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Homily of the Prefect of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints at the Holy Mass for the Beatification of Alphonse-Marie (Élisabeth) Eppinger in the Cathedral of Our Lady of Strasbourg, France

At 14.30 today in the Cathedral of Our Lady of Strasbourg, France, His Eminence Cardinal Giovanni Angelo Becciu, prefect of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, celebrated the Holy Mass for the Beatification of Alphonse-Marie (Élisabeth) Eppinger (1814-1867), Founder of the Congregation of the Sisters of the Most Holy Saviour.

The following is the text of the homily pronounced by Cardinal Giovanni Angelo Becciu during the Eucharistic celebration, after the proclamation of the Gospel:

Homily of the Prefect of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints

Dear brothers and dear sisters,

Today the Church of Strasbourg is pleased to see her daughter, Sister Alphonse-Marie Eppinger, inscribed in the book of the Blessed, and to propose her as a model of evangelical life. The whole diocesan community – we know – undertook a process of preparation for this day reflecting on the universal vocation to holiness and questioning how today we can become holy. The solemn event of the Beatification is a providential occasion to rediscover, 150 years after her death, the actuality of the message and of the figure of this singular woman, who was able to offer a living Christian witness and a profound spirituality.

When she was still alive, Blessed Alphonse-Marie inspired the appreciation of those who met her, who recognized in her the features of the holiness of life and the heroism of Christian virtues.

Two focal ascetic points marked her life: to know God's desires and to follow those desires by fulfilling His will. She was still a child – her name was Élisabeth – when one day, along the road, she saw a station of the via crucis. "Why did they crucify Jesus?" she asked her mother. "My little one, He was killed because of our sins",

replied the mother. "But what is a sin?" Élisabeth insisted. "It is an offence to God". "Then I do not want to offend Him anymore!" exclaimed Élisabeth. "From that time on", she later wrote, "there grew in me every day the desire to understand what must be done to love God and not to offend Him... This thought upset me and spurred me on to obedience".

But we must not think that Élisabeth was a girl who was all pious and docile; on the other hand, she had a strong personality, often rebellious. She herself says: "During adolescence, I had to fight a difficult battle against my irascible character ... If someone opposed me, I was angry. And if my parents ordered me to do a job when I should have been going out, I often disobeyed ... Then I prayed like this: "Jesus, you know my desire. I want to obey. Give me what my heart craves: the grace to know you and love you". Thus began a serious and demanding commitment: Élisabeth slowly learned to listen to the voice of God and to grow in intimacy with Him, until she becomes aware of two troubling facts: of how much God loved her yet, at the same time, of how many people show themselves indifferent to so much love. Touched profoundly by the love of God, she ardently desired that others too, indeed everyone, experience the infinite love of God. The impulse to be an instrument of God's love is born in her clear and impelling heart: that through her all may experience how much they are loved by God.

The love of God lived with intensity of life and overflowing joy cannot leave surrounding people indifferent. Her chosen motto "Draw joyfully from the sources of salvation" sealed her desire to transmit a joyous faith. Attracted by her lifestyle and inspired by her words, a small community of friends formed around her who contemplated with her the merciful heart of Jesus in the Gospel, His attitude towards the people who suffer in body and heart and towards the sinners. She wanted to mould her own heart and that of her friends on the Heart of Jesus so as to be, like him, the good Samaritan. She felt that Jesus' invitation: "Go and do likewise" (*Lk* 10, 37). Thus was born the religious family of the Sisters of the Divine Redeemer, to live the charisma of Élisabeth, who had by then changed her name to Alphonse-Marie. It is a charism centred on God's mercy: to go to the house of the poor to respond to their spiritual and material needs through the practice of works of mercy.

Under the guidance of Mother Alphonse-Marie we see her young Sisters make simple and concrete gestures to alleviate suffering, without making any distinction on the basis of religion or social class. They become missionaries of charity, facing even the epidemics with courage: some died, infected by diseases, especially during the terrible cholera outbreak of 1854. They kept watch day and night at the bedside of the sick, show ingenuity in saving lives and stemming contagion, assisting the dying, comforting families, exhorting them not to lose hope. The Crimean War led them to treat the wounded in field hospitals, to follow the army on its travels. Dr. Kuhn, the physician of Niederbronn, wrote: "These young pious women not only watch over the sick, assuring them the most assiduous care day and night, exposing themselves to any risk of contagion and overcoming disgust, but also entering the miserable houses of the poor, bringing them the comforts of religion. They behave gracefully in the face of rough ways, they make cleanliness reign where this quality was neither known nor appreciated, and give lessons to children even in the isolated villages, where there are no teachers or school".

Where did this apostolic passion come from that Blessed Alphonse-Marie Eppinger inculcated to her Sisters? She had learned the gift of herself by contemplating the dying Saviour on the cross. Her ardent desire was to live and act for Christ, to imitate Him in His sweetness, in His humility, in His love, to try to please Him alone. So she loved to repeat: "To see God in God, to see God in one's neighbour, to see God in all things". These words, a marvellous synthesis of the extraordinary evangelical witness of the new Blessed, are charged with actuality, since in our days there is still a great need to bear witness to authentic Christian love: it is not an abstract idea, but it becomes concrete in helping others, first of the weak and the poor, who are the flesh of Christ. The Holy Father Francis reminds us. He loves to repeat that "a love that does not recognize that Jesus came in flesh is not the love that God commands us. Recognizing that God sent His Son, has become incarnate and lived a life like us, means loving how Jesus loved; to love as Jesus taught us; to love walking on the path of Jesus. And it is Jesus' path that gives life" (*Homily, Domus Sanctae Marthae*, 11 November 2016).

Throughout her life, Blessed Alphonse-Marie Eppinger bore witness, with words and deeds, that Jesus did not come to speak to us about the love of the Father, but rather that He personally embodied His immense mercy, healing those He met on His journey. She was able to recognize the wounds of Jesus in poor and needy

humanity and for this she became an instrument of God's merciful love. The experience of our Blessed, whom the Church recognizes as a model to be imitated in following Jesus, is a stimulus to love the people we meet every day, becoming for them an instrument of God's merciful love.

We are celebrating this rite of beatification in a city that, in a certain sense, is the heart of Europe, since there are fundamental institutions of life of her citizens. From here there arises a pressing appeal to the entire European continent, increasingly tempted by selfishness and withdrawal into itself. This is the appeal of Blessed Alphonse-Marie: this courageous and strong woman, with her extraordinary Christian witness, urges all Europeans to have a great heart, to show a ready and welcoming love, able to meet those in need: weak, the defeated, the discarded, those fleeing from situations of war, violence, persecution.

Together with the Sisters of the Most Holy Saviour, the Sisters of the Redeemer and the Sisters of the Divine Redeemer, namely the three religious families that are still inspired by the charism of Mother Alphonse-Marie, we praise this bold Alsatian woman in love with God, and a tireless dispenser of mercy to suffering humanity. We honour in her a faithful disciple of the Gospel and an intrepid messenger of divine love. Let us welcome the message and follow her example, to be witnesses of Christ, our peace and our hope.

Let us say together: Blessed Alphonse-Marie, pray for us!
