1914-1917).

this declaration in 1926 and the second centenary of John's canonization in 1927 sparked a new wave of Sanjuanist studies in the German-speaking world. (To name but one example, her Jesuit friend and mentor Erich Przywara was ultimately responsible for two books on John's poetry.)

Thus Edith Stein's post-conversion years coincided, in the German-speaking world, with a period of renewed scholarly and popular interest in mysticism in general, and in John of the Cross in particular. Edith Stein was a part of this milieu. Already in a letter of November 20, 1927, written from St. Magdalena's College in Speyer, she encourages Roman Ingarden to consult the "witness of *homines religiosi*," among whom she counts "the Spanish mystics Teresa and John of the Cross" as "the most impressive."<sup>3</sup> Sancho Fermín offers an exhaustive list of all the German-language articles and books published on the Mystical Doctor during these decades, and suggests that Stein was very familiar with the state of Sanjuanist studies in Germany at that time. We can add that, given her facility with other languages, she was by no means restricted to works written in German. The only restriction would have been the availability of Sanjuanist materials to her, especially after entering Carmel and during the later years of the Second World War. We know from her letters of that period that she often had difficulty obtaining the research materials she needed.

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<sup>3</sup> This text is worth citing at length. See EDITH STEIN, *Briefe an Roman Ingarden*, ed. Maria Amata Neyer (Freiburg: Herder, 1991), p. 190. "...Es ist nicht nötig, dass wir bis zum Ende unseres Lebens zu einem Rechtsausweis der religiösen Erfahrung kommen. Aber es ist notwendig, dass wir zu einer Entscheidung für oder wider Gott kommen. Das wird von uns verlangt: uns zu entscheiden ohne einen Garantieschein. Das ist das grosse Wagnis des Glaubens. Der Weg geht vom Glauben zum Schauen, nicht umgekehrt. Wer zu stolz ist, durch dies enge Pfortchen zu gehen, der kommt nicht hinein. Wer aber hindurchgeht, der gelangt doch schon in diesem Leben zu immer hellerer Klarheit und erfährt die Berechtigung des *credo ut intelligam*. Dass mit konstruierten oder phantasierten Erlebnissen hier wenig anzufangen ist, glaube ich auch. Wo die eigene Erfahrung mangelt, muss man sich an Zeugnisse von *homines religiosi* halten. Daran ist ja kein Mangel. Nach meinem Empfinden sind das Eindrucksvollste die spanischen Mystiker, Teresa u. Johannes vom Kreuz." Edith Stein repeats her recommendation of John of the Cross in later letters to Roman Ingarden, including those dated 1 January 1928 and 27 November 1933.

*John of the Cross and Sr. Teresia Benedicta a Cruce, OCD*

But it was in Carmel that Edith Stein came to know John of the Cross most deeply. After all, they shared the same religious subtitle. For her this was no mere coincidence but sign of her destiny, since the “deepest meaning” of one’s subtitle in religion, she wrote, “is still that we have a personal vocation to live a particular mystery of the faith.”<sup>4</sup> We are all familiar with her famous remark in a 1938 letter to Mother Petra Brüning, OSU:

I must tell you that I already brought my religious name with me into the house as a postulant. I received it exactly as I requested it. By the cross I understood the destiny of God’s people which, even at that time, began to announce itself. I thought that those who recognized it as the cross of Christ had to take it upon themselves in the name of all. Certainly, today I know more of what it means to be wedded to the Lord in the sign of the Cross. Of course, one can never comprehend it, for it is a mystery.<sup>5</sup>

Thus even from the outset of her religious life, Sr. Teresia Benedicta a *Cruce* believed she shared a special calling with Juan *de la Cruz* to live out the mystery of the Cross — he amidst the birth pangs of the Teresian Reform, she in solidarity with all those suffering the horrors of Nazi persecution. What it means to live “wedded to the Lord in the sign of the Cross” is a theme she would explore at length in her final months as she composed her study of the Mystical Doctor.

To appreciate the extent of her acquaintance with John, it is interesting to compare her with two famous “elder sisters” in the Carmels of France, St. Thérèse of Lisieux and Bl. Elizabeth of the Trinity. All three were faithful disciples of John of the Cross. Recall Thérèse’s exclamation in *Story of a Soul*, “Ah, how many lights have I not drawn from the works of our holy Father, St. John of the Cross! At the age of seventeen and eighteen I had no

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<sup>4</sup> EDITH STEIN, *Self-Portrait in Letters*, trans. Josephine Koepffel (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1993), Letter #188 (14 December 1934). Note that this letter was written on what is now the feastday of St. John of the Cross.

<sup>5</sup> *Self-Portrait in Letters*, Letter #287 (9 December 1938).

other spiritual nourishment" (A 83r).<sup>6</sup> Yet Thérèse and Elizabeth seem to have read little if anything from John's *Subida* and *Noche Oscura* commentaries. They quote almost exclusively from the *Canticle* and the *Living Flame*, both contained in the final volume of the four-volume French edition of that time.<sup>7</sup> (Interestingly, this is the book Elizabeth is holding in her lap in her last photo, taken on the terrace outside her infirmary a month before her death in 1906.)

By contrast, and as one might expect from someone of her background, Edith approached her father in Carmel more systematically. As she prepares for her clothing retreat in 1934, she writes to Mother Petra: "Our holy Father John of the Cross will be my guide: *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*."<sup>8</sup> Her memorial card for her clothing ceremony carries the words from the *Ascent of Mount Carmel* (and the *Sketch of the Mount*), "To arrive at being all, desire to be nothing."<sup>9</sup> The following year, mentioning her upcoming retreat before profession of vows, she writes, "For the immediate preparation I will ask again, as I did for my Clothing, to have our holy Father John [of the Cross] as retreat master."<sup>10</sup> This time, she notes afterward, "for my meditation I had our holy Father John [of the Cross]'s *Dark Night* and the *Gospel of John*."<sup>11</sup>

By the time of her final profession of vows three years later, Edith Stein had familiarized herself with the *Cantico espiritual* and its commentary, for her solemn profession card carries a quotation from stanza 28, "Mein einziger Beruf is fortan nur mehr lieben" [my sole vocation is henceforth only to love more],<sup>12</sup> a fitting line for a woman who had sacrificed everything for her new life in Carmel.

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<sup>6</sup> THÉRÈSE OF LISIEUX, *Story of a Soul*, trans. John Clarke, 3d ed. (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1996), p. 179.

<sup>7</sup> *Vie et oeuvres de (...) saint Jean de la Croix*, t. 4: *Le Cantique spirituel et La vive Flamme d'amour* (Paris: 1892).

<sup>8</sup> *Self-Portrait in Letters*, Letter #168 (Easter Week, 1934).

<sup>9</sup> *Self-Portrait in Letters*, Letter #170 (15 April 1934).

<sup>10</sup> *Self-Portrait in Letters*, Letter #193 (3 February 1935).

<sup>11</sup> *Self-Portrait in Letters*, Letter #198 (25 April 1935).

<sup>12</sup> John's original Spanish reads "...que ya sólo en amar es mi ejercicio," which the Kavanaugh/Rodriguez translation renders "now that my every act is love."

In short, the many references to John in her letters<sup>13</sup> and informal writings after entering Carmel reveal an intense interest in the Mystical Doctor that is not merely intellectual nor merely a passing fancy. She recommends his writings to scholarly friends both lay and religious, and explains to them important points in his doctrine.<sup>14</sup> But she also marks John's feast days,<sup>15</sup> writes spiritual reflections for these occasions, composes a "pious recreation" for the Echt community featuring John of the Cross as one of the principle characters,<sup>16</sup> and even attempts "a copy of the sketch our Holy Father John made ... after the vision he had of the Crucified.... The reproduction in P. Bruno's book is not exactly sharp, and I am anything but an artist. But I made it with great reverence and love...."<sup>17</sup>

In short, within Carmel Edith Stein demonstrated an ongoing commitment to immerse herself progressively in John's writings and doctrine, but always coupled with a frank recognition that merely reading the Mystical Doctor was no guarantee that she had fully incorporated his message. In November 1940, she writes back from Echt to the Carmel of Cologne: "For several weeks I have also been responsible for the subject matter for meditation and, in preparation for the feast, am now taking short excerpts from the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*. That was also my meditation material for my retreat before Clothing. Then each year I would go one step further — in the volumes of holy Father John [of the Cross], but that does not mean I kept up with it. I am still way down at the foot of the mount."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> See Letters 168, 170, 188, 193, 198, 212, 229, 311, 316, 322-324, 326-329, 334-336 in *Self-Portrait in Letters*, as well as letters 116, 119, 158, and 159 in *Briefe an Roman Ingarden*.

<sup>14</sup> *Self-Portrait in Letters*, Letter #212 (2 November 1935) and 311 (30 March 1940).

<sup>15</sup> *Self-Portrait in Letters*, Letter #229 (15 November 1936).

<sup>16</sup> This is an unpublished manuscript in Dutch, written by Edith Stein in 1942, and bearing the title "Aartsengel Michael." It is now preserved in the Cologne Archives, File B I 63: fol. 1. See John Sullivan, "Liturgical Creativity from Edith Stein," *Teresianum* 49 (1998): pp. 173-174. In the 15 lines placed in John's mouth by Edith, he speaks of the role of the Blessed Virgin in his life, and how Mary taught him to love the cross.

<sup>17</sup> *Self-Portrait in Letters*, Letter #328 (18 November 1941).

<sup>18</sup> *Self-Portrait in Letters*, Letter #316 (17 November 1940).

*John of the Cross in Stein's Essays and Books*

Soon after she entered Carmel, as we know, Sr. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross was encouraged to resume her writing, and it is especially in the works she wrote as a Carmelite and intended for publication that she develops her reflections on John of the Cross at greater length. We find frequent references to "holy Father John" in all of the places we would naturally expect. In "Love for Love: Life and Works of St. Teresa of Jesus," she describes John's key role in the inauguration of the Teresian reform, and observes that "the humble little John of the Cross, the great saint of the church, inspired it with the spirit. But he was entirely a person of prayer, of penance. Others took on the external direction."<sup>19</sup> In her 1935 essay "On the History and Spirit of Carmel," she presents the following idealized image of the Saint (though once again, interestingly, without explicitly mentioning the theme of the cross):

As our second father and leader, we revere the first male discalced Carmelite of the reform, St. John of the Cross. We find in him the ancient eremitical spirit in its purest form. His life gives an impression as though he had no inner struggles. Just as from his earliest childhood he was under the special protection of the Mother of God, so from the time he reached the age of reason, he was drawn to rigorous penance, to solitude, to letting go of everything earthly, and to union with God. He was the instrument chosen to be an example and to teach the reformed Carmel the spirit of Holy Father Elijah. Together with Mother Teresa, he spiritually formed the first generation of male and female discalced Carmelites, and through his writings, he also illumines for us the way on the "Ascent of Mount Carmel."<sup>20</sup>

In a related article from the same year, "Eine Meisterin der Erziehung und Bildungsarbeit: Teresia von Jesus," she writes about John in a similar vein, and his name appears briefly in

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<sup>19</sup> EDITH STEIN, "Love for Love: Life and Works of St. Teresa of Jesus," in Edith Stein, *The Hidden Life*, trans. Waltraut Stein (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1992), p. 60.

<sup>20</sup> EDITH STEIN, "On the History and Spirit of Carmel," in *The Hidden Life*, p. 5.

other essays now gathered together in *Ganzheitliches Leben*, volume 12 of her *Werke*.<sup>21</sup> (Some commentators have even suggested that the theme of “night” in her famous 1931 essay *Weihnachtsgeheimnis*, or “The Mystery of Christmas,” also included in *Ganzheitliches Leben*, already shows early traces of John’s influence, although he is not mentioned explicitly.)

The revised version of her “habilitationsschrift” *Act and Potency*, which evolved into *Endliches und Ewiges Sein* [Finite and Eternal Being], includes reference to John of the Cross, and Father Sancho Fermín sees the influence of the Mystical Doctor particularly in Section VII, on the “Image of the Trinity in Created World” where she writes:

Mystical infused graces impart to the soul an experience of what faith teaches on the indwelling of God in the soul. Those who seek God guided by faith are by their own free effort setting out on the same road and are headed for the same goal to which the mystic is drawn by the grace of infused contemplation. They withdraw from the senses, from the images of memory, and even from the natural activities of intellect and will, into the empty loneliness of their inner life to abide there in the darkness of faith — in a simple, loving lifting up of the eyes to the hidden God, who is present under a veil. Here they will rest in deep peace — because they have reached the place of their tranquility — until it may please the Lord to transform faith into vision. This, in very sketchy outline, is the *Ascent of Mount Carmel* as taught by our holy father St. John of the Cross.<sup>22</sup>

She refers back to this work several times in *Kreuzeswissenschaft*, especially when discussing the nature of spiritual being.

Again, though the Mystical Doctor is not mentioned by name in “Wege zu Gotteseckennntnis” [Ways to Know God], the relationship between the John’s teaching and the doctrine of

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<sup>21</sup> See “Eine Meisterin der Erziehungs- und Bildungsarbeit: Teresia von Jesus,” in EDITH STEIN, *Ganzheitliches Leben*, ed. Lucy Gelber and Michael Linssen (Freiburg: Herder, 1990), pp. 184-185.

<sup>22</sup> EDITH STEIN, *Finite and Eternal Being*, trans. Kurt Reinhardt (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, forthcoming), VII, ß 9, no. 4. See SANCHO FERMÍN, FRANCISCO JAVIER, “Acercamiento de Edith Stein a San Juan de la Cruz,” *Teresianum* 44 (1993): 195-196.



Pseudo-Dionysius that “the ascent to God is an ascent in darkness and silence”<sup>23</sup> cannot have escaped her; we also find here a concern about nature of symbol that will reappear in *Kreuzeswissenschaft*.

Before moving on, I should say a word about “Love of the Cross: Some Thoughts for the Feast of St. John of the Cross,” which Dr. Lucy Gelber dates around 1934. This brief essay may never have been intended for publication, but it previews some of the themes that will reappear in *Science of the Cross*. She rejects the idea that John’s “love of suffering” is “merely the loving remembrance of the path of suffering of our Lord on earth, a tender impulse to be humanly close to him.” She stresses instead that the cross and resurrection are inseparable, and that “voluntary expiatory suffering” makes sense only in union with the self-offering of Christ, who died and was raised up to the right hand of God. Neither a naive joy oblivious to the world’s pain, nor a masochistic emphasis on suffering for its own sake, is adequate.

Only those who are saved, only children of grace, can in fact be bearers of Christ’s cross. Only in union with the divine Head does human suffering take on expiatory power. To suffer and to be happy although suffering, to have one’s feet on the earth, to walk on the dirty and rough paths of this earth and yet to be enthroned with Christ at the Father’s right hand, to laugh and cry with the children of this world and ceaselessly sing the praises of God with the choirs of angels — this is the life of the Christian until the morning of eternity breaks forth.<sup>24</sup>

### Kreuzeswissenschaft, “*The Science of the Cross*”

We come now to Sr. Teresia Benedicta’s final and most famous literary work, *Kreuzeswissenschaft*. Until recently, for many readers in my part of the world, Edith Stein the author was known primarily as a commentator on John of the Cross,

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<sup>23</sup> EDITH STEIN, “Ways to Know God” (New York: Edith Stein Guild, 1981), p. 18. Reprinted from *The Thomist* 9 (July 1946): 379-420.

<sup>24</sup> EDITH STEIN, “Love of the Cross: Some Thoughts for the Feast of St. John of the Cross,” in *The Hidden Life*, p. 93.

precisely because for so many years *The Science of the Cross* was her only full-length text available in English, in a 1960 translation by Hilda Graef.

I must confess that when I first read *Science of the Cross* twenty-five years ago during my philosophical studies at the university, I was disappointed. Perhaps in the present context this may sound like an admission of heresy! But I have met other readers, especially those who approached Stein's text with a prior knowledge of John of the Cross, who reported similar first reactions. In the first place, *Kreuzeswissenschaft* somehow doesn't seem — how can I say it? — as “wissenschaftlich” as the title might suggest. No attempt is made to place the subject matter in the context of the long German academic debate over the relation between the “natural” and “cultural” sciences, the “Naturwissenschaften” and “Geisteswissenschaften,” a question on which Stein herself had written as a young philosopher. Still less does she place John of the Cross explicitly in dialogue with phenomenology or any of the other major intellectual currents of the modern day, as she had tried to do with Thomism. The biographical sections on John of the Cross seem at times overly hagiographical, and some of her concerns (about acquired contemplation, about the authenticity of the surviving Sanjuanist manuscripts, or about reconciling John with Thomism) seem somewhat dated. But most of all, the bulk of the book appears to be simply a continuous paraphrase of John's writings, an endless catena of quotations linked together by an occasional transitional word or phrase from Edith herself. At first glance *Kreuzeswissenschaft* appears to be little more than a kind of handy summary or condensed version of John's works, rather than the landmark in Sanjuanist studies that one might have expected from someone of Stein's intellectual gifts.

Such criticisms, however, do not take adequate account of the nature and purpose of the book, or the context in which it was written. When she began working on *Kreuzeswissenschaft* in the Carmel of Echt in 1941, during the last months of her life, Germany had already overrun Holland, and the Nazi threat was growing ever more dangerous. Sister Antonia, the newly elected prioress, decided to free Sr. Teresia Benedicta from other household chores in order to utilize her intellectual talents more fully, and assigned her to write a book on John of the Cross in preparation for his centenary in 1942. Sr. Amata Neyer has suggested that Stein was given this task perhaps in part to

distract her from all that was happening outside the cloister.<sup>25</sup> In any case, Edith Stein eagerly set herself to the task, finding it both difficult and rewarding. She writes to Mother Johanna van Weersth, OCD, the prioress of Beek, in November 1940: "Just now I am gathering material for a new work since our Reverend Mother wishes me to do some scholarly work again, as far as this will be possible in our living situation and under the present circumstances. I am very grateful to be allowed once more to do something before my brain rusts completely."<sup>26</sup> In October of the following year, she asks her: "Please, will [Your Reverence] also pray a little to the Holy Spirit and to our Holy Father John for what I am now planning to write. It is to be something for our Holy Father's 400th birthday (June 24, 1942), but all of it must come from above."<sup>27</sup> A few weeks later she writes the Beek prioress again: "Because of the work I am doing I live almost constantly immersed in thoughts about our Holy Father John. That is a great grace. May I ask [Your Reverence] once more for prayers that I can produce something appropriate for his Jubilee?"<sup>28</sup> She also makes several requests for the books she needs, especially P. Bruno's biography of John of the Cross and Jean Baruzi's *St. Jean de la Croix et le problème de l'expérience mystique*, in the second edition.<sup>29</sup> This confirms Sancho Fermín's point that she was well aware of the current state of Sanjuanist studies at that time; she remarks repeatedly that although "Baruzi is an unbelieving author" his book "was produced with the greatest devotion and as a serious study it probably cannot be supplanted by anything else."<sup>30</sup> And the overly hagiographical elements in her treatment of John's life in *Kreuzeswissenschaft* are in fact largely drawn from P. Bruno's book, which was the most reliable and scholarly biography of John available at the time. These are the two sources she mentions by name in her "Preface" to *The Science of the Cross*,

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<sup>25</sup> AMATA NEYER, *Edith Stein: Her Life in Photos and Documents* (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1998), p. 67.

<sup>26</sup> *Self-Portrait in Letters*, Letter #316 (17 November 1940).

<sup>27</sup> *Self-Portrait in Letters*, Letter #323 (8 October 1941).

<sup>28</sup> *Self-Portrait in Letters*, Letter #328 (18 November 1941).

<sup>29</sup> See *Self-Portrait in Letters*, Letter #323 (8 October 1941); see also Letters 322, 324, 325, 327.

<sup>30</sup> *Self-Portrait in Letters*, Letters #324 (13 October 1941) and 325 (21 October 1941).

which shows that she used the best resources she could find.

On the other hand, all of this does raise interesting questions about the intended audience for the book. The original title of the manuscript version is "Science of the Cross: To the Doctor of the Church and Father of the Carmelites on the Occasion of the 400th Anniversary of His Birth," with the further annotation, "from one of his daughters in the Carmel of Echt," but without any mention of the names "Edith Stein" or "Sr. Teresia Benedicta a Cruce."<sup>31</sup> The surviving text is in German, a language in which the Dutch Carmel of Echt presumably would not have published. Nor could the book have appeared in Nazi-controlled territories with Edith Stein listed as author. She writes in a letter to the Carmel of Cologne in April 1942 that "when I finish this manuscript I would like to send a German copy [ein deutsches Exemplar] to P. Heribert [provincial of the German monasteries] to have it duplicated for the monasteries."<sup>32</sup> Such comments suggest that there may have been plans to publish the work anonymously in both German and Dutch, primarily for the internal and external use of the Carmelite nuns and friars themselves. This also explains why the book is written in a more accessible style than her philosophical works. She was not undertaking an academic research project or looking for ground-breaking new perspectives and conclusions, but simply composing a jubilee book for the Carmelites that would attempt "to grasp John of the Cross in the unity of his being as it expresses itself in his life and in his works — from a viewpoint that will enable one to see this unity."<sup>33</sup> And of course, as the title of the book indicates, Edith Stein finds this principle of unity in the *science of the cross*, which is not a *science* according to the usual understanding of the term; it is "not merely a theory, that is, not a pure correlation of — really or presumably — true propositions nor an ideal structure laid out in reasoned steps," but "living, real, and effective truth."<sup>34</sup> "St.

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<sup>31</sup> SANCHO FERMÍN, FRANCISCO JAVIER, *Edith Stein: Modelo y Maestra de Espiritualidad* (Burgos: El Monte Carmelo, 1998), p. 267.

<sup>32</sup> *Self-Portrait in Letters*, Letter #336 (9 April 1942). It was Sr. Josephine Koepfel, OCD, who first brought the possibility of an intended Dutch edition to my attention.

<sup>33</sup> EDITH STEIN, *Science of the Cross*, trans. Josephine Koepfel (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1998), p. 1.

<sup>34</sup> *Science of the Cross*, pp. 3-4.

John's doctrine," she says, "could not be spoken of as a science of the cross in our sense, were it based merely on an intellectual insight.... Its fruits are seen in the life of the the saint."<sup>35</sup> Edith's main purpose in this book, then, is to show how John's doctrine and life come together within the mystery of the cross (wherein she also found the unifying principle for her own life and thought).

The parts of the book that contemporary readers find most interesting, the parts where Edith Stein shines through most clearly, are not the long summarizing sections (though perhaps one could make a careful study of what her choice of quotations reveals, e.g., that she cites virtually every mention of "night" or "cross") but rather those brief introductory and transitional sections where she speaks in her own voice. Here is where we find a short and fairly creative summary of the various ways in which John encountered the cross (not merely through the trials in his life, but in Scripture, in the liturgy, in art and in visions). Here we find her reflections on "holy objectivity" (*heilige Sachlichkeit*),<sup>36</sup> and on the nature of symbol and the relationship between "cross" and "night"; her "phenomenological" analysis of these latter themes is justly famous.

[The cross] is therefore a sign, but one which has not artificially gained meaning, but rather has genuinely earned it by reason of its effectiveness and its history. Its visible form indicates the meaning connected with it....

*Night* on the contrary is something natural: the counterpart of light, wrapping itself around us and all things. It is not an object in the strict sense.... Nor is it an image insofar as one understands that to mean having a visible form. Night is invisible and formless. But still we perceive it, indeed it is nearer to us than all things and forms; it is more closely bound to our being. Just as light allows all things to step forward with their visible qualities, so night devours them and threatens to devour us also. Whatever sinks into it is not simply nothing; it continues to exist but as indeterminate, invisible, and formless as night itself, or shadowy, ghostlike, and therefore threatening....

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<sup>35</sup> *Science of the Cross*, p. 289.

<sup>36</sup> *Science of the Cross*, pp. 5-7.

Whatever brings forth in us effects similar to those of the cosmic night is, in a figurative sense, called night.<sup>37</sup>

In “The Soul in the Realm of the Spirit and of Spirits,” an important transitional section of about 25 pages, she takes up several key questions raised in the *Ascent* and *Dark Night* commentaries about human freedom and interiority, different modes of union with God, and the relationship between faith and contemplation. This part ends with a very moving passage that seems to speak as much about Edith Stein’s own spirit and spirituality as about the doctrine of John of the Cross:

In the Passion and death of Christ our sins were consumed by fire. If we accept that in faith, and if we accept the whole Christ in faith-filled surrender, which means, however, that we choose and walk the path of the imitation of Christ, then he will lead us “through his Passion and cross to the glory of his resurrection.” This is exactly what is experienced in contemplation: passing through the expiatory flames to the bliss of the union with love. This explains its twofold character. It is death and resurrection. After the *Dark Night*, the *Living Flame* shines forth.<sup>38</sup>

These more “creative” sections of *Kreuzeswissenschaft* have already been studied in detail by various Stein scholars. We need not discuss them further here, especially since they are less directly dependent on the life and doctrine of John of the Cross himself, as Stein acknowledges in her “Preface.”<sup>39</sup> (After all, she had already written on subject of symbolism before, for example, and the “science of the cross” itself originates not with John of the Cross but with Jesus.) So let us return at this point to the general topic with which we began — the relationship between our new saint and her “holy father John” — to see what conclusions we may now draw.

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<sup>37</sup> *Science of the Cross*, p. 36.

<sup>38</sup> *Science of the Cross*, p. 190.

<sup>39</sup> *Science of the Cross*, p. 1.

*Edith Stein's Debt to John of the Cross*

Ironically, even after reviewing all of this material, it is still difficult to say precisely how John of the Cross influenced Edith Stein's life and thought, except in the most general terms. Her famous remark, "secretum meum mihi," seems to apply here as well. We can speculate that she was attracted by the parallels between his life and hers. We can note her approval of John's love of Scripture and devotion to the liturgy, as well as her frequent references to the role of Our Lady in John's life (something she found missing in Baruzi's book<sup>40</sup>); all of these themes were of great significance to her both as a Carmelite and a Christian. And we can assume, from the fact that she took John as her "retreat master" again and again, that she relied on him as a source of sound spiritual guidance. But she records no sudden and dramatic grace through an encounter with John's works, no experience similar to reading Teresa's *Life* in a single night and concluding "This is truth!" Indeed, it seems as if John provided her not so much with the stimulus for a new intellectual or moral conversion, but rather with the opportunity to reflect more deeply on issues that were already important to her. As a phenomenologist, she would have appreciated the Mystical Doctor's profound grasp of the complexities of human experience and the subtleties of grace at work in the inner depths of the human person, even though John's insights were couched in a different conceptual language. And although she encountered the cross long before she had immersed herself in the Sanjuanist writings, John would have helped her appreciate the radicality of its requirements, the depths of the conversion and transformation needed in order to be united with the God she so loved; he would have guided her in living out the demands of the cross in even the tiniest details of her life. She was also one of the earliest authors to take John's theme of "night" and give it a social and political dimension, speaking of the "night of sin" that had then enveloped western Europe. "The more an era is engulfed in the night of sin and estrangement from God the more it needs souls united to God," she wrote. "The greatest figures of prophecy step forth out of the darkest night."<sup>41</sup> She

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<sup>40</sup> *Self-Portrait in Letters*, Letter #327 (11 November 1941).

<sup>41</sup> EDITH STEIN, "The Hidden Life and Epiphany," in *The Hidden Life*, p. 110.

herself would become such a prophet in the “darkest night” of Westerbork and Auschwitz.

Finally, if the most common error of past interpretations of John was to overstress the ascetical aspects of his teaching, perhaps the obversed contemporary error (shown especially in New Age attempts to assimilate John) lies in stressing only the exalted mystical consciousness he describes. Edith Stein, in *Kreuzeswissenschaft* and elsewhere, offers contemporary readers a valuable corrective, an alternative to these one-sided approaches to her “holy father John.” She points us back to the middle path, reminding us that although John never advocates suffering for its own sake, the “divinization” to which he guides us comes at a price: total death to our old self. The cross and resurrection belong inseparably together. This is precisely the same middle path shown in John’s “Sketch of the Mount,” the path of the sevenfold “nada” leading to the glorious banquet of charity, peace, joy, and justice on the summit, where “only the honor and glory of God dwells.” This is the path that Edith chose for herself, or rather, the path along which she willingly allowed God’s love to lead her.

### *Conclusion*

One week before he was killed this past summer, Father Ross Collings gave a final talk to the nuns of the Auckland Carmel, on the life and spirituality of our newest saint. Providentially, as I was preparing my own presentation, I received an audiotape of his conference. In his closing words, Father Ross observed that, for all her intellectual brilliance, how Edith Stein lived and died, her fidelity to her calling no matter what the cost, has become “immensely more important” than anything she ever wrote or thought. Perhaps the same can now be said, in a way, of Father Ross himself. As a token of respect and gratitude to Father Ross for all that he gave to our order and our church during his years in Carmel, I would like to conclude with a related observation about Edith Stein’s work on the Mystical Doctor, John of the Cross.

Tradition tells us that Edith Stein was working on *Kreuzeswissenschaft* almost until the very moment of her arrest. In fact, the book ends abruptly (though not as abruptly as John’s *Ascent of Mount Carmel* or *Dark Night* commentaries) with an



account of John's death, and lacks any conclusion or postscript. Consequently, *The Science of the Cross* is often called a "fragmentary" work.

Yet the internal evidence suggests that the book was essentially complete. Edith Stein had managed to survey and analyze virtually all of the writings of John of the Cross, even the minor works, and had discussed all the phases of his life. It is difficult to imagine what more she might have added, given the scope of the book, except some concluding remarks. In fact, as Sancho Fermín has pointed out, even the ink she used at the end of the surviving manuscript is identical with that used at the beginning, suggesting that she had gone back from the last section to write the "Vorwort," something authors typically do when they are putting the final touches on a project.<sup>42</sup>

Perhaps we can say, rather, that the work is necessarily "incomplete" in a different sense, in Edith Stein's sense. As we noted above, Edith Stein writes in the closing section, "St. John's doctrine of the cross could not be called a *science of the cross* in our sense, were it based merely on an intellectual insight.... Its fruits must be seen in the life of the saint." Simply writing *about* John's teaching was not enough for her. The last chapter had to be *lived*, had to be written, so to speak, in her own blood. It is Edith Stein's own complete surrender to the mystery of the cross, the mystery of dying and rising with Christ, that gives her final work such power and resonance. How Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross lived and died, even more than what she wrote, is her greatest testament and tribute to her holy father, Saint John of the Cross.

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<sup>42</sup> SANCHO FERMÍN, *Edith Stein: Modelo y Maestra de Espiritualidad*, pp. 268-269.

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