

A Theotokan reflects on Champion USA

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by “Sister Anne” Farran — March 1, 2017

Episode #6: Mary Speaks to the World

May Jesus and Mary be loved by all hearts!

Marie Adele Joseph Brise was born in Belgium in the town of Dion-le-Val, Brabant, January 30, 1831.

We don't have the details, but she lost an eye as a young child. Was it an illness or an accident? It didn't seem to affect her negatively. Adele was known for her warm and pleasing personality, fervent piety, and her confidence in the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary

Still in Belgium, Adele and several of her friends made a promise to the Mother of God to join a religious order in the town of Champion, in the adjoining province of Namur, and devote their lives to the foreign missions.

The other girls fulfilled their promise, but Adele continued to help her parents at home. Due to their financial circumstances Adele received a meager education. In 1855, when Adele was 24, her parents made the decision to immigrate to America to seek a better life.

Adele felt concerned about keeping her promise to the Blessed Mother. Her pastor counseled her to remain obedient to her father and mother, and join them on their move to America. “If God wills it, you will become a Sister in America. Go, I will pray for you.”

Lambert and Marie Brise purchased 240 acres of land in the town of Red River, Wisconsin, U.S.A. on August 7, 1855. Adele helped her family begin the arduous task of developing their homestead.

October 9, 1859

Four years later in October of 1859, Adele is now twenty-nine. While on her way to the grist mill, Adele saw a Lady clothed in dazzling white, with a yellow sash around her waist and a crown of stars around her head. The Lady was standing between two trees, one a maple, the other a hemlock. Adele was frightened and stood still. After several minutes, the vision slowly disappeared, leaving a white cloud. This was the first of three Apparitions. We are not given the precise date.

On October 9th, the following Sunday, Adele was on her way to attend Mass at Bay Settlement in the company of her sister, Isabel, and a neighbor woman. As they came near the same pair of trees, the Lady in white once again appeared to Adele. Adele proceeded on her way to attend Mass, then afterwards met with her confessor. He told her that if it was a heavenly messenger, she would see it again, and it would not harm her. She should ask in God's name

who it was, and what it desired of her. That same day, on her way home from Mass, Adele saw the beautiful Lady again.

“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.

One of the women with Adele asked, “Who is it?” Another woman began to cry: “O why can’t we see her as you do?” “Kneel,” said Adele, “the Lady says she is the Queen of Heaven.”

Our Blessed Lady turned, looked kindly at them and said,

Blessed are they that believe without seeing.

But, what are you doing here in idleness while your companions are working in the vineyard of my Son?

Now Adele began to cry: “What more can I do, dear Lady?”

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

Adele replied: “But how shall I teach them who know so little myself?”

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

Our Lady lifted her hands, as though asking God to bless them. Then slowly, She vanished.

A Chapel is Built Immediately, and Adele Begins to Teach

Throughout the 1840s and 1850s, Wisconsin’s population had expanded rapidly. The Church was unable to keep up with the growing need for pastors. For the Brise family, the nearest church was in Bay Settlement, eleven miles away. There was only one pastor to serve the entire northeastern part of the state. But was it lack of schools, that kept the children from receiving proper religious instruction? People were racing toward prosperity. Parents wanted their children to work.

Perhaps a few, that knew Adele’s integrity, believed in the Apparition and heeded Mary’s words, but gossip and resistance was not lacking. Adele devised a clever barter method to persuade reluctant Catholic parents to allow her to catechize their children. She would travel from house to house and teach the children, in exchange for doing the children’s chores.

While Adele’s father, Lambert Brise built the first chapel, a log structure 10 feet x 12 feet, to honor the Virgin who asked for catechesis and conversion, Adele Brise began her teaching mission. Despite her own lack of education, she traveled and up and down the Green Bay Peninsula, undeterred by long distances, snow, rain, fatigue, the teeth of wild animals and the biting pain of human ridicule, to fulfill the mandate she received from the Holy Virgin.

Visitors to the humble Apparition Shrine increased. After two years, in 1861, a second chapel is built. It’s a wood-frame construction, twice the size of the log chapel: 24 feet x 40 feet. They named it *Notre Dame de Bon Secours* (Our Lady of Good Help).

By 1864, Adele’s work has begun to attract the attention and admiration of other young women. At first, they came and went, but some stayed. With the advice of a priest, she and her companions formed a community of Third Order Franciscan and established themselves in a farmhouse not far from the Chapel. In 1869, they inaugurate *Saint Mary’s Boarding Academy*.

Misunderstanding, gossip, and opposition: unfavorable reports alarmed the bishop who put an interdict on the chapel and gave orders for Adele to close her school. The drama was soon dissipated. In two weeks, the doors were open again. Nevertheless, hardness of heart prevailed.

Exactly 12 years after the Apparition: Refusal to Convert Leads to Punishment by Fire

When Mary referred to “this wild country” it seemed that She meant untamed souls.

If they do not convert and do penance, my Son will be obliged to punish them.

The new immigrants were focused on material prosperity for themselves and their children, as if this was the only life. God would have to detach them from their temporal belongings in the hope that they would begin to

Seek first the kingdom of heaven.

Mt 6:33

Exactly on the eve of the 12th anniversary, when Mary had warned the people to repent or else God would punish, God sent a strong testimony to the Apparition in the form of a fiery punishment.

We'll be quoting from the data collected at the Peshtigo-Fire-Info website.

On the evening of October 8, 1871, the worst recorded forest fire in North American history raged through Northeastern Wisconsin and Upper Michigan. The “Peshtigo Fire” covered about 2000 square miles (1.5 million acres). It was described in some parts as “a wall of flame, a mile high, five miles wide, traveling 90 to 100 miles an hour, hotter than a crematorium, turning sand into glass.” It destroyed millions of dollars’ worth of property and timberland.

The great midwestern city of Chicago also happened to endure a terrible fire that same fateful night. The death toll in Chicago was about 250. Between 1,200 and 2,400 people died in the Peshtigo Fire. It's difficult to determine exactly how many people died in the vast frontier settlement. No one knows how many native peoples, itinerant lumberjacks, immigrant homesteaders, etc. may have moved into the area since the previous census in June 1870. Many bodies were burnt completely to ash.

Though other villages and farm settlements were affected by the fire, the greatest loss of life and property occurred in the village of Peshtigo. About 800 people died there, nearly half of the population. In less than an hour from the time the fiery tornado struck the town, the village of Peshtigo was annihilated. The wind-whipped fire moved with incalculable speed. The people were essentially trapped in the town, surrounded by wooden buildings and sidewalks, sawdust-strewn streets and a burning forest.

Peshtigo-Fire-Info website

The website collected contemporary newspaper articles. Here are some extracts:

Hundreds are maimed and helpless; many of them rendered cripples for life. In one short hour, whole townships were devastated by the fire fiend, hundreds of human beings hurled into eternity by one of the most awful visitations ever known in the history of the world.

The whole country is a scene of devastation and ruin that no language can paint, or tongue describe. At Peshtigo and in the Sugar Bush all the cattle, sheep, swine and poultry are destroyed. Miles of country, where but a few days ago existed pleasant farms and an abundance of the necessities of life, now lie devastated with not a living thing left.

A witness is cited: "The fire swept through the swamp and destroyed several outbuildings in the rest of the Boom Company's place and Dr. Hall's, together with a large barn containing nearly 100 tons of hay. The hay was the property of Mr. Bentley of Marinette. At this time the direction of the wind changed rapidly blowing from several points of the compass alternately. First from the south-west, then from the west, then from the north-west, then back again to the south, during which time we were visited by a series of whirlwinds which showered cinders and sparks in every conceivable direction. Cries of distress were heard down the river. From the rear of Dickey's store in the direction of the Bay all was one broad lurid sheet of flame as far as the eye could reach. No hopes were entertained of saving anything. Men worked with the energy of despair. Just below the Marinette Iron Works, the fire was raging so fearfully, that it was impossible to go any further. The streets were lined with men, women and children fleeing for their lives. Many of the families were engaged in making excavations in the sand and burying their household goods. The wind had at least settled to blowing steadily from the south west, but still it blew with tremendous fury, and the flames in the swamp immediately in the rear of the town, raged with corresponding fearfulness."

Volunteers drove in with wagon loads of donations for the survivors who beheld sad things.

Survivors are flocking into Marinette. The Dunlap House and several private homes are already well-filled-up with the victims, many of them terribly burned. The Davis family of 6 persons were found dead in a well at Peshtigo this evening. At the site of the Peshtigo village, the remains of what was evidently once three adult human beings, were found so thoroughly consumed that the ashes could be all placed in a two-quart measure. At another place, the remains of one person was found: a slate pencil, a knife and some metallic trinkets, a few teeth, and pieces of a skull, all of which could be held in the palm of the hand.

Peshtigo-Fire-Info website

What Caused the Greatest Fires ever Recorded in the Upper Midwest?

These were the human factors, such as,

Farming practices: piles of hardwood growth cleared away for farm crops = dry tinder

Logging and Sawmills: piles of cut wood were left in the clearings waiting to be transported = dry tinder

Railroad work: trees and brush, cleared from the path of the tracks, were left by the wayside. Sparks from steam engines could easily ignite grass, brush and "slash."

Construction: wooden buildings, board walks, sawdust floors and streets = dry tinder

The stripping of the forest of so much green, disturbed the normal rain cycle. A prolonged and widespread drought began. Then, high temperatures. Finally, many small fires ignited simultaneously. The rising heat generated a cyclonic storm which blew up into a massive forest fire on the night of October 8, 1871. The Peshtigo Fire Company had one single, horse-drawn steam pumper for the purpose of fighting a fire in the sawmill. There was virtually no other technology. The fire continued to burn until it reached the waters of Green Bay. The storm winds died down, and the rain came.

The Great Miracle: Mary is Champion of her Property

The Chicago Fire was less devastating, but received more attention because it had a press. The frontier town of Peshtigo had only a single telegraph line and it burned down in the fire. But word gradually spread along the frontier of a great miracle.

During the fire, Sister Adele and her small religious community, and the schoolchildren, were on the Shrine grounds, a 5-acre clearing in the middle of a burning forest. For hours they prayed the Rosary, walking on their knees on the perimeter of their property. In the end, they remained unharmed, and the buildings, virtually untouched. Everything in the surrounding area was destroyed except the convent, school, chapel and 5 acres of land, consecrated to the

Virgin Mary. It isn't just the fact that the fire went around them, but how could they keep breathing in all the heat and smoke? It was an obvious confirmation from heaven.

Pilgrimages increase and, from 1872, devotions are celebrated on the Feast of the Assumption to honor Mary, the Queen of Heaven, with a Rosary procession and an outdoor Mass. Why not the anniversary in October? This is Wisconsin. Snow can already be deep. Within a decade, a larger chapel was needed. In 1880, a brick Chapel was erected. Many physical healings took place over the years. These are memorialized by the multitude of crutches and other mementos of thanksgiving for answered prayers, left at the Shrine.

In 1885, a brick residence for the Sisters, and a brick school were built by the Diocese. Five years later Sister Marguerite Allard died, Sister Adele's assistant and secretary. Adele continues her teaching mission, despite failing health.

Sometime between 1890 and 1896, through a suggestion made by Sister Adele, the town of Robinsonville changes its name to Champion which, in a way, fulfilled her long-ago promise that she made in Belgium to the Blessed Mother.

Bishop Messmer solicits the help of the Canons of Premontre from Berne Abbey in Holland. Father Bernard Pennings and his group of Norbertines arrive in 1893.

On July 5th, 1896 Sister Adele dies at the Chapel. Leadership is entrusted to her associate, Sister Madeleine. In 1902, the last two Sisters join the community of Franciscan Sisters at Bay Settlement and Bishop Messmer entrusts the work at the Shrine to this congregation. Sister Pauline LaPlante, O.S.F is assigned to the chapel and school at Champion. She remains as its head for the next 24 years until her death, March 15, 1926 at the age of 80.

In 1929, the Chapel's boarding school is closed by Bishop Paul Peter Rhode of the Green Bay Diocese. But Franciscan Sisters remain and care for the Shrine complex.

In 1933 the old brick convent and school is remodeled as a Home for Crippled Children.

In 1941, Bishop Paul Peter Rhode lays the cornerstone for the fourth and present Chapel which is eventually dedicated under the title of "Our Lady of Good Help."

The crippled children's home lasted twenty years, then the property was remodeled as a novitiate for the Sisters of Saint Francis. About the same time, in 1954 the bishop appointed the first resident chaplain for the Shrine. In 1968, the novitiate closed but Franciscan Sisters continued on at the Shrine, serving the people in the area.

The Apparition had never been formally approved. In 2006, the new Bishop David Ricken [Green Bay Diocese] opens a formal Church investigation of the Apparitions and appoints a commission for the task. Four years later on Dec. 8th, 2010, he issued a decree approving the Apparitions and establishes the Shrine of Our Lady of Good Help as an official Diocesan Shrine.

Was there a deeper meaning in the Apparition of Mary?

She came vested almost as a priestess and crowned as a queen, into virgin territory reminiscent of Eden.

She calls it a wild country, and stands between two trees.

The maple will be eventually cursed. Millions of maples in North America today are slowly dying of disease.

The North American Hemlock Fir Tree is not poisonous like the herbal plant. It is used for timber and the manufacture of paper, perhaps an allusion for catechetical textbooks. This hemlock only vaguely resembles the poisonous European plant, but North America would initiate the Hemlock Society to promote assisted suicide, and a physician in Michigan would initiate the movement, personally euthanizing many of his patients, becoming the most famous champion for this crime, gaining worldwide attention.

God bless you!