

Our Lady of Champion:
Prayer Book for Pilgrims

OUR LADY OF CHAMPION: PRAYER BOOK FOR PILGRIMS

Fr. Edward Looney

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A Note on the National Shrine

In 2023, the National Shrine received notification from the Holy See's Dicastery for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments confirming the ability to celebrate an annual Solemnity Day on the grounds of the Shrine under the title of "Our Lady of Champion" every October 9—the established anniversary day of the Blessed Virgin Mary's second and third apparitions to Adele Brice in 1859.

Consistent with Champion Shrine's new Solemnity under the title "Our Lady of Champion," and in keeping with similar nomenclature used for other approved Marian Apparition Sites worldwide that take the name of the location where the apparitions occur, the Wisconsin Shrine will officially change its name to The National Shrine of Our Lady of Champion.

Not only did this step align more closely with other beloved Marian Apparition sites around the world, but it will also helped address any confusion that had existed in the past related to the Blessed Mother's title

in reference to the National Shrine, titles such as Our Lady of Good Health, Our Lady of Good Hope, Our Lady Help of Christians, and Our Lady of Perpetual Help. In the message itself given to Adele Brice, Our Lady simply referred to herself as the “Queen of Heaven”. The use of the name “Our Lady of Good Help” was reflective of the devotion that the Belgians had to Mary under that title for more than 200 years prior to their arrival in northeast Wisconsin. Champion in Belgium was also the location of the convent of Sisters who prepared Adele and her friends for their First Communion and Confirmation. Adele and her friends promised Our Lady at that time they would join the missionary work of the convent in Champion, a promise she could not keep when her parents emigrated to America. However, when the townspeople in the Wisconsin Belgian community, where Adele lived, petitioned and received permission from the U.S. Government for a new post office, the post office (and hence the town name) was changed to Champion. Thus, Adele did ultimately carry out a teaching mission with Our Lady . . . in Champion, WI!

Nota Bene: Unless otherwise noted, or already in the public domain, the prayers contained within this Pilgrim Manual were written by Fr. Edward Looney.

PART I

Introductory Essays
Concerning Marian
Apparitions and the Shrine
of Our Lady of Champion

Private Revelation, Biblical and Historical

The prayer book which you hold now is meant to aid pilgrims and devotees of an approved Marian apparition in the United States, commemorated at the National Shrine of Our Lady of Champion. The second section of the book contains many different devotionals, novenas, and prayers to help a person pray at the shrine and with the message Mary spoke. Before proceeding any further with the story of the apparition, its meaning, and significance in the life of the Church, it is necessary first to grasp the theology of private revelation, within which such manifestations fall.

Private revelation is not necessary for one's salvation because it is precisely that, private. If private revelation exists, that also means there must be public revelation. Public revelation refers to the revelation of Jesus Christ; it came to an end with the death of the last apostle. That means there can

be no new public revelation. All private revelation must then relate to the public revelation of the Church.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says this about public and private revelation:

“The Christian economy, therefore, since it is the new and definitive Covenant, will never pass away; and no new public revelation is to be expected before the glorious manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Yet even if Revelation is already complete, it has not been made completely explicit; it remains for Christian faith gradually to grasp its full significance over the course of the centuries.

Throughout the ages, there have been so-called “private” revelations, some of which have been recognized by the authority of the Church. They do not belong, however, to the deposit of faith. It is not their role to improve or complete Christ’s definitive Revelation, but to help live more fully by it in a certain period of history. Guided by the Magisterium of the Church, the *sensus fidelium* knows how to discern and welcome in these revelations whatever constitutes an authentic call of Christ or his saints to the Church.

Christian faith cannot accept “revelations” that claim to surpass or correct the Revelation of which Christ is the fulfillment, as is the case in certain non-Christian religions and also in certain recent sects which base themselves on such “revelations.”¹

Benedict XVI offered the following commentary about private revelation:

Consequently the Synod pointed to the need to “help the faithful to distinguish the word of God from private revelations” whose role “is not to ‘complete’ Christ’s definitive revelation, but to help live more fully by it in a certain period of history”. The value of private revelations is essentially different from that of the one public revelation: the latter demands faith; in it God himself speaks to us through human words and the mediation of the living community of the Church. The criterion for judging the truth of a private revelation is its orientation to Christ himself. If it leads us away from him, then it certainly does not come from the Holy Spirit, who guides us more deeply into the Gospel, and not away from

¹ CCC 66–67.

it. Private revelation is an aid to this faith, and it demonstrates its credibility precisely because it refers back to the one public revelation. Ecclesiastical approval of a private revelation essentially means that its message contains nothing contrary to faith and morals; it is licit to make it public and the faithful are authorized to give to it their prudent adhesion. A private revelation can introduce new emphases, give rise to new forms of piety, or deepen older ones. It can have a certain prophetic character (cf. *1 Th* 5:19-21) and can be a valuable aid for better understanding and living the Gospel at a certain time; consequently it should not be treated lightly. It is a help which is proffered, but its use is not obligatory. In any event, it must be a matter of nourishing faith, hope and love, which are for everyone the permanent path of salvation.²

Knowing the difference between public and private revelation, we might further ask, then why is there private revelation? Private revelation has biblical roots in its relationship to prophecy. The prophet Joel writes, “And it shall come to pass

² Pope Benedict XVI, apostolic exhortation *Verbum Domini* (2010), no. 14.

afterward, that I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. . . . And I will give signs in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke” (Jl 2:28, 30). Paul also refers to prophecy in 1 Corinthians 12:10, Romans 12:6, and Ephesians 4:11. The visionaries of apparitions relate prophecy as they receive it through the received locations. Not only does the Bible provide a biblical foundation for apparitions, but the New Testament also provides an account of an apparition received by Jesus. When Jesus goes up Mount Tabor with Peter, James, and John, and the Transfiguration occurs, Jesus sees and talks with two Old Testament biblical figures, Moses and Elijah.

In the Catholic tradition, apparitions are not limited to those of Mary. Jesus himself has also appeared to individuals like St. Margaret Mary Alacoque (Sacred Heart devotion) and St. Faustina (Divine Mercy). Saints have appeared, and the Holy Souls in purgatory might visit and request prayers of individuals. The first reported Marian apparition was in Saragossa, Spain in the year AD 40 to St. James the Apostle. The devotion calls

Mary Our Lady of the Pillar, and the legends believes that Mary appeared to St. James (while she was still alive; that is, before her assumption) to encourage him in a moment when he despaired of his apostolic mission. Mary's apparition renewed his fervor to preach and gain converts for Christianity.

After a visionary receives an apparition, the Church enters into a process of discernment and investigation, and will later render a judgment regarding the veracity of the claim. The process of approving apparitions will be discussed later. Some of the more popular Marian apparitions include Guadalupe, Laus (apparition occurring between 1664 and 1718, receiving approval in 2008), Rue du Bac (Miraculous Medal), La Salette, Lourdes, Champion, Pontmain, Knock, Fatima, Beauraing, and Banneux. With all of these apparitions, their purpose was to renew the faith and foster a greater commitment to prayer and living the Christian life. And each of the apparitions and messages lends itself to deeper theological reflection and study. Every detail of the apparition is significant, from what Mary wears to what she says and even

what she doesn't say. The location of the apparition also might convey a special meaning.

This prayer book will introduce you to the story, the message, and significance of an American apparition site in the state of Wisconsin. You will meet Adele Brise, the woman to whom the Queen of Heaven appeared relating a message of prayer and whom Our Lady "recruited" for service in the vineyard of the Lord. As is the case with all apparitions, the location has become a site of pilgrimage where people go seeking divine favor, petition the mother of God, and celebrate the sacraments. Your pilgrimage to Champion is only one leg of your greater pilgrimage from this life to the kingdom of heaven.

Mary Visits Wisconsin

For roughly 150 years, people in the greater Wisconsin area, the United States, and the world, probably did not even know that Mary appeared in Wisconsin. Or, if they thought so, it probably was to recall the condemned Marian apparitions claimed to have been received in the village of Necedah, Wisconsin. The names Our Lady of Good Help (Our Lady of Champion) and that of Adele Brise were foreign to most people, known only by locals within the Diocese of Green Bay. But today, in a rural setting, surrounded by farms in the country, a National Shrine pays tribute and offers pilgrims a place to pray at the place where the Queen of Heaven appeared to a twenty-eight-year-old immigrant named Adele Brise. This is her story. It is now more widely known, but it should be much better known still.

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. At the time of her First Communion, Adele, along with a few other girls, promised the Blessed Mother that she 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.³

Lambert, Catherine, and their three children immigrated to the United States in 1855 and settled in the area of Red River, Wisconsin.⁴ This area was populated with Belgian immigrants served by missionary priests, including Crosier Father Edward Daems and others who served in his absence.⁵ In American Catholicism at that time, language

³ Sister M. Dominica, *The Chapel: Our Lady of Good Help* (De Pere, WI: Journal Publishing Company, 1955), 5.

⁴ Ibid., 5.

⁵ Ibid., 2–3.

barriers prevented many local Churches from serving 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.⁶

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."⁷ Adele was frightened because she did not know who the visitor was. Eventually the vision disappeared, and she continued on her way. When relating the experience to her family, they believed her and presumed it to be a poor soul from purgatory in need of prayers. A few days later, Adele walked the same route on her way to Mass at the local church in Bay Settlement, eleven miles from her home. This time she was not alone but was accompanied by her sister Isabelle and a neighbor woman, Mrs. Vander Niessen. Adele again saw the lady. Much like the first time,

⁶ Ibid., 7.

⁷ Ibid.

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."⁸ Kneeling, Adele opened her mouth, beginning a conversation with the Blessed Virgin Mary which would change her life forever:

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

⁸ Ibid., 8.

“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. “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.”⁹**

The Queen of Heaven departed, lifting her hands as if beseeching 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 as 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, having been sent as a missionary, Adele, mystified, returned home to

⁹ Ibid., 8–9.

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 evangelization spanned the course of seven years, traveling 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 these extremes, Fr. Phillip Crud, the newly appointed pastor to the Belgian colony, encouraged Adele to begin a life that others could share with her to fulfill the mission given to her by the Blessed Virgin. 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.¹⁰ Over the course of the years preceding her death, many young women joined the group of sisters for a short time. This tertiary group enjoyed recognition by the Diocese of Green Bay, and as such, they wore a religious habit and referred to each other as “Sister.” In correspondences to Adele or about her work, the bishop often referred to her as *Soeur Adele*. Taking no formal vows, members were free to leave whenever they wished.

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, and Adele was responsible for the religious formation of the students. Often 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 trust in Divine Providence held by Adele and her companions. 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 other

¹⁰ Ibid., 16.

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 souls lost due to lack of instruction. 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.¹¹ Igniting 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.¹² Fr. Peter Pernin, an eyewitness in Peshtigo on October 8, 1871, told how some survived that terrible day by taking ref-

¹¹ Reverend Peter Pernin, *The Great Peshtigo Fire: An Eyewitness Account (Wisconsin)*, 2nd ed. (Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society, 1999), 16–18.

¹² Martin W. Sandler, *Lost to Time: Unforgettable Stories That History Forgot* (New York, NY: Sterling, 2010), 181.

uge in the Peshtigo River and “involuntarily turning [their hearts] towards heaven as their only resource.”¹³ The fire tornado that began in Peshtigo then leapt across the bay and penetrated the Door Peninsula; its next visitation was Robinsonville, where Adele Brise, her sisters, and the wooden Chapel of Our Lady of Good Help stood in its determined 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 believed that the end of the world was upon them.¹⁴ The people of the area, staring death in its 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 death. Adele was “determined not to abandon 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

¹³ Pernin, *The Great Peshtigo Fire*, 42.

¹⁴ Dominica, *The Chapel*, 19.

sanctuary.”¹⁵ 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 the wind and fire exposed them to suffocation, they turned in another direction and continued to hope and pray, saying the rosary.”¹⁶

Praying for many hours outside of a Chapel, which by its very composition should have been incinerated by the torrential fire, and further the people should have suffocated from smoke inhalation, the people found relief in the early hours of October 9, the day commemorating the message given to Adele. Rain fell, quenching the fire.¹⁷ 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

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 20.

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.”¹⁸

Twelve years previously, to the very day, Adele had been told that if people did not convert and do penance, Mary’s Son would be obliged to punish them. At the time, people spoke about the Peshigo 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 confirmed this interpretation. Given this, 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

¹⁸ Peter Pernin, *The Finger of God*, an unpublished manuscript accessed through the Shrine of Our Lady of Good Help (Our Lady of Champion) archives.

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 spiritual dimension. Joseph 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 because they 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.¹⁹

During his tenure in Wisconsin, Vilatte took residence in the town of Duvall at St. Mary's Old Catholic Church, where he erected an Old Catholic church between two Catholic churches.²⁰ Due to the number of people flocking to his sect, Adele

¹⁹ Dominica, *The Chapel*, 24.

²⁰ Ibid.

became concerned with the loss of souls and so faithfully prayed that he would do no more harm and convert. Bishop Messmer became aware of the growing heresy in the Peninsula and invited Fr. Pennings and the Canons Regular of Premon-tre, also 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.²¹ 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.²² 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 supposedly seduced 500,000 Catholics and sought a return to the Catholic Church. After recanting his heretical beliefs, he took up a life of

²¹ Ibid., 25.

²² Ibid., 26.

penance at the Cistercian Abbey of Pon-Colbert, Versailles, where he died as a layman.²³

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. Adele Brise died on July 5, 1896, with her last words being, "I rejoiced in what was said to me. We shall go into the house of the Lord."

On a Sunday morning of October 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

²³ Msgr. Joseph Marx, "Vilatte and the Catholic Church," *The Salesianum* 37, no. 3 (July 1942): 113–20.

Our Lady of Good Help share a rich history, not only with the Diocese of Green Bay, but with the United States and the Americas. Her insignificant role in history is intensified because it shares in the continuity of the Marian dimension of evangelization, specifically in the New World to the present day. The message of Champion, Wisconsin is becoming more widespread and has an ever greater urgency in this millennium. How the message will play out in the history of the American Church in this new age, the age of the New Evangelization and missionary discipleship, remains to be seen.