

November 17, 2019

## THE EDITH STEIN PRIZE

Dear Members of the Göttingen Edith Stein Circle:

I am very, very sorry that I cannot be with you in Göttingen today. I would have loved to come to Göttingen in order to thank you in person for this so very important prize. But at my age one must unfortunately obey one's doctor's travel prohibitions. That is why I am very pleased that my eldest son, Dr. Robert Buergenthal, will have the opportunity to be received by you in Göttingen to thank you on my behalf. You cannot imagine what it has meant to me to have been chosen as the recipient of the Edith Stein Prize. After studying Saint Edith's life story, I cannot think of a greater honor. Edith Stein was an admirable human being whose empathy, tolerance, and humanity do not very often enrich our world of today. She believed in peace and reconciliation, principles that have also guided my life. She was also convinced that without reconciliation there can be no peace because the absence of reconciliation leads to hatred, which invariably results in conflict.

If only the world could have read and acted on the letter Saint Edith wrote to Pope Pius XI in April 1933. What she said about silence in the face of inhumanity is worth repeating: "We all, who are faithful children of the Church and who see the conditions in Germany with open eyes, fear the worst for the prestige of the Church if the silence continues any longer. "Yes, silence leads to inaction. It empowered the Nazi and the Soviet regimes and it continues to empower the many dictatorial regimes that inhabit our world today. I also believe in and try to advocate the humanitarian principles Edith Stein

espoused and promoted. In my private life as well as in my professional life I have always tried to promote these principles and to live my life accordingly. That is why this prize has such enormous significance for me. I am deeply moved to be thus honored. In studying Edith Stein, I have been surprised that there are so many parallels between her life and that of my family. She arrived in Auschwitz in August 1942, only to be killed a few days later. My father, mother and I were sent to Auschwitz exactly two years later, that is, in August 1944. Although my mother and I survived Auschwitz, my father died in the Buchenwald concentration camp some months later. Pope John Paul II, who canonized Edith Stein, studied briefly at the same university in Krakow where my father had embarked on his legal studies a few years after the First World War. It will probably surprise you to hear that I had the very special honor of meeting Pope John Paul II. The meeting took place in March 1983 in Costa Rica, a country the Pope was visiting at the time and where I served as a judge of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. I was introduced to the Holy Father at a papal audience the Pope had granted the judges of our Court. When the Holy Father greeted me with a few English words -- he had been told that I was the American Judge on the Court -- I replied in Polish. He immediately turned back to me, wanting to know how I came to speak Polish. After he finished greeting my other colleagues, the Holy Father returned to me for what turned out to be a longer conversation which moved me very much. I can therefore fully understand why the life of Saint Edith must have made such a special impression on the Holy Father. What is so very moving to me about Edith Stein, the human being, is that she lived her life without hate. The letter she wrote to Pope Pius XI in 1933, in which she sought the Pope's intervention to ameliorate the condition of Jews in

Germany, does not only demonstrate her extraordinary courage but also her empathy for the suffering of Jews in Hitler's Germany. She paid for that courage with her life, even though she must have known what the consequences of her action would be.

The more I have learned about the life Edith Stein lived, the more I have come to admire this extraordinary human being. That is also why I consider it such a great honor that you deemed me worthy of receiving the Edith Stein Prize. Please, therefore, accept my profound appreciation for this decision on your part. I shall not disappoint you.

With heartfelt thanks and greetings from Washington,

Thomas Buergenthal.