

## CALLED TO EVANGELIZE:

### THE STORY OF ADELE BRISE AND THE MARIOPHANY THAT CHANGED HER LIFE

*Edward Looney\**

#### **Introduction**

On a cold December day in 1669, Jesuit missionary Fr. Claude Allouez journeyed along Wisconsin waterways to anchor on the bank of the Oconto River. On December 3, 1669, assisted by Native Americans, Allouez celebrated the first Mass in the territory that would become the Diocese of Green Bay. Two hundred years later, miraculous events would occur there involving a twenty-eight-year-old Belgian Catholic, an immigrant named Adele Brise.

In October of 1859, Adele claimed that the Blessed Virgin appeared to her on three occasions. Further, she claimed that in the final encounter she was given a message and a mission which called her to a life of evangelization. This apparition anticipates the Marian dimension of today's New Evangelization because the apparition emphasizes the necessity for evangelization, not only for Adele, but for the Church at large. It paves the way for the revitalization and growth of Catholicism in our post-Christian society by reminding us to reclaim the roots and tenets of the faith.<sup>1</sup> Part I of this paper will provide a narrative account of Adele Brise's life, the Mariophany she

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<sup>1</sup> Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993).

received, and the mission she undertook. Part II will provide the historical context of the Champion (earlier called Robinsonville) apparitions, in addition to the blueprint that is contained within the message.

**Part I.**  
**The Story of Adele Brise and the**  
**Apparition that Changed Her Life**

Marie Adele Joseph Brise was born in 1831 to Lambert and Catherine Brise in Brabant, Belgium. At a young age, an accident blinded her in one eye, but this did not affect her character; she was regarded as a pious young girl who loved God, the Blessed Mother, and everyone she met. She attended a Catholic grade school of the Ursuline Sisters, where at the time of her First Communion, Adele, along with a few other girls, promised the Blessed Mother they would join a religious order of missionary sisters to teach children in foreign countries. By the 1850s, however, Adele's desire to join a religious order in Belgium seemed impossible since her family intended to emigrate. Troubled, but relying on God, Adele sought the counsel of her parish priest who told her that she should obey her parents, and if God willed for her to be a sister, this would be realized in America.<sup>2</sup>

Lambert, Catherine, and their three children immigrated to the United States in 1855, and settled in the area of Red River, Wisconsin.<sup>3</sup> This area was populated with Belgian immigrants served by missionary priests, including Crosier Father Edward Daems, who would form the Franciscans of St. Francis of the Holy Cross in the Bay Settlement area.<sup>4</sup> In American Catholicism at that time, language barriers prevented many local churches from addressing pastoral needs. Ethnic churches were created to meet this challenge, but not in time to prevent the apathy of many immigrants regarding the practice of their faith.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Sister M. Dominica, O.S.F., *The Chapel: Our Lady of Good Help* (De Pere, Wis.: Journal Publishing Co., 1955), 5. Hereafter referred to as Dominica followed by page number.

<sup>3</sup> Dominica, 5.

<sup>4</sup> Dominica, 2-3.

<sup>5</sup> Dominica, 7.

Adele lived a simple life with her family in the years leading up to her Mariophany on October 9, 1859. On the first occasion of the Blessed Mother's apparition, she was walking to the grist mill with a sack of wheat when she encountered "a lady all in white standing between two trees, one a maple, the other a hemlock."<sup>6</sup> Adele was frightened, because she did not know who the visitor was. Eventually the vision disappeared and she continued on her way. A few days later, Adele walked the same eleven-mile route to Mass at her local church in Bay Settlement. This time she was not alone, but was accompanied by her sister Isabelle and a neighbor woman. Adele again saw the lady. Much like the first time, the lady did not say a word, and the apparition quickly vanished, leaving Adele distraught. As she had done a few years earlier in Belgium when she needed advice, she went to confession following Mass and asked the priest for counsel regarding the two encounters. Fr. Verhoef, the parish priest in the settlement, advised Adele that if it were a heavenly messenger, she would see the lady again, and this time she should ask, "In God's name, who are you and what do you want of me?"

Upon Fr. Verhoef's suggestion that the visitor might return, Adele armed herself with the two questions. On the way home from Mass, again with her two friends, she encountered the same "beautiful woman, 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, wavy, golden hair fell loosely over her shoulders."<sup>7</sup> Kneeling, Adele opened her mouth, beginning a conversation with the Blessed Virgin Mary that would change her life forever:<sup>8</sup>

"In God's name, who are you and what do you want of me?" asked Adele, as she had been directed.

*"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*

<sup>6</sup> Dominica, 7.

<sup>7</sup> Dominica, 8.

<sup>8</sup> Italicization is used to identify the dialogue of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

*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. "O 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 turned, looked kindly at them, and said, "*Blessed are they that believe without seeing. 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?" said 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?" replied Adele.

"*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.*"<sup>9</sup>

The Queen of Heaven departed, lifting her hands as if giving a blessing. In a matter of minutes, Adele, a simple laywoman, uneducated but pious, received her vocation: to teach young people their catechism, how to make the sign of the cross, and how to receive the Sacraments worthily. Her education was meager, and she knew it. She was a humble servant who did not regard herself a fitting instrument of Heaven, yet she was wise in the ways of the Lord. Anticipating her humility, the apparition provided precise instructions which were drawn from Adele's own instruction in the faith. She was not told to receive a loftier education, but to teach from her own love of God and the Blessed Mother. In doing so, she fulfilled the divine plan for her life.

Adele could not leave her experience along that Indian trail—it became a part of her being. Going forth from the apparition mystified, and having been sent as a missionary, Adele returned home to share her encounter and message with her parents, sisters, and everyone she met. Immediately following the apparition, Adele devoted her life selflessly to the cause of catechesis. Her early method of catechesis spanned

<sup>9</sup> Dominica, 8-9.

the course of seven years, travelling distances of fifty miles from home through all elements of weather. Walking from village to village, knocking on doors, she offered to do housework for families in exchange for permission to teach their children what the Queen of Heaven had prescribed.

Walking from home to home at great distances, one can easily imagine how exhausted Adele became. Impressed with her piety and willingness to follow her calling to great extremes, Fr. Phillip Crud, the newly appointed pastor to the Belgian colony, encouraged her to fulfill the mission given to her by the Blessed Virgin by forming a community of women who would share in this mission. With a letter of solicitation and commendation from her pastor, Adele set out with a companion to begin the first of many begging missions throughout the settlement. Supported by others, Adele began a lay third order group of sisters, often called the Sisters of Good Health, but called the Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi by Adele.<sup>10</sup> Over the course of the years preceding her death, many young women joined the group of Sisters. Taking no formal vows, they were free to leave whenever they wished. This tertiary group was officially recognized by the Diocese of Green Bay, and so they wore a religious habit and referred to one another as "Sister." In correspondences to Adele or about her work, the bishop often referred to her as "Soeur Adele."

In the late 1860s, the Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi were instrumental in founding St. Mary's Academy, distinguished as the second school in the diocese. The Sisters taught in both French and English. Adele was responsible for religious formation of the students. Oftentimes these students were orphans and other children who were sent there to have a better life. The school's foundation was a testimony to the religious community's trust in Divine Providence. Accommodating more than a hundred children, the tuition was only a dollar a week. Adele wanted to make the education affordable and never turned anyone away for lack of funds. The dollar did not cover expenses, so the Sisters begged for money, food, and

<sup>10</sup> Dominica, 16.

other necessities. On one occasion, false rumors about Adele allowing the sale of alcohol at events reached the bishop. Accordingly, he demanded that Adele should send the students home and hand over the keys to the school. When Adele obediently arrived with the keys, she reminded the bishop that he would be responsible for the loss of souls. Impressed by Adele's sincerity and her missionary zeal, he returned the keys and allowed the school to reopen.

On the eve of the twelfth anniversary of the apparition to Adele, a horrific event unfolded in northeastern Wisconsin. During an extended drought, fire broke out in the small lumber village of Peshtigo.<sup>11</sup> Ignited on the same day as the Great Chicago Fire of much smaller proportion, the Peshtigo Fire was the most devastating fire in the history of the United States.<sup>12</sup> Fr. Peter Pernin, an eyewitness in Peshtigo on October 8, 1871, told how some survived that terrible day by taking refuge in the Peshtigo River and "turning [their hearts] towards heaven as their only resource."<sup>13</sup> The fire tornado that began in Peshtigo then leapt across the bay and penetrated the Door Peninsula; next in its path of destruction was Robinsonville, where Adele Brise, her Sisters, and the wooden Chapel of Our Lady of Good Help stood in its path.

People in the Door Peninsula, particularly the area surrounding the Belgian settlement, were unaware of the happenings in Peshtigo. When the ferocious whirlwinds of explosive heat and flame overtook the territory, they, too, believed that the end of the world was upon them.<sup>14</sup> The people of the area, staring death in the eye, took refuge at the Chapel of Our Lady of Good Help. Trusting in the intercession of Our Lady who had promised help to Adele, they begged for aid at the hour of their impending death. Adele was "determined not to abandon

<sup>11</sup> Reverend Peter Pernin, *The Great Peshtigo Fire: An Eyewitness Account (Wisconsin)*, 2nd ed. (Madison, Wis.: Wisconsin Historical Society, 1999), 16-18.

<sup>12</sup> Martin W. Sandler, *Lost to Time: Unforgettable Stories That History Forgot* (New York, N.Y.: Sterling, 2010), 181.

<sup>13</sup> Pernin, *The Great Peshtigo Fire*, 42.

<sup>14</sup> Dominica, 19.

Mary's shrine. . . . The children, the Sisters, and the farmers with their families, drove their livestock before them and raced in the direction of Mary's sanctuary."<sup>15</sup> The chapel had become filled with

terror-stricken people beseeching the Mother of God to spare them, many wailing aloud in their fright. Filled with confidence, they entered the Chapel, reverently raised the statue of Mary, and kneeling, bore it in procession around their beloved sanctuary. When wind and fire exposed them to suffocation, they turned in another direction, and continued to hope and pray, saying the rosary.<sup>16</sup>

Praying for many hours outside of a Chapel (which by its very composition should have been incinerated by the torrential fire), the people found relief in the early hours of October 9th, the day commemorating the message given to Adele. Rain fell, extinguishing the fire.<sup>17</sup> Their prayers had been answered by the Lady of Good Help.

Fr. Peter Pernin, after hearing of the miraculous preservation of the Chapel of Our Lady of Good Help, journeyed to Robinsonville to see for himself. In the original manuscript entitled "The Finger of God," he recounts that "all the houses and fences in the neighborhood had been burned, with the exception of the school, the chapel, and fences surrounding the six acres of land consecrated to the Blessed Virgin . . . [the property] sanctified by the visible presence of the Mother of God now shone out like an emerald island amid a sea of ashes."<sup>18</sup>

Since the terrible fire occurred twelve years to the day Adele had been told that if people did not convert and do penance [Mary's] Son would be obliged to punish them, people spoke about the Peshtigo Fire as fulfilling Our Lady's words to Adele about punishment. However, this cannot be stated with accuracy, as there was no further revelation that

<sup>15</sup> Dominica, 19.

<sup>16</sup> Dominica, 19.

<sup>17</sup> Dominica, 20.

<sup>18</sup> Peter Pernin, "The Finger of God," an unpublished manuscript accessed through the Shrine of Our Lady of Good Help Archives.

confirmed this interpretation.<sup>19</sup> Given this explanation of the local populace, one cannot ignore what resulted: a widespread, ready belief in the apparitions, sincere devotion to the Blessed Virgin, and a return to the faith and the sacraments. The Chapel of Our Lady of Good Help stood as a testament to the miraculous intervention of God through the intercession of His Holy Mother. Trusting in Mary's assurance of help and in her departing words to Adele, people believed that God could [and would] spare them through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin.

The physical threat to the chapel by fire soon became mirrored by a threat of a spiritual nature. Joseph René Vilatte, a baptized Catholic, left the Church and was ordained a priest by the Episcopal Church for the Old Catholic Church. He moved to the Belgian territory and began seeking to gain converts to his sect. The Old Catholic Church was formed in the late 1800s by persons who did not accept papal infallibility. As such, the Old Catholic Church denied the Immaculate Conception, confession, and indulgences; they also viewed clerical celibacy as optional and celebrated Mass in the vernacular.<sup>20</sup>

During his tenure in Wisconsin, Vilatte took residence in the town of Duvall at St. Mary's Old Catholic Church, which he erected between two Catholic churches.<sup>21</sup> Due to the number of people flocking to Vilatte's sect, Adele became concerned with the loss of souls and so faithfully prayed that he would do no more harm and would be converted. Bishop Messmer of Green Bay became aware of the growing heresy in the Peninsula; thus, he invited Fr. Pennings and the Canons Regular of Premontre (commonly referred to as the Norbertines), from Berne Abbey in Holland, to the diocese to combat this heresy. In 1895, Pennings began an annual pilgrimage to the Chapel "to beseech Mary's help against the evil work and influence of Vilatte" and to catechize the people of the settlement.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>19</sup> There is no record that Adele Brise maintained this position. Additionally, there is no record of Adele's response to this given topic.

<sup>20</sup> Dominica, 24.

<sup>21</sup> Dominica, 24.

<sup>22</sup> Dominica, 25.



Ultimately, the Old Catholic Church was unable to flourish in the Door Peninsula, because Catholics who might have been drawn to the sect were unwilling to accept implementation of their reforms, especially public confession and the abolition of Mary's cult.<sup>23</sup> Vilatte's failure to gain converts to Old Catholicism in Wisconsin led him elsewhere, but by the end of his life, he confessed his wrongdoing and remorse for having seduced approximately 500,000 Catholics and sought a return to the Catholic Church. After recanting his heretical beliefs, he took up a life of penance at the Cistercian Abbey of Pon-Colbert, Versailles, where he died as a layman.<sup>24</sup>

Vilatte's bid to evangelize and convert people to Old Catholicism had been preempted by the Blessed Mother. Her triumph over heresy was marked in the end by faithful people who could not forego their Marian piety. Vilatte's conversion marked another milestone in the life of Adele Brise. As in 1871, when the faithful had gathered with her in prayer at the Chapel to spare their land, Adele's prayers were answered for the conversion of Joseph Vilatte and the demise of the heretical sect.

On the Sunday morning of October 9, 1859, Adele Brise experienced a heavenly vision of the Blessed Virgin. Very few in the history of the Church have received this privilege. For the thirty-seven years following that apparition, Adele's life was marked by a specific call to evangelize. Her life, witness, zeal, and mission testify to her love of the Lord and the Blessed Mother. Adele Brise and the Chapel of Our Lady of Good Help share a rich history, not only with the Diocese of Green Bay but also with the United States and the Americas. Her role in history is intensified because it anticipates the Marian dimension of today's New Evangelization. With the recent approval of the apparitions by Bishop David Ricken of the Green Bay Diocese, the message of Our Lady at Champion is becoming more widespread, and has an ever-increasing urgency in this millennium.

<sup>23</sup> Dominica, 26.

<sup>24</sup> Msgr. Joseph Marx, "Vilatte and the Catholic Church," *The Salesianum* 37, no. 3 (July 1942): 113-20.

How the message will play out in the history of the American Church in this new age, the age of the New Evangelization, remains to be seen.

## **Part II. Historical Context and Blueprint for Evangelization**

In Part I, the early life of Adele was presented, including the Mariophany she received and its message, along with her response and the fruit of the apparition. This section will illustrate the significance of the Champion apparitions both then and now. Furthermore, it will apply a blueprint for evangelization that is found within the context of Mary's name, message, and mission which is meant for all believers.

### **Champion's Historical Context: Then**

Throughout history, apparitions have served the purpose of religious renewal. They remind people of God's presence in the world and the desire of his Mother: that all may be saved and one day partake of the heavenly banquet. Her messages call sinners to repent and to draw closer to her Son through the sacraments and prayer. The Mariophany at Guadalupe occurred during a time of intensified demonic sacrifices; Mary appeared in a way that was understood and accepted by the Aztec people. Similarly, the 1858 manifestations of the Immaculate Conception at Lourdes affirmed the 1854 dogmatic declaration that Mary was conceived without original sin. This definition was important at the time, as secular forces were denying the reality of sin.

Similar to apparitions preceding those at Champion, the apparitions to Adele affirm the results of the First Plenary Council and complement the two later Councils held at Baltimore. Smaller councils led up to the plenary councils, which published decrees on behalf of the Church in America. The first provincial council in 1829 emphasized the importance for Catholic schools to teach young people the principles of

faith and morality. The First Plenary Council of Baltimore (1852) emphasized the duty of catechesis by the clergy and the establishment of parochial schools.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, the 1866 Plenary Council developed the necessity of catechetical sessions for those who attend public schools, especially those preparing for the sacraments.<sup>26</sup> The third and last Plenary Council of Baltimore (1884) again stressed the need for Catholic schools but it also promulgated a Catechism of Christian Doctrine, which many have come to know as the Baltimore Catechism. The Councils that convened at Baltimore served as an aid not only to the [Arch]dioceses in the United States, but also to Adele, as the Church continually, though indirectly, confirmed that the work she was doing was in cooperation with the bishops and priests.

The 1859 apparitions to Adele, preceding the final two Plenary Councils of Baltimore, illustrate how Mary's revelation to Adele was aligned with the mind of the Church. Years before the conception of catechetical instruction for public school students, Adele was already teaching children of all backgrounds from her experience as a religious: by her simple love of the faith and with her personalized blueprint from the Mother of God. This blueprint can be derived from Adele's mission to teach the children the Catholic faith—namely, their catechism, how to make the sign of the cross, and how to approach the sacraments.

The Third Plenary Council later promulgated a new catechism. As the Church has continued to evolve in its understanding of catechesis, it has become clear that they were indirectly affirming the directives given by Mary. The need for catechesis had been realized by the Church a few decades following the apparitions to Adele Brise. Her message, although simple, had been systematized by the hierarchy, making the message for Adele a message for all people.

<sup>25</sup> Peter Guilday, *A History of the Councils of Baltimore, 1791-1884* (New York: Macmillan, 1932), 179.

<sup>26</sup> Guilday, *History of the Councils*, 211.

### **Champion's Historical Context: Now**

On December 8, 2010, Bishop David Ricken decreed that the apparitions and locutions to Adele Brise are worthy of belief.<sup>27</sup> Why is it that Our Lady's message has taken center stage now, after more than one hundred and fifty years of having a quiet, humble following? At Champion, the sun did not spin (as happened at Fatima) and no miraculous spring was found (as at Lourdes). The appearance of Mary to Adele was not extravagant but was simple; it was to encourage Adele in her faith and to urge her to respond to a call of catechesis.

Pope Paul VI first wrote about the need for a new evangelization in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, and John Paul II wrote about it extensively throughout his papacy. In their writings, both popes describe today's society as being marked by: an age of defiance to Church authority, a decline in the sacramental life of the Church (especially in Mass attendance and Reconciliation), a breakdown in the family, secularization, and atheism.<sup>28</sup> Noticing these problems, John Paul II wrote his first encyclical *Redemptor Hominis* calling mankind to rediscover its Redeemer. John Paul II would develop his vision of the new evangelization over the course of his pontificate. The hallmark of his program for the new evangelization is quite simple: man needs to encounter the Lord in both Word and Sacrament. By drawing near to Scripture, the Mass, and the Sacrament of Penance, one is given the necessary grace to persevere in the spiritual and moral life.

Under the papacy of Benedict XVI the Church continues to call her faithful people to evangelization. In September 2010, Benedict XVI initiated the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization through his *motu proprio Ubicumque et Semper*. Pope Benedict realized that the need for catechesis

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Most Reverend David L. Ricken, "Decree on the Authenticity of the Apparitions of 1859 at the Shrine of Our Lady of Good Help," Diocese of Green Bay, [http://www.gbdioc.org/images/stories/Evangelization\\_Worship/Shrine/Documents/Shrine-of-Our-Lady-of-Good-Help.pdf](http://www.gbdioc.org/images/stories/Evangelization_Worship/Shrine/Documents/Shrine-of-Our-Lady-of-Good-Help.pdf) (accessed April 12, 2011).

<sup>28</sup> Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (Washington D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 8 Dec. 1975). Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia in America* (Washington D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 22 Jan. 1999). Pope John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 6 Jan. 2001).

and evangelization was still prevalent and, like his predecessors, he continues to make evangelization a priority. The Pontifical Council encourages the use of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and is exploring new ways of evangelizing in the third millennium.<sup>29</sup>

The approval given to the apparitions received by Adele Brise has allowed for Our Lady's message and story to resurface in an era marked with the same trends as of old—an era where Catholics have been raised in their faith but do not necessarily practice or even understand its basic tenants. The message to and mission of Adele was relevant in its day and in keeping with the conclusions reached at the Baltimore Councils (1852, 1866, 1884). This message and mission remain relevant today—the call to cooperate with the movement and direction of the Church under Pope Benedict—because they provide a blueprint for catechesis and evangelization. By knowing the historical context for the apparitions to Adele Brise, one is then able to understand the further implications they have in the life of the Church by proposing a way of life for all believers.

### **Formula for Evangelization**

In his presidential address at the 43rd meeting of the Mariological Society of America, Fr. James McCurry, O.F.M. Conv., proposed that Our Lady of Guadalupe was the evangelizer of the Americas.<sup>30</sup> In his paper, he argued a Guadalupan formula for evangelization emphasizing three aspects: the Blessed Virgin's name, her message, and her mission. As McCurry applied three aspects of evangelization to the Guadalupan apparitions, I will analyze the Champion apparitions in like manner.

There is an interconnecting theme in both the messages given to Juan Diego and Adele Brise, specifically in the way that each responded to their given messages. Historically, the Blessed

<sup>29</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *Ubicumque et Semper* (Vatican: the Holy See, September 21, 2010) [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/apost\\_letters/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_apl\\_20100921\\_ubicumque-et-semper\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/apost_letters/documents/hf_ben-xvi_apl_20100921_ubicumque-et-semper_en.html) (accessed April 5, 2011).

<sup>30</sup> Rev. James E. McCurry, O.F.M. Conv., "Our Lady of Guadalupe: Evangelizer of the Americas," *Marian Studies* 43 (1992): 9-16.

Mother appeared to Juan Diego at the beginning of the New World, a time when her apparition was needed. The effects of the message were drastic: widespread conversion of a multitude of people, allegedly numbering nine million. The methods of the early missionaries to the New World were not working; as a result the Blessed Virgin Mary appeared with an effective tool (the *tilma*) to facilitate conversion. Similarly, Adele received her mission and message not only at a time when many Belgian immigrants were settling in new territory, but also in the beginning history of the [established] Diocese of Green Bay. Living similar simple lives, both visionaries, Juan Diego and Adele Brise, dedicated themselves as lay missionaries to instruct individuals using the tools they had been given at the bequest of the Blessed Mother. For Juan Diego it was the codex,<sup>31</sup> icon,<sup>32</sup> and Aztec symbol of the tangible *tilma*, while for Adele it was her intangible blueprint for catechesis. Thus, both Guadalupe and Champion must be viewed in the same context, with conversion and evangelization being at the heart of their message, all deriving from the name of Mary, her message, and the mission she entrusted to the seers.

Mary appeared to Adele as the Queen of Heaven who prays for the conversion of sinners. She comes as a queen to encourage sinners to repent through the message given to Adele. Mary proves herself to desire the salvation of souls for the sake of her Son. It is in this desire we understand Mary's eschatological identity. As she prays for the conversion of sinners, she gives Adele an instruction to catechize, which if done in the way suggested will result in conversion. Catechesis facilitates conversion, because in this way we are given the means to convert, do penance and amend our lives.

The second name applied to Mary at Champion came through Adele's devotional life. Similar to the Polish who

<sup>31</sup> Janet Barber, I.H.M., "The Sacred Image Is a . . . Divine Codex," in *A Handbook on Guadalupe* (New Bedford, Mass.: Franciscan Friars of the Immaculate, 2001), 68-73; also Janet Barber, I.H.M., "The Codex That Breathes Life," in *A Handbook on Guadalupe* (2001), 75-80.

<sup>32</sup> Dom. Columban Hawkins, O.C.S.O., "The Iconography of Guadalupe," in *A Handbook on Guadalupe* (2001), 63-67.

revere Our Lady of Czestochowa or the Hispanic devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe, the Belgian people had a culturally derived devotion to Mary under the title of *Notre Dame de Bon Secours* (Our Lady of Good Help), in which a confraternity with specific prayers and litanies existed.<sup>33</sup> With her devotion already cultivated, Adele had the chapels erected in Champion dedicated under the title Our Lady of Good Help. Fittingly enough, Mary did promise to assist Adele in her mission of catechesis by her departing words: “Go and fear nothing, I will help you.” In her life, Adele often relied on the good help and intercession of the Blessed Mother in her begging missions, during the Peshtigo disaster, and in the defeat of heresy. As news of the apparitions spread, people began to flock to the small chapel, seeking the good help of Mary. Adele’s devotion to the *Notre Dame de Bon Secours* could be because she took inspiration from St. Marguerite Bourgeoys, who founded the Sisters of Notre-Dame as a teaching order and built a chapel in honor of the *Notre Dame de Bon Secours*.<sup>34</sup> Given St. Marguerite’s devotion to Mary under this title, we find that the devotion dates back to at least the mid-1600s. Regardless of the reasons, the Lady of Good Help acted as an intercessor in the work of evangelization and catechesis as Adele strove to bring people closer to Jesus so they could share in the reality of Heaven with Jesus and Mary.

Due to the way in which I have categorized or broken down the dialogue Adele had with Mary, modeling it after Rev. McCurry’s analysis of Guadalupe, I contend that the message of Adele’s apparitions was personal, but the mission, although entrusted to one individual, was universal—for all people. In terms of this Mariophany, it is important to make the distinction between personal message and mission. In my initial reflections on the message and mission of the 1859 apparitions, I believed that the message of this Mariophany was

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Confraternity of Our Lady of Good Help, *Règles de la Confrérie de Notre-Dame de Bon-Secours* (Mons: Imp. de Masquillier et Lamir, 1778).

<sup>34</sup> “Marguerite Bourgeoys (1620-1700)—Biography,” Vatican: The Holy See, [http://www.vatican.va/news\\_services/liturgy/saints/ns\\_lit\\_doc\\_19821031\\_bourgeoys\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/news_services/liturgy/saints/ns_lit_doc_19821031_bourgeoys_en.html) (accessed March 26, 2011).

centered on the sacraments, specifically the Holy Eucharist and Confession, and the mission was catechesis. After further reflection, I have concluded that the sacramental focus of the dialogue was actually a part of the mission—making the mission twofold and distinguishing elements of the dialogue as a personal message, meant for Adele. Before analyzing the mission, one must understand the importance of the mission, given in the context of the personal message.

Our Lady told Adele to offer her Communion for the conversion of sinners, for “if they do not convert and do penance, my Son will be obliged to punish them.” There are two ways in which this phrase can be understood. The first would be apocalyptically, or in terms of a pending or forthcoming chastisement. Some have alleged the Peshtigo Fire of 1871 was that chastisement, a tool sent by the Heavens to facilitate conversion and repentance. On the other hand, and perhaps more realistically, this phrase of Our Lady was meant to help Adele understand the importance of the apostolic mission she would be entrusted with later in the dialogue. This phrase for many is quite startling, and does not necessarily align with our understanding of a good and loving God. But, the humble, handicapped and unlearned Adele asked the Blessed Mother: “What more can I do, for I know so little myself?” This response prompted the entrustment of an active mission to her. This earlier phrase, of punishment, indicates the importance of the catechesis Adele was to undertake. In the English translation, Our Lady uses the conditional clause *if*, meaning that this does not have to happen. The prevention of this punishment would depend on how Adele would respond to the mission, despite how qualified and fit she was for it.

The second element of a personal message began with the question posed by Mary to Adele: “What are you doing here in idleness . . . while your companions are working in the vineyard of my Son?” This question for Adele was to remind her of the promise she had made earlier in life, while still in Belgium, that she would join an order of religious and teach in the foreign missions. After having immigrated to America, Adele had yet to join an order; she was not fulfilling a promise made years earlier. Adele then receives a visitation of the Queen of Heaven,



bestowing upon her a specific mission for the salvation of souls, culminating in the foundation of a lay tertiary order.

The purpose of Mary's apparition in 1859 was mission-driven. Our Lady gave Adele two missions which were not meant to be separated, but were meant to complement each other. The mission entrusted to Adele was both contemplative and apostolic (or active). When reviewing the dialogue Adele had with Mary, it is very easy for one to focus on the catechetical overtone. But the catechetical aspect or the active/apostolic mission given to Adele must not be divorced from the contemplative mission. Adele was commended for receiving Holy Communion, but she was told to do more—to make a general confession and offer her communion for the conversion of sinners. This mission, this command, was spoken before she was told to gather the children, because prayer must always precede apostolate. Only through her own personal encounter with the eucharistic and forgiving Lord could Adele go out on mission to teach the young people. Before she could become an instrument of conversion, she herself should be converted. Her participation in the sacramental realities of faith would become the wellspring from which she drew strength, enabling her to share the message with others. Her pleas to God for the conversion of sinners effectually united her with the Virgin, and, as such, fulfilled the evangelistic tone of the entire message of the Queen of Heaven who prays for the conversion of sinners. The twofold dimension of the mission called Adele from a life of contemplation into action in the Lord's vineyard.

The active or apostolic mission of Adele was catechesis, to teach by word and example the basic things one should know for salvation. As the Virgin instructed, Adele worthily approached the sacraments and taught the children the sign of the cross. Adele took this mission to heart: it became who she was. To her dying breath, she was dedicated to the mission that was entrusted to her. On her deathbed, she told a fellow tertiary, Josie, to "be kind to the sick and the old, and continue to instruct the children in their religion, as [she had] done."<sup>35</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Dominica, 39.

Adele's life was defined by her mystical encounter with Heaven, a mission that she strove to live faithfully each day.

The name, message and mission of the Blessed Mother revealed to Adele had serious implications not only for her but also for others. The message which called Adele to a life of prayer became the basis of the ministry she was to undertake. She rooted herself in the Eucharist and unveiled herself in the Sacrament of Penance. Before she could begin the mission, she herself had to have an inner conversion so she could effectively bring others to that point of conversion called for by the Blessed Mother. Paul VI said that "modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses."<sup>36</sup> Adele became a witness by the life she led. Through the foundation of a tertiary order, her life became a life of availability for all people. After she died on July 5, 1896, it was only a few years later that the tertiaries disbanded. Unlike Bernadette Soubirous or Lucia dos Santos, Adele was not called to a contemplative life within a cloister, but to an active life in the Church. She was to be a contemplative in action. As a result, the tertiary order supplied Adele with the maximum capacity to fulfill her mission, by dedicating her entire life to this calling.

After rooting herself in prayer and drawing closer to the eucharistic and forgiving Lord, Adele was then able to carry out her mission to teach the young people. Adele's life of prayer and action stands as a witness to the Church today. She is indeed a model for the new evangelization. By looking at how Adele lived and responded to the call of Our Lady to bring souls to Christ, we in turn are entrusted with the same mission. Despite the demise of the tertiary order, the mission has been entrusted to the Church at large.

The message and mission Adele Brise received in 1859 proposes to the Church a program for the new evangelization. It is a program that was effective one hundred and fifty years ago and can still be effective today. The new evangelization does not necessarily call us to have better materials or to reach out

<sup>36</sup> *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, no. 41.

in new and different ways. Rather, one needs to return to the source of all life—the same wellspring which Adele drew from—the sacraments of Eucharist and Penance coupled with personal prayer. Catechists first need to be formed in the spiritual life so they truly believe what they confess, before being able to relay the faith to others. Re-echoing Paul VI, they must first be witnesses of the Christian life before they can be teachers.

The story of Adele, the apparitions and the Marian shrine she founded have the potential to transform the lives of many as they encounter Jesus Christ in the simplicity of this lay, third-order woman. As a Church, we can be inspired by the fervor of the saints who were great preachers and evangelizers.<sup>37</sup> Although not lifted to the altars of the Church, Adele lived a life marked by extraordinary events that are able to inspire us today. Like her, who learned from the Queen of Heaven, the Mother of all catechists, we, too, are summoned to learn first from the Queen of Heaven before relaying the faith to all we meet.

The history of the Americas and the evangelization that has occurred in them has been greatly influenced by a Marian dimension, beginning with the Marian piety of Christopher Columbus and culminating with Mary's concern for the conversion of sinners at Tepeyac Hill and at Champion. The messages given to Juan Diego and Adele Brise are not archaic messages of yesteryear, but are still relevant even today. In a time of great spiritual need, the Queen of Heaven appeared to a simple Belgian immigrant in the middle of a wooded settlement, entrusting to her a specific mission of prayer and service.

This blueprint for evangelization provides a base for catechesis. Looking to Adele, we return to the basic fundamentals of the faith. This blueprint points individuals towards conversion as they encounter the Lord through the motherly guidance and intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary. With the 2010 approval of this apparition, the message is no longer limited to the Diocese of Green Bay or even the United States, but is a

<sup>37</sup> *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, no. 80.

message for the entire world. The name, message and mission of the Queen of Heaven provide a way of life which is crucial in this age of the new evangelization. The Blessed Mother provided a program for evangelization for her people, first in Guadalupe and then in Champion. Today these programs are more important than ever. May the program entrusted to those visionaries and the Church at large be a call that is heard and responded to by God's holy people.

Our Lady, Queen of Heaven and the Lady of Good Help, pray for us as we pray and work for the conversion of sinners in our day and age. May your message be heard by the entire world today as it was one hundred and fifty years ago by Adele, in her unflinching trust and belief in those miraculous events and in her faith-filled response to them.