Women reflect on journey of Edith Stein

BY MELISSA MCNALLY
Staff Writer

SOUTH ORANGE — The life and legacy of Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross (Edith Stein) was the focus of the annual Women’s Day of Reflection held at Seton Hall University (SHU) March 20.

Presented by the archdiocesan Women’s Commission, the conference began at Holy Family Parish, Nutley, where Archbishop John J. Myers celebrated Mass. The theme of this year’s event, “Hail the Cross, Our Only Hope,” focused on Saint Teresa Benedicta’s devotion to Christ and her philosophy regarding the role of women in the Church.

Born in Breslau, Germany, in 1891, Edith Stein was raised in the Jewish faith. She was baptized Catholic in 1922 and was received into the Discalced Carmelite Order as a postulate in 1934. In 1942, she was arrested and sent to the Auschwitz concentration camp where she died on Aug. 9 at the age of 50. She was canonized in 1988 by Pope John Paul II.

Saint Teresa Benedicta “captured the essence of women as only a woman can” according to featured speaker Colleen Carroll Campbell. Campbell is an author, columnist, television and radio host, and a speechwriter for President George W. Bush. She is the host of “Faith and Culture,” a television and radio show that airs internationally on EWTN.

Campbell’s talk, entitled “The Feminine Genius: A Call to Love,” focused on how feminine nature informs spirituality. She believes popular culture has misconstrued femininity as either aggressive female sexuality or being superficial and materialistic. Pope John Paul II, who she calls the “feminist pope,” stressed the idea of feminine genius and believed in using inherent, female qualities in society and faith.

"Pope John Paul II believed that in the technological age, there is loss of the intrinsic dignity of the human person. He believed women have a natural inclination to focus on the concrete and the personal. We live in a society that values people for what they have, not who they are. Women are born to love and called to make society more gentle and humane,” Campbell explained.

When speaking about feminine nature, there is the tendency to stereotype, Campbell noted. Pope John Paul II spoke in "incubations not absolutes" and believed that radical openness to the human person is a distinctly feminine nature. "Pope John Paul II also spoke of 'spiritual maternity' and argued that mothers were crucial to the transformation of our culture,” Campbell added.

Saint Teresa Benedicta foreshadowed Pope John Paul II’s writings on women, Campbell noted. “Saint Edith Stein believed that biology of women reflected truths in spiritual makeup. Female biology is attuned to sensitivity and receptivity that we can apply to the world in a uniquely feminine way. Femininity is not greater than or less than masculinity, just different.”

According to Saint Teresa Benedicta, the ultimate spiritual maternity is “nurturing the spark of divine life in a soul.” Spiritual maternity is not just about nurturing, but about being strong as only a mother can be.

"It is not easy to practice spiritual maternity,” Campbell said. “It is not our job to fix ourselves, but we must surrender to God for what we cannot do. Every woman is longing for a loving relationship with God. If we look to other people for the love we seek in God, we are bound to be disappointed.”

Many women, especially mothers, may feel overwhelmed by the tasks ahead of them, according to Campbell. She encourages using Saint Teresa Benedicta as a model of feminine spirituality. “Saint Edith Stein is an example of intense spiritual stamina. If we take refuge in the Lord, our daily problems may still be there but we will remain at peace. Saint Edith Stein believed women are natural contemplatives in the world.”

Dianne M. Traflet, J.D., S.T.D., associate dean, assistant professor of pastoral theology and founder/co-director of the Institute for Spirituality Christianity at Immaculate Conception Seminary School of Theology, SHU, was another key speaker at the women’s conference. She is the author of "Edith Stein: A Spiritual Portrait” (Pauline Media, 2008) and guided a reflection at the conference entitled “The Way of the Cross with Stations of the Cross with trials from Stein’s life.

In 1933, when the Nazi regime rose to power in Europe, Edith Stein could no longer teach due to her Jewish ancestry. Throughout her trials, the future saint relied on faith to guide her. “God leads each of us in a different way…Edith Stein journeyed with Christ. She knew God was guiding her and called Him the Good Shepherd. She would pray in front of the image of Mary, the Sorrowful Mother. She had a profound prayer life and pondered the Body of Christ,” Traflet said.

Saint Teresa Benedicta knew she would suffer and often contemplated her death. “When Stein entered the cloistered convent, people thought she was hiding (from the Nazis) but she was aware of the pain in the world. She knew that they would find her. She knew of the importance of self-denial and self-sacrifice,” Traflet noted.

When Saint Teresa Benedicta entered Auschwitz, she would continue in prayer and shared her faith with others in the camp. “She embraced everyone as her own. She prayed the rosary and tried to create a spiritual family in a word that was terror-filled. One witness wrote that Edith Stein created an atmosphere of peace and grace around her,” Traflet said.

The life of Edith Stein serves as an inspiration not only to women, but for all Christians, Traflet believes. “She died a martyr and laid down her life to build up God’s kingdom. Saint Edith Stein died but her message survived and her mission still inspires.”