



On the tracks of Mother Alphonse Marie;
on her path of life and path of faith



In the search for traces of a spiritual
itinerary we discover

A child who gave to God his place in its daily life

From this develops the burning desire:
"to better know God and to do what pleases him"

In the decisive "why":
the encounter with the Mystery of the Cross

With the first communion the increasing personal
"Source of strength for the route"

A witness to **what God's love accomplishes/achieves**
in a heart that is open to his action.



BAD NIEDERBRONN, THE HOMETLAND/HOME TOWN OF ELISABETH EPPINGER (MOTHER ALFONS MARIA)



Starting point for this route is the Europe of 1848 with its upheavals - Niederbronn les Bains, a town in the east of France, and in these surroundings, a young girl/woman called Elisabeth Eppinger.

Niederbronn in Northern Alsace is known for its thermal baths, appreciated already in 100 B.C. Thus the town owes its name to a spring in the centre called even today the « Roman source».

In the 19th century, this small town counted 3000 inhabitants mainly living on the agriculture. Thanks to the initiative of the industrialist, John De Dietrich, a striving iron industry developed in this densely wooded region.

For reflection:

- Where are my roots?
- What does my homeland/home town/native country mean to me?

THE HOUSE WHERE MOTHER ALPHONSE MARIE WAS BORN

Who are you Elisabeth Eppinger?

- ***a poor, sickly, insignificant girl ...***
- ***a girl touched by God, seized with longing to love him and to make known his love to all***

Elisabeth is born on Septembre 9th 1814 in Niederbronn as the first child of George and Barbara Eppinger. The young family occupies the first floor of the parental home constructed in 1807. The parents Eppinger and the unmarried siblings live on the ground floor of this house.

In the course of the year 10 more children are born bringing joys and worries to this modest home. Elisabeth lives her life in this context: in the house, on the fields, in the church, in the village. Barbara, the mother, assumes the responsibilities of day-to-day life like all women of her condition. George, the father, takes care of the heavy works and the running of the small farm.

Life at Eppingers is decisively marked by work however there is also time for the joys of family life.

Their days are marked by Christian faith giving meaning to the entire life. Every day all members of the family gather together for prayer even after a long day of hard work. The mother teaches her little daughter very early to kneel down for prayer mornings and evenings.



"It happened that one evening a neighbour came to my father and talked with him ; he spoke about the passion of Christ ... I listened attentively and began to cry. Noticing this, my father asked me why I was crying. I couldn't answer because of my tears.

A little later the neighbour came again and while we were having supper he again talked about the passion of Christ. I was sitting at the table, but at once I laid everything down and turned to a crucifix hanging over the table on the wall. Again I started to cry. Seeing this, the neighbour said to my father: "Look, there is something extraordinary happening to this child" (Autobiography, 5).

Endowed with a strong personality, Elisabeth shows a great sensitivity for the spiritual. She is touched by the suffering of the people that in many ways alienate them from the infinite love and mercy of God. **She wants "to know God, to love him and to do what pleases him".**

During her younger days, Elisabeth is several times afflicted by long periods of illness. She spends the decisive years prior to the foundation of the Congregation in a small room of her parental home. She receives numerous visitors; she will be the instrument of the grace of God for many. Here, the plan for her work matures with the help of Father Reichard.

Today the former sickroom of Elisabeth is a place of reflection and of prayer. It reminds us what the grace of God could accomplish through this woman of faith. The cross in this room tries to show/present the spirituality of our Congregation.

For reflection:

The life of Elisabeth can refer me to my own life history.

- What do I long for?
- I look back at my life:
 - What would I like to thank for? For joys, gifts/talents, successes for the insight/recognition that God loves me
 - I dwell also on what paralyses my life, what makes it difficult:
 - What has helped me in times of trial, of discouragement, of suffering?
 - What helps me still today to hold out in difficult times?

THE PROTESTANT CURCH, ST:JOHN THE BAPIST



Elisabeth knew only this church in Niederbronn. From 1691 to 1886, it served Catholics as well as Protestants. According to a survey of 1802, Niederbronn had 3120 inhabitants - 1218 of them Catholics (39%) and 1729 Protestants (55%).¹ There was also a small Jewish community here.

Elisabeth is baptised in this church on the day after her birth, on 10th September 1814. She had also her first communion here at the age of 13 and a half (years). For her, it was the time to choose her own way. Trusting in the presence of Jesus, Elisabeth resolutely fulfils her baptismal promise.

"After the first communion, my confessor had allowed me to receive Holy Communion every fortnight. But my desire for the Holy Communion was already so strong that this time was too long for me. So after a week I went again to my confessor ... He posed some questions as to how I pray, how I behave with regard to obedience towards my parents, how I behave in the church during mass. I answered him that in all these things I desire to please God through my behaviour. Then my confessor told me: "Go now, my child, to Holy Communion and ask our loving God that he may increase this desire in you". (Autobiography 6

Since the decision to follow Jesus is an act of liberty/freedom, this has to be taken again and again during the whole life. Therefore, Elisabeth takes up the struggle every day and searches the necessary aids, in order to be able to respond to the grace of God.

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH ST. MARTIN



was constructed in 1885 and it serves until today as parish church. In 1987, two stained-glass windows (realized by the glass artist F. Haas) were built-in in the side chapel. They look like a road: starting from the Motherhouse showing the novices in formation, leading further to the sending of the « missionary sisters » and ending with the care of the sick. Other activities of the Congregation are also represented: visiting the poor, accompanying the dying, looking after children ...

For reflection:

- Belonging to the Church, calling God « Father »: what does it mean to me?
- How do I speak with others about God?
- Which are the concrete steps I take in order to open myself to ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue and to recognize the richness of diversity?



***AN EXCELLENT WITNESS
FATHER DAVID REICHARD
(1796-1867)
PARISH PRIEST OF NIEDERBRONN***

Father Reichard meets Elisabeth during his visits to the parishioners. He finds her again among the school children attending his religious instructions. During the preparation for the first communion he comes to know about the eagerness of this child « to know God », how difficult it is for this strong-willed nature to obey. For Elisabeth, Fr. Reichard is first of all the confessor who supports her in the evolution of her spiritual life and he stands by her in the trials of her illness. Then, all of a sudden and without preparation, he becomes witness of mystical occurrences with unforeseeable consequences for his parish, for the Church and also for himself. He becomes the parish priest of the "Ecstatic of Niederbronn" and assumes the obligations and troubles resulting from this. Through his docility/obedience to the Holy Spirit in the accompaniment of his parishioner, through his humility in the face of a mystery that is beyond him, he leaves the testimony of a man of strong faith. His respect and the way of accepting the events characterize this man. He becomes collaborator for the work that Elisabeth Eppinger is called for and merits the title « co-founder ».



*A SUPPORT IN THE VERY FIRST BEGINNNINGS
ANDRÉ RAESS,
BISHOP OF STRASBOURG*

His long period of office (from 1842 to 1887) in the turbulent years as regards the secular history as well as the Church belongs to the prime of Catholicism in Alsace. Bishop Raess displays an untiring zeal to support the boom of Christian life.

Soon he pays attention to the events in Niederbronn and closely follows them with great interest. He takes Elisabeth under his protection and prudently disapproves of her joining the Sisters of Ribeauvillé. He finds it better to wait for a sign of the Providence and thus favours the foundation of the Congregation of the Sisters of Niederbronn through Elisabeth. He continued to have a particular interest and concern for this Congregation. As the Congregation has to go through an internal crisis after the death of the foundress, he nominates Fr. Simonis as the Ecclesiastical Superior for the Congregation. Fr. Simonis gives shape to the original spirit of the Congregation by giving it powerful impetus.



CONVENT ST JOSEPH "KLOESTERLE"

Elisabeth more and more discovers how much God loves all and wants their happiness. She has the deep desire to consecrate her life to God and thus to make people know God and love him. In the course of the year 1848, she comes to the realization that with the help of her parish priest she has to found a religious Congregation.

On 28th August 1849, Elisabeth Eppinger leaves her parental home and together with four young girls of Niederbronn and surroundings, moves to a small house that was later called "the Klösterle" (little convent). Here, Elisabeth receives the religious habit and assumes the name «Sister Alphonse Marie». She gives instructions to the novices in the so called «chapter hall» and speaks to them about the spirit that has to animate them in the service of God and their brothers and sisters.



The first sisters respond to the needs of the sick in the surroundings. They give warm food to the school children and take in orphans. From the first

convent, sisters are sent out to open other convents in France, Germany and Austria.

As the number of postulants increases, it becomes necessary to extend the Klösterle.

In 1852, the chapel and the enlarged convent are inaugurated. Up to 1880, the Klösterle is the Motherhouse of the Congregation. Few years later, the new premises are also not sufficient. Mother Alphonse Marie, Elisabeth is called so as Superior General, acquires a former mansion in Oberbronn. In 1858, the noviciate is transferred to here and in 1880, the General Council moves in. Thus Oberbronn becomes the seat of the Congregation.

The Klösterle has known many renovations. Today, the building is a house for sisters in retirement and for sisters as well as other persons from the surroundings of Niederbronn who need nursing care.

On the gallery of the chapel, still there is the kneeler/prie-dieu of Mother Alphonse Marie, a witness to the starting time. Above the chapel there is the former sick-room of Mother Alphonse Marie; today this is an oratory/small chapel. From this room, Mother Alphonse Marie could see the altar and participate in the celebration of the Eucharist when she was bedridden and could not be with the community

On the strength of her own experience, Mother Alphonse Marie recommends to her sisters:

"You have come to live the life of Jesus Christ. Discover it, contemplate it continuously ... in order to model your lives on his life".



For reflection:

- What is the significance of prayer in my life?
- Do I read in the Gospel, in order to better know Jesus? Did I have the experience that God speaks to me through the Scripture?
- Which is the word that has touched me particularly?

**THE CROSS
ON THE ROAD
BETWEEN NIEDERBRONN AND REICHSHOFFEN**

For the Sisters of the Divine Saviour, the cross at the side of the road to Reichshoffen represents a precious witness to their past.

As a toddler already, Elisabeth here asks her mother: "Why have they *crucified our Saviour?*" Her mother responds: "*My child, our sins have done this.*"

From then on, Elisabeth constantly tries in her daily life, to do what pleases God and to avoid what displeases him. She opens herself more and more to the mercy of God and longs to make it known to all.

During work on the fields, Elisabeth frequently kneels down before this cross. At the age of 15, after a long period of struggle she perceives the call to consecrate her life totally to God



Elisabeth richtet ihren Blick auf das Kreuz Christi. Diese Betrachtung verhilft ihr zu innerem Wachstum: sie entdeckt die Liebe Gottes zu der sie umgebenden Welt.

Wie weit ist unsere Liebe zu Gott von derjenigen entfernt, welche Er für uns gehabt hat. Für uns ist er gestorben, um uns den Himmel zu öffnen und dies aus reiner Liebe zu uns. (nach Mutter Alfons Maria)

For reflexion:

Wath does it mean for me „contemplate the cross“?

Can I associate God's love with the «foiled» in my life-history?

What does it mean to me to make the sign of the cross?

What am I worried about?

Do I entrust my worries and concerns to Jesus who carried all suffering of the world?





Jesus said to Martha: "I am the resurrection. Anyone who believes in me, even though that person dies, will live, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die". (Jn 11, 25-26)

For reflection:

- What does a cemetery say to me?
- Do I believe in the power of God, in his promise to save me from death?
- Do I believe in an eternal life, a life in plenitude, an eternal home with God?

JAEGERTHAL

Already since 1684, mining had developed in Jaegerthal; the inhabitants of this woody area could find work in the hammer mills of De Dietrich. However the population was very poor. In 1852, Mother Alphonse Marie decided to send sisters to take care of the social and spiritual needs – to nurse the sick and to teach the children. Fr. Lienhart, Assistant parish priest in Niederbronn, with his own means managed to construct a chapel for the people so that they can participate in the Eucharistic celebration

"On 25th March 1852, on the feast of the Annunciation of Mary, the chapel of Jaegerthal was consecrated. Mother Alphonse was feeling very ill the previous evening and much more on the day of this feast. She could not decide to participate in the consecration of the chapel though many times she had an inner urge to do it. She wanted to send the sisters who were to open the school in Jaegerthal, on Monday after the feast. Finally, on the order of her confessor, she decided to go there with **the** two sisters.

During the ceremony, suddenly she felt relieved from her sufferings and was in ecstasy. She heard a voice that said to her:

"See my daughter, now you are happy to be here. No one can explain what a joy Mary has experienced on this day. No one can understand what she has solicited for this place. No one can understand what she has received.

Many will come to this place from far away. Much grace will be granted. Many unbelievers will find light and the true Faith!"

(From a Document concerning the blessing of the Chapel of Jaegerthal, found in the bishop's house at Strasbourg)



The construction of the school and of the chapel surely responded to the particular needs of Jaegerthal, however it was also a concern of the foundress to send a sister for nursing the sick in their homes.

Up to now there is a community in Jaegerthal. The school was closed in 1984 whereas the care for poor, neglected children continues in the same spirit in other countries and in other forms: in various schools, nursery schools, through tuition programmes, literacy programmes ...



WASENBERG

A similar situation is found in a hamlet close to Niederbronn, in Wasenberg. Mother Alphonse Marie sends sisters also to this place, Fr. Lienhart sees to it that a chapel is built (through his own means). In the course of time, the needs have changed; this chapel continues to be open to the public. Thanks to the concern and generosity of an Association, its further maintenance is assured. Once a year there is a pilgrimage organized by the neighbouring parishes.

For reflection:

- Is the future of children and youth a preoccupation for me?
- What responses can I give to the current needs of the world and of the Church at the place where I am?

THE MOTHERHOUSE IN OBERBRONN**THE VILLAGE OBERBRONN**

is located at the foot of "Wasenkoepfel", a foothill of the Northern Vosges. From here, one has a magnificent view over the wide plain stretched away as far as the Black Forest.

THE MANSION OF OBERBRONN

Its existence is mentioned for the first time in an official document of 1186. Owners were the lords of Born. In the course of history, the owners changed many times as a result of inheritance, marriage, political events or sale². After the death of count Charles-August of Stralenheim in 1857, his children decided to sell the mansion. Because of the stream of postulants from France, Germany and Austria, the house in Niederbronn became too small. So the founders decided to acquire this property. Mother Alphonse Marie has a chapel fitted out in the left wing. On 24th June 1858, the noviciate is established here and in 1880, Oberbronn becomes the seat of the Congregation.



² The counts of Ochsenstein, of Lichtenberg, of Leiningen-Westerburg (the entrance porch, the tower and the cellar under the building St. Saviour date from this time of 16th century), the families of Sinclair, Lewenhaupt, Hohenlohe-Bartenstein, Stralenheim.

The convent (Oberbronn)

The present convent church and the oratory are constructed in 1886. Multiple constructional alterations and extensions gave the convent its present appearance:

The Motherhouse is the centre of the large international family to which the Congregation has developed through branches in Europe, Africa, Asia and South America.

- As guest house it offers space for meetings, sessions, spiritual retreats and vacation.
- It is open to sisters as well as to non-religious.
- It is also a place where sisters and non-religious can spend their old age or where they can be cared for.

The Oratory

Mother Alphonse Marie was interred in 1867 in the cemetery of sisters in Niederbronn. Her mortal remains were transferred to the General Motherhouse on 8th November 1950, and since then they rest in a shrine in the oratory, on the left side of the choir of the chapel.

This spot has become a place of contemplation and prayer for all sisters - living in the Motherhouse and sisters coming from the different countries - as well as for others visiting the Motherhouse.



The Chapter hall

The important/great events of the Congregation - among others the General Chapters where important decisions are taken for the future, for the life and work of the sisters in the different continents - take place in this hall. Two large portraits on the wall - from the time of origin - show the founders: Mother Alphonse Marie and Father Reichard. They testify that today also it is the wish of the sisters to live from the spirit of the founders.



The centre of the spirituality of the Congregation is Jesus Christ: He is the source of salvation, the source of life and happiness for all.

„Joyfully you will draw water from the springs of salvation“.

Isaiah 12, 3

For reflection:

Mother Alphonse Marie has lived from this source. The call of Isaiah is addressed to me, to each one of us: I can come and draw, I can refresh myself.

- What does this source mean to me?
- Do I search for this source in my day-to-day life?

CHRONOLOGY

- 09. 09. 1814 Birthday of Elisabeth Eppinger (Mother Alphonse Marie) in Niederbronn les Bains, Alsace, France
- 20. 01. 1823 Installation of Father Reichard (Co-founder) in the catholic parish of Niederbronn
- 28. 08. 1849 Foundation of the Congregation of the Sisters of the Divine Saviour
- 10. 09. 1849 Mother Alphonse Marie takes the habit
- 02. 01. 1850 Profession of Mother Alphonse Marie
- 24. 06. 1858 Transfer of the noviciate to Oberbronn
- 11. 04. 1866 Papal Decree of Approbation of the Congregation
- 24. 07. 1867 Death of Father Reichard
- 31. 07. 1867 Death of Mother Alphonse Marie
- 15. 04. 1880 Transfer of the Motherhouse to Oberbronn



**On our search we meet a faith-witness:
Mother Alphonse Marie**

The contrasts in her life make us sit up and take notice:

A frail person of delicate health,

but with an energetic soul, full of courage and boldness.

A woman with little education,

but of great wisdom.

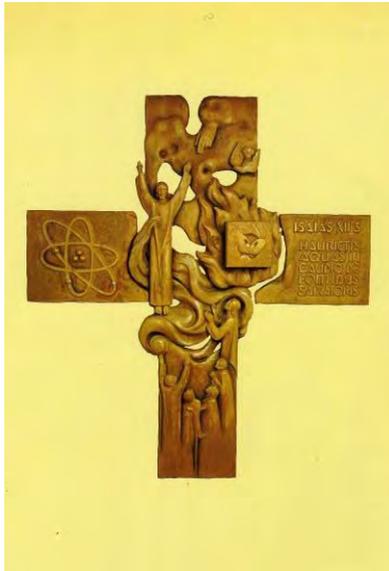
A context of limited family surroundings,

but a domain extending along the roads of Europe (and beyond)

A sister with the desire to be the last in a convent,

but in reality, becoming the first, as the foundress.

Aren't we amazed about this young woman from Niederbronn who through the contemplation of the *Mystery of the Cross* has heard the cry of the poor of her time?



- " Following Mother Alphonse Marie, the Congregation wants ...
- to be like her attentive to the real needs and sufferings of men/women and to help them to take their lives in hand themselves;
 - to devote oneself like her particularly to the disadvantaged and oppressed, all who are hampered in their development, whose needs are not taken care of by anybody;
 - **to try like her to be present where one's whole life revolves around matters of "this world", where the social life of man has become cool and impersonal..."**

(Rule of Life of the Sisters of the divine Saviour)



SŒURS DU
TRES SAINT SAUVEUR



Motherhouse

Tel.: 0033 (0) 3 888 08450

2, rue principale
F- 67110 OBERBRONN
Frankreich

homepage: <http://soeurs-stsauveur.cef.fr>

homepage: www.schwestern-vom-goettlichen-erloeser.de