

Green Bay bishop becomes first in U.S. to approve Marian apparitions

CHAMPION, Wis. – Bishop David L. Ricken of Green Bay has approved the Marian apparitions seen by Adele Brise in 1859, making the apparitions of Mary that occurred some 18 miles northeast of Green Bay the first in the United States to receive approval of a diocesan bishop.

Bishop Ricken made the announcement during Mass at the Shrine of Our Lady of Good Help Dec. 8, the feast of the Immaculate Conception. More than 250 invited guests filled the shrine chapel to hear Bishop Ricken read the official decree on the authenticity of the apparitions. He also issued a second decree, formally approving the shrine as a diocesan shrine.

The decree on the apparitions' authenticity comes nearly two years after Bishop Ricken opened a formal investigation. On Jan. 9, 2009, he appointed three theologians to study the history of them.

“They are all theologians with a particular concentration and expertise in the theology of the Blessed Virgin Mary,” said Father John Doerfler, vicar general and chancellor of the diocese. Although the three theologians were not named by the diocese, Father Doerfler said two of the three are internationally recognized and they have “general experience in examining apparitions.”

Brise, a Belgian immigrant, was 28 when Mary appeared to her three times in October 1859. The first appearance took place while Brise was carrying a sack of wheat to a grist mill about four miles from Robinsonville, now known as Champion.

A few days later, on Oct. 9, as Brise walked to Sunday Mass in Bay Settlement, about

11 miles from her home, Mary appeared to her again. After Mass, Brise told the pastor what she had seen. He told her to “ask in God’s name who it was and what it desired of her,” according to a historical account found on the shrine’s website.

On the way home from Bay Settlement, Mary again appeared to Brise. When Brise asked who the woman was, Mary responded, “I am the Queen of Heaven, who prays for the conversion of sinners and I wish you to do the same.”

She told Brise to “gather the children in this wild country and teach them what they should know for salvation. Teach them their catechism, how to sign themselves with the sign of the cross and how to approach the sacraments.”

Brise devoted the rest of her life to teaching children. She began a community of Third Order Franciscan sisters and built a school next to the shrine. Brise’s father, Lambert, built a small chapel near the spot of the apparitions. When a brick chapel was built in 1880, the trees where Mary appeared were cut down and the chapel’s altar was placed over the spot.

A school and convent were also built next to the chapel. The current chapel was dedicated in 1942 under the title of Our Lady of Good Help. Today the shrine, which sits on six acres of farmland, receives thousands of visitors each year.

Brise died on July 5, 1896, and was buried in a small cemetery just east of the chapel.

Father Doerfler, who serves as the shrine’s rector, said official recognition of the apparitions affirms “the mystery of God’s providence.”

“He has had the Blessed Virgin Mary appear here. I do not know the reasons why,” he told *The Compass*, Green Bay diocesan newspaper. “All of this ... has to do with God’s plan to bring people to salvation through his son Jesus Christ.”

Apparitions have taken place throughout history “as a sign of God’s providence, to remind us of what God has already revealed,” said Father Doerfler. “As a loving mother would remind her children about things that are important, so our Blessed Mother Mary has appeared throughout history to remind us of things that are important for our salvation and to draw us closer to her Son.”

Marian apparitions date back to the fourth century and have been reported around the world, according to the University of Dayton’s Marian Library, which holds one of the world’s largest collections of research on Mary. The Marian Library lists 11 Marian apparitions that have received official approval by diocesan bishops worldwide since 1900.

Karen Tipps, who has been a volunteer and caretaker of the shrine with her husband Steve for 18 years, said Bishop Ricken’s decree “is the fulfillment of everything we’ve worked for: to make the shrine a beautiful place of pilgrimage; to try and promote the message of what happened here.”

While the declaration will not change the way longtime pilgrims view the shrine, it will change the way the rest of the world sees it, she said.

“The shrine has had pilgrims for more than 150 years ... but in the church view and the world view, having the bishop gone to this length to get the commission going, it’s what others need for affirmation of what happened here,” said Tipps.

She believes that the timing of the apparitions’ approval was part of a divine plan.

“It’s now because this message is meant for this time in history,” Tipps told The Compass. “If you look at the state of our children right now, there’s no hope. There’s no faith. There’s nothing to live for.”

She said a “crisis in catechesis” exists today, much like it did when Brise was told to

teach children their catechism.

“The message (given to Adele Brise) is, ‘Gather the children. Teach them their catechism. Teach them their faith,’ she said. “We need to do that. ... We’re not giving them the substance of their faith. So I think that’s why it is happening at this time in history. That’s why Bishop Ricken was brought here. I think it’s a divine plan that this needed to come to fulfillment now for the world to get this message.”

Tipps said it will be a big adjustment having more people visiting the shrine. “It’s been such a quiet place. But now it’s for the world to be able to share ... what we’ve had here and what we’ve experienced for the last 150 years.”