



AUSTRALIAN CENTRE FOR  
**CHRISTIANITY AND CULTURE**  
WISDOM FOR THE COMMON GOOD

20th Sunday in Ordinary Time

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14 August 2022

Jeremiah 38:4-6,8-10; Psalm 40; Hebrews 12:1-4; Luke 12:49-53

Listen at <https://soundcloud.com/frank-brennan-6/homily-14822>

Jesus confronts us with a troubling declaration in today's gospel: "I have come to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were blazing already." He says he has come not to bring peace on earth, but division. On account of his message, households will be divided – three against two, father against son, daughter against mother etc. This is all so contrary to our sugar-coated version of Jesus who is always proclaiming a message of peace, love, reconciliation and forgiveness. So what are we to make of it? Scripture scholar Luke Timothy Johnson says, "The effect of his mission, he declares, is not the sort of peace by which domestic tranquillity is undisturbed. Indeed, the precise point of the prophetic challenge is to divide the people."<sup>1</sup>

The attentive reader of Luke's gospel recalls the prophecy of Simeon when Jesus was presented in the Temple by his parents. Simeon blessed "the child's father and mother and said to Mary: 'Look, he is destined for the fall and for the rise of many in Israel, destined to be a sign that is opposed – and a sword will pierce your soul too – so that the secret thoughts of many may be laid bare.'"<sup>2</sup>

Trying to make sense and draw some fruit from these deliberately conflictual words of Jesus in today's gospel, I have been reflecting on the feast of Teresa Benedicta of the Cross which we celebrated during the week. On Tuesday, it was 80 years to the day since Edith Stein died in the gas chamber at Auschwitz. As a child in her Jewish family, she became an atheist. Very bright, she went on to study philosophy, being mentored by the phenomenologist Edmund Husserl. Having read an autobiography of St Teresa of Avila, she became a Catholic and then a Carmelite nun. When the Nazis started hunting down Jews, her superiors moved

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<sup>1</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, Sacra Pagina Series (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991), p. 209.

<sup>2</sup> Luke 2:34-35.



her to a convent in the Netherlands. When the Dutch bishops spoke out against the Nazis, the Nazis rounded up Jews in the Netherlands who had converted to Christianity and sent them to join millions of other Jews being processed through the gas chambers.

On Tuesday, Michael Czerny, the Canadian Jesuit Cardinal and Prefect of the Vatican's Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, went to Auschwitz to celebrate mass at the Carmelite monastery there. He delivered a very moving homily, disclosing that he too had Jewish forbears who had perished during the Shoah. He spoke of his mother's family – "both parents and two brothers – were also Catholic but shared the Jewish origins that the enemy abhorred. My maternal grandmother Anna, my grandfather Hans and my uncles Georg and Carl Robert, were all interned in Terezín, where Hans died. My grandmother and uncles were transported to Auschwitz. From here my uncles were sent to labour camps and eventually murdered there."<sup>3</sup> His grandmother Anna Löw later died and the family knows not where.

In his homily, Cardinal Czerny said: "Auschwitz links the witness and dispersed ashes of St Teresa Benedicta of the Cross with my grandmother's story and spirit, wherever her remains may lie. For me it is very moving to celebrate Edith Stein's 80th anniversary and, at the same time and place, the 77th of Anna Löw, to mourn my grandmother and honour her, to think of her reunited with all our family and also with St Teresa Benedicta."<sup>4</sup>

It is always difficult, as it should be, for a Christian to talk about the suffering and death caused to 6 million Jews during the Shoah. Given his family heritage, Cardinal Czerny was well placed to say things which others of us could not say, without risking offence or misunderstanding.

Earlier in his homily, Michael Czerny said: "On 12 April 1933, Edith Stein addressed a heartfelt letter to the aging Pope Pius XI urging him to break his silence and speak out against all expressions of antisemitism. In fact, in March 1998, the Church formally apologised for failing to take more decisive action during World War II to challenge the Nazi regime about its racist and antisemitic policies and the Endlösung or so-called final solution to the Jewish problem." It was the simple phrase 'In fact' that jarred with me, and has stayed with me as I have contemplated today's gospel about Jesus bringing a fire and division on

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Czerny, 'A life spent in love: On the 80th anniversary of Edith Stein's heavenly birthday', *Thinking Faith*, 8 August 2022, available at <https://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/life-spent-love-80th-anniversary-edith-stein's-heavenly-birthday>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.



earth rather than peace. Jesus came into a world and we inhabit a world where fire and division continue to be necessary if we are ever to come to complete truth, love, and peace. We need to be attentive to the voices of those who incarnate the tensions of our history and reality.

Let's face it. Pope Pius XI never answered Edith Stein's letter in 1933. And the Church's formal apology 65 years later entitled *We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah* was not all that it could have been. Four years after Edith sent her letter, Pius XI did issue his encyclical letter *Mit brennender Sorge*. This is the description given in the 1998 document *We Remember*: "Pope Pius XI too condemned Nazi racism in a solemn way in his Encyclical Letter *Mit brennender Sorge*, which was read in German churches on Passion Sunday 1937, a step which resulted in attacks and sanctions against members of the clergy. Addressing a group of Belgian pilgrims on 6 September 1938, Pius XI asserted: 'Anti-Semitism is unacceptable. Spiritually, we are all Semites.'"<sup>5</sup>

Seven months after the publication of *We Remember*, Pope John Paul II canonised Edith Stein. 97 of Edith's family members attended the canonisation mass in St Peter's Square. Some media reporters, observing the gigantic statues of the apostles above the piazza, noted: "The Jews who had founded the original church, witnessing another Jew being received into the community of saints of the church." One of the family members in attendance was Stein's niece, Susanne M. Batzdorff. Reflecting on the canonisation, she reviewed the document *We Remember* and Pius XI's encyclical. She noted: "Neither Edith Stein's letter nor the arguments of other, more prominent personages impelled Pope Pius XI to issue an encyclical condemning anti-Semitism. It is often said that his encyclical *Mit Brennender Sorge*, published in 1937, was a response to Edith Stein's plea. This document, however, was not issued until four years after she wrote her letter, and it did not mention the Jews."<sup>6</sup>

Church leaders like our own Australian Cardinal Edward Cassidy who was president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity did a power of work to have the 1998 apology published and promoted, while admitting,

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<sup>5</sup> Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity, *We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah*, 16 March 1998, available at <http://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/commissione-per-i-rapporti-religiosi-con-l-ebraismo/commissione-per-i-rapporti-religiosi-con-l-ebraismo-crrre/documenti-della-commissione/en1.html>

<sup>6</sup> Suzanne M Batzdorff, 'Edith Stein's Niece on what her canonisation means for Catholic-Jewish dialogue, America, 13 February 1999, available at <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/1999/02/13/edith-steins-niece-what-her-canonization-means-catholic-jewish-dialogue>



"Nothing is closed with this document."<sup>7</sup> When *We Remember* was published, Jewish leaders were gracious while insisting that it fell short of what was hoped for. For example, Efraim Zuroff, director of the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Jerusalem, said, "Unfortunately, it does not unequivocally take responsibility for the teachings of the church that created the atmosphere that ultimately led to the Holocaust, and to the participation of numerous believing persons in that crime." Stein's niece said that "in general, Jewish leaders expressed disappointment and dismay with the statement."<sup>8</sup>

At Edith's canonisation, Pope John Paul II said, "From now on, as we celebrate the memory of this new saint from year to year, we must also remember the Shoah, that cruel plan to exterminate a people – a plan to which millions of our Jewish brothers and sisters fell victim."<sup>9</sup> Edith's niece Susanne wrote: "There is something troubling to those of us who are Jewish in regarding as a symbol for Jews a woman who turned away from Judaism and embraced Christianity."<sup>10</sup>

After the canonisation, Susanne wrote: "In a small way, the family of Edith Stein mirrors the whole human family. Just as the members of the Stein family could come together for the canonization despite their different backgrounds and beliefs, so Jews and Christians can come together in an atmosphere of peace and good will. They can open a dialogue to reach some understanding and find a way to bridge their differences. In the confines of the extended Stein family, we find various religious allegiances represented. At times our discussions can become quite heated, but we respect each other's right to differ. After the political upheavals that scattered us in all directions, we refuse to allow ideological or religious differences to tear us apart. Our basic entity as family must remain a unifying principle."<sup>11</sup>

As we wrestle with the big intractable questions from our past, questions that still confront us in our present, let's thank God for those like Michael Czerny and Susanne M. Batzdorff who carry with them the creative tension of the fire and division which avoid the quietism and compromise of the passive acceptance of enduring injustice suffered by the powerless posturing as peace on earth.

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<sup>7</sup> 'The Vatican and the Holocaust: The Overview', New York Times, 17 March 1998.

<sup>8</sup> 'Vatican Apologises to Jews', Washington Post, 17 March 1998.

<sup>9</sup> Pope John Paul II, Homily for the Canonization of Edith Stein, 11 October 1998, available at [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/1998/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_hom\\_11101998\\_stein.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/1998/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_11101998_stein.html)

<sup>10</sup> Batzdorff, 'Edith Stein's Niece'.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.



Troubled by today's gospel, we can affirm Pope John Paul's II observation at the 1998 canonisation of Edith Stein: 'St Teresa Benedicta of the Cross says to us all: Do not accept anything as the truth if it lacks love. And do not accept anything as love which lacks truth! One without the other becomes a destructive lie.'<sup>12</sup>

R. Lord, come to my aid!

I have waited, waited for the LORD,  
and he stooped toward me.

R. Lord, come to my aid!

The LORD heard my cry.  
He drew me out of the pit of destruction,  
out of the mud of the swamp;  
he set my feet upon a crag;  
he made firm my steps.

R. Lord, come to my aid!

And he put a new song into my mouth,  
a hymn to our God.  
Many shall look on in awe  
and trust in the LORD.

R. Lord, come to my aid!

Though I am afflicted and poor,  
yet the LORD thinks of me.  
You are my help and my deliverer;  
O my God, hold not back!

R. Lord, come to my aid!

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<sup>12</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Homily for the Canonization of Edith Stein*, 11 October 1998.