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Bishop first in US to approve Marian apparitions

by Sam Lucero by Catholic News Service

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.

Ricken made the announcement in Champion 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 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.

As he declared, "I do hereby approve these apparitions as worthy of belief," the congregation burst into applause, with many in attendance moved to tears.

"This is now an official declaration and an explicit recognition of what has been going on in the development and expression of people's faith in our Lord Jesus," Ricken said in his homily. "Mary always leads us to Jesus. We hold Mary in such high regard because she is the mother of our savior Jesus Christ. So she is probably the greatest evangelist and catechist who ever lived. ... She has been sent out all these years since Christ's death and resurrection to proclaim this good news."

Ricken said the proclamation was a desire of many people. "So many of you have asked for this in one way or another," he said. "I regard this also as a simple declaration in that it already states what has been going on here so quietly for so many years."

"I think today is a gift we give back to the Blessed Mother for all the prayers she has answered in this place. All the solace and comfort she has given to troubled souls," said Ricken.

"In many ways it is also a thank-you gift to Adele Brise, that Belgian immigrant who came here to this

country. ... We owe a great deal to her witness because she was simple, she was uneducated in our terms today. She was a humble soul, but she was obedient."

Ricken added that the message Brise answered in teaching children the faith is the same message people are called to today.

"We need this message today as much as they needed it 150 years ago; the message to proclaim the Gospel, each one of us, in our families and in our workplace. We need to have that same zeal for souls that Adele Brise had," he said.

Catholics must provide children "adequate catechetical formation" so they understand the Gospel and "are able to defend and explain the teachings of the church," he added.

The bishop's decree comes nearly two years after he opened a formal investigation into the apparitions. On Jan. 9, 2009, he appointed three theologians to study the case.

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The theologians' names were not released by the diocese. But Fr. John Doerfler, vicar general and chancellor, said all three had expertise in Marian theology and "general experience in examining apparitions," adding that two are internationally recognized.

Brise 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 secular Franciscans 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 July 5, 1896, and was buried in a small cemetery near the chapel. Although she was sometimes photographed in a habit, she never took vows as a religious.

Karen Tipps, who for 18 years has been a volunteer and caretaker of the shrine with her husband, Steve, said 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 go 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, Green Bay's diocesan newspaper. "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.

At a news conference in the shrine's crypt following Mass, Ricken said he has had a strong devotion to Mary since his childhood. "When I came and found that this shrine was dedicated to her and to her intercession, I was so pleased and happy to see that so many good things have come about here -- story after story. It's living proof that something authentic is here."

Just across the room from where the bishop stood were dozens of crutches and canes left there by people who say they were cured through Mary's intercession.

Ricken said the diocese is in "the very beginning stages" of preparing for what could be a large turnout of pilgrims to the shrine now that the apparitions have been declared valid.

"We're also just trying to get through this phase of making the announcement and see how people respond," he added.

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