

In the Age of Dictators: Edith Stein and Pope Pius XI in Conversation

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Abstract: *Like my previous contribution to the eJournal, this essay is part of a longer study about ideas, values and attitudes. It is about women and men of passion who were embroiled in their historical times. It is designed to bring together women and men in conversation in an atmosphere of mutual respect and interest; it brings together feminism and the Catholic tradition.*

Key Words: Edith Stein; Pius XI; Catholic-feminist dialogue; male-female relationships; family ethics; sexuality; role of women; theopoetics

The structure which I have adopted for this project is the literary device of the dinner party. This I considered would enable the humanity and ideas of the people concerned to be highlighted and not lost in a dense academic presentation. I decided that a small dinner party of no more than five or six would provide the best setting in which people could get to know one another and explore ideas to some extent through conversation.

I involved two fictional friends, Monica and Catherine, in the project. Monica is the type who makes sure we do not dally endlessly over pre-dinner drinks, while Catherine has always done her home-work on the background of our guests exceedingly well. My friends and I agreed that it was our responsibility to provide the venue and promote the conversation of our guests but that it would defeat the purpose of the exercise if we intruded unduly into their conversation. The following conversation between Edith Stein and Pope Pius XI is drawn from their writings, and the original only modified when the dinner party setting required it.

As we were informed at the last dinner party, Pope Benedict XV had advised the victors that forgiveness and reconciliation are the essential basis of a lasting peace. His advice was not heeded. Benedict judged that the terms of the Treaty of Versailles had treated Germany with inhuman harshness and that the victors were inviting more conflict. Indeed he was proven right: 1939 saw the commencement of the Second World War. It followed a crippling economic depression and the rise of dictators, Hitler with his Nazi philosophy in Germany and Mussolini with his Fascism in Italy.

A country usually submits to a dictator because he appears to be able to deal efficiently with a difficult situation. Such was the case in both Germany and Italy. In Italy even Benedict's successor, Pius XI, was seduced briefly by Mussolini as he sought to settle the long-running dispute over the 'Roman question' with the Italian Government and thus bring an end to the so-called imprisonment of the pope and the crippling alienation of Italian Catholics from the political processes of their country.

Feminism had been hampered in its suffrage activity during the First World War although, paradoxically, the war opened up new work opportunities for women. In those countries where the vote had been obtained, the philosophical differences of the various factions in the women's movement came to the fore and inhibited united effort on the part of women to become a strong force in society, though ongoing research indicates that more significant feminist activities continued than those of which we were formerly aware.

Catherine, Monica and I readily agreed that Edith Stein, the German feminist, would be an appropriate guest to invite to dinner with Pius XI. Both had come into conflict with dictators. Edith Stein was a philosopher, Jew, convert to Catholicism, Carmelite nun and mystic; Pope Pius XI was a scholar, archivist and mountaineer of note. Edith Stein was our first feminist guest to have had a university education.

Introducing Edith Stein

Edith Stein was born in 1891 at Breslau in Silesia, then German territory. She was the eleventh child, the seventh surviving, to Siegfried and Augusta Stein. Her father died when she was very young and her mother, determined to be independent of her family's help, successfully managed her husband's lumber business. Edith grew up in a close-knit, liberal Jewish family. This much loved child proved to be highly intelligent and headstrong. She recalled as a seven-year old experiencing a secret inner life, which she was unable to express. Edith was raised almost like a twin with her sister, Elsa, who was a little older than herself. Although scholarly by nature, as a child she was allowed much free play and later with her sister and young relatives and friends, both men and women, she loved to hike, play sport, discuss endlessly, and she confessed that she enjoyed going to the theatre even more than reading.

Because Fraulein Stein respected the wishes of her children, she supported Edith's decision in 1906 to leave school at the age of fourteen. She subsequently also supported her decision to resume study and prepare for her university entrance examination, after she had spent some time helping a married sister.

Matriculating brilliantly, Edith initially chose psychology as her major field of study but soon transferred to philosophy. She enrolled at Breslau University and later furthered her studies at Gottingen. Edith formed deep and lasting friendships, but described herself as an increasingly independent person. By the time she had left school she had lost her childhood faith.

During her university days Edith was part of a vital group of talented German intellectuals. She studied under the famous phenomenological philosopher Edmund Husserl. Among the distinguished academics she knew were Martin Heidegger and Max Scheller.

After a brilliant university career Edith was awarded her doctorate in philosophy *summa cum laude*. There followed a career in lecturing, teaching and research. She was especially interested in contemporary problems, including the nature of woman, the education of women and their various roles in the wider society.

Through the influence of the philosophy of phenomenology and some Christian Lutheran friends, Edith was drawn to Christianity. After being deeply affected by the autobiography of St Teresa of Avila she elected to become a Catholic and finally entered the Discalced Carmelite Order in Cologne in 1933 at the age of forty-two. As a Catholic Jew she was a victim of Auschwitz in 1942.

Introducing Pope Pius XI

Ambrogio Damiano Achille Ratti was born at Desio in the foothills of Lombardy in 1857. With his father a factory silk weaver he was to become the first pope to be the son of an industrial-age working man. After studying at the local seminary, he graduated to the major seminary at Milan and was ordained in 1879.

Ratti undertook studies at the Gregorian University and the Sapienza in Rome, where he received doctorates in philosophy, theology and law. A brilliant student, he was personally congratulated by Leo XIII. Subsequently, he was assigned to parish work in a small village for a brief period, after which, before being invited in 1882 to teach at the seminary in Milan. The following year he was appointed to the staff of the Ambrosian Library in the same city. In 1907 he became the director of the library, which he reorganised and modernised along with the associated picture gallery and museums, making them more available to research scholars.

In 1910 Ratti was called to Rome to assume responsibilities in the Vatican Library. Even as a young priest in Milan, he had shown diplomatic skill in working with the Italian government on local matters, so it was not surprising that in the spring of 1918 Achille Ratti was sent as apostolic visitor to Poland and appointed nuncio in 1919.

Shortly afterwards he was consecrated archbishop and in 1921 he was appointed to the See of Bologna and created a cardinal. On the death of Pope Benedict XV in 1922, Ratti was elected pope, taking the name of Pius since, as he said ‘that is the name of peace.’ He chose as his motto: ‘The peace of Christ in the reign of Christ.’ He came to the papacy with a positive attitude to cultural developments in the world and with a determination to solve the Roman Question: the impasse with the Italian government, the legacy of Pius IX.

There was another side to Ratti. Often spending his holidays at the family home, which was near the alps, he had become an expert climber. With a priest friend, Grasselli, he achieved two ‘firsts’ in this area: the ascent of Monte Rosa from the Italian side in 1889 and the descent from Mont Blanc by the Dome Glacier in 1890. The routes that he charted for these climbs are named after him and his companion.¹

THE DINNER PARTY

On the appointed evening we awaited the arrival of our guests with mixed feelings.

Catherine suggested that Pius would appreciate Edith’s Jewish background since he was on record as declaring: ‘Mark well that in the Catholic Mass, Abraham is our Patriarch and forefather. Anti-Semitism is incompatible with the lofty thought which that fact expresses... I say to you it is impossible for a Christian to take part in anti-Semitism ... Spiritually we are all Semites.’²

Another possible help in facilitating the conversation during the evening was the fact that Pius had been chaplain to the German community in Milan and no doubt was familiar with German culture.

We anticipated that these two highly intelligent, highly educated and strong characters would have ample ground for conversation, but we also expected that the evening would have its lighter moments. Pius XI, though said to be quite sharp and authoritarian, was not without a sense of humour. It was recorded that when an

¹ T. McLaughlin (ed.), *The Church and the Reconstruction of the Modern World: The Social Encyclicals of Pope Pius XI* (New York: Image Books, 1957), 2, 3.

² A. Rhodes, *The Vatican in the Age of the Dictators, 1922-1945* (London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1973), 339.

ambassador to the Vatican apologised to Pius for presenting himself in relatively informal attire, Pius surveyed him quizzically and remarked (drawing on his librarian background): ‘Ah, yes, normally you come to me bound in leather but to-day you are in paper back!’

After the guests had arrived, introductions had been made, the weather disposed of and pre-dinner drinks on the way, it was feminism which, surprisingly, emerged as the initial topic of conversation.

Feminism

It soon became clear that Edith had espoused the feminist cause early in life. Part of the programme at the graduation party ending her high school days had been terse epigrams about each of the class members. She confessed that the one concerning herself read:

Let woman equal be with man,
So loud this suffragette avers,
In days to come we surely can
See that a Cab’net Post is hers.³

Pius laughed and the atmosphere relaxed perceptibly.

Edith said that she had campaigned for feminism in her high school days and that her interest in women’s issues continued throughout her life. She commented concerning her early University period: ‘My deep conviction of social responsibility... made me decidedly favour women’s suffrage. At that time, this was still far from being an integral part of the women’s rights movement.’⁴

Pius associated feminism with the ‘flappers’ of the post-war period. It was a period he saw as characterised by ‘restlessness of mind, intractability and discontent.’ He went on to observe: ‘Levity among women and girls, licence particularly in dances and dress, has gone beyond all bounds, becoming an open insult to the misery of others.’⁵

Edith pursued her train of thought: ‘Feminism became very strong in the Weimar Republic before Hitler and the Nazis came to power. After winning the right to vote, German feminists elected thirty-two women deputies to the Reichstag in 1926 (compared to fifteen in the British Parliament and three in the US Congress) and they gained popular support for women in industry and the professions.’

Pius was suitably impressed but doubtfully approving.

Edith observed: ‘There is still a multitude of thoughtless people satisfied with hackneyed expressions concerning *the weaker sex* or even *the fair sex*. They are incapable of speaking about this weaker sex without a sympathetic or often a cynical smile as well.’⁶

She added: ‘Sporadically, there are Romanticists who idealise women and paint them in delicate colours against a gold background. They would like to shield woman as much as they could from the hard facts of life.’⁷

With considerable sadness Edith informed us: ‘The gains won during the early decades of the 20th century were wiped out by the effects of the economic depression. There resulted the romanticist ideology of the Nazi regime with its emphasis on the use of

³ E. Stein, *Life in a Jewish Family: An Autobiography*, ed. Dr L. Gelber and Romaeus Leuven, trans. Josephine Koepfel (Washington, DC: ICS Publication, 1986), 178.

⁴ Stein, *Life in a Jewish Family*, 191.

⁵ McLaughlin (ed.), *The Church and the Reconstruction of the Modern World*, 30.

⁶ E. Stein, *Woman: The Collected Works of Edith Stein*, vol. 2, trans. Freda Mary Oben (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1987), 144.

⁷ Stein, *Woman*, 145.

women to bear babies of Aryan stock.' Edith also deplored the exploitation of women in the Communist Party.⁸

Pius said that he knew the Communist Party well from his Milan days.

After detailing some of the effort made in Germany to achieve educational opportunities for women, Edith, with some asperity, commented: 'The girls who today take their "Abitur" and go to the universities, more often than not, know nothing as to what had to be done until the German universities finally opened their doors to women in 1901 after countless meetings, memoranda and petitions to the Reichstag and state governments.'⁹

She pointed out: 'The radical feminists in their concern to achieve equal rights for women minimised the differences between the sexes and concentrated on their shared nature. On the other hand, the early German feminist Helene Lange, whom I admire enormously, throughout her life insisted that "the dissimilarity of the sexes must be emphasised in order that the feminine nature be freely developed and properly formed."¹⁰

Catherine murmured to me: 'Shades of Virginia Woolf.'

Pius supported the highlighting of the differences between the sexes and the complementary nature of men and women.

Edith and Pius proceeded to discuss the various studies being done in such disciplines as psychology, sociology and philosophy in connection with the differences between men and women. Edith indicated that the 'nature versus nurture' debate, concerning the differences of the sexes, was alive and well.¹¹

However, she finally commented: 'Thankfully, in comparison to the earlier discussions of this topic, tendencies to completely deny woman's uniqueness have diminished. Women have become free to be concerned with such issues as the significance of woman's intrinsic value in national life.'¹²

Pius was pleased to hear this.

Monica enquired about the German Catholic Women's Movement.

In her response Edith recognised the connection between the Catholic and non-Catholic women's movements: 'The goals of the Catholic Women's Movement have much in common with the non-Catholic movement and are indebted to it for valuable preparatory work: the opening up of educational opportunities and gainful employment in the economic field; and the establishment of jobs in the legal, political and social fields. Also, in the value placed on marriage and motherhood, the Catholic movement is still in agreement with the moderate elements of the middle-class feminist movement.'¹³

She paused before adding firmly: 'But it should never be forgotten that the non-Catholic Women's Movement developed on a foundation foreign to us - that of German idealism, of philosophical and political liberalism. The Catholic Women's Movement must rest on its own foundation, the foundation of faith and a Catholic world view which is well thought out in all its consequences. We must be aware, too, of those elements in the wider culture which influence us.'¹⁴

⁸ Stein, *Woman*, 145.

⁹ Stein, *Woman*, 138-139.

¹⁰ Stein, *Woman*, 155.

¹¹ Stein, *Woman*, 145.

¹² Stein, *Woman*, 33, 247.

¹³ Stein, *Woman*, 159, 160.

¹⁴ Stein, *Woman*, 159-160.

Pius agreed heartily with this.

Monica took advantage of a break in the conversation to move us to the dining room table. During the first course the conversation initially centred on the relationship between men and women.

Relationships between Men and Women

Very soon it became clear that this was a subject to which Edith had given considerable scholarly thought.

She commented concerning the second account of the biblical creation myth: “‘But no helpmate corresponding to him was found for Adam.’” The Hebrew expression used in this passage is barely translatable - *Eser kenegdo* - which literally means “‘a helper as if vis-a-vis to him.’” One can think of a mirror in which man is able to look at his own nature. The translators who speak of a “‘helpmate suitable to him’” perceive it in this way. But one can also think of a counterpart, a *pendan*, so that, indeed they do resemble each other, yet not entirely, but rather, that they complement each other as one hand does the other.’¹⁵

Pius seemed to like this exegesis.

Edith also pointed out that the fact that man was created first did not indicate a pre-eminence any more than any person of the Trinity in God is pre-eminent.¹⁶

She went on: ‘It is not a question here of sovereignty of man over woman. She is named as companion and helpmate and it is said of man that he will cling to her and that both are to become one flesh. This signifies that we are to consider the life of the initial human pair as the most intimate community of love.’¹⁷

Pius’ face lit up at this and he responded: ‘The souls of the man and woman in the sacrament of matrimony are joined and knit together more directly and more intimately than their bodies are. This unity results from a deliberate and firm act of the will – not by any passing affection or sensual attraction.’

He paused before adding deliberately: ‘By God’s decree, from this union of souls a sacred and inviolable bond arises. Each promotes the spiritual development of the other in their shared daily life of love centred on the demands of their life in communion.’¹⁸

Edith voiced the belief that, although both man and woman were both affected by original sin, man had the more perverted ‘drive for perfection’ emanating from his original sin. She elaborated: ‘This has far-reaching consequences for mankind especially in marriage and the workplace. This relentless seeking for “‘perfection’” by man produces a one-sidedness in his development and consequently the deterioration of other qualities, producing such aberrations as brutal authority, as in domestic violence and sexual promiscuity.’¹⁹

She added: ‘Men tend to have very narrow interests compared with the usual broadness of interest and sympathy of women.’²⁰

Pius listened to Edith closely and with growing respect.

Edith also connected the one-sided development of man, the male, with the devastation of the earth, and she elaborated: ‘Instead of reverential joy in the created

¹⁵ Stein, *Woman*, 59.

¹⁶ Stein, *Woman*, 60.

¹⁷ Stein, *Woman*, 60.

¹⁸ *Encyclicals of a Century* (Derby, NY: Daughters of St Paul, 1942), 120, 128.

¹⁹ Stein, *Woman*, 70-71.

²⁰ Stein, *Woman*, 71.

world, instead of a desire to preserve and develop it, man seeks to exploit it greedily to the point of destruction or to senseless acquisition without understanding how to profit from it or how to enjoy it.²¹

Monica, a born again Greenie, could not restrain the enthusiasm of her agreement.

Edith went on to point out: 'Woman, as a result of her special emotional gifts, is better protected by nature than man against a one-sided development of faculties.'²²

In what we came to recognise as her balanced way, she then added: 'On the other hand woman is less qualified for outstanding achievements in an objective field, achievements which are always purchased by a one-sided concentration of all spiritual faculties; and this characteristic struggle for development also exposes her more intensely to the danger of fragmentation. Then, too, the one-sidedness, to which by nature she inclines, is particularly dangerous: unilateral emotional development.'²³

Edith now had our complete attention.

She continued: 'A woman shares with man the powers to understand, enjoy and act; but she also shares the same degenerate desire for the possession of things through violence, a desire which falsifies, distorts and destroys. Her reverent joy in the things of this world may degenerate into greed, leading her, on the one hand, to the anxious, avaricious scraping together and hoarding of things for which she has no use; and, on the other hand, a lapse into a mindless idle life of sensuality.'²⁴

There was silence as we reflected upon this. It was a comfortable silence. Monica topped up our wine glasses.

Edith then underlined the difference between the soul-body relationship of man and woman: 'Woman's soul is present and lives more intensely in all parts of the body and it is inwardly affected by that which happens to the body; whereas, with man, the body has more pronouncedly the character of an instrument which serves in his world and which is accompanied by a certain detachment.'²⁵

This seemed to be making sense to Pius.

The special love which Edith had for the theatre was evident when she cited Nora in Ibsen's *The Doll's House* as an example of the longing that women in general have to give and to receive love and consequently to be raised above a narrow, day-to-day existence into the realms of higher being. In her view: 'A woman performs her role as a companion to man better and is a more competent mother if she does not lose herself in association with her husband but cultivates her own gifts and powers.'²⁶

Edith said that she was convinced that the centre of the life of man and woman was God and she commented: 'There is a natural relationship between the nature of woman and the unique essence of religious life. It is a specifically feminine yearning to give herself completely to the other.'²⁷

She went on to warn: 'When such self-abandonment is directed to a person instead of to God, it can easily become perverted because no human being can really fulfil that yearning.'²⁸

²¹ Stein, *Woman*, 70.

²² Stein, *Woman*, 96.

²³ Stein, *Woman*, 96.

²⁴ Stein, *Woman*, 73-74.

²⁵ Stein, *Woman*, 95.

²⁶ Stein, *Woman*, 92-93, 110.

²⁷ F.M. Oben, *Edith Stein* (New York, Alba House, 1988), 47.

²⁸ Oben, *Edith Stein*, 47.

Edith paused and surveyed us with a steady calm before stating with conviction: ‘Everywhere about us, we see in the interaction of the sexes the direct fruits of original sin in most terrifying forms: an unleashed sexual life in which every trace of their high calling seems to be lost; a struggle between the sexes, one pitted against the other, as they fight for their rights and in doing so, no longer appear to hear the voices of nature and of God.’²⁹

Marriage and Motherhood

Pius proceeded to lament the present general situation concerning marriage, including the lack of due order, especially respecting the primacy of the husband and the subjugation of the wife to him.³⁰

Edith did not seem wholly comfortable with Pius’ expression of this relationship between husband and wife.

Aware of the feminist position, Pius explained: ‘This subjection, does not deny or take away the liberty which fully belongs to the woman in view of her dignity as a human person and in the light of her most noble office as wife and mother and companion.’ He also clarified that a woman is not expected to obey her husband’s every request ‘if not in harmony with right reason or with the dignity due to a wife.’ He was adamant that a wife should never ‘be put on a level with persons who in law are called minors, to whom it is not customary to allow free exercise of their rights on account of their lack of mature judgment, or of their ignorance of human affairs.’³¹

Edith appeared to relax and Pius continued: ‘But it forbids that exaggerated liberty which does not care for the good of the family ... if the man is the head, the woman is the heart and as he occupies the chief place in ruling, so she may and should claim for herself the chief place in love.’ He acknowledged that there were times when a woman had to take over the role of her husband, owing to his ineptness, but this was exceptional and not according to Divine Law.³²

Edith certainly agreed that woman generally was gifted for motherhood. She pointed out: ‘Her body and soul are fashioned less to fight and to conquer than to cherish, guard and preserve.’³³

Nevertheless Edith held that marriage cannot be considered to be the basic vocation of woman. She explained: ‘The New Testament holds up the ideal of virginity ... from the point of view of the Catholic faith ... it is impossible to consider marriage and motherhood as woman’s exclusive vocation.’³⁴

Pius agreed. What concerned him were the feminists who, he considered, distorted the ‘honourable and trusting obedience which the woman owes to the man’ and he declared: ‘Many of the feminists assert that such a subjection of one party to the other is unworthy of human dignity, that the rights of husband and wife are equal; they boldly proclaim the emancipation of women has been or ought to be effected.’³⁵

²⁹ Stein, *Woman*, 76.

³⁰ *Encyclicals of a Century*, 118, 129.

³¹ *Encyclicals of a Century*, 129.

³² *Encyclicals of a Century*, 129, 130.

³³ Stein, *Woman*, 72.

³⁴ Stein, *Woman*, 174.

³⁵ *Encyclicals of a Century*, 152.

As Pius elaborated, it became clear that he interpreted women's emancipation to mean that the woman simply followed her own interests outside the home and disregarded her family responsibilities.³⁶

Edith looked as though she was going to make a comment at this stage but refrained as Pius was really wound up. He continued: 'This, however, is not the true emancipation of woman, nor that rational and exalted liberty which belongs to the noble office of a Christian woman and wife.'³⁷

Barely pausing for breath he went on: 'More than this, this false liberty and unnatural equality with the husband is to the detriment of the woman herself, for if the woman descends from her regal throne to which she has been raised within the walls of the home by means of the Gospel, she will soon be reduced to the old state of slavery and become, as amongst pagans, the mere instrument of man.'³⁸

Pius then moved fearlessly into the very vexed area of rights: 'Undoubtedly, those rights which belong to the dignity of the human soul and are proper to the marriage contract both parties enjoy and both parties are bound by the same obligations. In other things there must be a certain inequality and due accommodation. This is demanded by the good of the family and the stability of home life.'³⁹

Realising that his approach could appear to Edith, the feminist, as repressive, Pius conceded that changes must be made in the situation of women: 'The social and economic conditions of the married woman must in some way be altered on account of the changes in society. It is part of the office of public authority to adapt the civil rights of the wife to modern needs and requirements, keeping in view what the natural disposition and temperament of the female sex, good morality and the welfare of the family demands.'⁴⁰

Edith ventured at this point to explore the complex relationship between husband and wife, and she pointed out: 'Part of the wife's natural feminine concern for the right development of the beings surrounding her involves the creation of an ambience, of order and beauty conducive to their development.'⁴¹

She conceded: 'The wife in accordance with her nature is called to carry more than half of the load involved in raising a family. But the wife craves for an unhampered development of her personality just as much as she does to help another toward that same goal.'⁴²

Pius was listening closely.

Edith emphasised that the father, as a Christian, must take responsibility for the spiritual education of the family and promote not only the development of the talents of the children but also those of his wife: 'Should the husband try to confine his wife to a sphere too narrow for her talents or should he relinquish her entirely to the merely sensual life, he would carry a great share of responsibility for the atrophy of her higher life, for pathological disturbance, for an excessive dependence on husband and children (one which becomes a burden to them), and for the desolation of her life if one day she is left behind on her own.'⁴³

³⁶ *Encyclicals of a Century*, 152.

³⁷ *Encyclicals of a Century*, 152.

³⁸ *Encyclicals of a Century*, 152.

³⁹ *Encyclicals of a Century*, 152.

⁴⁰ *Encyclicals of a Century*, 152-153.

⁴¹ Stein, *Woman*, 77.

⁴² Stein, *Woman*, 77.

⁴³ Stein, *Woman*, 76.

Pius seemed to have no real problem with this stance but was impatient to talk about current practices that were eroding the sanctity of marriage. With genuine concern in his voice he lamented: ‘Some men go so far as to concoct new species of unions, suited as they say to the present temper of men and the times, which various forms of matrimony they presume to label “temporary,” “experimental,” and “companionate.” These offer all the indulgence of matrimony and its rights without the indissoluble bond and without offspring, unless later the parties alter their cohabitation into matrimony in the full sense of the law.’⁴⁴

Again getting really worked up, he complained bitterly: ‘Nowadays, not secretly nor under cover but openly by all the inventions of modern science, the sanctity of marriage is trampled upon and derided. Divorce, adultery and all the basest vices are either exalted or depicted in such colours as to appear to be free of all reproach and infamy.’⁴⁵

Pius and Edith went on to discuss divorce, which Pius argued worked to the disadvantage of women.⁴⁶

He declared: ‘A successful marriage, apart from the immediate pre-marriage preparation, depends basically on the education of boys and girls through childhood and adolescence in the virtues basic to a successful marriage.’⁴⁷

Edith said that even before her conversion to the Catholic Church she had agreed with its teaching on marriage but she was critical of its educational methods. She conceded to Pius that he had endeavoured to address contemporary problems in his 1930 encyclical on Christian marriage but she was not wholly satisfied with it.⁴⁸

Pius had the grace to swallow hard and accept this criticism.

Edith explained: ‘The concept of marriage on a Catholic foundation must be further developed. The discussion concerning sexual problems, involving the psychology, pedagogy and pathology of sex has spread so extensively and has already made such a powerful practical impact on the upbringing and education of the young, in health care and way of life generally, that it is necessary to come to an understanding of all these trends on the basis of Catholic thought.’⁴⁹

Pius nodded; he was not at all opposed to the modern sciences.

Edith added: ‘We must do this critically i.e. not negatively but in a thorough and serious analysis of what is acceptable and unacceptable for us. We can learn a great deal from modern research methods. This would be a great support to people of good will outside the Church seeking to live by the Christian or natural law.’⁵⁰

Edith and Pius XI then gave further attention to the issue of sexuality. In this difficult and complex area, Edith led the way from her psychological, philosophical and theological background.

Meanwhile Monica and I tried to serve dessert and at the same time not lose the thread of the conversation, which was no mean feat.

⁴⁴ *Encyclicals of a Century*, 141.

⁴⁵ *Encyclicals of a Century*, 138.

⁴⁶ *Encyclicals of a Century*, 162.

⁴⁷ *Encyclicals of a Century*, 173.

⁴⁸ Stein, *Woman*, 137.

⁴⁹ Stein, *Woman*, 137-138.

⁵⁰ Stein, *Woman*, 137, 139.

Sexuality

Edith observed: ‘In the 1930s there was an increased significance attributed to eroticism and sexuality. They held such a predominant position in scholarly writing as well as in *belles lettres*, in public discussion and in daily life that even children were confronted with them at every turn.’⁵¹

Pius agreed sadly. He went on to deplore, among other things, the type of sex education, which naively assumed that early initiation and precautionary instruction would aid the growing child to cope with the demands of sexuality.⁵²

Edith did not idealise the past as she observed: ‘In my day it was hardly possible for women to be ignorant of sexual matters but in former times how many women, who were so protected in their innocence until marriage, were suddenly robbed of all their ideals, in the cruellest manner, in marriage itself?’⁵³

With frank concern Edith asked: ‘In this respect, could one not say that the matter-of-fact and objective, scientific approach is still one of the most acceptable methods, if not the absolutely best one to become acquainted with natural data?’⁵⁴

Edith went on to say how difficult priests and even mothers find it to speak to their daughters about sexuality. She declared: ‘Calm and objectivity concerning these matters are found in genuine scholarly occupations, especially the medical. But there is a much more radical liberation through supernatural insight, which makes what is intimately personal accessible in calm, objective consideration.’⁵⁵

While Edith appreciated the Virgin Mary as being highly relevant to the total development of girls, she was critical of the superficiality of many contemporary devotions to Mary in the Church. She held that communal expressions of devotion to Mary should be more solidly based in doctrine and dogma.

She asserted: ‘Experience from innumerable instances teaches that superficial Marian devotions cannot ward off the dangers to which young girls are exposed. Only a deep inner positive appreciation of chastity can do that.’⁵⁶

This seemed to make sense to Pius.

As the discussion on chastity proceeded, Edith confided: ‘As a young woman I took a strong stance in favour of chastity. This position was shared by my sister Erna and our other two close women friends with whom we formed a special foursome that was the centre of an extended group during our university days in Breslau.’

She laughed and continued: ‘We called ourselves the four-leaf clover. When a male medical student, a friend of my sister Erna and her future husband, attached himself to our group, Erna cross-questioned him on his attitude to chastity. Since his answers were favourable he was accepted.’⁵⁷

Pius responded: ‘Bravo!’

We knew that Edith had dealt likewise with a male friend with whom she studied and who had romantic inclinations towards her.⁵⁸

⁵¹ Stein, *Woman*, 136.

⁵² *Encyclicals of a Century*, 94.

⁵³ Stein, *Woman*, 112.

⁵⁴ Stein, *Woman*, 112.

⁵⁵ Stein, *Woman*, 242.

⁵⁶ Stein, *Woman*, 242.

⁵⁷ Stein, *Life in a Jewish Family*, 122, 212.

⁵⁸ Stein, *Life in a Jewish Family*, 209-214.

Pius XI stated categorically: ‘Chastity for both men and women is basic to marriage. The house built upon a rock, that is to say on mutual conjugal chastity and strengthened by a deliberate and constant union of spirit, will not only never fall away but will never be shaken by adversity.’⁵⁹

Edith strongly supported this view.

As Monica served coffee Edith and Pius discussed the challenges of women working outside the home.

Women and Work Outside the Home

Edith stated firmly: ‘Only subjective delusion could deny that women are capable of practising vocations other than that of spouse and mother. The experience of the last decade and, for that matter, the experience of all times has demonstrated this. There is no profession which cannot be practised by a woman.’⁶⁰

Pius seemed to be taking this calmly.

It became apparent that discrimination against women in the work force was very real to Edith. She herself had suffered discrimination in her efforts to gain a professorship at a German university. Initially because she was a woman and later because she was a Jew.⁶¹

In the process of discussing the type of work that generally suited women, Edith declared: ‘One can say that the development of the feminine nature in the work place can become a blessed counter-balance, especially where everyone is in danger of becoming mechanised and losing his humanity.’⁶²

She added: ‘Women can make a positive contribution to the so-called masculine vocations provided that they suit their own particular gifts and do not do violation to themselves as persons.’⁶³

Edith put family life definitely before work for both husband and wife: ‘It seems to me a contradiction of the divine order when the professional activities of the husband escalate to a degree which cuts him off completely from family life. This is even more true of the wife.’⁶⁴

Pius relaxed; this made sense to him.

Monica offered another serving of coffee as Edith moved the conversation into the public arena.

Women in Public Life

Edith asserted: ‘I see woman in public life to be a seminal spore bringing new life to the national body. Women tend to be protected naturally against the poison infecting the body of our society. The innate sympathy of woman serving in public life in the legislature or as a member of the government is able to counterbalance the excessively abstract procedures of the bureaucracy.’⁶⁵

Pius laughed saying that he understood what she meant.

⁵⁹ *Encyclicals of a Century*, 153.

⁶⁰ Stein, *Woman*, 47-48.

⁶¹ Oben, *Edith Stein*, 16, 17, 26.

⁶² Stein, *Woman*, 48-49, 82, 112-113.

⁶³ Stein, *Woman*, 48-49.

⁶⁴ Stein, *Woman*, 79-80.

⁶⁵ Stein, *Woman*, 35.

With conviction Edith informed us: ‘The woman politician in Germany has already proved herself as a blessed counterbalance against the deterioration of masculine objectivity. Women more than men have proved themselves capable of surmounting party differences for the common good.’⁶⁶

Regretfully Pius said: ‘One can only lament the strife of political parties, with all their different views, not really seeking the public good, but rather their own advantage at the expense of the others.’⁶⁷

He confided: ‘My chief pastoral duty for the best part of thirty years when in Milan was as chaplain of the nuns of the Cenacle. They were engaged primarily in promoting lay retreats. Here indeed was sown the seed of my later policies in Catholic Action.’⁶⁸

In the last analysis, however, Pius admitted that, although he had encouraged both men and women to be involved in Catholic Action, he saw the home as the woman’s chief sphere of action and influence.

The conversation from here took many turns and continued into the early hours of the morning. Among the major areas covered were priesthood, education, war, peace, and nationalism.

Priesthood

In the course of the discussion on the priesthood Edith, for our benefit, gave a summary of the participation of women in the formal ministry of the Church from the early centuries, highlighting the decline of women’s participation in the diaconate.⁶⁹

She commented: ‘The fact that a gradual change took place indicates the possibility of development in an opposite direction. And in the contemporary Church we may expect that increasingly women will be called to Church duties ... The imperturbability of the Church resides in her ability to harmonise the unconditional preservation of eternal truths with an unmatched elasticity of adjustment to the circumstances and challenges of changing times.’⁷⁰

Pius agreed with this but said with a grimace, that this ‘adjustment to the circumstances and challenges of changing times’ was behind his brief dalliances with Mussolini and Hitler.

Edith speculated on the matter of the priesthood for women: ‘It seems to me that such an implementation by the Church, until now unheard of, cannot be forbidden by dogma. However ... the whole tradition speaks against it from the beginning. But in my opinion, even more significant is the mysterious fact ... that Christ came to earth as the *Son of Man*. The first creature on earth fashioned in an unrivalled sense as God’s image was therefore a man. That seems to me indicate that He wished to institute only men as His official representatives on earth.’⁷¹

She continued: ‘Yet, He bound himself so intimately to *one* woman as to no other on earth. He formed her so closely after His own image as to no other human being before or

⁶⁶ Stein, *Woman*, 258.

⁶⁷ McLaughlin (ed.), *The Church and the Reconstruction of the Modern World*, 30.

⁶⁸ McLaughlin, *The Church and the Reconstruction of the Modern World*, 2; P. Hughes, *Pope Pius the Eleventh* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1937), 40, 44.

⁶⁹ Stein, *Woman*, 83.

⁷⁰ Stein, *Woman*, 147-148.

⁷¹ Stein, *Woman*, 83-84.

after. He gave her a place in the Church for all eternity such as has been given to no other human being.⁷²

She paused and concluded: ‘And just so, He called women in all times to the most intimate union with Him: they are to be emissaries of His life, proclaimers of His will to kings and popes and forerunners of His Kingdom in the hearts of men. To be the Spouse of Christ is the most sublime vocation which has been given and whoever sees this way open before her will yearn for no other way.’⁷³

We were obviously getting a glimpse of Edith the mystic.

Education

Pius opposed co-education, declaring that it was ‘founded upon naturalism and the denial of original sin.’ He went on to explain that ‘nature itself clearly shows that there are differences between the sexes that must be respected and nurtured in the educational process so that men and women can effectively complement one another in society.’⁷⁴

Edith emphasised the need for woman to be educated in objectivity to balance her natural tendency to subjectivity and emotionalism. However, she obviously valued the emotional gifts of women and pointed out: ‘It is only the person who is deeply involved with life whose emotions are stirred.’⁷⁵

Pius roundly condemned secular education, including the so-called ‘neutral’ or ‘lay’ school. He held that the exclusion of religion is contrary to the fundamental principles of education. Such a school he stated ‘cannot exist in practice; it is bound to become irreligious.’ The whole atmosphere of the school, he argued, ‘informed the student.’⁷⁶

Edith also was critical of the Enlightenment because of its neglect of the religious dimension and she commented: ‘We recognise that education is more complex and mysterious and less subject to arbitrary will than the Enlightenment conceived. Because the Enlightenment did not deal with the essential factors of formation, its system of education had to suffer shipwreck.’⁷⁷

Edith counselled: ‘Only the power of grace can uproot and form fallen nature anew; it happens from within, never from without.’⁷⁸

War, Peace and Nationalism

Pius and Edith discussed the bitter strife that followed the First World War and its unjust peace settlement. Their discussion ranged over the discussion of old rivalries, the rise of ‘false and exaggerated nationalism,’ re-armament, lack of respect for legitimate authority based in natural law, the economic depression, fascism, socialism and communism.⁷⁹

Pius deplored with passion ‘the disorder and inequality from which arises the accumulation of the wealth of nations in the hands of a small group of individuals who

⁷² Stein, *Woman*, 84.

⁷³ Stein, *Woman*, 84.

⁷⁴ *Encyclicals of a Century*, 95-96.

⁷⁵ Stein, *Woman*, 102, 251.

⁷⁶ *Encyclicals of a Century*, 100-101.

⁷⁷ Stein, *Woman*, 118.

⁷⁸ Stein, *Woman*, 47.

⁷⁹ McLaughlin (ed.), *The Church and the Reconstruction of the Modern World*, 34, 279-284.

manipulate the market of the world as their own caprice, to the immense harm of the masses ...'⁸⁰

We reminded Edith of her distinguished war service as a nurse and, in the course of the following discussion, she confided: 'My love for history was no mere romantic absorption in the past. Closely associated with it was a passionate participation in current political events as history in the making. Both of these interests probably sprang from an extraordinarily strong social conscience, a feeling for solidarity not only with all mankind but also with smaller social entities.'⁸¹

As Pius and Edith were discussing the depression, Pius acknowledged the importance of safeguarding the right to private property but he declared: 'The common good places limitations on these rights and more frequently today than formerly, calls for the application of social justice.' Indeed he advocated 'a more equitable distribution of the goods of the earth.' This involved support for the rights of the working man and the concept of the basic wage.⁸²

Pius also felt strongly about the need for a controlled economy and explained: 'Just as the unit of human society cannot be built upon class-warfare so the proper ordering of economics cannot be left to free competition alone.' From this source have proceeded in the past all the errors of the "individualistic school."⁸³

After pausing to see that he had our full attention, Pius said very emphatically: 'Free competition, however, though within certain limits just and productive of good results, cannot be the ruling principle of the economic world. This has been abundantly proved by the consequences that have followed from the free rein given to these dangerous individualistic ideals.'⁸⁴

Pius XI was painfully aware that the Church in its members did not in fact consistently live up to its ideals and that this often created situations that tempted working people to follow Communism. Edith was also acutely aware of this. Pius cited cases of Catholic industrialists who were actively hostile to and endeavoured to suppress his encyclical which dealt specifically with the problems of the workers in relation to industry and society.⁸⁵

Mountain Climbing

Although it was well after midnight, we could not refrain from asking Pius XI about his mountain-climbing activities.

Pius' face lit up with pleasure as he commented: 'Mountaineering is not a break-neck pursuit, but... more a question of prudence and of a little courage, of love of nature and her most secret beauties...'⁸⁶

He then explained the details of preparing for the ascent of Monte Rosa from the Italian side. Precisely he described the preparations and graphically the scenery. He etched in some detail the dawning of the day when they finally reached their goal: 'We were to witness the first diffusion of light, to see the loveliest tints growing in the east, the

⁸⁰ McLaughlin (ed.), *The Church and the Reconstruction of the Modern World*, 30, 282.

⁸¹ Stein, *Life in a Jewish Family*, 319, 499.

⁸² McLaughlin (ed.), *The Church and the Reconstruction of the Modern World*, 287.

⁸³ *Encyclicals of a Century*, 228.

⁸⁴ *Encyclicals of a Century*, 228.

⁸⁵ *Encyclicals of a Century*, 314.

⁸⁶ Hughes, *Pope Pius the Eleventh*, 63.

sun appearing in its splendour between the summits and its rays spreading like a fiery mantle over a thousand slopes of ice and snow, lighting them up with a wondrous medley of splendid tints! It was enough to drive a painter mad ...⁸⁷

Edith, who loved to hike in the countryside, obviously empathised with Pius' experience.

Farewells

As we were saying our farewells, Monica acknowledged that some of the topics of our conversation during the evening had not been exactly designed to cheer us up!

Pius smiled and said that, despite his experiences during the harrowing years in the 1930s building up to the Second World War, in the last analysis, he still held to the position he had expressed on the occasion of his silver jubilee of the priesthood in 1904, when he was working at the Ambrosian Library in Milan: 'I then declared, let us thank God's providence that we are preserved to see such grandeur, such human progress in every direction. For despite all its abuses, all its faults, we can see in the totality of the results an ascending movement of humanity towards Truth and Goodness, that is to say towards God ...'⁸⁸

On this note our dinner party concluded.

AFTER THE PARTY

As usual after the guests had gone we made some idle conversation while we cleaned up.

Monica asked about Edith's fate at the hand of the Nazis. Catherine informed us that Edith was aware that her presence in the Carmelite Community at Colone-Lindenthal was certain to bring reprisal on the Sisters there. Her superiors thought that the Carmel of Echt in Holland might offer a safe haven so she transferred there in 1938 and lived in precarious safety for a while. Then, retaliating against the Utrecht Catholic Archbishop's persistent criticism of their persecution of the Jews, the Nazis moved against Catholic Jews in Holland. Edith was transported to Auschwitz, where she died on 9 August 1942.⁸⁹

We noted that during the dinner party conversation Edith had not mentioned that she had made through a priest friend an appeal to Pius XI to speak out against Hitler's treatment of the Jews. Pius, on the other hand, had not mentioned that he had in fact in 1939 commissioned an encyclical condemning anti-semitism but died while it was still in draft form.⁹⁰

I pointed out that Edith was formally canonised by the Catholic Church in 1998. We voted unanimously that she should be officially proclaimed the 'patron saint of feminists.'

Catherine noted that well informed historians generally agree that in Pius XI the Catholic Church was served by one of the ablest of the popes during 'the age of revolution.' Administrator and statesman, he was intensely aware of the multiform currents which characterised the age.⁹¹

⁸⁷ Hughes, *Pope Pius the Eleventh*, 65.

⁸⁸ Hughes, *Pope Pius the Eleventh*, 130.

⁸⁹ Rhodes, *The Vatican in the Age of Dictators*, 428, 432; Stein, *Life in a Jewish Family*, 345.

⁹⁰ G. Passelecq and B. Suchecky, *The Hidden Encyclical of Pius XI*, trans. Steven Rendall (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co, 1997).

⁹¹ For example: K.S. Latourette, *Christianity in a Revolutionary Age*, vol. 4 (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), 45; F.J. Coppa, *The Modern Papacy since 1789* (London: Longman, 1998), 248-258.

The reign of Pius XI, it has been said, was ‘filled with events and charged with papal initiative.’ Certainly our evening with Edith Stein and Pius XI had been filled with engrossing conversation well into the early hours of the morning. As two committed Catholics they had much in common but obviously Edith’s scholarly feminism gave another dimension to Pius’ orthodoxy, which she shared.⁹²

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⁹² Hughes, *Pope Pius the Eleventh*, 313.