I.) The Life of St. Edith Stein:

- Born to a Jewish family on the feast of Yom Kippur/Day of Atonement in Breslau in 1891. She would refer to this fact many times during her life as divine providence. Later, as a Carmelite nun, she would write a book entitled *The Science of the Cross*, wherein she specifically addresses the issue of redemptive suffering and a Cross-centered mysticism, indicative of the Carmelite spirituality.
- Although raised Jewish, she ceased to practice her faith as a teenager and proclaimed herself to be an atheist (much like Dorothy Day in her earlier life).
- Edith’s mother, Auguste Stein, lost her husband prior to Edith’s second birthday. Auguste Stein struggled for years in raising her seven children and maintaining the lumber business she inherited from her husband. Frau Stein had a tremendous impact on Edith and would serve as a feminine model par excellence in the years to come, in spite of Frau Stein’s objections to her becoming Roman Catholic.
- She attended the University of Breslau, but later transferred to Gottingen to continue her studies in philosophy. It was her thirst for truth in philosophy that eventually brought her to the Catholic faith.
- While studying philosophy, Stein came into contact with a man who would have a tremendous impact on her life: Edmund Husserl. Husserl, whom she referred to simply as ‘the master,” founded a philosophical school of thought known as phenomenology, or the philosophy based in experience (it was in this mode of philosophy that Fr. Karol Wojtyla would immerse himself into as well at the University of Lublin in Poland). Stein would become Husserl’s closest assistant and she later applied the phenomenological realism of Christianity to the dignity of women/feminism.
- Around 1920 Edith’s close friend, who was also a Christian, Adolph Reinach, was killed in battle during World War I. Adolph’s wife asked Edith to assist her in sorting through her
late-husband’s affairs. The great Catholic faith and strong spirit of Mrs. Reinach deeply impacted Edith and she began to wonder from where such faith came from.

- In 1921, at age twenty-nine, Edith read the autobiography of St. Teresa of Avila in one night and in one sitting. Closing the book she reportedly proclaimed out loud: “This is the truth!” She later told her acquaintances: “I have found the truth and He is a Person: Jesus Christ!” Anyone who has ever read any of Edith Stein’s writings knows that she considered St. Teresa of Avila to be her spiritual mother. Thus, it is impossible to consider Stein’s philosophy of Christian womanhood without considering the great impact of St. Teresa of Avila on her life. It is my belief that Teresa of Avila’s thought is found most profoundly in Edith’s writings on the Cross.

- Edith became a Roman Catholic in 1922 and thereafter became a leading feminine voice in Catholic social circles, fighting tirelessly for the dignity of women. Her conversion deeply wounded her mother, who never understood how Edith could join the same faith of so many of the Nazis who were persecuting them (Many Nazis were of Christian origin, including Rudolph Hoss, the architect of Auschwitz, who was a baptized Catholic).

- In 1933, while on a trip to Cologne during Holy Week, she stopped by a Carmelite convent and therein decided to become a nun. During a Holy Hour at the convent in Cologne, Edith was given a vivid image of the turmoil that awaited the Jews in the coming years and she wrote:

  “I spoke with the Savior to tell him that I realized it was his cross that was now being laid upon the Jewish people, and that the few who understood this had the responsibility of carrying it in the name of all, and that I myself was willing to do this, if he would only show me how.”

Edith would continually see the redemptive value of suffering.

- Regarding this redemptive suffering Edith once wrote to a fellow Carmelite sister: “One can only gain a scientia crucis (Knowledge of the Cross) if one has thoroughly experienced the Cross.”
On October 15, 1934 she assumed the name Teresa Benedicta de la Cruce (or Teresa Blessed by the Cross). She entered the convent at Cologne, but when over time it became apparent that her Jewish roots were placing the lives of the sisters in jeopardy, she requested to be sent to a convent in Echt, Holland (her sister Rosa soon converted to the faith and followed her there to serve as a porter for the sisters).

On March 14, 1937, Pope Pius XI promulgated his encyclical *Mit Brennender Sorge/With Burning Concern*, which was written in German and addressed specifically to the German people. In it Pope Pius virulently attacked Nazi ideology and philosophy. Shortly before the publishing of this document, Pope Pius received a plea for help from Edith who suggested that the Holy Father write an encyclical attacking Nazi and Fascist ideology, which he did.

On July 26, 1942, the Catholic Archbishop of Utrecht, in union with the local Protestant and Catholic parishes, issued a public letter condemning the Nazis for their attack on the Jews, which was read the following Sundays at all the parishes:

“Ours is a time of great tribulations of which two are foremost: the sad destiny of the Jews and the plight of those departed for forced labor. All of us must be aware of the terrible sufferings which they have to endure, due to no guilt of their own. We have learned with great pain of the new dispositions which impose upon innocent Jewish men, women, and children, the deportation into foreign lands...Let us pray to God and for the intercession of Mary, that he may lend his strength to the people of Israel, so sorely tried in anguish and persecution.”

On August 2, 1942 the Nazis responded with a swift and particularly brutal persecution of Catholics and Jews, with nearly 80% of all Jews in Holland being deported to the death camps. Heinrich Himmler, head of the Nazi SS, responded to the Archbishop: “If the Catholic clergy can thus ignore negotiations, then we are forced to consider the Catholic full-blooded Jews as our worst opponents and to take measures to
ship them off to the east as soon as possible.” The ‘east,’ of course meaning the concentration camps.

- That same week the Nazis came for Edith and her sister at the convent. When they pulled up to the convent doors, Edith reportedly took her sister’s hand and said: “Come Rosa, we go for our people.” That day Edith and Rosa Stein, along with 600 other Catholics, nuns, and religious brothers were sent to Auschwitz, where most died in the gas chambers.

- Edith was last seen with her sister in Auschwitz comforting many of the families and trying to bring them hope through prayer. It was reported that the Nazis permitted her to die wearing her habit in the gas chambers. She died on August 9, 1942 along with her sister Rosa and six other German nuns.

- St. Edith Stein was canonized in October of 1998 by Pope John Paul II in Rome.

II.) Feminine Role Models in the Life of Edith Stein:

Other than the great feminine role models on Edith’s life already mentioned, undoubtedly two others would be St. Teresa of Avila and the Blessed Mother. While the virtuous feminine figures of the Old Testament certainly impacted her as well (Ruth, Judith, Esther), it was the great ‘fiat’ of the Virgin Mary that impacted her most profoundly. Edith, however, always considered herself a daughter of Teresa of Avila.

- St. Teresa of Avila: After having translated Teresa of Avila’s The Way of Perfection into German, Stein grew in great admiration of St. Teresa as a strong-willed reformer and yet profoundly humble as well. Stein admired the feminine strength of this woman who, while having spent her life largely in solitude in Carmel, took upon herself the religious reform of her community, encountering tremendous odds and persecution in the process. In her personal journal Edith writes of St. Teresa:

“What was it that inspired this nun, who had been living in prayer in her cloistered cell for so many years, with the ardent desire to do something for the cause of the Church? Precisely the fact that she was living a life of prayer, that she let herself be drawn ever more deeply into the inner parts of her ‘Interior Castle,’ even into that hidden chamber where He could say to
her that it was time that she took upon herself His affairs as if they were her own, and that He would take her affairs upon Himself.”

- It is by praying over the lives of these great women that Stein came to realize that the feminine nature of womanhood has, of itself, a specific nature or being (ontology) that is ordered to the fulfillment of God’s plan towards humanity through her vocation.
- Shortly after her conversion to Catholicism, Stein accepted a teaching post at a Dominican School for young women. During this time of teaching young women she became convinced that women require an education that is specific to their needs and nature as women and daughters of the Trinity. Many of the young women she taught at the Dominican school would later say of Edith: “When she looked at you it was if she peered directly into your soul.” During this time frame she also came to know another phenomenologist named Roman Ingarden, who would later become one of the University professors of Karol Wojtyla at the Jagiellonian University in Poland.

III.) **The Teachings of St. Edith Stein on Women:**

Cardinal Lustiger of Paris, himself a Jewish convert to Catholicism, once said of St. Edith Stein that “her greatest pupil was Pope John Paul II.” Her insights, thought, and philosophy can be found repeatedly throughout his writings (see: *Love and Responsibility*, *The Theology of the Body*, *Familiaris Consortio*, & *Mulieris Dignitatem*). Lustiger referred to her as “undoubtedly one of the greatest philosophical minds of the twentieth century.”

Within the years of 1928 to 1932, Edith traveled widely throughout Europe lecturing on the dignity of womanhood, and, as George Weigel notes, “sketched out a distinctively Christian feminism,” which was very much needed among the rising tide of Socialist ideology in Germany at the time. The Nazis understood women to be second-class citizens and non-German women as nearly sub-human. The woman’s role was solely to perpetuate the Arian race. Stein’s lecturing on the dignity of women was a beacon of light in the midst of the ‘culture of death’ in which she found herself. Because she was a woman, she was denied a teaching post at a University level, yet
imitating the fortitude of St. Teresa of Avila, she refused to allow this to hinder her resolve.

**IV. Some key Aspects of Edith Stein’s Feminism:**

- **Sexual Complementarity & Differences:** Many modern feminists, in an effort to counterbalance the misogyny often found in the culture, argue that there is no difference whatsoever between men and women and that women should be permitted to assume any societal role as a man. While Edith would certainly agree, along with John Paul II in *Mulieris Dignitatem*, that women should always be encouraged to assume leadership within the culture and society, there remains the fundamental distinction between men and women. Put simply: we are equal but different and our vocations in the eyes of God are likewise different. Edith argued that there is an essential nature and value which accompanies being a woman, and when both sexes come to realize this, their relationships together fully matures and their self-fulfillment expands. Thus, when a woman comes to understand her feminine identity as companion and mother/nurturer, she grows in self-awareness in being able to give herself completely to her ‘helper’ in fulfilling her vocational call. Stein goes on to note that while not every woman has the vocation to be a biological mother, all women have the vocation to spiritual motherhood of others, and this is accompanied by a great responsibility before God to change the world.

- **The Feminine Nature:** Stein argued that the beauty of the feminine nature includes “maternal instincts, in addition to an enormous capacity for empathy and love” (*Eight Spiritual Heros*, Brennan Hill). She likewise taught that women are generally more “emotionally centered” than men, and thus they require specific training to better enable them to grow in self-knowledge. Women, then, should have positive female role models, who serve possibly as unofficial teachers for them. In referring to women teaching other young women, Edith often said, “They need less of our words and more of who we are.” In other words, there is a definitive need for positive female role models for young women. It is important to understand as well that Edith Stein directly addresses the beauty of the masculine. She points out that as a man and a woman come to understand and mature in their respect
and self-giving to the other they in turn grow into a deeper awareness and acceptance of their own sexual identities. This is perhaps seen most profoundly in the dual-nature of Natural Family Planning among couples. The family planning and sexual self-giving involves both to a full degree, and thus the man in particular comes to a fuller appreciation of the beauty and nature of his wife’s body, femininity, and fertility.

- Other-Oriented: Women tend to be oriented towards what is inherently personal and human (person-oriented), whereas men are generally oriented towards what is more “objective” and practical (goal or ratio/reason-oriented). Likewise, she notes that: “Women are directed towards the whole, whereas men tend to compartmentalize” (Stein, Sarah Borden, p.71). Men generally direct their energies towards projects, study, work, or a mission, whereas women generally direct their energies towards ‘living things,’ people, and the lives of others. She points out that in taking up the cause and concerns of others, women often involve their entire being in the welfare of others needs/concerns and the woman thus becomes a spiritual mother, of sorts, to the other. Such an involvement in the lives others includes the possibility of genuine self-fulfillment by becoming a self-gift for another, or as the Second Vatican Council stated in Gaudium et Spes: “Man cannot fully find himself except through a sincere giving of himself to the other” (#24). Our Lord Himself refers to this: “No one has greater love than this, than to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (Jn 15:13). Within this feminine and God-given nature of woman, she is able to intuit the needs of others and to empathize on a profound level with the pain experienced by others. Everyone has heard of ‘women’s intuition.’ Edith Stein certainly supports this reality in her writings, yet she points out that this capacity towards intuition and empathy give the women a great responsibility to help others, not manipulate them. Edith points out that there is always the danger among some women to become obtrusive and destructive in intruding in the lives of others (i.e. gossip or character-destruction) rather than assisting them. She notes that because this divine-calling to assist others the woman possess a nature that is characterized by a ‘responsiveness to the real,’ or a capacity to attend to the real-life realities, struggles, and joys of others.
We should remember that Edith does not think that men cannot be oriented towards others and that women cannot be oriented towards ‘projects’ or tasks. She simply points out that these are general characteristics of men and women: “the traits in question are primarily human ones, and all powers that are present in masculine nature are also present in feminine nature because the human traits may generally appear in different degrees and relationships” (Woman, Edith Stein, p.107). Edith argues that both man and woman should strive towards the full development of their own nature. Yet, truth be told, Edith points out that women genuinely possess insights into the lives of others that men may simply not possess, or at least to a lesser degree. As an example of this she uses a female doctor (her sister was a medical doctor), who should be attuned not only to the physical ailments of her patient but likewise the emotional and psychological as well.

- **The Soul of a Woman:** Many years before Christ, Aristotle argued that there are certain traits that are unique to our souls (see: *De Anima*), and that our actions are intertwined with our souls, thus we must strive for a virtuous life (see: *Nichomacean Ethics*). In the 13th century, St. Thomas Aquinas reasserted this as well, noting that our ontology (our being) and our souls are imbued with rationality (which animals do not possess) and free choice in order to find the Truth of Christ. Having translated much of Thomas Aquinas’ work from Latin into German, Edith was very well versed in the Thomistic school of thought on the human soul. For her part Edith argued that a woman’s soul is fundamentally unique from a man’s and that God had intended these differences as a form of sexual complementarity. Edith noted that besides psychological, physiological, and sexual differentiation between men and women, it was simply obvious that men and women are different but equal. She also pointed out that every woman is meant to somehow be both a mother and a companion because, of her nature, the woman always seeks to embrace what is living, whole, and true. She notes that women are called, “To cherish, guard, protect, nourish, and advance growth is her natural, maternal yearning.” Likewise, this ‘caring’ for the other person is not limited only to their physical wellbeing but the woman is concerned with her whole being, of body, soul, and spirit.
• **Feminine Intuition:** The word “intuition” is often defined as the “immediate apprehension of an object by the mind without the intervention of any reasoning process” (Oxford English Dictionary). Intuition is sometimes described as a sixth-sense or a gut-feeling about someone/something else. In 1916 Edith Stein wrote her doctoral dissertation, under Edmund Husserl, on “The Problem of Empathy.” In her dissertation and other writings Stein notes that women, of their nature and ontology, have a particularly attuned capacity to empathize with the needs, concerns, joys, and worries of others due, in large part, to their capacity for intuition. Whereas *empathy* is the capacity to recognize another’s particular emotions, feelings, or state of mind, *sympathy* is when one actually feels compassion for another. It is typical of *sympathy* that we wish to alleviate the pain or suffering of another. *Pity*, on the other hand, is characterized as one who can see that another is in trouble and is in need of help. All of these traits can certainly be found in both men and women, though they are accentuated within the women to a larger degree. Empathy does not always guarantee loving behavior towards others. Even a psychopath is capable of empathizing with another in order to manipulate, use or harm them. Empathy, then, must be accompanied by genuine love/charity (St. Thomas Aquinas: True love is “to will the good of the other.”).

V.) **The Influence of St. Edith Stein on Pope John Paul II:**

Pope John Paul II was the first pope in 2000 years to enter a Jewish synagogue (April 13, 1986). He was the first pope to pray at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem (2000). He likewise visited the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial, where he prayed the psalms in Hebrew. He reestablished diplomatic relations with the Holy See and the state of Israel. But besides this, most of his friends growing up were Jewish. In Wadowice, where he grew up, roughly one-third of the 10,000 inhabitants were Jewish and he grew up side-by-side with many Jews. His landlord was Jewish and many of his close friends spent large amounts of time at his home and he at theirs. His close friend Jerzy Kluger survived the Shoah/Holocaust, though he lost everyone in his family. He was a grade-school friend of John Paul’s and referred to him simply as “Lolek,” even up until shortly before John Paul’s death. Thus, it stands to reason that Pope John Paul II should have a soft place in his heart for the Jews, knowing especially that Catholics and Jews pray to the same
God. He often referred to the Jews as “our elder brothers and sisters in the faith.”

While it is certainly true that Edith Stein’s Jewish heritage impacted Karol Wojtyla to some degree, seeing in her heritage a beautiful history, it is of greater merit that Pope John Paul II canonized St. Edith Stein because he found in her writings, teachings, and example a woman of profound courage and mystical union with her Spouse, Jesus Christ.

Below are a few of the documents/talks by John Paul II wherein one can directly see the influence of St. Edith Stein:

- *The Genius of Women*
- Angelus Reflections on Women – 1995
- *Letter to Women* – June 29, 1995
- Letter to Mary Ann Glendon and the Holy See’s Delegation to the Fourth World Conference on Women – August 29, 1995
- *Holy Thursday Letter to Priests* – April 7, 1995
- *Evangelium Vitae/the Gospel of Life* – March 25, 1995
- *Mulieris Dignitatem/The Dignity and Vocation of Women* – August 15, 1988