

Homily
Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, Virgin and Martyr
August 9, 2024

How do we deny ourselves? I kind of like who I am, but Jesus is telling us to deny the part of ourselves that is selfish. God made us good. It is through our selfishness that we deny Christ. When we deny our selfishness, we embrace Christ and all that He stands for. Jesus stands for loving us, serving us, interceding for us, carrying His cross. He calls us to do the same. In doing so, we deny that part of us that prevents us from loving, serving and interceding for others, and for carrying our cross.

Born into a prominent Jewish family, Edith Stein was a brilliant philosopher who stopped believing in God when she was 14. She was so captivated by reading the autobiography of Teresa of Avila that she began a spiritual journey that led to her baptism at the age of 31. Twelve years later she imitated Saint Teresa by becoming a Carmelite, taking the name we now know her by, Teresa Benedicta of the Cross.

"I no longer have a life of my own," she wrote at the beginning of the First World War, having done a nursing course and gone to serve in an Austrian field hospital. This was a hard time for her, during which she looked after the sick, worked in an operating theatre, and saw young people die. The hospital was dissolved in 1916. As a student, she became fascinated by phenomenology – an approach to philosophy that applies qualitative research, which uses subjective observation, such as interviewing families and looking for patterns. She earned her doctorate *summa cum laude* in 1917.

During this period, she went to Frankfurt Cathedral and saw a woman with a shopping basket going in to kneel for a brief prayer. "This was something totally new to me," she said. In the synagogues and Protestant churches I had visited, people simply went to the services. Here, however, I saw someone coming straight from the busy marketplace into this empty church, as if she was going to have an intimate conversation. It was something I never forgot." She continued as a university teacher until 1922, when she moved to a Dominican school. Her appointment as lecturer ended under pressure from the Nazis.

Sister Teresa Benedicta moved to a Carmelite monastery in the Netherlands in 1938. The Nazis then occupied that country in 1940. In retaliation for being denounced by the Dutch bishops, the Nazis arrested all Dutch Jews who had converted to Christianity. Teresa Benedicta and her sister Rosa, also a Catholic, died in a gas chamber in Auschwitz on August 9, 1942.

Pope John Paul II beatified Teresa Benedicta of the Cross in 1987 and canonized her 12 years later.

She denied that part of herself that was selfish. She saw the benefits of following Christ. It takes great humility to recognize this selfishness in ourselves and make the decision to pick up our cross, deny ourselves, and eventually enter into eternal life.