



Elisabeth Eppinger

The Mystic of Niederbronn

1814 – 1867



Mother Alphonse Marie Eppinger after the foundation of the Congregation in 1849

1814
09.09. Birth of Elisabeth

1847
She sees the necessity to care for the sick and poor and to pray for the conversion of sinners

1849
28.08. Foundation of the Congregation of the Daughters of the Divine Redeemer

1854
Foundation of the House in Wurzburg

1857
Foundation of the House in Vienna

1863
Foundation of the House in Sopron

1866
11.04. Papal approbation of the Decree

1866
The establishments in Vienna and Wurzburg become independent

1867
The Sopron establishment becomes independent

1867
31.07. Death of Mother Alphonse Marie

1951
Opening of the Diocesan Process of Beatification

2006
Retrial of the Process

2011
19.12. Promulgation of the Decree on the heroic virtues of the Servant of God Mother Alphonse Marie



A map of Alsace

The Mystic of Niederbronn



"It is we, Christ's disciples, who have the task of proclaiming and living out the profound mystery of Divine Mercy which regenerates the world!"

John Paul II,
General Audience of August 21st 2002

1814-1867 The mystic of Niederbronn



*A fine, radiant young man dressed all in white,
his head crowned with thorns,
Jesus speaks to his beloved Elizabeth.
At her son's side, Mary sparkles in white
as she intercedes for the world.*

So who is this young Elizabeth, bed-ridden and suffering, who was rewarded with such visions in the middle of the nineteenth century? Visitors constantly come to see her and ask her advice. Yet this “poor girl”, uncultured and extremely fragile, has never left her village in Alsace. Some people nickname her “the ecstatic of Niederbronn”.




Do you know Alsace, that very beautiful and attractive region at the eastern end of France? It borders with Germany whose uncertain frontiers have shifted several times. It was in North Alsace, in Outre-Forêt, home of the Reformation, in a village named Niederbronn-les-Bains, surrounded by forests and famous from Roman times as a medicinal spa resort, that Elizabeth Eppinger was born on September 9th 1814. This small town is situated at the base of the Vosges foothills, at the crossroads of the Alsace and Lorraine plain. The region's industry is predominantly agricultural. The fields and the forests are operated as small properties.



At the time, living conditions in this rural and deprived world were tough. Various epidemics ran rampant, such as dysentery, smallpox and typhus. Village solidarity was a question of life and death. The families were very close-knit. So, for example, the only place of worship, the church, was shared by both Protestants and Catholics. It is here that little Elizabeth was baptised the day after she was born, by Fr. Eberlen, a priest who formerly had been “resistant”.¹ Alsatian Catholicism, though very popular, was in the minority in this area.

In fact, this region, which since 1570 had been part of the county of Hanau-Lichtenberg, was mainly Protestant. After the wars of the sixteenth century which had decimated the county's population, an immigration wave led to the arrival of newcomers, among whom were some Catholic families, including the ancestors of the Eppinger family.

¹ During the French Revolution the civil Constitution of the clergy (1790) resulted in the integration of the Catholic Church within the new political regime. All priests had to swear an oath on the Constitution of the Republic; those who refused to do so had to leave France or submit to hard penalties (prison, deportation and even execution).

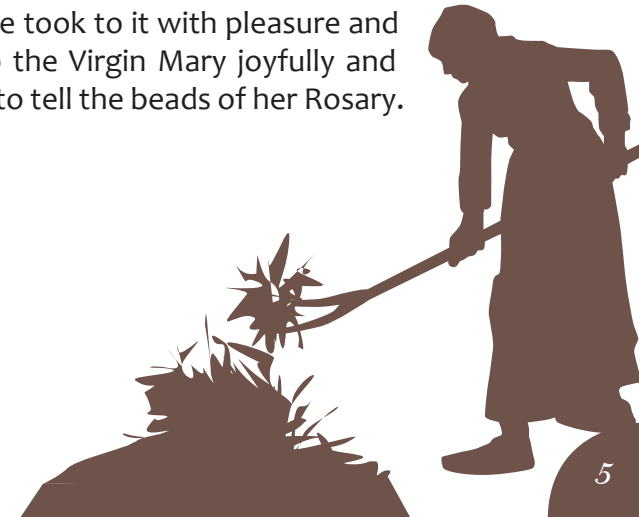


Chapter 1 • 1814-1830

Country childhood, simple and fervent



The Eppinger family was one of the oldest Catholic families in Niederbronn. Elizabeth's parents, Jean-Georges Eppinger and Barbe Vogt, had a small farm, they were workers who were dignified and deeply Christian. They were to have 11 children the oldest of whom was Elizabeth. Her father carefully managed their modest plot. As for her mother, she had to be alternately at home, in the fields and in the barn. So early on Elizabeth assisted her mother in looking after her numerous young brothers and sisters and in helping to keep the house, not forgetting her work in the fields. She was never afraid of work and she took to it with pleasure and gusto. She prayed to the Virgin Mary joyfully and simply and she loved to tell the beads of her Rosary.



One day out on the road when she came across a Calvary statue, Elizabeth asked her mother:

- Why did they crucify Jesus?
 - My little child, it's because of our sins, replied her mother in a sad voice.
 - But what is a sin?
- Elizabeth asked insistently.
- It's offending God...
- her mother answered.
- Well then, I don't want to offend him anymore!
- shouted Elizabeth with a cry from the heart.

"It is our sufferings
that he has borne
and our sorrows
that he has carried."

Isaiah 53:4

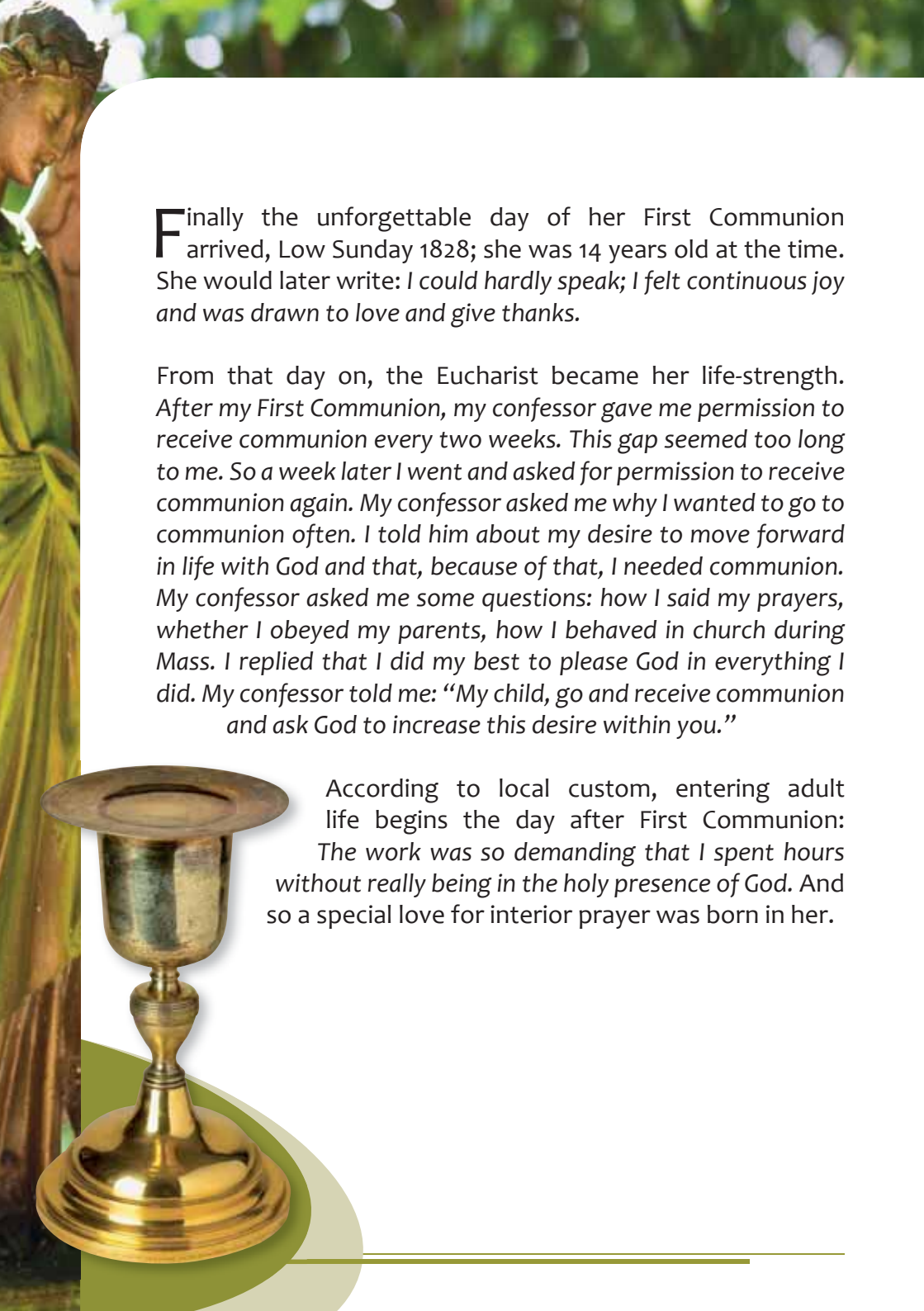


This discovery affected the child deeply. Later she would say: *From that time on, the desire to know what we have to do to love God and not offend him grew within me day by day... It overwhelmed me and led me to obedience.* While still young she had to tame her strong personality. As a passionate person she transformed her strength into missionary zeal and invited her friends to console Christ with her by doing his will: *I spoke about the Passion with my friends as best as I could.*

Lively, wilful and independent, from the age of six she displayed a certain liking for solitude, since she was attracted to God and loved spending time with him. She had a particularly high regard for priests: *From my childhood, the Lord placed a deep respect for priests in my heart... They are the dispensers of divine graces. Priests are our beloved Saviour's brothers and favourites.*

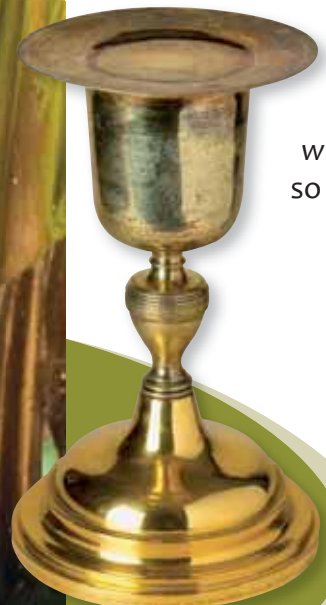
At the age of nine she left for school. This was a great sacrifice for her parents since they were losing a precious helper, but with all their hearts they wanted their daughter to be educated and especially wanted her to prepare for her First Communion. The road ahead was not going to be easy because Elizabeth had big problems with her memory. In addition, her native language was Alsatian. Despite trying hard, she would never be able to write properly and she would read only with difficulty. Her parents always remained attentive to her difficulties and lavished affection on her.





Finally the unforgettable day of her First Communion arrived, Low Sunday 1828; she was 14 years old at the time. She would later write: *I could hardly speak; I felt continuous joy and was drawn to love and give thanks.*

From that day on, the Eucharist became her life-strength. After my First Communion, my confessor gave me permission to receive communion every two weeks. This gap seemed too long to me. So a week later I went and asked for permission to receive communion again. My confessor asked me why I wanted to go to communion often. I told him about my desire to move forward in life with God and that, because of that, I needed communion. My confessor asked me some questions: how I said my prayers, whether I obeyed my parents, how I behaved in church during Mass. I replied that I did my best to please God in everything I did. My confessor told me: “My child, go and receive communion and ask God to increase this desire within you.”



According to local custom, entering adult life begins the day after First Communion: *The work was so demanding that I spent hours without really being in the holy presence of God. And so a special love for interior prayer was born in her.*

But she still had to battle against her strong personality; with the help of Mary she wanted to fight against her weakness from the bottom of her heart. Let's listen to her: *During my adolescence, I had to fight a battle against my angry temperament. I was very attached to my times of prayer. I organised my work in such a way that I could go to Mass. If anyone crossed me, I became angry. And if my parents ordered me to do some task when I was about to leave, I often disobeyed them. One day, while I was going to weekday Mass against their will, I was ill on my way back home. In my prayer I understood that this was absolutely the wrong way to please God: “O Jesus, you know what I want. I want to obey. Grant me what my heart ardently desires: to know you and love you.”*

What a resemblance to the little Bernadette Soubirous, born 30 years later into a loving, believing family in the south-west of France: a worker, stubborn, in frail health, speaking only the local dialect of the region and having trouble at school!

The Protestant church in Niederbronn served simultaneously for protestant and catholic. Here was Elisabeth baptized.



Chapter 2 • 1830-1845

Great mental and physical suffering

Between the age of 16 and 20, Elizabeth would undergo uninterrupted periods of unspeakable anguish. She could no longer feel the inexpressible joy of God's presence. She lost the taste for prayer and had grave doubts.

"Why do I suffer constantly?
Why is my wound painful and refuses to heal?"
Jeremiah 15:18

Elizabeth recalled this deep spiritual ordeal that overwhelmed her: *In my greatest anguish I didn't even dare to raise my eyes to heaven any longer or to the cross, she later wrote, and my inner suffering became so violent that my body was weakened by it and my health declined.*

Her heart cried out:
"My God, my God,
why have you forsaken me?"
Psalm 22[22]; Matthew 27:46



She particularly remembers persevering in the ardent prayer of her childhood to keep her heart pure, achieve holiness and do the will of God in all things. This was a very hard ordeal, but the sick woman came out of it victorious thanks to the uncommon energy that characterised her.

How can we help thinking of the young Therese of Lisieux who some years later would undergo similar mental and physical suffering? This anguish and these doubts are surely present in today's world just as they were at the end of the French Revolution and the dawn of the 1848 insurrection?

The illness stopped in 1834. I was then 20 years old and from this age on until my 27th year I was able to enjoy reasonably good health.



The cross in the former Elisabeth's room, which was converted to a chapel



Once back on her feet, Elizabeth once more took up her many activities at home, in the village and of course in the parish: *I devoted myself even more than previously to always spending time with God through interior prayer during my daily tasks. Whether working or socialising, I don't ever remember spending even ten minutes without inwardly talking to God.*

Some people in her village laughed at her but others felt attracted by her spiritual influence, by her fervour and her simplicity of life. And that is how a small group of young Catholic girls began to follow her with the intention of giving themselves to God. As for Elizabeth, in 1842, with the permission of her confessor, the parish priest of Niederbronn, Fr. John David Reichard who had known her from when she was nine years old, she joyfully made a vow of perpetual chastity before God.

"My beloved is mine and I am his."
Song of Songs 2:16

At the invitation of their local priest, Elizabeth and her early companions visited the marginalised, the sick, people who lived alone and families experiencing difficulty. Maybe it was in the course of one of these visits that Elizabeth caught typhoid fever? For during 1841 and 1842 we find her ill once again for 18 months.

Her love for solitude intensified and her desire for God became insatiable. She never stopped praying and offering up her physical sufferings (fever, constant headaches, acute stomach pains, exhaustion and extreme dejection). Feeling a heavy responsibility towards her family and no longer being able to help them was difficult to accept, even more so when the tenth child was born. Her suffering was also mental: *My illness was very painful at the start, but the inner sufferings were even more violent. I saw death before my own eyes, I was assailed by terrible temptations that made me despair about my health.*



St. Teresa of Avila

She then asked for St. Teresa of Avila's intercession so she could love God as much as she had loved him and so that she might bear her sufferings. But she wanted to live: *I no longer wanted to die; I prayed for my life to be prolonged and I asked God to let me be able to serve him for a long time to come. When the illness developed and became more serious, I was really scared that I wouldn't get better and would be unable to enter a religious Order.*

Then in 1845, Elizabeth fell ill once more with painful suffering that would endure for four long years, yet they would be years of great graces.





Chapter 3 • 1845-1848 The ecstatic of Niederbronn



The physical suffering intensified, but Elizabeth did not seem worried by it. Constantly bed-ridden, crippled and suffering continually, she never stopped living with Jesus, her divine spouse.

When she was 30 years old, the young woman would experience in prayer some unusual phenomena called “ecstasies”. (This word comes from the Latin word “ex”, which means “outside”, and the word “stare”, which means “to stand”.) She felt as if she was being transported outside of herself and she lost awareness of her surroundings and even her own body. She could then speak very simply with Jesus and receive valuable insights. She said that she saw Jesus under the guise of a young man dressed in white, his face shining with goodness and with a crown of thorns on his head. She spoke with him and received instructions for herself as well as for those who came to visit her. On several occasions she was given an unbearable vision of the sins of the world. She penetrated deeper and deeper into the mystery of the cross and divine mercy.

The salvation of souls became her incessant prayer's intention: *I only think about doing God's will and suffering out of love. My only desire: that God's name should be glorified by all people and that he should be better known.*

In her modest room, in her village, Elizabeth also had numerous visions of world events which she could not have had the slightest idea about, given her location, her education and the lack of media!

For example, she received keen insight into the great sufferings of the new pope, Pope Pius IX, elected on June 16th 1846 and for whom her confessor had asked her to pray. Jesus told her: *I am giving you a man after my own heart as Shepherd of my Church.* She saw the new supreme pontiff praying, suffering and being exposed to all sorts of opposition by his inner circle. She understood that Pius IX would work for the glorification of Mary. Indeed it was he who several years later, in 1858, would proclaim the dogma of the Immaculate Conception.



She also saw the state of the Church and the urgent need for sanctification of priests: *One of the great graces that Jesus Christ gained for us by his Passion is the institution of the Eucharist and the power to confer the sacraments upon us... Instead of thanking God for these huge benefits, people don't think about them and they have scant respect for priests... they don't pray for them... However, despite all this ingratitude, God continues to give his graces, to show us his infinite mercy even more. She says again: If only I could tell the priests how much God loves them with a special love, and how sublime their state is! Ah, if only they could understand how much God loves them!*

The unfaithfulness of certain members of the clergy haunted her. All her life she would never stop praying for them and many of them came to seek her advice.



But that was not all. Her visions even touched upon the area of politics. We must remember that the 19th century was very eventful and so during her life Elizabeth lived through five different political regimes.

The Restoration would last from 1814 until 1830, with Kings Louis XVIII and Charles X. And at that time the Congress of Vienna (1814-1815) would reshape Europe according to the views of the great powers who had defeated Napoleon I. But France kept Alsace and Lorraine, which it had lost after its defeat in 1871 to Germany.²

In July 1830, France experienced revolutionary times that led to the setting up of a parliamentary monarchy with Louis-Philippe. The July Monarchy ended in 1848, one of the most troubled years in the history of the 19th century when throughout Europe nationalist movements appeared along with a deep social crisis. These currents of ideas spread throughout the whole of Europe and brought great changes to political regimes in their wake, the building of new States (Germany, Italy, Belgium) and another demarcation of borders, notably in Italy where the temporal power of the Roman Pontiff would be at the centre of conflicts.

In February 1848, the Second Republic was proclaimed in France, followed in 1851 by the inauguration of the Second Empire with Emperor Napoleon III (1851-1871).

² In 1919, the French Republic got Alsace back. It was once again annexed by Nazi Germany in 1940 before becoming French again in 1944/1945.



In 1846, Elizabeth foresaw in her visions that Louis-Philippe's regime was going to collapse and that the king would be removed. Then, according to her visions, a man would be called to save France (Napoleon III). On several occasions she also saw the bloody uprising that would take place in Paris in 1848. She was deeply shaken by the vision of the fighting and the many dead.

Faced with all these events, the visionary exhorted people to prayer, to penitence and to conversion. More clearly than ever, she understood the love of God and humankind's ingratitude. She realised that God loves us immensely but so many people seemed indifferent to this infinite love. It is the same message that a humble Visitation Sister had received at Paray-le-Monial in 1675: *"Behold this Heart which loves people so much that he did not spare himself at all, even to the point of exhausting himself and being consumed to bear witness to them of his love. And in return, all he receives from most people is ingratitude."*

Street Sister
ELISABETH EPPINGER
(1814-1867)


Called Sister Alphonse Marie,
Foundress of the Congregation
of the Sisters of the Divine Saviour -
Niederbronn-les-Bains.





Chapter 4 • 1848-1849

Visitors flock to her bedside



Day after day, calmly and simply, Elizabeth told Fr. Reichard, her faithful confessor, everything she saw. He passed on the information regularly to Monsignor Raess, the Bishop of Strasbourg. The bishop was a man who listened, was very attentive, and was an eminent and kind pastor.

It was in the course of the year 1848-1849, in her 35th year, that the visionary was invited by her confessor to write an account of her life, an account written down in German by Fr. Reichard: *Life of Elizabeth Eppinger, told by herself at the request of her confessor and written down by him.*

And while the confessor carefully took down her words, events described by the visionary were actually taking place far away from Niederbronn. And some well-informed famous people were challenged by the accuracy of what her visions revealed.

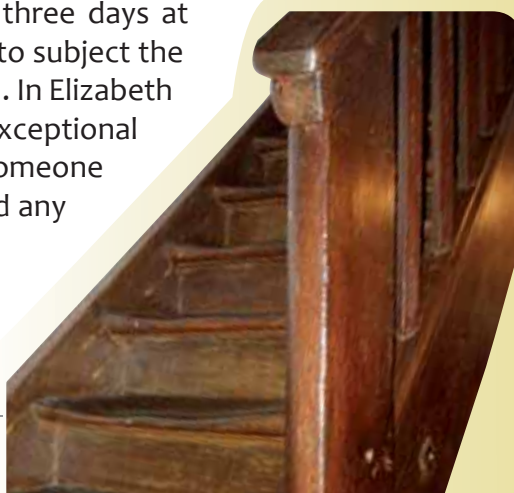


Rumours began to spread, because Niederbronn was a spa resort to which people came not only from all over Alsace but also from nearby French regions and the neighbouring German duchies. The spa industry was about to experience a rise in business! In the political situation that Europe was going through, shaken by revolutionary movements, people were worried. Among the social classes that frequented the resort, people were looking for some advice, some message that would restore confidence. Did someone say something about a woman who was enlightened in a special way by God? People asked to see her. Visitors flocked to the Eppinger home asking “the sick woman” for prayers and advice, and telling each other about the benefits they received when they met her.

And this is how a movement began which was soon considered a “threat to public order”. The mayor, Albert de Dietrich, attacked the priest, holding him responsible for these visits and the stories that were doing the rounds. These visits were also a great nuisance to the family which was exposed to all the taunts of the neighbourhood.

Faced with these disturbing events, the Bishop of Strasbourg decided to go to Niederbronn himself where he stayed for three days at the end of July 1848, in order to subject the seer to a rigorous examination. In Elizabeth he saw a soul gifted with exceptional graces, an upright person, someone of good faith who was beyond any hint of manipulation.

Old staircase in the birthplace of MAM which was used by many guests



Later, at the time when she was undergoing strong attacks, he wrote forcibly: *I recognised in her all the marks of a privileged soul with admirable candour, noble simplicity and a fine fool-proof faith. Despite the traps I tried to set for her, it proved impossible for me to find fault with her in any kind of way.*

After the bishop’s visit and his valuable support, Elizabeth’s life was completely turned upside down. The visitors flocked to this woman whom they nicknamed “the ecstatic of Niederbronn”. What she had to say spread well beyond the confines of her diocese.

Some people took her for a fanatic, a crazy woman or a trickster; others however ardently wanted to meet her to seek her prayers and advice. If a visitor asked her a question, Elizabeth turned to Jesus and said to him: *My divine spouse, what should I reply? If she received no answer then she said nothing.*

For many people these meetings with the sick woman were like a balm and a great light in their lives. And therefore key figures from both Church and civil society asked to see her.

Mother Alphonse Marie on the church window of Reichshoffen





Elizabeth did not want to stand out conspicuously. Her path of grace was lived out in discretion and in obedience to her confessor. She was very aware of her unworthiness and said to Jesus: *How can you give me such graces, I who am so small, who am nothing?*

Elizabeth remained this small country woman with fragile health and scant education, completely bound up in the life of her family and her village which she never left. And yet her spiritual radiance, from her modest bedroom in the Eppinger household, crossed frontiers.

It was at this same time that crowds were also descending on Ars, the little Dombes town, and waiting for hours to meet its humble priest, St. John Mary Vianney.

From a very young age Elizabeth was always eager to devote herself to God. The teaching Sisters of the Ribeauvillé Province, who had arrived in Niederbronn some years previously, would be happy to take her in. This Congregation, started in 1783, blossomed throughout all of Alsace, running schools for educating girls.

Their ecclesiastical Superior even suggested to Elizabeth that she come and take the habit and bear the name of Sister Alphonse Marie Liguori (a Neapolitan priest, founder of the Redemptorists, who worked with the poor in the countryside during the 18th century).

But Monsignor Raess, from whom the priest sought advice, accurately wrote: *Prudence demands that in this case we should not be too hasty.* For Fr. Reichard, too, Elizabeth was called to something else, to a greater good for the diocese. But what then was “this other thing”; what would her vocation be?



St. Alphonsus
Maria de Liguori



Father John David
Reichard (1796 - 1867),
co-founder and
the first Superior of
the Congregation



Chapter 5

A special vocation



Jesus was about to let his little bride know that she was being called to found a new Order: *I am destining you for this Order. I am preparing the necessary graces for you and I will teach you what you are to say. I want to show you the inner ways by which you must teach each person... abandon yourself to me and worry about nothing when you do my will.*



On December 20th 1848, Elizabeth renewed her vow of perpetual chastity and added a vow of obedience to her confessor. He would become the Superior of the new Order which was to be founded. Then during the horrible night of December 21st she was shown by Heaven all the faults that she had committed and how many graces and insights had not been received as a result. We might remember that the Curé of Ars, that tireless confessor, also received the terrifying revelation about his sins.

Like the humble Curé, she would be attacked several times by the “Grappin” (Satan). Thus, on March 13th 1849, while she was spending time with a person, a shadow advanced towards her and took the form of a snake that insulted her by shouting accusations: hypocrite, pretender, liar. Elizabeth was scared; she grabbed hold of the cross and immediately regained her sense of peace.

On August 28th 1849, the people of Niederbronn took part in the installation of the eldest of the Eppinger children in a little house in the village where four young Alsatian girls were waiting for her. In the same week they were joined by five others. They formed with Elizabeth a community of ten members.

Soon the house was designated as the “little convent” in the local dialect: the *Kloesterlé*. And thus, in great simplicity, the Order of the Daughters of the Divine Redeemer was founded. The *Kloesterlé* was just a house alongside the others of the village. A little chapel had been furnished in a basic way on the ground floor.

A small community was born around the first Rule which can be summarised as follows: contemplating in the Gospel the merciful heart of Jesus, contemplating his attitude towards all those who suffer in heart and body, as well as his attitude towards sinners. This involved shaping one’s heart on the Heart of Jesus to be a Good Samaritan like him and to act as disciples to whom Jesus said: “*You go too and do the same*”, learning how to love and to become close to all people.

On September 10th 1849, at the age of 35, Elizabeth Eppinger received the habit in the little chapel that had just been fitted out in the summer and she officially took the name of Sr. Alphonse Marie. She was appointed Superior General of the new Congregation by the bishop. Then on December 27th it was the novices’ turn to take the habit as they promised obedience to Sr. Alphonse Marie. They formed the first novitiate.



Most Rev.
Andreas Raess
Bishop of Strasbourg
(1842 - 1887)

A few days later, on January 2nd 1850, Sr. Alphonse Marie made her religious profession. This is what a witness described: **It was as if she was surrounded by light. She spent the whole of that day absorbed in feelings of deep gratitude; she had to restrain herself so as not to burst with joy.**

"Come then, my love; my darling, come with me"
Song of Songs 2:16

Then on the same evening Sr. Alphonse Marie said this prayer:

*O Mary, my dear Mother,
have mercy on me and take me as your child.
See, I have to be the mother of these children:
but how can I be so?*

*I am so poor, have mercy on my poverty.
From your Son, my Divine Spouse,
obtain for me a heart that is as maternal as your own.
Obtain understanding, wisdom and knowledge for me.*

*O St. Alphonsus, St. Theresa,
see the heavy burden that I must bear, help me,
pray for me.*



At the end of this prayer she had a new ecstasy: accompanied by the saints she had invoked, she went to the feet of Jesus and prayed:

*See, my Divine Spouse,
I must come to you again.
I place my heart in yours;
take it and give me yours.*

*Oh! I am afraid of offending you, of causing you pain.
Oh! Don't let that happen.*

*Take my entire will, and remove from me
all that might offend you.*



In the discrete shelter of her "Little Convent" her mystical life grew ever deeper. She was sometimes transported into scenes from the life of Jesus and his mother. She became intimately part of the action and the pictures she describes in her notes are particularly colourful and vivid. She was continually invited by Jesus to work in the vineyard of the Father and to undergo the sufferings of his Passion with him. In all these scenes the Virgin Mary was present to help her Son and to associate the visionary with his work.



The foundation - little convent in Niederbronn, called "Kloesterle"



The portrait of Mother Alphonse Marie



Chapter 6 Making known the kindness and mercy of God to those who are suffering

But what was the original intuition of this new work? The Sisters of the Divine Redeemer aim “TO BE AN INSTRUMENT OF GOD’S MERCY THROUGH SIMPLE GESTURES WHICH SOOTHE AND COMFORT THE BODY WHILE AT THE SAME TIME CALMING THE SOUL BY THE ATTENTION AND PRESENCE THEY PROVIDE TO THOSE WHO ARE OVERWHELMED, AND THE WAY THEY ARE ATTENTIVE AND RESPECTFUL TO THOSE IN ANY KIND OF DISTRESS.” What a great programme and one that is so relevant today and for all times!

Sr. Alphonse Marie keenly observed all forms of material and spiritual misery, even though she never left Niederbronn. The township regularly featured among the Bas-Rhin area’s poorest where delinquency and begging were significant issues.

Her deprived region, predominantly rural, underwent violent economic crises caused by a series of disastrous seasons. And so 1816 and 1817 proved to be years of great shortages in which people even ate the seeds that were needed for sowing! In 1829-1830, a severe cold hit them; then in 1846-1847 the heat and drought caused a cruel lack of grain and potatoes. In addition to this inclement climate, epidemics ravaged the area: typhus, smallpox and cholera.

The Saviour’s statue,
Motherhouse, Oberbronn

Families were often crammed into dilapidated houses with very little furniture or linen. In her village, she saw men and women crushed by the harshness of life, exhausted by their work and bedevilled by worry about tomorrow. It was not easy to feed so many mouths every day. We know how the Foundress herself was repeatedly seriously ill and how she felt she was a burden on her family.

Can you imagine what it was like for a poor family in those days when one of its members fell ill? Very often they stayed at home alone all day in a hovel with no help, because the other family members, though torn to have to do so, had to leave them and go off to work. Sr. Alphonse Marie described the situation: *Poor sick people have to remain pitifully in need and groaning like the paralysed man who waited 38 years at the pool in Jerusalem because he had no one to help him.*

Let's listen to the word of God in Psalm 85 (86).

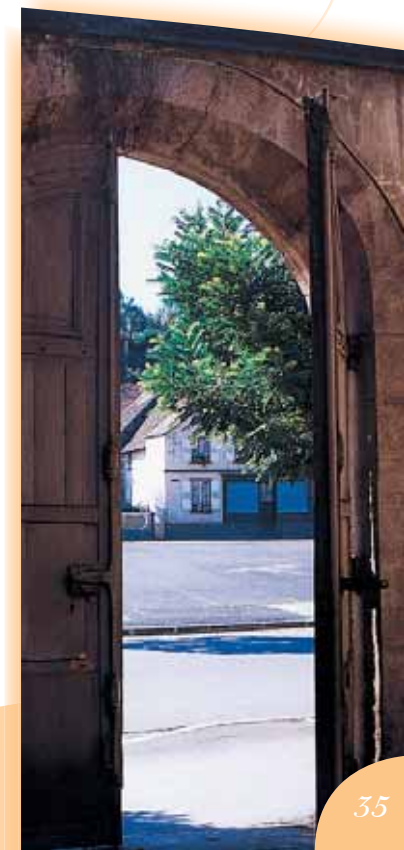
"Listen to me, Lord, and answer me,
for I am poor and wretched.
Watch over me for I am faithful,
O my God, save your servant who relies on you.
Have mercy on me, Lord,
you whom I call to every day.
Lord, make your servant glad;
to you I lift up my soul!
You who are good and forgiving,
full of love for those who call on you,
hear my prayer, Lord.
Hear my voice as I call upon you.
I call on you in the day of my distress,
and you, Lord, answer me."

The specific character of the Congregation would therefore be very practical: to go into the homes of the poor to respond to their spiritual and material needs by practising the works of mercy.

According to the *Community Chronicle*, from October 15th, only about two months after they were founded, on the feast of St. Teresa of Avila, people came to ask them to help a poor woman who had been suffering for several days from violent pains in childbirth.

Then on October 28th, someone came again to ask for their help for a man who was close to death and had been languishing for some time in a bed whose sheets were soaked with sweat. His wife, a Protestant, was deeply distressed that she had no more sheets to change the bed. A witness writes: *Several neighbours were in the bedroom when Sr. Alphonse Marie entered; they were all astonished when they saw her. But she spoke so kindly, with such consoling words, that she brought new heart to the distressed wife. Then she promised to keep coming to help before leaving.*

On November 30th, Mother Alphonse Marie was called by the postulant who was looking after this dying man. He wanted to see her there and then. She calmed him down, encouraged him, prayed with him and stayed by his side until midnight. *Several men who were there were very moved and showed great respect for her. This visit also made a good impression on his wife as well as the other Protestants.*



On December 17th a very young servant girl not originally from the village was dying alone and without anyone to care for her. She was taken into the convent. The Sisters looked after her with kindness until she died.

Very soon they were pleased to be able to feed all the poor children from the surrounding villages who came to the Niederbronn parish school.

And so, with such simple gestures as these, the Daughters of the Divine Redeemer began their mission of lightening suffering in a joyful and humble way without making distinctions between religion or social class.

They were missionaries of charity, very similar to those of Mother Teresa in today's world!

"You heavens, cry out with joy and earth exult;
let the mountains shout out
for the Lord has consoled his people
and taken pity on his afflicted ones.
Zion had said: "The Lord has abandoned me;
the Lord has forgotten me."
Does a woman forget her little child;
is she without pity for the fruit of her womb?
Even if women do forget, I will never forget you.
See, I have carved you on the palm of my hands;
your ramparts are always before me!"

Isaiah 49:13-16



Chapter 7 • 1850-1854


Taking root in alsace



Their charity quickly spread and 14 foundations grew up in a few months around Niederbronn: Reichshoffen, Brumath, Mommenheim, then Hochfelden, Haguenau, Wasselonne, Neuhoffen etc., all situated not far from the first foundation.

Providence showed itself in a very concrete way for the community. In the Chronicle we read that: "When the Sisters came to their new house they still had no cooking utensils or food. But, they had hardly crossed the threshold when people from all sides brought them what they needed and all of a sudden they had so much that they gave what was over to the poor."

In the evening of May 11th, Mother Alphonse Marie was praying in front of the Blessed Sacrament. The Lord told her: My daughter, tell my children that they must meditate on my life and sufferings more. By so doing, I will teach them to save souls and will even grant wisdom and special knowledge to the most ignorant. So she gathered them together and shared with them what the Lord had told her. They were all very moved and made a firm resolution to fervently meditate in future on the life and sufferings of Jesus.



Attracted by this life of prayer and compassion, a number of young girls came knocking on the convent door. It became far too small to accommodate them all and needed to be enlarged as soon as possible. Mother Alphonse Marie entrusted this project to St. Joseph and consecrated the new Congregation to him on March 19th 1850. On March 24th she told her confessor: *This morning during Holy Mass, when I was praying to St. Alphonsus (de Liguori) as protector of the Order, I heard a voice coming from St. Joseph's altar which distinctly told me: "It is not St. Alphonsus who is the protector but St. Joseph. He will maintain the true spirit here. No one will be able to harm this house..."* Then the Superior saw St. Joseph building the new convent himself. Later, Jesus would tell her: *See, my daughter, St. Joseph, my father, will be the principal protector of this house from now on; through his intercession the house will gain great graces. Look at the simplicity of this saint! That's why I am giving him as protector and patron of this house.*

With the bishop's authorisation, the building of a convent was undertaken and gifts flowed in. The convent would be called "St. Joseph Convent" and would provide the Catholics of Niederbronn with their first chapel since the 16th century. On May 19th 1850 the blessing of the first stone took place: *Many people from Niederbronn and Reichshoffen were there; some Protestants and Jews took part in it, as well as 80 men who were working on the site.*

And a few days later, another foundation stone was laid: Sr. Attala, one of the first companions of Mother Alphonse Marie died.

At her funeral, Psalm 40 (41) was chosen:

"Happy are those who are concerned
for the poor and weak:
the Lord will save them on the day of distress!
In my innocence you have sustained me
and kept me in your presence for ever.
Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel,
now and for ever!
Amen! Amen!"

The year 1851 saw six other foundations springing up, some of which were asked for by the bishop, such as the one at Marienthal, a well-known Marian pilgrimage site, in the north of Alsace where there was a house for elderly priests, or the one in Strasbourg that took care of the Cathedral's poor. Two foundations were also set up in two valleys close to Niederbronn which housed some isolated hamlets in the forest and whose population lived in great poverty.

Wherever they went, the Sisters were immediately appreciated for their great dedication, their humility, their discretion and their prayer.

Dr. Kuhn, a physician from Niederbronn, wrote at the start of 1853: **Not only do these pious girls look after the sick, giving them the most assiduous care day and night as they expose themselves to all sorts of contagious attacks and put up with all sorts of unpleasant things, but by going into the hovels of the poor they also bring them the consolations of religion. They repay bad manners with kindness and they introduce cleanliness where hitherto it was neither known nor appreciated, while also teaching children in these out-of-the-way hamlets where there was neither teacher nor school. In my eyes this Congregation is, therefore, a great benefit for the poor who are sick, as well as an instrument that civilises people and provides them with religious morality.**



Chapter 8

Rapid spread of spirituality

Despite her fragile health, Mother Alphonse Marie was called upon to undertake a number of journeys to visit the new foundations, often in very precarious conditions. Nevertheless, she maintained her pleasant mood, always gentle and caring towards the Sisters. She never ceased exhorting them to holiness along with her devoted co-worker, Fr. John David Reichard, ecclesiastical Superior and co-founder of the new Congregation, who was a humble and wise priest, admired by all.

Mother Alphonse Marie was aware that she had received a lot from the Lord and she eagerly wanted to pass on his teaching. Her talks with the Sisters were very personal and the advice given by the Lord in the course of her visions was woven into these conversations. She urged them to *learn how to know the price of souls by contemplating the Saviour dying on the cross*. Consoling the afflicted and assisting the dying: isn't this the most important thing there is since it deals with *the salvation of souls ransomed by the precious blood of our divine Saviour*? And so nothing is too much when it comes to serving our neighbour: tiredness, unpleasantness, self-giving to the point of giving our lives. Living and acting for him, *imitating him in his kindness, his humility, his love, pleasing him alone, and not seeking praise from men and women*. Carrying out *all the spiritual and corporal works of mercy with a right and pure intention, and trustfully leaving all the rest to God*.

The chapel in
St. Joseph's convent,
Niederbronn

The word mercy, that feeling by which the misery of another person touches our heart, (from the Latin *misereri*, to have pity, and *cor*, heart,) is a perfect way of summarising the specific character of the new Congregation.

Mother Alphonse Marie used to insist on the reason behind, the aim and intention of all her actions. She takes up the words of St. Paul in the first Rule:

"If I lack love, I am nothing but a sounding brass,
a clashing cymbal...Even if I give all my fortune
to the hungry, even if I have myself burned alive,
if I lack love then it's no use to me."

I Corinthians 13.

In the same way, St. John says:

"Anyone who does not love, lives in death."

I John 3

The love which the two apostles speak about is not simply love of neighbour but love of God. Love of God and neighbour are one and the same; they cannot be separated. Whoever serves people in order to please them or attract compliments from them has already received their reward like the Pharisees in the Gospel. As St. Paul says, he is simply a servant of Christ and expects nothing from him. The Daughters of the Divine Redeemer should have as their aim that of pleasing God, of imitating the Heart of Jesus and the Immaculate Heart of Mary, serving the person of Jesus Christ in each of the poor and sick people, remembering the words of the Lord:

"Whatsoever you did to the least
of my brothers and sisters,
you did to me."

Matthew 25

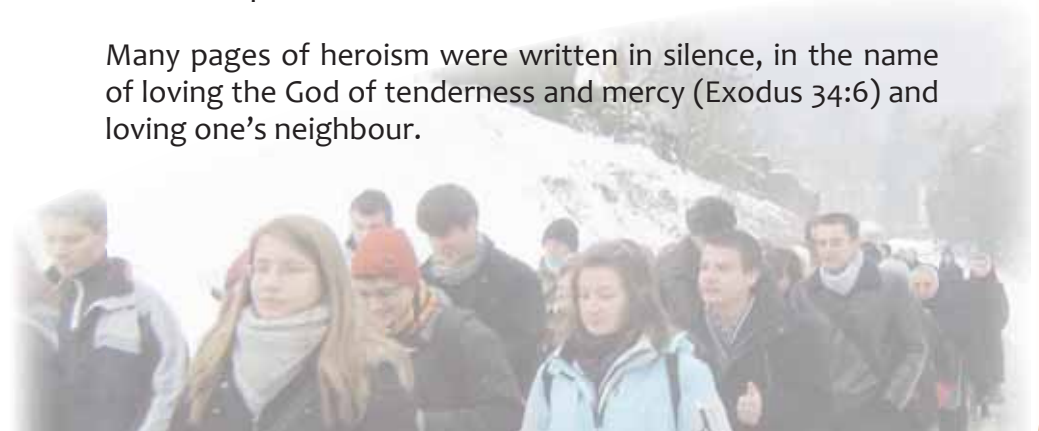
Mother Alphonse Marie's
signature



Requests for foundations multiplied from parishes and municipalities but also from the highest State authorities. Even the German Bishop of Spire (Rhénanie-Palatinat) wanted the Sisters of the Divine Redeemer to come and set up in his diocese. At the end of 1852, the Congregation comprised 153 members and already numbered 30 communities. The young Sisters of the Divine Redeemer were everywhere to help during the severe floods in Strasbourg in 1853, or during the cholera epidemic that was to ravage Alsace in 1854.

The Prefects of the two Departments appealed to the Congregation. Mother Alphonse Marie sent some Sisters wherever the epidemic struck. Some of these fell victim to the disease themselves. They were all admired by the general population as they attended the besides of the sick day and night, giving proof of their skill at saving lives and preventing contagion, assisting the dying, consoling families and calming the storm. In that same year, another request reached Niederbronn. It was the Crimean War and the Sisters' first confrontation with the fields of battle. Among many other Religious, a small group of Daughters of Mother Alphonse Marie took part in caring for the wounded in the field hospitals, following the army wherever it went. And so we come across some Sisters at the Siege of Sebastopol.

Many pages of heroism were written in silence, in the name of loving the God of tenderness and mercy (Exodus 34:6) and loving one's neighbour.



Let us not forget that the 19th century was one of extraordinary expansion of religious life. On the eve of the Revolution, France had 55,000 Religious. When it was over there were no more than 12,000, but in 1900 there were 135,000 to be found!

We know that the large number of religious foundations is linked to the situation of extreme poverty in a section of European society. The Congregations were to be found on all fronts: hospitals, education, teaching, working with the poor... There were some bold and innovating women: Madeleine-Sophie Barrat (Foundress of the Congregation of the Sacred Heart of Jesus), Anne-Marie Javouhey (St. Joseph of Cluny), Thérèse Couderc (the Cenacle), Jeanne Jugan (the Little Sisters of the Poor), just to quote those who were born in France. There were foundresses of a similar type in other countries.

The time came for the Congregation to receive letters of official recognition from the civil and religious authorities. Monsignor Raess, until then the person in sole charge of the new religious family, started the process rolling. And it was in November 1854, by Imperial Decree of Napoleon III that the Congregation of the Daughters of the Divine Redeemer obtained an official statute from the French State. Then she obtained official recognition from the Church by means of the "Decree of Praise" of March 7th 1863 signed by Pope Pius IX and followed by the "Decree of Approval" on April 11th 1866.



Paintings in the clinic
St. Odile in Strasbourg

After 1863 the Congregation would bear a new name: the Congregation of the Sisters of the Most Holy Saviour, to avoid the risk of its being confused with another Congregation. At this time the Congregation was composed of 700 Sisters spread over 83 houses in 15 dioceses of Europe. But which were these European countries?

The first foundation outside France was that of Spire, close to the border, in 1852. The town was French until the fall of the Napoleonic Empire in 1814, when it reverted to being German.



Chapter 9 • 1854-1867

Lights and shadows

In 1854 it was in Bavaria, in Würzburg, that a new community opened with Sr. Marie Honorine. This foundation would go on to flourish. Then in 1857 a foundation was to come to birth in Vienna, in Austria, with Sr. Théophile, the daughter of the Niederbronn's bailiff, a very gifted woman who was one of Mother Alphonse Marie's companions during her youth.

In the same year in France, the Congregation acquired the Oberbronn Castle, close by Niederbronn, in the same canton. They set up the novitiate there and later turned it into their Motherhouse. Later in 1863, at the instigation of St. Théophile of Vienna, a community was opened in Hungary at Saprón, 60 kilometres from Vienna, with Sr. Basilissa as Superior.

The diocesan bishops greatly appreciated the benevolent work of the Sisters. They hoped that the Congregation would develop quickly for the greater good of the people. This desire of the bishops and the growing distance of the communities from the Motherhouse in Niederbronn led to different points of view. This more and more affected the relationship between Mother Alphonse Marie and Sr. Théophile. These two charismatic and single-minded women had been united since their youth by the same spiritual quest: they both wanted to serve God in the poor. However, in the tension between the Foundress' concern to strengthen the Sisters in their spirituality and the bishops' desire for them to offer useful service to the people of their dioceses, they did not manage to find a satisfactory solution.

In March 1866, the Archbishop of Vienna decided that the Sisters' house in Vienna should become an independent Motherhouse. And so the communities in Austria and Hungary found themselves separated from Niederbronn and the "Congregation of the Daughters of the Divine Saviour" was founded with Sr. Théophile becoming the first Superior General. The Congregation would extend within Austria and neighbouring countries and later would also move into the Netherlands and Argentina. (In 1984, the

name of the Congregation would become "Sisters of the Divine Redeemer". In 1999, this Congregation amalgamated once more with the Congregation of the Sisters of the Most Holy Saviour whose Motherhouse is in Oberbronn.)

In June 1867, the Bishop of Raab in Hungary set up a special Congregation which became the "Congregation of the Daughters of the Divine Redeemer" (later to be known as "Congregation of the Sisters of the Divine Redeemer") whose Motherhouse was in Sopron and whose first Superior was Sr. Basilissa. This Congregation founded houses in Hungary, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Austria, the United States and Ukraine. Since 1955 its Motherhouse has been in Rome.

In June 1866, the same process took place for the communities of the diocese of Würzburg. As a result the "Congregation of the Sisters of the Redeemer" was founded with its Motherhouse in Würzburg in Germany and Sr. Marie-Honorine was its first Superior General. This Congregation spread throughout Germany, the United States and Tanzania.

In 1916, a branch from the Vienna Congregation was set up as the "Congregation of the Daughters of the Most Holy Saviour" with its Motherhouse in Bratislava (modern-day Slovakia). This Congregation was later set up in Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Germany. (In 2009, it also decided to merge with the Congregation of the Sisters of the Most Holy Saviour of Oberbronn.)

These separations by a certain number of Sisters and communities were a painful ordeal for Mother Alphonse Marie. Meanwhile, these years of rapid trans-border growth proved a new and disconcerting experience for her. This modest project, born from contemplation of God's love for men and women, was becoming a human organisation with rigorous requirements.

Mother Alphonse Marie
on the deathbed





The tomb of Mother Alphonse Marie
in the cemetery of the sisters in Niederbronn

"It is the word of God
that called me into being
and his will that has crowned
me with love and kindness.
Even at the heart of my distress
I keep faith in his promise;
his law and his love are my consolation.
Lord, make me a witness to your truth,
so my whole life may be a sign of your word"
From Psalm 118 [119]

On July 24th 1867, Fr. Reichard died and a few days later on July 31st, Mother Alphonse Marie, aged 53, concluded her earthly pilgrimage. Her funeral was celebrated on August 2nd on the feast of her patron, Alphonsus de Liguori.

Later, despite the three deadly conflicts between France and Germany, the Congregations tirelessly pursued their mission on the two banks of the Rhine, working with those who were suffering.

In the 20th century, the different religious families that developed around the world (in Africa, America and Asia) radiated the spiritual experience of Mother Alphonse Marie whom they recognise as their Foundress.

On December 19th 2011,
Pope Benedict XVI
promulgated a decree
that officially recognised
the heroic virtues practised
by Elizabeth Eppinger –
Mother Alphonse Marie.
She now bears
the sweet title of
"Venerable Servant of God".



Pope Benedict XVI



Windows in the clinic chapel
of St. Odile in Strasbourg

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The Mystic of Niederbronn

1814 – 1867

Elisabeth Eppinger

“Happy the poor in spirit,
for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs.
Happy the gentle,
for they shall inherit the earth.
Happy the afflicted,
for they shall be consoled.
Happy those who hunger and thirst for justice,
for they shall be satisfied.
Happy the merciful,
for they shall be granted mercy.
Happy the pure in heart,
for they shall see God.
Happy the peacemakers,
for they shall be called children of God.
Happy those who are persecuted,
for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs.
Happy are you when people insult you,
persecute you and say all kinds
of lies about you on account of me.
Be joyful and glad,
for your reward will be great in heaven.”

Matthew 5:3-12

