



**The greatest grace, which God gave us,
is the *E*ucharist and the *p*riesthood,
thanks to which priests can administer the sacraments to us.**

*These are the words of the mystic, Blessed Alphonse Marie,
baptismal name Elizabeth Eppinger*

Blessed Alphonse Marie was a simple woman, whose greatness did not lie in her theological knowledge and view, but in her intensive cooperation with God's grace. This helped her to stay herself and God entrusted her with another task – to care for vocations to the priesthood and defend the dignity of priests.

Elizabeth was born on September 9, 1814, in Niederbronn, Alsace. She learned very early to bear sufferings and meditate on the mystery of the cross and the mercy of God. In 1846, she experienced the mystical phenomena. She founded a Congregation, which cares for the sick, regardless of social status or religion. Thus, she worked to spread the message of merciful God, who loves all people. She died on July 31, 1867, in Niederbronn. She was beatified on September 9, 2018. Her Feast day is on September 9.

1. A Source of a Respect for Priests and Priesthood of the Young Elizabeth

It is right to ask ourselves, how the respect towards priest's dignity, priests, and priesthood was born in still little Elizabeth.

We have to say that this respect began in her with her upbringing in the Eppinger family.

Her early recollections, about which Elizabeth narrates, lead us to know the atmosphere of her family. In her Autobiography, from her own mouth, we learn how important is the care for good moral and religious education in her family despite hard work and how much she evaluates the principles she has received through the good care of her parents.

In her biography, the talks with her mother and father on different topics are repeatedly written. They both tried to answer her questions, and as she says, "I remembered their answers for a long time". She also keeps memories of mother and father's loving gestures and how she ran to them for help having difficulty with memory to learn homework for school.

Elizabeth also learns from her parents the respect and a meaning of obedience, which makes her very soon to be able to evaluate her actions. She has a firm and decisive, even stubborn nature. Yet she finds in her parents definite and safe leaders, who teach her to know and discipline herself. Another strong feature of good care is a talk with parents, which manifests their ability to convey religious beliefs in a simple way which is the speech of everyday life. These are the talks about a prayer, priests and their role, suffering and death of Christ on the cross, and eternity. It has to be said that Elizabeth, as the oldest daughter, very early understands adult language, which they use.

When Elizabeth curiously asks her mother, "Why did they crucify Jesus?", her mother answers, "Our sins caused it." "And what is sin?", she asks further. "Sin is an insult to God caused by stubbornness or disobedience." After these answers from her mother, Elizabeth immediately makes the decision, "I will never sin again!"

Five-year old Elizabeth walks one day with her father, who holds her hand, when she suddenly notices a person in black clothes on the street. Immediately she overwhelms her father with questions. “Who is he?” Father answers, “A priest.” “Who are priests?” “Priests are the servants of God. They proclaim the Gospel and we should have respect for them; they teach us.” This conversation with her father is vital for her. However, her father’s answer is even more decisive because it affects Elizabeth’s further development of **reverence for priests**.

In this family environment faith puts its seal on everyday life as well: common prayers in family circle, rosary, Holy Mass on Sundays, and participation in life of parish community. Elizabeth, still as a child, participates them with joy and very early she expresses her desire to go to the church with her parents and to attend Holy Mass.

2. Impact of Good Priestly Personality on Education of Children

When Elizabeth begins to attend the school, she hopes that “she will hear a lot about God, to get to know Him better.” She attends religion lessons with a great interest. She recognizes in their priest “one of those saints about their lives she heard at home.” She mentions, “My eyes pointed to the cross, which hung over the desk. I said to myself in my heart, ‘**My Jesus, I always want to obey our priest, so that I too can become a saint.**’”

In Catholic school, a local parish priest incorporated into the curriculum basics of religion and preparation for the sacraments, especially the preparation for the first Holy Communion. This goal was very important for both her parents and Elizabeth herself. It was probably one of the reasons why Elizabeth began to attend a school. In other words, she did not show a great talent in other subjects and she only knew how to write her name.

Elizabeth, in her very early childhood, is sensitive to what leads her to God – she listens to her heart. It penetrates her deep in her inner self. Thus, twenty years later, she is able to say what topics left a deep mark on her, namely the sacrifice of Holy Mass, which she understands through the mystery of Christ sufferings and death, the gift of the Eucharist, the gift of priesthood, the importance of prayer, and the immense magnitude of God's love.

The next day when Elizabeth attends Holy Mass, during the penitential act she imagines Jesus’ torments again and she says, “Since then my desire to **attend Holy Mass daily** was even greater.”

Every time she is attentive to the pious attitude of the believers present at Holy Mass. The strongest moment is right after receiving the Holy Communion. She **cannot take her eyes off** of the people who just received the Holy Communion. She says inwardly, “How happy must be these people who possess God in their hearts!” The atmosphere of prayer deeply touches her. An experience of a community of believers and their priest, which she experiences in the church, deeply affects her sensitivity.

These experiences soon become the school of life for Elizabeth, and lead her to make a decision to embark on a fight with her bad inclinations, stubbornness and the desire for independence, realize the presence of God in the prayer, and understand the meaning of nobility and dignity of priesthood.

3. Learning the Truths of Faith, Elizabeth Chooses Her Confessor and Spiritual Director

In her illness and sufferings, Elizabeth learns to constantly lean on God asking Him for graces and help. Love for solitude enables her to grow in inner prayer. The desire after the Eucharist constantly grows in her and the mystery of suffering and death of Christ deepens her contemplation on the passion of our Savior.

She deeply respects their parish priest, John David Reichard, and she chooses him as a spiritual director, whom God is giving to her.

On the day of her first Holy Communion, she prays, saying, **“Jesus, You shall leave our spiritual shepherd to me, would You? Give him health and strength. May he live as long as I will.”** And that happened. This priest guided her spiritually for 44 years and 39 years was her confessor; almost until her death. He died on July 24th and she died on July 31, 1867. On the day of his death, she lay unconscious in bed.

There is another curiosity in connection with Elizabeth’s respect toward priests. Father Reichard writes about it to the Diocesan Bishop, “How good is our God! How many graces He sends to your Diocese! I wish you would hear and see everything that happens by Elizabeth’s bed with priests, who visit her and to whom she talks about the priestly virtues, especially about the obedience toward the bishop. How much consolation your fatherly heart would experience seeing all these priests, how tears well up their eyes and their hearts suddenly change.”

After this message, the Bishop was amazed what a treasure he has in his Diocese. He immediately personally visited Elizabeth and spent some days in her presence. He was convinced about Elizabeth’s extraordinary gifts, which she received from God.

4. Prayer for Priests and Their Sanctification

Elizabeth’s life clearly shows that she offers her prayers and sacrifices, especially during her sickness, particularly for priests. In her ecstasies, the Lord shows her their unfaithfulness, attachment to the world, and lack of zeal for the salvation of souls. Elizabeth has to accept that even these “unfaithful servants” she must adopt, show them their weaknesses, and talk to them about mercy. These days are very hard and demanding for her. Several authentic witnesses of priests confirm that Elizabeth was really able to read what happens in the heart and soul of a priest. When Elizabeth has to uncover to some priest his faults, she experiences torment, which she hardly overcomes because of her reverence toward priesthood. Therefore, when she must **admonish priests**, she is drenched in a cold sweat from morning to evening.

Historian Pflieger writes that during the year of 1848, 600 priests, who wanted to know her and to make their own opinion about her, visited Elizabeth. They did not regret it!

These priests, after the meeting with Elizabeth, wrote to their friends. Many priests, who in large numbers came to Niederbronn, found in Elizabeth consolation and help in their physical difficulties as well as spiritual needs. Others, by her, felt that they have to reject their sinful life and still others felt that they have to be stronger to persevere in virtues on the way of priestly service.

A certain priest confesses that in discussion with sick Elizabeth she told him things about which none of the people could know. And this really shook him.

5. Sacrificing Herself for Priests and Caring for Them

Everything that Elizabeth sees by her inner sight during several months (from September 21, 1849 to January 29, 1850) is related to what she spiritually deals with in her inner self. It is the suffering of Christ dying on the cross and ingratitude of sinners and her participation in this suffering and **offering all her pain and sufferings for the sanctification of priests**. The Savior constantly calls her to work with Him in the vineyard, to undergo ill-treatment, torture and death on the cross with Him and to know exhaustion and suffering of priestly life.

In *Meditations* of Elizabeth, the basic topic is **the attitude of priests and their ingratitude towards grace, the indelible sign of priesthood**. In one of her visions, the crucified Savior let her know sufferings caused by infidelity of His servants-priests. Now, Elizabeth quickly learns her mission: **ultimately sacrificing herself for priests**.

Then, follows visits by priests at her bedside and whom Elizabeth receives. Their confessions, which she hears, distress her and cause her pain. Her soul is tortured because of them and she worries about priests even after their leaving. She holds each of them within her spiritual sight for a long time.

Considering her love, which she has for the Eucharist and the respect towards priesthood, she is deeply wounded in her soul because of the infidelity of priests.

She participates, together with the Blessed Virgin Mary, in suffering and pain of her Son, who suffers because of sins of those who should be completely submitted to Jesus and whom He calls **friends of God**.

Elizabeth also spread devotion to the Blessed Virgin among priests by the rosary prayer. She obtained permission from Father Reichard to pray the rosary in the parish church every Sunday and Feast day, in atonement for insults committed during these days. In her ecstasies she saw the Blessed Virgin as a Mediator of graces. She got knowledge that all will be saved through Mary and her devotion will still intensify. She received from the Blessed Virgin certain instructions, which, according to her words, were noble and full of consolations.

In her inner self, she understood that she has to fulfill the will of the Savior and to pray for the sanctification of priests. At the same time she felt that they will not believe her, they will despise her and make fun of her. It is interesting that Elizabeth was prepared that she will bear the cross for the rest of her life and thus she will make sacrifices **for priests to live as real disciples of Christ**.

For many years, Elizabeth, and after the foundation of the Congregation, Mother Alphonse Marie (her religious name), was visited by many priests, who opened their hearts and souls to her asking for advice. These numerous and protracted talks allowed her to obtain deep knowledge about the state of the priestly soul. On the other hand, these priests reported to the Bishop the testimony, which they experienced when talking with her.

Mother Alphonse Marie had respect for all priests, but especially for the elderly and the sick. Here is the proof. In Marienthal, a well-known Marian pilgrimage place in the north of Alsace, is located a house for the elderly and the sick priests. The Bishop asked just Mother Alphonse Marie to send at least four Sisters, who will take care of the elderly and the sick priests. The Bishop, in

his efforts for the well-being of these priestly veterans, wanted that at the end of life, they would receive care from the hands of Religious women.

It is clear that Mother Alphonse did it with immense joy. It was the most beautiful that before the beatification of Mother Alphonse Marie, just from this place a petition from the principal of the Priestly House and the church in Marienthal came that the Beatification Vigil on September 8, 2018, would take place exactly at this place where the elderly and the sick priests live as a gratitude for her. Here it is visible that the good done once is not forgotten even after 167 years.

6. Elizabeth's Specific Advice and Recommendations to Priests

In her advice and recommendations to priests, Elizabeth says, "Above all, **a priest should get to know his value in the eyes of God. The priest is called to proceed in the work of redemption and mediate the grace of salvation in the name of Jesus Christ. Let the priest get to know the grandeur of his status, because he better understands what it means to help man to be saved.** Meditating on Christ's passion, the priest penetrates directly to the heart of our Lord and gains knowledge, which allows him to carefully guide souls which God entrusted to him."

At another time, Elizabeth advises priests that the topic of their meditation should be the **wounds of crucified Jesus**. "The priest could feel sadness and be worried and he may be subject to various circumstances, but in this time, he must look at the Savior's wounds. **Looking at Jesus, the darkness will brighten and what hurts him will be healed.**"

In *Exhortations for Priests* is even a topic "**Transforming Presence of Christ**" through which the priest is inwardly deeply united with Christ and "he resembles Christ."

7. Elizabeth's Special Mission in Formation of Priests

In one of her visions, Elizabeth sees a large garden, where a vineyard is planted. Jesus says to her, "Look, you have to replant this garden. You have to rip out the old vineyard and replant a new one." And He adds, "Look, **this field is an image of priests**. You have to rip bad habits and sins from their hearts and sow in them my word, which I will tell you." Jesus explains to her that this vineyard symbolizes some priests, who should alter and work on themselves from the ground. It has to be emphasized that Elizabeth **respected all priests because she saw God Himself in them**. She repeated often, "**I am willing to fall at the feet of every priest to obtain blessing from him.**" All her life, she specifically showed respect and complete obedience to her spiritual director, Father Reichard, and all priests as well.

This is the meaning of Elizabeth's mission for priests. Jesus said to her, "As I have been working on you and molded you, so **I will mold the hearts of priests to virtue through you.**"

She talked about bishops and priests kindly. She talked about their dignity and priestly virtues. She prayed a lot for them, "*Jesus, look at them mercifully, do not look at their weaknesses. My Love, just one word of Yours is enough to enkindle in them a fire of Your love. Fill them with resistance and abhorrence toward everything earthly. Press in their hearts Your bitter sufferings and give them grace to leave everything You dislike.*"

Honesty, straightforwardness and love of truth are the dominant features of Elizabeth's personage.

A certain priest said about her, “As soon as I entered her bedroom, her sincere expression impressed me, although I expected pretense typical for persons, who think that they are chosen by God. In her behavior I saw nothing exaggerated, on the contrary, everything witnessed of the angelic tenderness and noble submission, which cannot be pretended even with the best of effort. I felt that I talked with an angel and not with a human being.”

Complete obedience, which Elizabeth faithfully practiced, she recommended also to children towards their parents, parishioners towards their priest, priests towards their bishops and all people. **She constantly discovered the beauty of priestly virtues and the nobility of priesthood.**

Jesus spoke to Elizabeth about good and zealous priests, saying, **“Look my daughter, now I would like to show you that in many of them My grace was not in vain, because these priests meditated on My life and sufferings.”**

A certain priest, who was hurt by the malice of people, confided in Elizabeth with his suffering. He complained a lot. Elizabeth tried to console him, saying, “Reverend Father, you are a very happy man! Yes, father, you are the happiest man on the earth! There are many people who raise their hands and pray for you at this very moment. I see that God listens to them.” The priest noted, saying, “Who can only pray for me?” Elizabeth answered, “Do you remember the poor widow and her children, who were in danger of losing their roof over their heads? You saved their house by paying their debts out of love for our neighbor.” The priest became breathless, when he heard from Elizabeth’s mouth this matter, which he intended to keep secret.

8. Lectures and Advice to Priests

Elizabeth, later Mother Alphonse Marie, feels that she has a specific mission for priests; that is **to remind them to lead their ministry and their lives appropriate to their status.** Although she often lectures them and calls them to conversion, the priests who visit her **appreciate the beneficial effect of meeting her.**

Elizabeth, out of respect for them, so as not to offend them and for the sake of discretion, sometimes speaks about the sins causality of priests in the third person, so that it does not directly point to them. In her vision, Jesus let her know the roots of all sins of priests. The most perilous are convenience, lack of self-denial, lack of spirit of repentance and prayer, and too free and frequent contact with the world which subsequently cause fear from the lingo of people that would lead to a loss of dignity of their status. Then priests do not remember the graces received on the day of their ordination to the priesthood.

Then she speaks about priests who live in sensuality, hide their faults, and do not want to see the mistakes of others, as well as those, who lack the spirit of prayer. She also mentions priests, who rely on the “great” of this world to profit from their favor. They lack the spirit of humility, poverty and prayer.

In reality, the **visits of priests** bring Elizabeth **great suffering.** Father Reichard explains, “It is a truth that for this angelic soul, which was never tormented with impure thoughts, is real martyrdom that after her visions must reveal transgressions against chastity of some priests. This martyrdom is unbearable especially when she has to remind the faults to priests. She, namely, sees in them God and has a great reverence toward them.

Father Reichard offers the following witness, “Some conversions of priests, which happened, are so wonderful that they represent for me a greater miracle than bringing to life the dead person. Not a priest leaves her without being moved to tears. As her confessor, I testify to the great miracle of God’s mercy.”

When Elizabeth **offers her suffering for priests**, she “feels immense consolation” and experiences “indescribable peace of mind and her heart is filled with unspeakable love and trust to Jesus”. Jesus Christ let her know it, saying, *“How much I suffer when I see that my servants only little present my suffering. They celebrate Holy Mass without thinking about my suffering and love, which I show them. Look my daughter, thus My servants hurt My head with their pride...”*

They pierce My heart by receiving the Eucharist unworthy and My hands by their unclean hands while they administer My graces. They break My bones by worldly amusements... By many sins and vices they let flow My blood... They are full of themselves and they do not allow God the Father to fill them.”

Therefore, Elizabeth often wished that her physical sufferings would be even stronger. She often offered herself as a sacrifice to obtain God’s mercy and thus she could change the situation in favor of the priests.

Conclusion

This is the respect for priests and priesthood of Elizabeth, today already Blessed Alphonse Marie. I believe that all of us better understand the meaning of priesthood and the active presence of Christ in priests. A priest is the second Christ - *alter Christi*. By his ordination, the priest truly became the second Christ. Further, certainly we understand that priests are important for our lives. The Second Vatican Council says in the *Constitution on Sacred Liturgy*, *“To accomplish so great a work, Christ is always present in His Church, especially in her liturgical celebrations. He is present in the sacrifice of the Mass, not only in the person of His minister, the same now offering, through the ministry of priests, who formerly offered Himself on the cross, but especially under the Eucharistic species. By His power He is present in the sacraments, so that when a priest baptizes it is really Christ Himself who baptizes. He is present in His word, since it is He Himself who speaks when the Holy Scriptures are read in the Church.”*

In this, a nobility of priesthood lies, to which Blessed Alphonse Marie felt a deep respect and to which she all constantly encouraged.

Even today, Blessed Alphonse Marie intercedes for priesthood before the heavenly throne of God the Father and she would like to be a caring mother to priests.

Blessed Alphonse Marie, pray for our priests and all of us. Amen.

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Sr. M. Katarína Krištofová, SDR

Postulator of the Process of Canonization