

WOMEN'S HISTORY MONTH MARCH



This supplemental material for the book *Everything Could Be a Prayer* offers suggested reading selections for Women's History Month (March). Each month is broken down further still into groups of mystics who share common traits. The March readings offer five new devotionals and images not found in the book: Edith Stein, Evelyn Underhill, Matushka Olga, Kateri Tekakwitha, and Amanda Berry Smith.

In 1987, Congress designated the month of March as Women's History Month. While this celebration honors only women who have contributed to the United States, the list below includes women of faith who have impacted the world. These women of courage confronted the authoritative powers of their day and remained steadfast to God's cause in the face of opposition.

PIONEERS & LEADERS

- March 1 **MARY OF EGYPT** (Page 136)
Repentance
KATERI TEKAKWITHA (Alternate)
Purity
- March 2 **BRIGID OF KILDARE** (Page 78)
Hospitality
- March 3 **HILDA OF WHITBY** (Page 44)
Encouragement
- March 4 **CLARE OF ASSISI** (Page 156)
Simplicity
- March 5 **JULIAN OF NORWICH** (Page 164)
Spiritual Direction
- March 6 **CATHERINE OF SIENA** (Page 178)
Suffering
- March 7 **THEA BOWMAN** (Page 202)
Worship
EVELYN UNDERHILL (Alternate)
Mysticism

CAREGIVERS & CREATIVES

- March 8 **AMMA THEODORA** (Page 138)
Resilience
- March 9 **HILDEGARD OF BINGEN** (Page 28)
Creativity
- March 10 **MECHTHILD OF MAGDEBURG** (Page 22)
Compassion
- March 11 **JARENA LEE** (Page 48)
Evangelism
AMANDA BERRY SMITH (Alternate)
Empowerment
- March 12 **THÉRÈSE OF LISIEUX** (Page 68)
Gratitude
- March 13 **PANDITA RAMABAI** (Page 36)
Dignity
- March 14 **MOTHER TERESA** (Page 152)
Servanthood
- March 15 **MAMIE TILL** (Page 96)
Justice
MATUSHKA OLGA (Alternate)
Caregiving
- March 16 **SATOKO KITAHARA** (Page 8)
Assimilation

ACTIVISTS & REFORMERS

- March 17 **TERESA OF AVILA** (Page 114)
Mystical Union
- March 18 **IDA B. WELLS** (Page 186)
Truth
- March 19 **DOROTHY DAY** (Page 6)
Activism
- March 20 **EILEEN EGAN** (Page 66)
Gospel Nonviolence
- March 21 **ROSA PARKS** (Page 26)
Courage
- March 22 **FANNIE LOU HAMER** (Page 32)
Determination
- March 23 **WANGARI MAATHAI** (Page 14)
Care for Creation

LIBERATORS & SURVIVORS

- March 24 **PERPETUA & FELICITAS** (Page 108)
Loyalty
- March 25 **AMMA SYNCLETICA** (Page 46)
Endurance
EDITH STEIN (Alternate)
Resolution
- March 26 **JEANNE GUYON** (Page 128)
Praying Scripture
- March 27 **SOJOURNER TRUTH** (Page 198)
Witness
- March 28 **HARRIET TUBMAN** (Page 122)
Perseverance
- March 29 **JOSEPHINE BAKHITA** (Page 60)
Freedom
- March 30 **CORRIE TEN BOOM** (Page 158)
Solidarity

“Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.”

—EXODUS 3:5

Mysticism is one of those words that’s hard to define. It was coined in the eighteenth century to describe “the experience of mystical union or direct communion with ultimate reality reported by mystics,” as the Merriam-Webster Dictionary puts it. The Oxford Dictionary takes it up a notch, defining mysticism as “union with or absorption into the Deity or the absolute, or the spiritual apprehension of knowledge inaccessible to the intellect.”

The book *Mysticism*, written by British Anglo-Catholic Evelyn Underhill and published in 1911, became one of the earliest authoritative writings on the subject. Underhill describes mysticism as “the direct intuition or experience of God.” A mystic is more than an individual with a correct belief system.

Experiential knowledge, rather than intellectual, seems to be a defining factor of mysticism. But what degree of heightened experience characterizes mysticism? That remains unclear. Moses and the burning bush, St. Francis and the stigmata, St. Julian of Norwich and her visions: these all have fantastical elements. But can we have mystical experiences in our daily lives?

Underhill writes of peak experiences. These need not even be epiphanies of a religious kind but can include things like seeing the majestic in the natural world, looking at great art, falling in love, or experiencing a birth. All these contain mystical elements. Our understanding of religious experience needs to expand. Underhill writes, “There is no place in my soul, no corner of my character, where God is not.”

Many of the mystics would agree that solitude, silence, and contemplation are essential elements, on our part, for creating a contemplative atmosphere. Yet ultimately, mysticism is God-imparted.

To Your Unsayable Name: sometimes I fear going deeper into our relationship, but I know that you are Love. Help me to trust you, to desire you, and to immerse myself into the mystery that is you. Amen.



I needed clothes and you clothed me.

—MATTHEW 25:36

A small, unassuming woman of the Yup'ik tribe in Alaska was canonized by the Eastern Orthodox Church in 2023. Matushka Olga—her given name was Arrsamquq—is the first North American woman to receive such an honor.

Saint Olga didn't write volumes of spiritual books or cross oceans with evangelical zeal. She wasn't a cloistered nun or on the cutting edge of reform in the church and society. Instead, Olga lived an ordinary life, according to standards often assumed for saints. She supported her husband, a postmaster and Orthodox priest, and raised her children. In the small town of Kwenethluk, Alaska (population approximately 750), where she was born and died, Olga did small acts of kindness with great love. She provided the community with what she could by making parkas, fur boots, clothing, mittens, and socks and giving away food.

Olga also acted as a midwife for young mothers-to-be. In the warm public bathhouse, she sat with women who had been physically and sexually abused. She offered them counseling and prayer but never judgment. Olga spoke from experience.

Saint Olga's intimacy with the Spirit gave her insight into those to whom she ministered. It was said that she knew when a woman was pregnant even before the woman knew herself. She also could discern if more expertise was required for a delivery than she could offer as a midwife.

The quotation "Not all of us can do great things, but we can do small things with great love" has been attributed to Mother Teresa. This sums up Olga's life well. She was a caregiver: a giver who cared. She was an ordinary person able to meet her family's and neighbor's needs. God created beauty through her and on behalf of others. This ability to give care is part of what makes her a saint. In what ways might God be working through you as a caregiver: a giver who cares?

God of grandeur and of the ordinary, you bless the everyday things we do. Make me aware of your presence as I mow a neighbor's lawn or cook them a meal, write a letter of encouragement or visit a friend. You are there in the mundane if I have eyes to see. Amen.



Therefore have I set my face like flint, and I know I will not be put to shame.

—ISAIAH 50:7

Edith Stein, canonized in 1998 as St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, was a Jewish woman who converted to Catholicism and became a Discalced Carmelite nun. As a member of a religious order, Stein committed to “stand in proxy for sinners through voluntary and joyous suffering and thus to cooperate in the salvation of humankind.” She was resolute in her decision to follow Christ and lay down her life for others. Little did she realize at the time of her confession what would eventually be required of her.

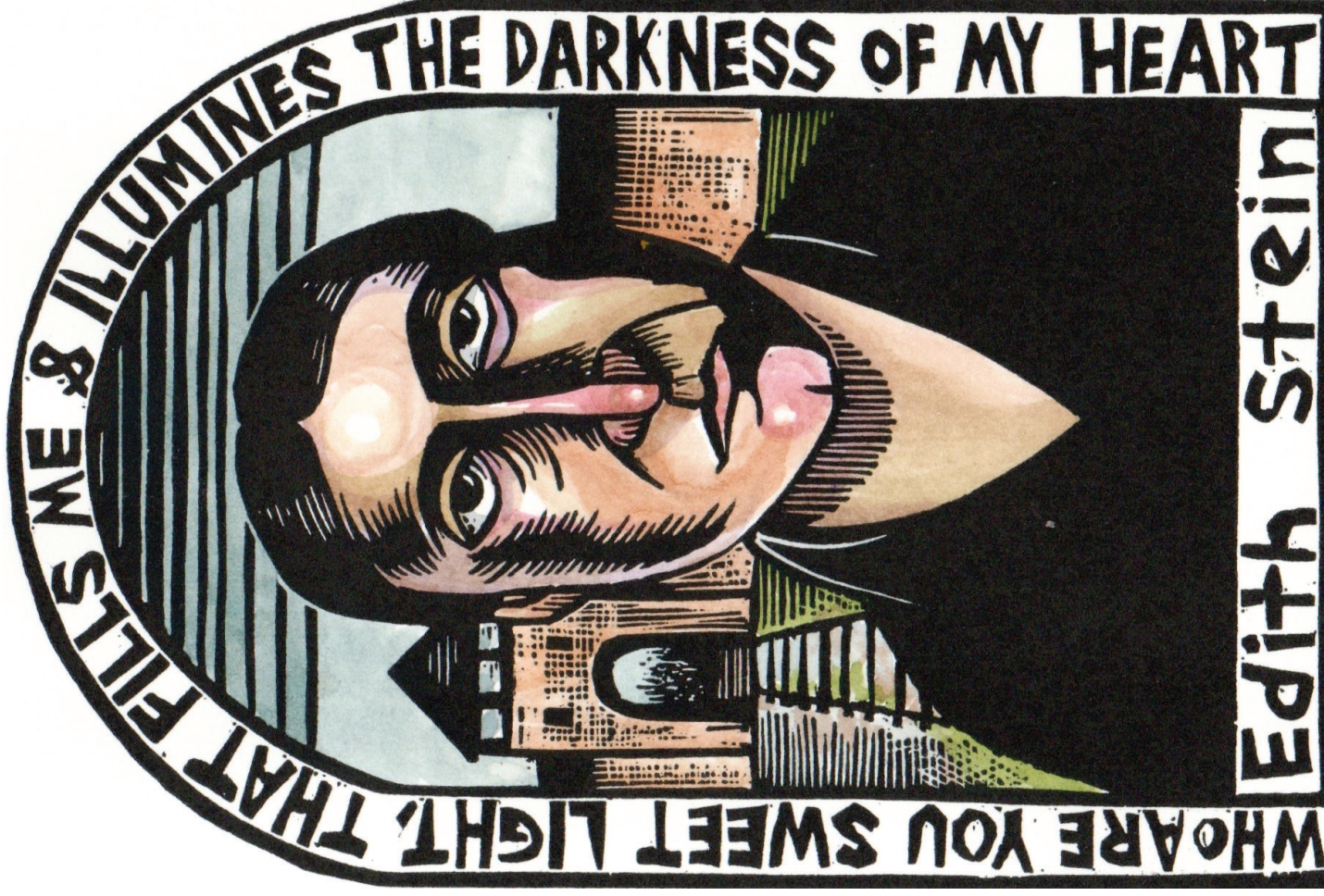
Stein was residing at the Carmelite monastery in Echt, Holland, when the Nazis invaded the Netherlands in 1940. The safety of her cloistered confines ended when the Dutch Bishop’s Conference released a statement condemning Nazi racism. In retaliation, the Nazis deported Stein and other Jewish converts to Birkenau and executed them in early August 1942.

There was a time when Stein could have made her way to a safer environment. She refused. She wanted to stand in solidarity with her brothers and sisters and not abandon them during their most desperate time of need. More than once, she offered her life, in her words, as an “atonement for the sake of true peace.”

We can resolve to follow Christ, surrender our lives, and live selflessly for our family and friends, but all of that is easier said than done. The Spirit of Love must empower us. A mental assertion is not enough. A daily dying of self and selfish desires brings us to this point. “Pick up your cross daily,” Jesus instructed. Stein understood this. She once confided to a mentor: “Every time I feel my powerlessness and inability to influence people directly, I become more keenly aware of the necessity of my own holocaust.”

Stein resolved to follow Christ and to stand in solidarity. When the Nazi officers came to take the nuns away, she looked at her sister Rosa, also a Carmelite nun, and said, “Come, we are going for our people.”

God of mercy, death is not the end but the beginning—death of self, death of body. Going deeper with you requires resolution—it starts in the mind but ends in the heart. Be the life I desperately desire so that all else pales in comparison. Amen.



KATERI TEKAKWITHA (1656-1680) Purity

Like a lily among thorns is my darling among the young women.

—SONG OF SONGS 2:2

The lily has symbolized purity and innocence throughout Christian history. Churches and cathedrals are adorned with these scented flowers during Easter services to represent the purity of Christ—untainted by sin. It's through him that we are made pure and holy.

The nineteenth-century First Nations saint Kateri Tekakwitha is often portrayed holding a lily and is affectionately known as Lily of the Mohawks. She is named after the fourteenth-century Saint Catherine of Siena, who is also often depicted carrying a lily.

Tekakwitha was born into the Mohawk tribe in the lands that are present-day New York. Her baptism and faith in Christ at nineteen was, in many ways, a progression of her spiritual journey. A Mohawk tribesman of the Bear Clan, Rarihokwats, states, “Indigenous spirituality is not a religion. It is a way of being. . . This quest is what makes life a journey, not a destination.” Tekakwitha had hoped to form a Native religious order, merging the similar virtues of Indigenous spirituality and Christianity, but was met with resistance. For Tekakwitha, there was no conflict between the two. She was deeply committed to her people as she was to Christ, even unto marriage.

Virginity and purity seem to have a role in the biblical story. “The body is not meant for sexual immorality but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body,” St. Paul writes to the men in Corinth who had been sleeping with prostitutes. Priests and nuns take a vow of celibacy, while married couples vow to remain faithful to each other.

Purity is not about following rules and regulations but rather about forming a greater intimacy. Our ultimate pursuit is to create bonds of trust with God and our partner. Trust is an essential element of any committed relationship, and we find the freedom to be our authentic selves through this trust.

Holy Bridegroom, you adorn me as a robe of righteousness and purity, the deepest love I can know. Along with other faithful followers, I am your bride, holy and acceptable, for you have made me so. May I continue to reach deeper depths of intimacy with you. Amen.



Amanda Berry Smith was born enslaved in Maryland and was not allowed to attend school. But her father was able to purchase the family's freedom while she was young.

At thirteen, Smith came to faith in Christ while attending a church revival. "I went home and resolved I would be the Lord's and live for him," she later wrote. She recounts her story in the autobiography: *The Story of the Lord's Dealings with Mrs. Amanda Smith, the Colored Evangelist*.

In 1870, Smith had a vision of the letters **GO** at the front of a church sanctuary and heard an audible voice say "PREACH." Sparked by that vision, Smith began evangelizing. Her new vocation of evangelism wouldn't be easy, and she readily admitted that she had to overcome many fears. Yet she accomplished spectacular things with the Spirit's empowerment.

Although Smith lacked ordination or financial support from the AME church, of which she was a member, she set out. Initially traveling throughout the United States, she then went on to Africa, India, England, Ireland, and Scotland. Unlike many present-day evangelists, Smith never told people about her financial needs. "I always make my needs known directly to God," she said. This dependence on God deepened her trust, and God always delivered.

Smith's incredible worldwide journey progressed one step at a time: from her harsh beginnings of enslavement to overcoming her fear of public speaking, to traveling thousands of miles and over oceans despite her fear of the sea, to not knowing where her financial support would come from. When encountering obstacles, Smith prayed that God would either remove them or help her to overcome them. And with each hurdle successfully cleared, Smith felt empowered by God.

When physical ailments finally slowed her down at the end of her life, Smith didn't rest on her laurels. She opened an orphanage in Harvey, Illinois, just south of Chicago.

Smith lived a remarkable life. Like Smith and in her words, we "belong to royalty." God will empower us for the impossible tasks at hand.

Mighty God, you are my strength and courage and sustenance. Sometimes the mountains look impossible to scale. In those moments, empower me to do the impossible, for you can lift me to new heights. Amen.

