

# Those who remain silent will be complicit

## Edith Stein to Pope Pius XI

Publications in the Educational Center of the Archdiocese of Freiburg  
Freiburg. i.Br. 11/2017  
Germany

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**The letter by Edith Stein to Pope Pius XI is a first-class historical document. What the highly educated student of the famous philosopher Edmund Husserl and the future Carmelite wrote to Rome about the beginning darkness in Germany is explosive and prophetic in every respect. Unfortunately, the letter was not accessible to the public for seventy years.**

**In the Vatican's view, it was missing. Edith had left no copy. However, when parts of the Pontifical Secret Archives for Nazi research (2003) were opened, the letter was discovered and published.**



In spring 1933, Dr. Edith Stein was forty-three years old and a respected philosopher. In addition, she was an appreciated expert in theological and pedagogical fields beyond national boundaries. In the theological field, for example, she made a name for herself in ecclesiastical circles with various translations and commentaries, especially about the opus of Saint Thomas Aquinas.

Eleven years before, as an atheist from a formerly strictly religious Jewish parental home, she converted to the Christian faith. On January 1, 1922, she was baptized and became a member of the Catholic Church. However, she always stayed connected to her Jewish roots.

In 1933, Cardinal Secretary of State was Eugenio Pacelli – the later Pius XII. He knew Edith Stein and her work. They met once when Pacelli was still a nuncio in Germany. He came to Speyer to join the celebration of the 700-year jubilee of St. Magdalena. Edith Stein had been chosen to welcome the nuncio in the name of the teaching staff.

In March 1933, Edith Stein had already assessed the new Nazi government very critically. Alarmed by the first anti-Semitic riots instigated by the Nazi leaders, she wanted Rome to intervene. She planned to get a private audience with Pope Pius XI. She wanted to inform his Holiness face-to-face about the situation in

Germany and to beseech him to publish an encyclical or at least a papal declaration against the growing violent anti-Semitism.

After Edith had determined whether there was any opportunity to get a private audience with the pope in Rome, she put that ambitious project out of her mind. She was told that it was completely hopeless to meet the pope, especially in the “Holy Year” of 1933. At best, she could attend a general, silent audience in a group of pilgrims. It is not known whether Edith had requested this on her own in Rome or whether she used the assistance of the nunciature in Berlin or contacts of the Archabbey Beuron.

The bureaucratic rejection of Rome disappointed Edith Stein. Edith did not want to accept the argument that it was the “Holy Year of Redemption” and that the pope had no time for such private audiences. Ironically, this year – the celebration of salvation by the Jewish Messiah Jesus Christ, exactly 1,900 years ago – was more suitable for Edith Stein than any other year to make the new persecution of the Jews in the middle of Christian Europe a topic of the highest priority by the deputy of Jesus of Nazareth. She soon made up her mind to write at least a personal letter to the pope. If she was not welcomed, she might be able to put a strongly worded letter on the desk of Pope Pius XI.

Edith Stein turned to Archabbot Raphael Walzer of Beuron Monastery. The abbot had been her spiritual mentor for years, and he knew Cardinal Secretary of State Pacelli very well. Father Walzer could send her letter directly to the Apostolic Palace.

When Edith came to Beuron in the holy week at the beginning of April, she gave Abbot Walzer a sealed envelope with the letter to Pius XI. Father Walzer agreed to send her letter to Pacelli with an enclosed letter of recommendation. Based on everything we know, the archabbot did not insist on reading or correcting the text. He sent the sealed letter to Rome.

The Secretary of State Pacelli handed the letter “dutifully,” as he expressed it, to Pope Pius XI. The latter could read the original letter since he understood German quite well. Edith Stein had typed the letter neatly on two pages. She signed with “Dr. Edith Stein” and her professional title. A date is missing; presumably, it was the 8th or 9th of April 1933. She had written the letter in the city of Muenster shortly before her departure to Beuron, where she usually witnessed holy week and the Easter celebrations.

**Here is a copy of the original letter from the papal secret archives:**

Heiliger Vater !

Als ein Kind des jüdischen Volkes, das durch Gottes Gnade seit elf Jahren ein Kind der katholischen Kirche ist, wage ich es, vor dem Vater der Christenheit auszusprechen, was Millionen von Deutschen bedrückt.

Seit Wochen sehen wir in Deutschland Taten geschehen, die jeder Gerechtigkeit und Menschlichkeit - von Nächstenliebe gar nicht zu reden - Hohn sprechen. Jahre hindurch haben die nationalsozialistischen Führer den Judenhass gepredigt. Nachdem sie jetzt die Regierungsgewalt in ihre Hände gebracht und ihre Anhängerschaft - darunter nachweislich verbrecherische Elemente - bewaffnet hatten, ist diese Saat des Hasses aufgegangen. Dass Ausschreitungen vorgekommen sind, wurde noch vor kurzem von der Regierung zugegeben. In welchem Umfang, davon können wir uns kein Bild machen, weil die öffentliche Meinung geknebelt ist. Aber nach dem zu urteilen, was mir durch persönliche Beziehungen bekannt geworden ist, handelt es sich keineswegs um vereinzelte Ausnahmefälle. Unter dem Druck der Auslandsstimmen ist die Regierung zu „milderen“ Methoden übergegangen. Sie hat die Parole ausgegeben, es solle „keinem Juden ein Haar gekrümmt werden“. Aber sie treibt durch ihre Boykotterklärung - dadurch, dass sie den Menschen wirtschaftliche Existenz, bürgerliche Ehre und ihr Vaterland nimmt - viele zur Verzweiflung: es sind mir in der letzten Woche durch private Nachrichten 5 Fälle von Selbstmord infolge dieser Anfeindungen bekannt geworden. Ich bin überzeugt, dass es sich um eine allgemeine Erscheinung handelt, die noch viele Opfer fordern wird. Man mag bedauern, dass die Unglücklichen nicht mehr inneren Halt haben, um ihr Schicksal zu tragen. Aber die Verantwortung fällt doch zum grossen Teil auf die, die sie so weit brachten. Und sie fällt auch auf die, die dazu schweigen.



Alles, was geschehen ist und noch täglich geschieht, geht von einer Regierung aus, die sich „christlich“ nennt. Seit Wochen warten und hoffen nicht nur die Juden, sondern Tausende treuer Katholiken in Deutschland - und ich denke, in der ganzen Welt - darauf, dass die Kirche Christi ihre Stimme erhebe, um diesem Missbrauch des Namens Christi Einhalt zu tun. Ist nicht diese Vergötzung der Rasse und der Staatsgewalt, die täglich durch Rundfunk den Massen eingehämmert wird, eine offene Häresie? Ist nicht der Vernichtungskampf gegen das jüdische Blut eine Schmähung der allerheiligsten Menschheit unseres Erlösers, der allerseligsten Jungfrau und der Apostel? Steht nicht dies alles im kassersten Gegensatz zum Verhalten unseres Herrn und Heilands, der noch am Kreuz für seine Verfolger betete? Und ist es nicht ein schwarzer Flecken in der Chronik dieses Heiligen Jahres, das ein Jahr des Friedens und der Versöhnung werden sollte?

Wir alle, die wir treue Kinder der Kirche sind und die Verhältnisse in Deutschland mit offenen Augen betrachten, fürchten das Schlimmste für das Ansehen der Kirche, wenn das Schweigen noch länger anhält. Wir sind auch der Überzeugung, dass dieses Schweige nicht imstande sein wird, auf die Dauer den Frieden mit der gegenwärtigen deutschen Regierung zu erkaufen. Der Kampf gegen den Katholizismus wird vorläufig noch in der Stille und in weniger brutalen Formen geführt wie gegen das Judentum, aber nicht weniger systematisch. Es wird nicht mehr lange dauern, dann wird in Deutschland kein Katholik mehr ein Amt haben, wenn er sich nicht dem neuen Kurs bedingungslos verschreibt.

Zu Füßen Eurer Heiligkeit, um den Apostolischen Segen  
bittend

*Fr. Editha Stein*  
*Lehrerin am Deutschen Institut*  
*für wissenschaftliche Pädagogik*

*Münster 9. 11.*  
*Collegium Marianum*



## Remarks

Edith Stein argued sharply and wrote in an urgent tone. Imploringly, she put her finger on a very sore spot, which was deadly threatening for the church, the violent anti-Semitism of the state. If this was to be kept silent any longer, she feared “the worst for the prestige of the Church.” She had already written that in early April 1933! Obviously, for four weeks, all her alarm bells were already ringing. She hoped that the alarm bells would ring in the Vatican, too. Could the deputy of the Jew Jesus Christ still hesitate to stand up in horror and denounce the persecution of the Jews in Nazi Germany?

An “extinction of the Jewish blood” had begun! This sacrilege was a blasphemy against Jesus Christ, the virgin Mary, and all the apostles. This argument hits like a punch to the theological and diplomatic most sensitive spot of the church. With this third point, Edith Stein definitely wanted to alert the pope.

Previously in her letter, she argued in terms of humanitarianism and politics. Edith indignantly noted that the terrible events in the last few weeks were a mockery to every justice, humanity, and charity. The rulers of the present government had been preaching hatred toward Jews for years, and now the seed had taken root. The government had even armed criminal elements to attack the Jews. In addition, there was the intolerable idolization of race and governmental power. Public opinion was being gagged and manipulated as the government pleased. Moreover, that it called itself “Christian!” was an open heresy!

The Holy See should not be tempted to believe that its silence could purchase a permanent peace with that government. The Nazi government was entirely anti-Christian and killed Jews. Diplomatic calculations against these rulers were not only useless but also forbidden. Edith Stein spoke plainly to the pope that thousands of Catholics in Germany and all over the world were now waiting for a word from the church.

Two sentences before this wake-up call, Edith formulated the remarkable sentence: The responsibility for the Jewish victims also falls on those who are silent in the face of such events. This had to sound to Pius XI and to his secretary of state, Pacelli, the successor Pius XII, like a beacon from another world.

Complicity because of silence! Complicity in Rome for the dead and persecuted Jews in Germany! What Edith Stein presented to the pope was a massive reproach. This is far from the current diplomatic and religious language of Peter’s Chair. To be jointly responsible for the persecution and killing of human beings is one of the most serious ethical accusations in moral theology.

One might argue that Edith Stein wrote her letter in a heated, deadly atmosphere and that her formulations should not be taken as drastically as they were. The argumentative diction of the letter and the author herself speaks against this objection. Edith Stein was well educated in philosophical and theological fields and very versed in pedagogy. She was extremely loyal to the church and the Holy See. It is absurd to suppose that she wrote words to the pope that she did not mean or that she was not aware of their scope.

Five years later, Sister Benedicta – that was Edith’s religious name – stood completely behind her letter. She had not written anything that was unjustified or thoughtless. Sister Benedicta greatly regretted that Rome had not responded in any way, except with a general blessing to her and her family some time later. She mused that, perhaps after 1933, the pope thought of her words on several occasions. In addition to the persecution of the Jews, the Nazis’ fight against the church began as she foretold. Later statements of Sister Benedicta concerning her letter are not known.

At the end of 1938, she "fled" from Cologne to the then still safe Holland (Convent Echt). After the German occupation, when the Jews were also persecuted and deported there, the convent tried to organize an emigration to Switzerland for her and her sister Rosa. However, the application was left undone for a long time. Shortly after Edith and Rosa’s arrest and deportation to Auschwitz (at the beginning of August 1942), a refusal came from Switzerland. Two weeks later, after a contradiction through the convent, the entry into Switzerland was approved, but it was too late! Edith and Rosa were killed in the gas chamber on the day of their arrival in Auschwitz (August 9<sup>th</sup>).

Would it have consoled Edith Stein that she soon would be raised on the altars as a special saint and that she would become the new patron saint of Europe and that she would “arrive” at the Vatican for the permanent ornament of St. Peter's with a statue of white Carrara marble over five meters high under papal and international honors?

In any case, she is now there where she always wanted to be to warn and remind us prophetically that the pope should have taken action.



Picture: private