

Lessons of Faith: By Pope Francis and Edith Stein, The Truth-Is-Love-Is-Truth and Divine Mercy

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One of my millennial son's is a mystery and a mover. Like Pope Francis he shares a love for the humble yet direct approach of St. Francis of Assisi. With few words these caring men sometimes touch your conscience inspiring contemplation and action. While sharing a veggie burger my son suddenly blurted out, "Mom, you should learn what the saints feast-day is for every day of the year!" This thought-provoking message, delivered in sincere candor, surprised me considering the source. A bright, persuasive, young man but charmingly rebellious when it comes to faith and family tradition. Preferring to sample various off the beaten tracks on his life journey. His startling question that day brought me a smile while igniting the candle of hope, calming a mother's aching heart. Inspiring peaceful thought that hopefully his Judeo-Christian roots are deeply embedded, just needing more time to bloom-according to God's plan. Oh that darn ideal virtue of parents-called patience! I asked him why he suggested I take on the feat of knowing the feasts of saints of the day. He unexpectedly responded, "It's interesting and cool."

The inspiration for sharing lessons in faith was triggered by another catalyst, an expert in Thomas Aquinas thought. Out of the blue, my Columbia University professor-friend sent a message wishing me a "Happy Edith Stein Feast-Day." I reflected on his being Catholic and his wife being Jewish, religion and politics stimulating constant invigorating debate in their Judeo-Christian household. The last time we were all together was at a private Mass held in my friend's Jewish family home with his Jewish in-laws and his devoutly Catholic mother and an Irish-Catholic priest. It was a beautiful, loving Judeo-Christian shared values experience, leaving an indelible memory and mark for all present.

Once again I recall my son's unexpected nudging to be "interesting and cool" by sharing the significance of holy feast-days, connecting my research and life experiences to theological discourse, hence this piece came to be written.

Truth and Love

In the Catholic Church, German-Jewish convert saint Edith Stein is called the “Martyr of Love.” Her feast-day honoring her life and death is August 9, marking the date she together with her sister Rosa, also a convert to Christianity, were both sent to their death by Nazis at Auschwitz Concentration Camp in Poland for being Jewish. *Tish’a B’Ab*, the Ninth day of the Month of Ab, is an annual day of black fast in mourning memory of the destruction of the first and second Temples in Jerusalem. It is notable that the death CERTIFICATION issued by the Chief of the Settlement Bureau for Jewish Affairs of the Netherlands Red Cross Bureau of Information confirms that according to the papers kept in archives, Edith Teresa Hedwig Stein, born October 12, 1891 in Breslau, Germany (now Poland) with last residence at the Monastery of the Carmelite Nuns in Echt, Holland was arrested on August 2, 1942 and it states in capital letters: “FOR REASONS OF RACE, AND SPECIFICALLY BECAUSE OF JEWISH DESCENT.” The last recorded words of Edith Stein while she and her sister marched to their death in the gas chamber were, “Come, we are going for our people!” Poignantly, this “Martyr of Love” left humanity a legacy of lessons in faith with courage. Spiritual food for thought are her words, “Do not accept anything as the truth if it lacks love. And do not accept anything as love which lacks truth.”

Edith Stein was born on the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the Jewish year. She was of superior intellect and became a doctor of philosophy. On her faith journey she first became atheist and then she was inspired by reading the biography of St. Teresa of Avila, a 16th century Spanish mystic who founded the Discalced Carmelites and is a renowned Doctor of the Catholic Church. Edith experienced the desire to convert to Christ and was baptized on January 1, 1922. She then chose to consecrate her life to Jesus as a Carmelite nun, taking the name Teresa Benedicta of the Cross. It is written of her in the autobiographical book, “Life in A Jewish Family” that her given name Edith indicates her rich gift:

*the beloved daughter of a Jewish Family, a staunch German patriot,
a young woman, confident in her academic world,
a philosopher whose depth of empathy helped her
to establish and maintain warm relationships.
As a Carmelite, she came to see with clarity
what awaited her, her people, Germany, and the world.*

Edith Stein longed for the meaning of life which lead to her conversion and writings, “My desire for the truth was one sole prayer.”

Imagination and Conscience

We learn from the lives of saints and people in our midst that our moral vision is greatly influenced by others. Our conscience is innate, chosen and formed by our social world. Another perspective is that our imagination is the result of life experiences. This thought clearly informs humans to consider the company they keep, the role models they emulate, the school they attend, the media they listen to, what books they read and movies they see, if their desire is to be influenced in a virtuous way.

The weight of concern is growing heavy on parents trying to ensure good moral grounding in the new millennium and how to foster a righteous moral culture in the community at large. There is intense competition for souls and temptation to follow diverse moral norms. Knowing the “truth” for conscience formation and moral guidance is an ongoing challenge for understanding and choosing. Personal reflection validates the assertion that family, religion, the entertainment world, social activities and network of friends play a vital part in forming our conscience and influencing our moral choices.

When considering “how” the imagination is formed, we discover in the book *Making Disciples* by author Timothy E. O’Connell that research by Antonio Damasio illustrates “Imagination is rooted in life experience.” O’Connell then asserts, “Imagination actually precipitates experience” and that both are part of “the real world.” Contemporary support for this argument can be found in lessons from the entertainment world. One may recall the popular baseball film, “Field of Dreams.” Kevin Costner, the lead actor, plays a farmer from Iowa grappling with a conscience full of regrets, the threat of losing his farm by bankruptcy and intense desire for dream fulfillment. He imagines a baseball diamond on his remote rural cornfield and he envisions a favorite old-time player from the Chicago White Sox at the mound. When he opens his eyes after his creative images, he says to his wife and children, “If I build it, he will come.”

In the film, he does build it and “he” does come. Not only does the famous player show up but also his deceased father with whom he had unsettled business and many fans come to watch the game in his front yard alleviating the concern for financial ruin. Leaving one to ponder, which came first the fulfilled experience or the image? From a moral perspective, did his imagination compel him to “think outside the box” for ways to confront his conscience, saving his family’s farm and their livelihood? The answer is affirmative in this article.

Spirituality and Reality

When considering spiritual exercises, as a Jesuit, Pope Francis would submit that it is also useful to discuss “Ignatian Contemplation” which teaches, “Imagination is the privileged pathway through which God can touch our hearts and minds and transform our lives.” By emulating the teachings of St. Ignatius of Loyola one is told to close their eyes and imagine being with Jesus or in a Scripture setting.

When addressing the role of images in shaping vision and directing a way of life I found “imagination” with the help of an Ignatian-trained spiritual director offered a life-transforming experience. On one such occasion after being told to close my eyes and imagine myself at the Sea of Galilee I witnessed a violent storm taking place. The spiritual guide told me to look at the boat arriving at the end of the pier and to see Jesus in it. He challenged me to imagine whether I would get into the boat with Jesus or was I too afraid.

This “image” was a profound spiritual experience. I actually saw Jesus in Technicolor and heard Him in Bose sound. I felt His warm presence. He was tall and handsome dressed in a blue and white robe with a gold colored rope belt tied around His waist. He was wearing brown leather sandals. He had long wavy light brown hair with a matching moustache and short beard. He was standing at the back of a small grey and white fisherman’s boat facing toward me. The paint was peeling from the side of the ancient vessel that was filled with fishermen nets stacked in the front. His graceful arms were held wide open waiting for the dozen or so people standing with me on the shore. At first He did not speak with His voice, only with His penetrating blue-green, brown rimmed eyes and His captivating body language.

Dressed in a long white dress, barefoot with my hair flowing in the wind, I remember the excitement within me when I saw Him. My breathing became shallow. I could not wait to touch Him and to speak to Him. I desired to be His alone. I was the only one who ran to Him and boarded the boat. It was rocking back and forth and when I approached, it suddenly became still. Practically flying along the pier I dove into the calm boat throwing my elated body to the floor and wrapping my arms around Jesus’ feet breathlessly exclaiming, “I want to go with You!”

His strong hands embraced my head lifting it up. He stared at me for what seemed a lifetime with His gentle smile. He transmitted his pulsating energy to me through His deft fingers and then with a commanding declaration He said, “Not yet Noel, I have more work for you to do.” Gazing in His eyes I responded with total surrender and commitment, “I’m ready.” When I opened my eyes I felt that I was

a true disciple of Jesus Christ. My body was overflowing with fearless energy, my mind was at peace, my heart was filled with passion and my soul was on fire. He was finally answering my prayers to use me in any way that He sees fit for as long and for as much work as He desires.

O'Connell writes, "Imagination is a key tool in making of disciples." I concur with his assertion. Not only was this "imagination" a significant spiritual exercise at the time it took place, but it has also continued to be a memorable life changing experience. Actually being with Jesus for those emotional moments has affected my ethical thought process and moral decisions. I now turn to His words and actions found in the New Testament for guidance. I also look to the Old Testament trying to discern what did He want His disciples to continue from the early biblical teachings before The Incarnation. This and other personal experiences validate for me the power of The Holy Spirit and strong connection between imagination, vision, experiences, conscience and actions.

Passion and Transformation

As an example of the "role of images" that can lead to an illumination of conscience and a "moral conversion," I submit another "Jesus" experience resulting from images in the moving Mel Gibson film, "Passion of the Christ." Accompanying me for the opening night was a close friend and minister from First AME Church. She brought a lady Rabbi with her who told us she was speaking to her congregation the next day to report just how "anti-Semitic" the film really was or was not, given all the publicity and different points of view expressed. We sat together and the images we shared that evening were extremely disturbing, bringing us both to tears. The pain and suffering of Jesus was portrayed so realistic that we could not speak for several minutes after the film ended. We were both shaken by the images. The Rabbi embraced me and said, "I had no idea." Holding each other, I said, "Jesus was Jewish and his Mother Mary was Jewish, how can Christians not love every Jewish person and everything that is Jewish?" The Rabbi said she would tell her community the film was not "anti-Semitic" that she was moved by the love and sacrifice of the story.

For me, the images of Christ's Passion were the spark for desiring an interior life. Each time Jesus was beaten, or ridiculed or spat at or fell on His cross I loved Him more and more and I wanted to carry His cross for Him. I still do.

The enormity of the human suffering of The Holocaust during World War II is almost unbearable to consider. I recall visiting Mauthausen Concentration Camp located behind a pretty tree-lined street of Austrian cottages. Standing with my Jewish best friend by ourselves in the gas chamber, we were overcome with the desolate feeling of how can humans do this to one another. How can people smell

the burning flesh in their nearby homes and not do something about it? As a Christian, I believe God is love and that God wants all of His children to be saved, if they desire to be.

Pope Francis consecrated 2016 “The Year of Divine Mercy” with daily worldwide prayers for extra graces of reconciliation for humanity. At Auschwitz Pope Francis recently wrote in the visitor book, “Lord have mercy on your people. Lord forgive so much cruelty.” It is the hardness of hearts that must undergo transformation for good to prevail.

Edith Stein teaches in her book “The Science of the Cross” how we can be formed to holiness, experience conversion phenomena by illumination of consciences and passionate desire for the way, the truth and the life eternally. Upon reflection, my desire to help carry Jesus’ cross and delve deeply into theology was partly inspired by these intense experiences of “real” images. To sum it up, the power of what we learn from Sacred Scripture, undertaking a prayer life and allowing imagination from life experiences including films, family, friends and foe of all faiths or no faith help form our conscience, our character and our actions. Most importantly we become closer to God, desiring to please Him above all else. This is what Edith Stein discovered and shares with humanity. She expressed the faithful thought, “What was not included in my plans lay in God’s plan.” O’Connell speaks of the image of Christians becoming “spiritual Semites” attributing this notion to the shared identity with the Jewish people “who were called as God’s people and remain that people today,” asserting “Christians have much to learn from their Jewish fellows.”

The Jewish-Catholic saint Edith Stein insightfully wrote a compelling call to action with Divine grace, “Do you want to be totally united to the Crucified? If you are serious about this, you will be present, by the power of His Cross, at every front, at every place of sorrow, bringing to those who suffer comfort, healing and salvation.”

Brothers and Sisters, Sons and Daughters, Alleluia, Amen.