



EDITH STEIN:
INTO THE DARK

BY CYRIL O'REGAN

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Edith Stein the Saint: Status and Icon

Edith Stein (1891–1942)—whose taken name was Sr. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross—was beatified by John Paul II in 1987 and canonized in 1999. It was expected that there would be more than the usual debate about this particular canonization, even allowing for John Paul II’s prodigality in the declaration of saints. And there was. There were two main criticisms that came from Jewish quarters, which in turn were echoed by Catholics. The first was that raising up a Catholic who died in the Holocaust took the light away from the mass extermination of Jews. Second, the fact that Stein was a Jewish convert showed the kind of insensitivity towards Judaism that made the policies of the Third Reich possible. There were defenders who answered the objections, some insisting on the prerogatives of the Church to do things for its own community. What is more important than the arguments that ensued were the motives of John Paul II, who rarely appealed to the rights of the Church and who cannot be accused of insensitivity to Judaism. He is the Pope who wished to show that, in its relation to Judaism, the Catholic Church is much more the Church penitent than militant. The last thing that John Paul II was interested in doing was putting Jews in their place by insisting that Catholics also died in the concentration camps. He accepted that the concentration camp system was primarily for Jews (and other “undesirables”), not specifically for Christians. So why do it? There was the stated reason: Edith Stein led a compelling life of witness to the love of God in Christ that the Church confesses. Unstated reasons undoubtedly included the judgment that Edith Stein concentrated in her life of witness elements that are not always or even often seen together: a life of prayer and renunciation *and* the life of the intellect; a contemplative-intellectual life *and* the fate of the martyr (which of course is the Greek word for “witness”).

**Xavier Tricot, *Le Regarde*
(Edith Stein) (2011);**

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John Paul II was convinced that Catholics should be consoled and cheered by the examples of saints, especially in our modern world, where we might think that they are impossible. The many examples that he holds up suggest that the possibility of sainthood is shown by the fact. For John Paul II, what was truly important about a saint was that he or she is iconic: which means that the saint illustrates a particular way of being faithful to Christ and makes transparent particular aspects of the divine love disclosed in Christ, who is the icon of icons—the archetype and model of all sanctity. John Paul II also had special reasons for this canonization. While he did not want in any way to challenge Jewish specialness with regard to the death camps, he did want to hold up Catholics who lost their lives in the camps, knowing full well that many Catholics behaved abysmally. He also felt that we could look at Edith Stein as showing us how Judaism and Christianity should be seen as intimate (as they were in Jesus Christ), with a suggestion that Christianity cannot afford to leave Judaism out of the economy of salvation. John Paul II spoke of Stein as both “eminent daughter of Israel and a faithful daughter of the Church.” He went on to say that: “Through the experience of the Cross, Edith Stein was able to open the way to a new encounter with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

John Paul II probably had a personal as well as papal stake in getting us to see the latter point. The point would not have been lost on his Polish brothers and sisters in World War II. Perhaps there was also something personal about this canonization in that Edith Stein was a source of inspiration for his philosophy of the body. They travelled a very similar intellectual road—from the rigors of that philosophical movement called Phenomenology (of which I will give a brief digest later), through St. Thomas Aquinas, to the attempt to bring the two together; but this in light

of their service to a God of boundless and infinite love. And in this service, prayer was the bedrock of intellectual work, and intellectual work was finally the expression of prayer, which is the dialogue between ourselves and the triune God who infinitely surpasses us. But maybe their display of unity in the irreducible particularity of a life also is iconic in that in the modern world there seems to be almost an irresistible tendency to pull them apart, and to fall into an unreflective division of labor. It is important to point out that for John Paul II it is the iconic nature of the saint that matters, not the status, which is immeasurably beneath that of Christ. The saint is the object of our respect and love, not our worship. The saint is a light for the world and a light to us. Through the saint we see Christ and are shown ways (more than one) to live the life of discipleship which—and this is the good and bad news all at once—holds the prospect at every moment of truly exorbitant cost.

Icon in Motion

The saint is not a static figure, but always a life in which there is discovery, conversion, and progress, sometimes accompanied by backsliding. The life of Edith Stein illustrates the general rule, while at the same time being totally particular. The basic outline of this life is not difficult to tell. Edith is born in 1891 into a relatively prosperous Jewish family. Her father dies when she is two, leaving her devout Jewish mother with seven children to raise. Her mother turns out to be an accomplished businesswoman, so the family is financially comfortable growing up. Despite her mother's best intentions, Edith does not grow up devout. She is strong-willed, fairly precocious, and grows up to be an intellectually gifted young woman. As she turns twenty, she gets caught up with the movement in philosophy that goes by the name of Phenomenology, which quite literally means: the logic

or rationale of phenomena given in our experience. In the pursuit of this new line of experiential investigation in philosophy, she comes to study with the founder of the movement: that is, Edmund Husserl, who though Protestant also has a Jewish background. The movement of Phenomenology was not just one more local shift of intellectual taste in the twentieth century. For Stein and for other early twentieth-century intellectuals, it represented nothing less than a revolution in philosophical method, in how fundamentally we approach reality. Simply stated, on this view, the entire philosophical tradition is a tissue of concepts that more often conceal than disclose what is given in experience regarding our bodies, time, memory, hope, other selves, our experiences of love (and hate), our experiences of art, and our experiences of the divine. We have to get beneath or behind these concepts to get at something real and to put ourselves in a position whereby we are able to judge what is more or less useful or real in the philosophical tradition. Stein's dissertation, submitted in 1916, was on experience of empathy—our empathy with other selves who are centers of consciousness and agency, but also and especially vulnerable to suffering in body and spirit. The topic of empathy was an interest she shared with another phenomenologist of the period, that is, Max Scheler, who was an important influence on John Paul II's elaboration of Christian personalism. Success at the dissertation (*summa cum laude*) neither immediately nor in the long run turned into an academic position, although she became and remained an assistant of Husserl for some time. There was first the problem of being a woman; in due course there was the even more serious problem of being a Jew.

A key moment—perhaps *the* key moment—in Stein's life comes in 1921 when, left alone in the house of her friends with nothing to do, she picks up and reads the autobiography of Teresa of Ávila (sixteenth-century Carmelite), whom John Paul II made the first woman

Doctor of the Church. The experience is overwhelming for Stein. Teresa had done nothing less, in her view, than reveal the Truth which is encapsulated in the love that God has for us and our love for God that God makes possible. For her this knowledge is practical as well as theoretical: it demands a change in her fundamental orientation and how she should lead her life. This is a conversion experience, and bears all kinds of relation to the conversion of St. Augustine recounted in the *Confessions*. Not only is there in 1921 something equivalent to the *tolle lege* (take up and read) of Book VIII of the *Confessions* (Paul), but this moment crystallizes the subtle changes in perception, attitude, belief, and practice that have been happening over a number of years. It is a moment also to start from; it is a beginning, indeed *the* beginning. The life of Teresa is iconic for Stein, although it will be twelve years (1933) before she takes up the way of the Cross and enters a Carmelite convent (monastery). There is no particular repugnance with respect to the thought, but there is the issue of discernment, the complication of her intellectual vocation, the need to be truly embedded in the Catholic Church, and above all the problem of her mother, whom Stein feels as a devout Jew is able to sustain conversion to Catholicism, but not her entry into an enclosed religious order. The conversion leads to Baptism and Confirmation the following year (1922) and a change in employment status, as Stein leaves behind the role of assistant to her beloved Husserl, and begins life at a Dominican Educational Institute which covers both high school students and trains teachers. She teaches at the Institute for eight years. Her conversion opens up a host of relations with other Catholic intellectuals, most notably Erich Przywara, who was an original synthetic intellect as well as a profound reader of Augustine, and John Henry Newman, the latter two not uninterestingly both themselves converts.

Stein continued to eke out for ten years an academic existence, translating works of religious interest from Spanish to German and from English to German (Newman), and talking and writing widely on the relationship between faith and reason, as well as on women and specifically on what now would be called the question of sexual difference. She also was part of a larger movement which involved the rediscovery of Thomas Aquinas and included Jacques Maritain as it did Przywara. This had to do with an Aquinas who would speak to the concerns of the present moment. That is, Aquinas was read to have an experiential dimension which made sense of his intellectual judgments concerning our relation to God, the world, and to others. In the middle to late 1930s Stein produced her masterpiece on Aquinas called *Finite and Infinite Being*, which continued to show her commitment to Phenomenology while also indicating that Teresa of Ávila, who brought her to the Church, never deserted her. In the German edition of the text, there is a long appendix on Teresa. This large and unwieldy text did not get published in her lifetime (1948). This period in the thirties also saw her entrance into the Carmelites (1933), which caused a real rift (as feared) between herself and her mother. Final vows were taken in 1938, and while Sr. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross was one Carmelite in a convent of twenty and came under the rule of St. Teresa of Ávila, she was allowed to engage in intellectual work and gave talks away from the convent.

By all accounts Stein was a happy Carmelite, convinced that prayer and renunciation brought one closer to God, but also to other selves, by breaking down what impedes pure openness to God's grace. She knew that what got in the way was our ignorance, vanity, and pride, and she believed that the paring away of this false self was the condition of the emergence of a human being who is truly a person and truly relational. She

had an unblinkered view of the Third Reich and saw with alarm the rising hostility towards the Jews in the thirties. In fact, she struck a more than usually ominous note with respect to the likely fate of the Jews, which already was one of protracted and immense suffering. With the implementation of the racial purity laws, however, the Carmelite order moved her to Holland (1938), which was deemed at that point to be safe. It turned out not to be so, as Holland was overpowered shortly after the opening of World War II and was occupied. The Dutch Catholic Church's protest against the Jewish policy of the Third Reich in 1942 brought about the reprisal that all Catholics of Jewish extraction would be treated the same as Jews and be deported. Edith Stein was arrested in early August of 1942, transferred to Auschwitz, gassed immediately on arrival, and was buried in a mass grave. She left behind her sisters in the faith, siblings in Europe and the U.S., and an intellectual world that took her very seriously. On her desk she left an unfinished commentary on St. John of the Cross (the other great Carmelite saint), which was commissioned for the four-hundredth anniversary of his birth. John she regarded as providing an exemplary testimony to what she described as the "Science of the Cross"—a position which one presumes he shares with the other Carmelite genius, Teresa of Ávila.

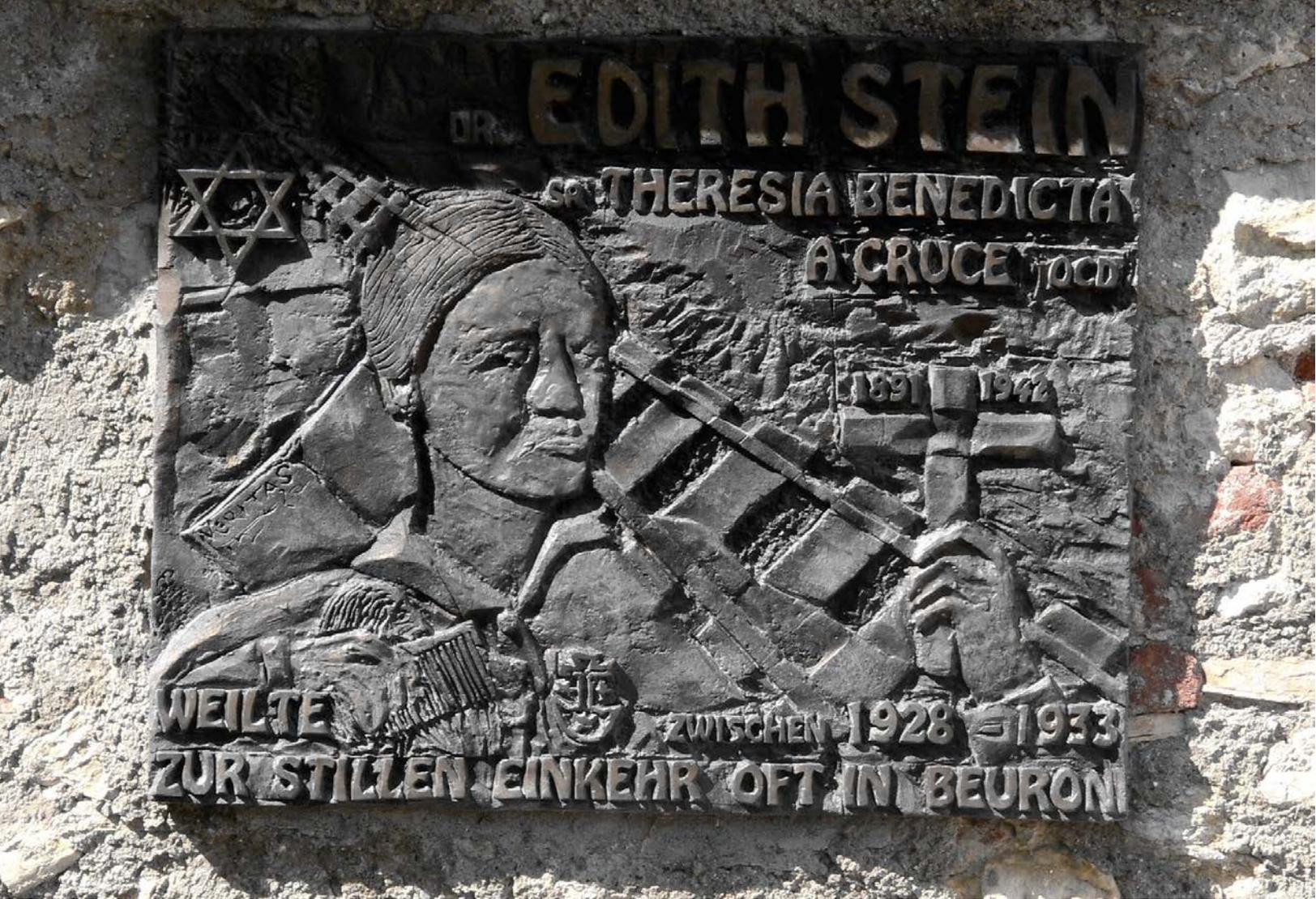
The title *Science of the Cross* proves misleading unless we recall two of the main sources of Stein's thought: Phenomenology on the one hand and Carmelite spirituality on the other. In classic texts of Phenomenology there is much talk of science, but the science referred to is neither that of the natural nor even humanist sciences; nor is it a conceptualist style of philosophy which thinks that its main job is to provide a conceptual grid whereby to comprehend the world and in the process to make faith fully comprehensible. Rather, science is the discipline of describing a

particular phenomenon as adequately as possible and tracing the lines of relation with other phenomena. In short, science is experiential all the way through. From Carmelite spirituality Stein learned that there exists an intuited center from which everything else flows in an ordered way in the spiritual life, which is nothing but ordinary faith in an intensive form. What is at the center is the Cross of Christ and what that Cross suggests in terms not only of what we see but also what we do and how we shape our lives. Crucially—she had learned this from Teresa and John—the way of the Cross is not marked by consolations and spiritual ecstasies: the kind of gifts that might encourage the man or woman on the journey to feel self-satisfied in that one finds one’s efforts rewarded.

In her commentary, which is arguably her second masterpiece, Stein thinks of the science of the Cross as finding its experiential center in concepts and images of darkness, the darkness that seems to testify more nearly to the absence of God than God’s presence, the abandoning of all hope rather than its sustaining, the darkness that speaks to the dryness of the spirit—its desert—rather than the spirit which has been irrigated by divine gift. Notice that in St. John of the Cross darkness is not simply a function of the fact that God and darkness go together insofar as God is infinite and we are finite and that therefore our knowledge is inadequate regarding God, indeed a form of ignorance even if special in kind. Overall, Stein has no doubt that darkness is the site of love, indeed is the crossing point of all human and divine love: our love for God and our love for each other and God’s love for us which enables our love of the other and perhaps even our own love of ourselves. She says at one point that Carmel is about nothing else than the love of God, but for her this love embraces all of reality. John Paul II does not forget this in his homily on her canonization. Love is perception; love is action; love is form of life. And it is revealed—

paradoxically precisely by not being revealed—in extreme moments of our lives which are lives of trial, where we waver between constancy and inconstancy.

When it comes to John of the Cross, perhaps we can say that there is no mystic of the Christian tradition—with the possible exception of St. Bernard of Clairvaux—where the emphasis falls so sharply on love; and certainly there is no mystic in the Christian tradition who is quite the poet. John writes original poems that are effectively the companions of the Song of Songs, then proceeds to interpret them in the way other mystics interpret the Song of Songs, as being the nuptials of the Church and Christ and the individual and Christ. And perhaps no mystic is as emphatic about the gap between our expectation and God’s disclosure to us in hiddenness which can seem like divine absence. In the obscure dark (*La Noche oscura*) God seems absent; the love or *eros* of the soul does not meet with a consoling presence. The dark is paradoxical and genuinely holy. It is a trial of the greatest renunciation in which God cannot be a prop and in which we need a faith beyond faith, a hope beyond hope, and a love beyond love. One of the more adequate modern verbal expressions of John of the Cross’ central insight can be found in T.S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets*. The third section of the second of the four poems, “East Coker,” begins with the lines “Oh dark dark dark. They all go into the dark.” While this could be an evocation of John of the Cross, it could also refer to any number of texts in the Western literary tradition, or evoke the Psalms, or perhaps none of these things. But that John of the Cross is being recalled is suggested when ten lines or so later we find: “I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come upon you/which is the darkness of God.” And the recall of St. John of the Cross is demonstrated when the dialogue between the I and the soul continues.



A plaque honoring Edith Stein on the exterior wall of the Beuron Abbey Church (Germany).

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*I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope
For hope would be the hope for the wrong thing; wait without
Love
For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith
But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.*

Eliot knew what St. John of the Cross knew; that the deepest form of life is not about the subtleties of knowing, even finding out that there is a non-grasping, non-controlling form of knowing. More important is a non-controlling, receptive, and accepting form of existence towards others and the world, and especially the divine Person that grounds everything; a life steeped in gratitude for each day, each encounter, for friends and family, for a book read or left unread because there is something more important to do. Gratitude here responding to what is rightly perceived as gift.

St. John of the Cross is able to illustrate in and through a mastery of language that is a match for his spiritual insight into what Christian life is truly about. But it is not as if Edith has displaced St. Teresa from her affections. John and Teresa are brother and sister; the hyperbole of the one is balanced by the sharp non-nonsense of the other; the drama that is the hallmark of the spiritual life for John is balanced by Teresa's emphasis on the progress of the Carmelite which cannot be expected to be absolutely smooth. Nor does Edith see that a choice has been made between John of the Cross and Thomas Aquinas. If John of the Cross is a rigorous thinker as well as an ecstatic, then Thomas Aquinas is a spiritual master as well as the greatest of Scholastics, and a thinker the match of the modern greats, even or especially her beloved Edmund Husserl, and greater than the thinker who in the eyes of many displaced him—Martin Heidegger, who traveled a very different path than Stein, having had among other things a serious flirtation with National Socialism.

Stein's commentary on the works of St. John of the Cross is so extraordinarily faithful as to seem almost slavish. But since the time of her conversion from reading Teresa's life (her adopted name), she understood that Truth has leverage over all our sophistications. John speaks the truth as did Teresa, and one bows to this. But one is bowing to the Truth, not to them, although one is extraordinarily grateful to them for the way in which they make the Truth transparent. This Truth is Christ, and our way into the darkness of God who is the light of our life. We are to give ourselves up in trust so that the lavish but undemonstrative love of God will sustain us in all the hours of our life and the great hour of our death. We give ourselves in a faith beyond faith, a hope beyond hope, and a love that can never grasp its object. God is beyond our technique. This faith, hope, and love which remains unextinguished in the darkest hours of our lives are

not simply ours. The community of Carmel is not just a stage prop for each sister to become a member of a spiritual elite. The love of community makes love essentially communitarian. One wishes that the love of God transform all hearts and that the fire of love would be lit outside and inside the enclosure. This love is profligate, having no measure either in terms of depth or scope. We cannot even say that it begins and ends in the Church, for there are the original pilgrims, the Jews from whence our Lord comes. Going into the dark, as going into the light, is not something that a person who is truly a person does alone. In the convent (monastery) each sister remains tied to every other in love. But the convent is only the site of the experiment in which the world is reformed and brought to its proper self. To move from the convent to the world is to be nothing more than a leaven. And in the real and baleful history of the era of the Third Reich there is a darkness that is just the opposite of the darkness of God into which we can move with trust. One week after she is taken by the Gestapo from her convent and transported to the death camps of Eastern Europe, Edith Stein is dead, gassed with some fellow Catholic Jews, including her sister Rosa, her friend Renete Frederike Kantorowicz (who typed her manuscripts) and her godchild Alice Maria Reis. She and her sisters in faith die with numerous other Jews to whom she always felt tied, and with whose suffering she wished to be in solidarity through the mystery of the suffering of the Jewish Christ. Going into the dark night is going into the night with them in the conviction that God's lavish love reaches them in this night of history and insanity.

From the vantage point of John Paul II, Stein is nothing less than a parable of what Christian-Jewish relations can be in their tonality: a hospitality that is grounded in the love of God that is stronger than death and harder than hell. And this is why it would have served neither Jewish nor Christian purposes for her canonization to

have been held up. The point is not to create another idol, but to put forth an icon allowing us to see what a pure waiting on God in a horrendous moment of history looks like, where the waiting is not solitary but a waiting with and indeed for others, and especially with our Jewish brothers and sisters. This waiting, which is recommended to be a posture in all moments, in all activities, domestic, manual labor, intellectual work, is also a waiting in the hour of our death, whether this comes naturally or from the insanity of history. In the darkness of an unjust death there is the even greater darkness of God which is coming to meet all who are in Auschwitz. The science of the Cross is not simply piety; it is the stance towards the horrors of history. This is the stance of Edith as she makes her way naked towards the ovens with her Jewish and Catholic Jewish sisters in Auschwitz.

When Stein died in conscious solidarity with her Jewish as well as Christian sisters, her commentary on St. John of the Cross, *The Science of the Cross*, lay unfinished on the table in her cell in the convent at Echt in Holland. What is crucial about this science is that it has as its model the discipleship presented in the Gospels where supernatural faith, hope, and charity replace our standard operating procedures. Stein recognizes with Eliot that here faith, hope, and love have lost the objects to which they usually refer, and are purified in the dark knowledge which is the knowledge of God. The foundational poem of all poems in the corpus of John of the Cross is the "Dark Night" (*Noche Oscura / Dunkle Nacht*). Here are verses one and four in Stein's own rendition, which wrings some small changes on John:

One dark night,

As love's yearning did enflame me

I escaped unnoticed

O happy fate!

I escaped unnoticed

When my house lay at rest so still. (43)

And this conducted me

Far surer than the light of brightest day

Thence, where for me eagerly was waiting

He whom I knew so well,

Aside, there where no one could part us. (44)

John is a guide towards the Cross; he is our companion; but the Cross is a decision: it will be embraced or refused by each of us. The final word should be given to Edith Stein or St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross. From *The Science of the Cross* we read an analysis that is become testimony:

No human heart ever entered as dark a night as did the God-man in Gethsemane and on Golgotha. No searching human spirit can penetrate the unfathomable mystery of the dying God-man's abandonment by God. But Jesus can give to some chosen souls some taste of this extreme bitterness. They are his most faithful friends from whom he exacts the final test of their love. If they do not shrink back from it but allow themselves to be drawn willingly into the dark night, it will become their leader. . . . This is the great experience of the cross: extreme abandonment, and precisely in this abandonment, union with the Crucified. . . . Cross and the night are the way to heavenly light: that is the joyful message of the cross. (30-31)



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