

## *Blessed Alphonse Marie and her Sister's Respond to the Epidemics*

Holy Father Francis says that “the crisis of the coronavirus pandemic affects all of us: both rich and poor. He talks about the descent to the reality of the inconspicuous saints, especially those who stand in the front line in the battle against the coronavirus, trying to help the sick.

We can also include among these inconspicuous saints our Foundress, Blessed Alphonse Marie Eppinger, who founded our Congregation in the time of devastating epidemics in 1849, in spa town of Niederbronn, Alsace, France.

She was called – literally – the inconspicuous saint by Swiss Protestant theologian Walter Nigg. Once, when he briefly visited a cloister, he saw her picture. She caught him so much that he devoted his talent to her and wrote a little book about her. He states in it that he is convinced of her sanctity, although she is inconspicuous. Why? She left the work, which has existed for 170 years and it is still current. Even today, her Sisters stand by beds of the sick, regardless of rank or religion, simply, they serve everyone indiscriminately.

We live in a time when the coronavirus pandemic still threatens us. We look for a way to survive, to help, to be close to those who are affected, and to pour into them a hope.

Thus acted also Bl. Alphonse Marie in the fight against the devastating epidemic, shortly after founding the Congregation.

### **Cholera Epidemic in 1854 – 1855**

The fire test was unfortunate cholera's year of 1854. The Niederbronn Sisters showed to a surprised world, how much courage and heroism were hidden in the young Congregation. It was apparent, how capable the Foundress, Sisters Alphonse Marie, was to educate and to form her Sisters, who would immediately understand what to do and alleviate the misery that people suffered in body and in mind.



When the cholera epidemic broke out, which crept out from Asia, as well as the coronavirus pandemic crept out today, and devastated Western Europe, the Sisters with fearless hearts went to the sick, to villages and towns where the epidemic raged and people helplessly cried for help. Mother Alphonse Marie did not hesitate for a moment, yet she answered immediately to the numerous requests of the Church and secular authorities. Instead of worries, the Foundress encouraged the Sisters, who were leaving for the outbreak areas and battlefields out of love toward the neighbors, to be courageous. The words of Mother Alphonse Marie, which she directed to her Sisters prior to their leaving in all directions, to the places where the epidemic raged, were very strong, yet also touching.

The first assignment was Strasburg, where raging sickness spread very rapidly. The Diocese Bishop, Andrew Räss, with many of his collaborators visited the sick. His attitude was an excellent example of courage to the sacrifice, which our Sisters bravely followed. The Sisters quickly became accustomed to the stressful situations, which the contagion brought. They did not rest for four weeks, but tired and exhausted, they fall asleep on dead bodies. Yet, it did not deter them.

In the town Colmar, where the Sisters also helped, the sickness raged in a horrible way almost four months. In this short time, 339 children died. The government tried several

possible measures to help the Sisters to care for the sick. One courageous Sister did not leave that horrible place for a full six weeks. Twenty-seven nights she did not sleep. Some of those horrible situations she would never forget, yet she handled it very well. The Major of the town Colmar publicly honored “true admirable courage” of the Niederbronn Sisters, which wasn’t the custom in France. Of course, since the Sisters are human, so among them were also losses. Two of eight Sisters, who served there, succumbed to the contagion.

At the beginning of October, a Major of a little town, asked our Sisters for help, because of the cholera break out. Thanks to the experiences with the cholera epidemic, the Sisters managed it without loss of lives. Catholics and Protestants, unbelievers and believers alike, all appreciated the courage of the Sisters.

At the beginning of August, the government asked the Niederbronn Sisters for help, because in the town of Metz and the surrounding area, cholera broke out. Without immediate help, which the Sisters provide to the sick day and night, many sick would die. The Sisters served with full commitment and thus they fulfill their mission, which responds to the greatest love. Indeed, with their advice given to the sick, they substituted even physicians, and thanks to their care, only a small number of the sick succumbed to the contagion. At that time, everyone healthy fled from the infected, and no one had the courage to approach them. Only the Sisters did not retreat from anything. With a tenderness of a mother they stood by the beds of the sad sick and they were not afraid of any sacrifice. They served to all humbly and with joy, although seeing this horrible sickness, the nature of a healthy person was in turmoil. How often was only a dark night the witness of their willingness to serve the sick! But what did the sick value the most? It was Sister’s words of consolation, closeness, hope and spiritual support. Their words full of faith penetrated admirably to the hearts of the dying. In the fall, the horrible epidemic stopped. The Sisters, tired and exhausted by the difficulties of hard times, returned back to Niederbronn to their Foundress, Mother Alphonse Marie, from all the places, yet they were accompanied by the blessings. The Congregation passed the test of this devastating epidemic excellently. The press and the public offices did not spare the words of appreciation to the brave Niederbronn Sisters. The government did not hesitate any longer, and granted state approval to the Congregation, although it was established only for a short time.

### **Cholera Epidemics in 1866 and 1873**

Another mission of the Niederbronn Sisters during the cholera epidemic was during the Germany-Austrian war in 1866. Cholera raged on the Germany side. The sickness was brought by Prussian soldiers. The epidemic affected the army as well as civil inhabitants. All of them suffered with incurable sickness. In the Würzburg area, the Sisters from Niederbronn took care of the soldiers sick with cholera. Thanks to the Sister’s foreseeable measures, no one succumbed to the horrible contagion. There also were counties, where the people were completely staggered by the contagion. Arriving to these counties, the Sisters found the dead in their houses, because for fear of sickness, no one had the courage to bury the dead. So, the Sisters first had to bury the dead, then take care of the sick.

The Sisters of Niederbronn were not afraid of the contagion and tirelessly stood by the beds of the sick and the dying. Here, some of the Sisters also succumbed to the contagion. They were buried at the presence of high public participation and a nice thought was said that God asked the lives of these young Sisters for the sake of the many sick.

In 1866, the town of Luxemburg also was affected. Many Sisters came to help. They brought a blessing by their work, because soon after they fully took care of the sick, the spreading of epidemic was stopped. It happened due to the fact that they knew intimately this “unwelcomed guest”, as a cholera epidemic was called, from the previous period. It is certain that they saved lives of many by their care. A public honor for their work during the reign of the cholera epidemic was their reward, for as the fire, they feared every human praise. The next year of 1867, the sickness broke out in other counties of Germany. For an extraordinary work during the cholera epidemic, the Sisters received a royal recognition.

In 1873, the town of Speyer was afflicted by this horrible disease. Let us read the testimony of a Sister, who was a witness of these hard days. She reported the work of the Sisters in detail, as well as the course and devastation of the disease.

“Cholera raged deep in the streets of a town where water was standing in the houses because the river Rhine had just overflowed. The epidemic broke out in July and stopped in October. We worked at the town Hospital. Two departments were for those who were getting well and other departments for others. It was horrible. There were many dead. At the funeral, no bells rang, so that the already frightened people would not be even more frightened. One day was extraordinarily terrible, because the hearse drove all day on the streets. The Sisters in the Hospital had to put the sick, in whom the disease had just manifested, into the boxes with hot sand and serve hot drinks, so they would start to sweat. By this manner, we could help many sick. In October, when cholera began to retreat, the Sisters were infected with the disease due to exhaustion and dread, yet they were cured. The government did not spare the words of appreciation for the Sisters.

During the severe cholera epidemic, which also broke out at the same time in Munich, many people succumbed. The Sisters of Niederbronn tirelessly helped there. They were especially distinguished by great sacrifice, although several of them succumbed to the disease.

## **Typhus Epidemics**

Another dreaded enemy of mankind, to which the Sisters of Niederbronn often had to face, was typhus. They met for the first time in the fight against this epidemic in 1855, in southwestern Germany. There, people suffered much for it. Typhus broke out in jails and hospitals. The Bavarian government asked the Sisters to take care of sick people in the countryside. In 1863, the epidemic again spread very rapidly and the Sisters bravely took care of the sick. The disease appeared a week prior to their arrival and it claimed half a dozen lives daily. The tireless care of the Sisters stopped the disease, so no one was mortally endangered any more. Each of the Sisters took care of half of the village. They served very hard for three months; during this time they did not get into bed at all, they could only afford a half-hour rest in a hard chair. In a school kitchen the Sisters cooked hearty meat soup, which was distributed to the sick by the last six healthy people of the village. The Sisters also went from house to house, washed the sick, made beds, and kept the ordinances of physicians. When most people were getting better, the last six healthy people, who assisted the Sisters, became sick. Thanks to the Sisters, they were cured. After the disease had subsided, the Sisters returned home. In 1872, in Strasburg and the villages close by, the typhus broke out. A number of the Sisters again devoted themselves to the care for the sick. At that time, a Sister fell victim to this disease. Another Sister was sent to another village. There she kept vigil day and night for four weeks over the sick with the typhus disease, in the camp. In 1874, in Strasburg,

in a military infirmary with the typhus disease, another Sister paid with her life for her heroic courage. As a reward, she had a magnificent funeral with military honors.

We would need a lot of time to count all of the cases, when the Niederbronn Sisters acted bravely and successfully in the fight against the insidious typhus or other epidemics. Not a single Sister has died fearlessly in these battles. Yet, their love for their neighbor was stronger than death.

The true Christian heroism was shown and appreciated in the death of a young Sister. At the age of 28, she died from typhus disease. She wished to be a nurse. Three years later, her desire became true. She was assigned to take care of a medical student, sick with the typhus disease. She took care of this young man for three weeks, whose insidious disease was visibly driving him to death. The Sister became more and more sad and in her pure soul matured a heroic decision. She offered herself to God as a sacrifice, because a physician can help much more the suffering as a single Sister could. God answered this request. The Sister died from the typhus disease when carrying about the sick man and shortly after she died. Yet, the young medical student was cured and he recovered so quickly that he was able to walk at the procession of her funeral. This Sister's life has passed quietly and unobtrusively, yet who wouldn't change all worldly glory for such a beautiful end of life?