

A Visit With Fr. Groeschel

By Jim Seghers

Recently, my wife and I drove to New Orleans to listen to Fr. Benedict at Notre Dame Seminary where he gave two conferences and celebrated Mass for the attendees. When Fr. Groeschel came on the stage the seriousness of the accident that almost took his life was immediately evident. He now walks with difficulty and his right arm is impaired. God's goodness was also evident, not only in sparing his life, but in preserving the good priest's wit and wisdom.

My first encounter with Fr. Groeschel was at a conference in Southern California a few days after Bill Clinton was first elected to the presidency of the United States. During the question and answer period, one anxious person asked: "Fr. Groeschel, what about the three days of darkness?" He replied with a wily smile, "Isn't this dark enough?" He also delivered a few gems at Notre Dame.

My favorite was his comment about Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta receiving an honorary doctorate at Harvard. He quipped, "That's like making Jesus a Monsignor!" Then he added, "but she knew what she was doing. She spoke to a hushed audience about chastity and purity. After her talk 1,600 students hurried to find pocket dictionaries to find out what the words 'chastity' and 'purity' meant!" He does have a unique way of making his points.

The focus of his conferences was suffering. He used his near death experience as a springboard to address the devastation of hurricane Katrina, which disrupted so many lives in the New Orleans-Gulf Coast area. Suffering, of course, is not limited to Katrina and its aftermath. It comes in many forms. Therefore his observations had a broad application.

Suffering often confronts us with the problem of evil. It was illuminating how Fr/Benedict explained the different major religions view evil.

- Hindu** – Both good and evil comes from God, because he is the cause of both.
- Buddhist** – Evil is in your eyes because it depends on how you view it. Good comes from evil.
- Moslem** – Evil can be destroyed and defeated, then we can make a perfect world. This approach can lead to fanatics. As an aside, Fr. Benedict observed that in the 20th century Lenin, Stalin, and Hitler attempted to destroy what they perceived as evil and to create a perfect world!
- Jewish** – Don't ask! Rather praise God in the mystery of darkness.
- Christian** – Evil is a mystery, but we triumph with Christ.

Something is called a mystery when we don't understand its inner workings. It doesn't make sense to us. Fr. Groeschel spoke how he grappled with the mystery of the evil in

connection with his accident. “Why did I look the wrong way when I stepped in front of that vehicle?”

The Blessed Mother suffered with the evil of her son’s death. She said: “My mother’s heart feels Him dying and it is pierced by all his horrible agony... My son Jesus has become nothing other than the Man of Sorrows. He no longer bears resemblance to a man; He is crushed under the weight of suffering, cruelly beaten, outraged, humiliated. He suffers without complaint; as gentle as a little lamb, He is nailed to the Cross.”¹

God brought good out of the greatest evil act. This gives us hope and courage. We are a religion of the God who suffered and died. He tasted all the bitterness of human disappointment, sorrow, pain and death. He is with us in the midst of our messiness, sadness, and hurting.

Fr. Benedict listed three attitudes that will lead us to wallow in depression and self-pity:

1. Continually blame yourself. Everyone makes mistakes, many times they are big ones. We need to accept responsibility and repent. Thus, David lamented: “For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me” (Ps 51:3). However, David also prayed: “The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise” (Ps 51:17). God forgives us. We must also forgive ourselves.
2. Believe the present situation is permanent. Things will never get better. Actually things do get better.
3. Suffering and evil are everywhere; therefore everything stinks! Not so. Have confidence. God can bring good from evil. He has made a history of snatching victory from the jaws of defeat.

Fr. Groeschel also spoke about not becoming fixated on the troubles at hand, but to look beyond this world. He also gave a very practical suggestion. “Do something today to make the painful situation a little better. Take a step.” He also spoke of two people who caught my attention: Pope John Paul II and Edith Stein.

Pope John Paul II

There may have been no human during the last 30 years who was less naïve about the evils in the world than John Paul II. He wrote in *Redemptoris Missio*: “If we look at today’s world, we are struck by many negative factors that can lead to pessimism”. Not so, this great pope. He proclaimed that “this feeling is unjustified: we have faith in God our Father and Lord and in his mercy.” Then he continued: “...God is preparing a great springtime for Christianity, and we can already see its first signs.”²

We have the great privilege to be alive at this critical time in the history of the Church, and to be called by Christ and his Vicar to “put out into the deep” (Lk 5:5) as workers in this great catch. He challenges us to throw off our lethargy and commit ourselves fully to

¹ *To the Priests: Our Lady’s Beloved Sons*, 11th English Edition (Marian Movement of Priests), #124, p. 172.

² *Redemptoris Missio*, # 3.

the task of reclaiming the world for Christ. That's something to get excited about! We need to refocus and charge forward into the future. This great pope gave us the unforgettable example of evangelizing to his last breath.

Many people feel adrift today. It's as if their life is without meaning. They merely seem to be going through the motions. They feel the depressing song, "That's All There Is," applies to them. This can be very painful. Pope John Paul II called us out of this malaise and lethargy. He challenged us to become evangelists.

Edith Stein

Edith Stein's remarkable life began on Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement in 1891. She was the youngest of eleven children in a devout Jewish family. "When she was not yet two years old her father died suddenly, leaving Edith's mother to raise the seven remaining children (four had died in childhood) and to manage the family business."³ Edith considered her mother to be a living example of the strong woman of Proverbs 31, who rises early to care for her family and trade in the marketplace. By her teenage years, Edith no longer practiced her Jewish faith and considered herself an atheist.

During the summer of 1921, at the age of twenty-nine, Edith was vacationing with friends but found herself alone for the evening. She picked up, seemingly by chance, the autobiography of St. Teresa of Avila. She read it in one sitting, decided that the Catholic faith was true, and went out the next day to buy a missal and a copy of the Catholic catechism. She was baptized the following January.

While on a trip during Holy Week of 1933, Edith stopped in Cologne at the Carmelite convent during the service for Holy Thursday. By her own account, the homily moved her very deeply. She wrote:

"I told our Lord that I knew it was His cross that was now being placed upon the Jewish people; that most of them did not understand this, but that those who did would have to take it up willingly in the name of all. I would do that. At the end of the service, I was certain that I had been heard. But what this carrying of the cross was to consist in, that I did not yet know."

On October 15, just after her forty-second birthday, Edith Stein entered the Carmel of Cologne, taking the name Teresa Benedicta of the Cross. Her family saw her entry into the convent as a betrayal, and as coming at the worst possible time, just when the persecution of Jews was intensifying. Her mother felt crushed. It was only after her mother's death in 1936 that Stein's sister Rosa felt free to be baptized as a Catholic as well.

After the Dutch bishops issued an encyclical attacking the anti-Semitic atrocities of the Nazi regime, the Gestapo retaliated immediately by rounding up all Roman Catholic Jews to be sent to the death camps. Edith and Rosa Stein were arrested on August 2, 1942. When Rosa seemed disoriented as they were led away from the convent, Edith gently

³ Laura Garcia, "Edith Stein – Convert, Nun, Martyr (Catholic Educational Resource Center), p.1.

encouraged her, “Come, Rosa. We go for our people.” The sisters were deported to Auschwitz and executed a week later. Edith Stein was fifty years old.

One woman who survived the war wrote a description of Stein during the time before her execution. “Maybe the best way I can explain it is that she carried so much pain that it hurt to see her smile...In my opinion, she was thinking about the suffering that lay ahead. Not her own suffering — she was far too resigned for that — but the suffering that was in store for the others. Every time I think of her sitting in the barracks, the same picture comes to mind: a Pieta without the Christ.”⁴ Other eyewitnesses also spoke of her tenderness and care of the children in the terrible conditions of the death camps.

Although she did not seek death, Edith had often expressed her willingness to offer herself along with the sacrifice of Christ for the sake of her people, the Jews, and also for the sake of their persecutors. She was beatified by Pope John Paul II on May 1, 1987 and canonized on October 11, 1998.

This remarkable woman gave a courageous example of what it means to be an authentic evangelist in horrific circumstances. It’s called holiness. The martyr Ignatius of Antioch urged the Magnesians on his journey to die in the arena of Rome: “We must not just be called Christians, but that we actually be Christians.”

⁴ Ibid.