

Introduction

On December 8th, 2010, the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception, Bishop David Ricken gave formal and official diocesan Church approval of the apparitions of the Blessed Virgin Mary to Adele Brise. This proclamation made the Shrine of Our Lady of Champion the only approved Marian Apparition site in the United States and one of the under 30 apparition sites approved worldwide.

Life of Adele Brise (Brice)

So who is Adele Brise? Adele was born in Dion-le-Val, Belgium, to Lambert and Catherine Brise on January 30, 1831. She had two sisters and seemed to experience a relatively normal childhood; however, she did suffer an accident at a young age that left her blind in her right eye. Despite this accident, Adele was known for being very cheerful and outgoing.

Upon receiving her first Holy Communion Adele, along with a few close friends, promised the Blessed Virgin Mary that they would devote their lives to becoming religious teaching sisters in Champion, Belgium. Unfortunately, because of Adele's circumstances, she could not pursue her desire to join the convent in Belgium and would not stay in school for long as she was needed to help her family at home.

Eventually, Adele's parents decided to move to America, and in 1855 the Brise family made the 6-week voyage to the United States. This was a difficult move for Adele as she was still dedicated to her promise to the Blessed Mother to become a teaching sister in Belgium. After seeking the advice of a priest, she was told to be obedient to her parents and reassured that if God willed her to become a teacher and a sister, she would serve in that vocation in America.

After eventually traveling to the new state of Wisconsin, Adele's father bought land northeast of the current Shrine property. The Brise family joined the largest Belgian settlement in the United States in this area of Wisconsin. Life for the Belgian pioneers and settlers was difficult and oftentimes a great struggle to survive. Many people died in the harsh Wisconsin winters during those early years. Adele served her family's needs by often taking grain to the grist mill.

The Apparition

It is known that Adele followed a long wooded Indian trail to carry the family grain to the grist mill. During one of those journeys along the trail, Adele saw a lady dressed in white and standing between two trees, believed to be a maple and a hemlock. The lady said nothing to her; leaving Adele wondering what sort of encounter this might have been. When Adele told her family, they believed her but thought perhaps it was a soul in purgatory visiting this earthly life asking for prayers.

A few days later, on what is believed to be Sunday, October 9th, 1859, Adele was walking to Mass with her sister and a friend. The closest Catholic Church was 10 miles away, but Adele walked to Mass every Sunday through all types of weather. Adele and her companions were traveling through the same Indian trail as before and once again Adele saw the mysterious lady at the same spot between the two trees. Adele was the only one to see her; which frightened her and left her speechless. All three women, however, continued their journey toward the church for Mass.

After Mass, Adele spoke to her priest about what she had seen; he instructed her that if she saw the lady again to ask her the question: "in God's name, who are you, and what do you want of me?" Adele, feeling reassured and now more confident that she had direction from her priest, traveled back home with her companions. On this return journey, Adele saw the lady a third time.

The Shrine's history book describes this event:

“As they approached the hallowed spot, Adele could see the beautiful lady, clothed in dazzling white, with a yellow sash around her waist. Her dress fell to her feet in graceful folds. She had a crown of stars around her head, and her long golden wavy hair fell loosely over her shoulders; such a heavenly light shone around her that Adele could hardly look at her sweet face. Overcome by this heavenly light and the beauty of her amiable visitor, Adele fell on her knees, saying, ‘In God’s name, who are you, and what do you want of me?’”

“I am the Queen of Heaven who prays for the conversion of sinners, and I wish you to do the same. You received Holy Communion this morning and that is well. But you must do more. Make a general confession and offer Communion for the conversion of sinners. If they do not convert and do penance, my Son will be obliged to punish them.”

“Adele, who is it?” said one of the women. “Oh, why can’t we see her as you do?” said another weeping. “Kneel”, said Adele, “the Lady says she is the Queen of Heaven.” Our Blessed Lady looked kindly at them saying,

“Blessed are they that believe without seeing.”

Then Our Lady asked Adele: “What are you doing here in idleness while your companions are working in the vineyard of my Son?”

“What more can I do, dear Lady?” asked Adele weeping.

“Gather the children in this wild country and teach them what they should know for salvation.”

“But how shall I teach them who know so little myself?” Adele said.

“Teach them,” replied her radiant visitor, “their catechism, how to sign themselves with the sign of the Cross, and how to approach the sacraments; that is what I wish you to do. Go and fear nothing, I will help you.”

Wrapped in a luminous atmosphere, our Lady lifted her hands as though she were beseeching a blessing for those at her feet. Slowly she vanished from sight, leaving Adele overwhelmed and prostrate on the ground, and the dense woods as solemn as before.

[End of History Book passage]

This was the mysterious yet simple beginning of Adele’s mission to become a teacher for our Blessed Lord and our Blessed Lady. Those around her generally believed her experience, though they found it astonishing.

The Mission and Ministry of Adele

Adele began at first going door-to-door (up to 25 miles a day), offering to do household chores in exchange for the privilege of instructing the children in their catechism. By extension, the parents of these children would often listen to the lessons given by Adele and grow in the knowledge of their faith as well. After several years, however, this became too much for her to handle alone. With encouragement from her priest, Adele gathered around her other women who would assist her as a teaching sister. In addition, Adele and her sisters were blessed with gifts of money and workers; men and women came forward and built the convent and school on these grounds. Soon after, they built a larger chapel which replaced the smaller one Adele’s father, Lambert Brise, had originally built near the place where the Queen of Heaven appeared. The children now came to this place to be taught their catechism and faith.

Although Adele and her sisters had centralized their ministry and apostolate to one location, life was still very difficult at times. The schoolhouse and its facilities were known to have had food shortages, parents oftentimes did not pay their bills, and a croup epidemic presented heavy challenges for Adele, her sisters, and the students. At one point the Diocese received a new Bishop who, although he knew nothing personally of Adele and her activities, had heard about vendors creating a rowdy atmosphere right outside of the boundaries of the holy property. The Bishop decided that, until he had time to get the full story about what was going on, it was best to close the school and the Chapel until further notice. He demanded that Adele bring him the keys to the schoolhouse and Chapel to officially close its doors.

In humble obedience, Sister Adele gave the keys to the Bishop as soon as she could. When she handed him the keys she reminded him of his responsibility for the souls of those children, especially since they would be lacking their religious instruction. Impressed by her zeal and sincerity, the Bishop returned the keys to her immediately and counseled her to continue her good work.

The Peshtigo Fire

On October 8th, 1871, the great Peshtigo fire broke out. The Peshtigo fire is still considered to this day the most devastating fire in United States history, killing between 1200-2400 people and burning 1.2 million acres. Though authorities are still not certain what started the fire, it is known that it was very dry that year and very windy that day. Once it began, it quickly became a huge storm of fire. This great natural disaster roared like a tornado right toward this very location.

The Shrine's history book recounts the words of Father Pernin:

“After hours of horror and suspense, the heavens sent relief in the form of a downpour. The fervent prayers to the Mother of God were heard. The fire was extinguished, but dawn revealed the ravages wrought by the conflagration. Everything about them was destroyed; miles of desolation everywhere. But the convent, school, and chapel on the holy land consecrated to the Virgin Mary shone like an emerald isle in a sea of ashes. The raging fire licked the outside palings and left charred scars as mementos. Tongues of fire had reached the chapel fence, and threatened destruction to all within its confines; the fire had not entered the Chapel grounds.”

[End of History book passage]

The amazing ending of the great Peshtigo Fire on these grounds was recognized at that time and is still recognized today, as a miraculous answer to prayers. The great event of the fire has done much to show the authenticity of the apparition. Adele and her Sisters continued to teach and catechize the children long after the drama of the fire. Their presence and influence have had a lasting effect on the people of this local community. Adele especially lived with zeal and love of God and love of Mary which was reflected in her ministry. Her response to the mission and ministry given to her by our Blessed Mother provides for all Christians a model for living and carrying out the vocation God gives to us.

Adele Brise died on July 5th, 1896, and she is buried in the cemetery located near the entrance to the Apparition Oratory. On her headstone is inscribed the disposition of her life: “Sacred Cross Under thy Shadow I Rest and Hope”

The National Shrine of Our Lady of Champion exists to promote and continue the message and mission entrusted to Adele by our Blessed Mother. This holy place continues to be a refuge of peace, protection, and learning for all who come with faith.