



Mary in America

Tuesday, June 9, 2026

Our Lady of Champion



Have you ever not known about something in your backyard and one day discover it? And you wonder, “How did I live without this?” For those of you who know me, I’m from Wisconsin. When most people hear that, they think Green Bay Packers. But did you know there’s another thing that the Green Bay area is famous for? Tonight’s talk is about Our Lady of Champion. This is the only nationally approved Marian apparition in the United States located in Champion, Wisconsin. I grew up about 20 minutes away from this Shrine and didn’t discover it until my later teenage years. It’s my pleasure to talk to you about it tonight.

I’m going to divide the talk into 5 parts. First, the seer of the apparitions; second, the apparitions themselves; third, the mission; fourth, the fire; and fifth, the legacy.

First, the seer. Adele Brice was born in Belgium. She grew up in a family with two sisters. She was known to be cheerful and charismatic. When Adele was young, she suffered from an accident with lye that made her blind in her right eye. If you see pictures of her, you can notice it. Despite the disability, she remained joyful. She was prepared for her First Communion by a group of religious Sisters. After receiving her First Communion, she promised the Blessed Virgin Mary that she would become a Sister and devote her life to teaching in Champion, Belgium. Remember this detail. This dream wasn’t exactly fulfilled because her family was to immigrate to America when she was 24. Seeking advice from a priest, she agreed to be obedient to her parents and confident the Lord would provide for her to be a teacher somewhere in the States. It took 6 weeks to travel to America and they settled in Northeast Wisconsin, which was the largest Belgian settlement at the time. Can you imagine all the waffles made there? Adele did farmwork and household chores. Most settlers were Catholic but many were losing their faith and heresies were being taught. Also, many of them lived far away from a church.

Second, the apparitions. One of Adele’s chores was walking down a long and forested trail to carry the family’s wheat to the grist mill. One day, in the fall of 1859, Adele was walking this trail, carrying the wheat. All of a sudden, she saw a beautiful lady surrounded by heavenly light and standing between a maple tree and a hemlock tree. Most people know what a maple tree is but just to describe what a hemlock tree is to you so you can imagine it, it’s a prolific soft evergreen that has tiny pine cones. The woman was dressing in dazzling white with a yellow sash



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around her waist, had blonde, wavy hair and 12 stars around her head. She didn't say anything to Adele. Then she disappeared. Adele went back to tell her family and they believed she saw something but thought it could be a soul in purgatory visiting to ask for prayers.

A few days later, October 8, 1859, it was Sunday so Adele was going to Mass. She was accompanied by her sister and a friend. It was a 10 mile journey. As they were walking along, they came to the spot where the mysterious lady had appeared a few days earlier and she was there again. Adele was the only one to see her and they continued to walk to Mass. After Mass, Adele told the priest about it. He said that if the lady appeared again, to ask the questions, "In God's name, who are you and what do you want of me?"

So now as they were walking back home, for a third time, the mysterious lady appeared. The lady was surrounded by so much heavenly light, Adele could hardly look at her face. Adele fell to her knees and asked her, "In God's name, who are you, and what do you want of me?"

The lady replied, "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."

Before continuing with the dialogue, just a sidenote on what a general confession is. It's a devotional practice when someone examines and confesses the sins of their whole life.

Back to the dialogue.

Adele's sister and friend couldn't see Our Lady so they asked who she was and why they couldn't see her.

Adele told them, "Kneel, the Lady says she is the Queen of Heaven."

Our Lady looked at them kindly, saying, "Blessed are they that believe without seeing." Then, looking toward Adele, Our Lady asked, "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?" Adele asked, weeping.

Our Lady said, "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?"

Our Lady's answer, "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 for you to do. Go and fear nothing, I will help you."

Our Lady, surrounded by light, lifted her hands as though she were beseeching a blessing for those at her feet. Slowly, she vanished from sight, leaving Adele overwhelmed and prostrated on the ground.

And so Adele's mission began. Part 3.

Adele wanted to be obedient to Our Lady's call to teach and catechize the children. Northeast Wisconsin had many settlers that were far from churches and many religious elements were missing from their lives. Adele met this challenge. She would go from home to home, sometimes traveling 50 miles, to teach the children. When visiting a family, she would offer to do household chores during the day in exchange for the privilege to teach the children in the evening. Often the parents would listen to Adele's lesson too. They were simple, fulfilling what Our Lady had asked: teaching them their catechism, how to sign themselves with the Sign of the Cross, and how to approach the Sacraments.

After a while, it became too much for Adele to do on her own. A priest encouraged her to gather other women to assist her in the teaching and begging for missions. They really were missionaries. This group became Third Order Franciscans. They wore a habit but weren't religious in the same sense that we are.

Adele's father built a chapel shortly after the apparitions and it was later replaced by a larger one in 1861. A school was built in 1864. Over the chapel's entrance, translated from the French was "Our Lady of Good Help, pray for us". This title came from the last thing Our Lady said, "Go and fear nothing, I will help you."

Part 4. The fire.

On October 8, 1871 (almost 12 years to the date of Our Lady's third apparition) the Great Peshtigo Fire broke out. It is the most devastating fire in US history but you never hear about it because the Chicago Fire was around the same time and Chicago is more well-known. The Peshtigo Fire burned 1.2 million acres of land. It was starting to move toward the Shrine that had been created on the apparition site.

People from the surrounding areas fled to the chapel where Adele and friends were praying for Our Lady's protection. They processed with a statue of Our Lady around the sanctuary, praying a Rosary, and singing hymns. They did this through the night of October 8th. Early in the morning, on October 9th, 12 years to the date of Our Lady's apparition, there was a steady downpour that extinguished the flames. The fire reached the fence that was around the chapel but the chapel was not touched, nor the grounds around the chapel. It's considered a miracle.

A sidenote: I was reading in the Shrine's magazine that there was recently a wildfire in California around a Catholic camp. The owners and staff prayed to Our Lady of Champion that the camp would be spared. The fires were approaching the camp and then stopped precisely at the camp's boundary. Firefighters reported that the wind abruptly ceased at the property line, an event they could not explain.

Adele continued to teach and catechize until her death on July 5, 1896. She's buried in the cemetery located near the Apparition Chapel on the grounds of the Shrine. If it hasn't changed since I've been there, it's a simple plot.

Some exciting news regarding Adele is that her cause for canonization was just opened in January, so she is officially a "Servant of God".

Part 5. The legacy.

The Shrine continues to be a place of prayer, catechizing, and pilgrimage. There are many places to pray and it's very peaceful. The Fathers of Mercy run the Shrine, offering the Sacraments. There are several catechetical events hosted there throughout the year. Miraculous healings of people also occur.

If you're wondering about what the Church has said about the authenticity, I'm here to put you at ease. In 2010, Bishop David Ricken (of Green Bay but originally from Kansas), issued a decree on the authenticity of the apparitions. In 2016, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops designated it as a national shrine. Up until 2023, the Shrine was called Our Lady of Good Help but was then changed to Our Lady of Champion, which is the name of the town in which it is located.

A neat detail about the name of the town. Remember how Adele promised Our Lady she would teach in Champion, Belgium? There came a point when Adele was doing her ministry and the town decided to change its name. The community asked her what the name should be and she said, "Champion." She promised Our Lady she would serve in Champion, Belgium, but was instead able to do it in Champion, Wisconsin.

I mentioned earlier how Adele's cause has been opened. This for me personally is exciting but there's also a tinge of bittersweetness. This Shrine is so humble, quiet, and peaceful. I go there whenever I visit Wisconsin. It was a big part of my discernment to religious life. I'm afraid someday it will get too big. I am happy for the many pilgrims who visit and that more people are learning about it. The message is very applicable to our current needs in the Church. It is so crucial for children to learn the basics of the faith and for us to take part in that, in whatever way we can. It's also good for us to remember how we can have confidence in what Our Lady said to Adele, "Go and fear nothing, I will help you." If you've heard any of the talks thus far, I hope that theme has been standing out: how Our Lady accompanies us and helps us. She wants us to be faithful in following her Son and she herself can walk alongside us in following Him. If you've never considered having a personal relationship with Our Lady, I encourage you to try it.

There are a few large events that attract many pilgrims to the Shrine. In May, there is a 22 mile walk from the National Shrine of St. Joseph (located on the grounds of my home parish) to the National Shrine of Our Lady of Champion. It's called Walk to Mary. Historically there have been over 10,000 pilgrims that participate. It's a

similar idea to the Father Kapaun walk. Pilgrims pray along the way and finish with an outdoor Mass.

On August 15, there is a tradition that was said to have begun shortly after the apparitions that continues to this day. There is an outdoor Mass followed by a Rosary procession around the grounds. In the Shrine magazine, there's an article about this tradition. There's a question as to why it occurs on August 15. They said, "We don't know for sure, but we can speculate that of the three principal Marian feast days-Mary, Mother of God (January 1), the Assumption (August 15), and the Immaculate Conception (December 8)-August 15 was the closest on the calendar to the apparition anniversary of October 9. On a practical level, August also provides a more suitable temperature for the faithful to participate in an event held outdoors due to the large numbers that would gather, allowing families to come pray together." I have never attended this event but I know people who have and they say it's a beautiful experience.

On October 8, the anniversary of the Miracle of the Fire of 1871, there's also an event. That evening, thousands of candles light the grounds while the Miracle of the Fire is read aloud at 7 pm. The night continues with all-night Adoration and hourly candlelit rosary processions.

The next day, October 9, is the Solemnity of Our Lady of Champion. It's the anniversary of Our Lady's apparitions to Adele. This privilege was granted in 2023 when the Shrine's name changed. It's the only place on earth where the Solemnity is celebrated so I can imagine the festivity and celebration.

I hope there is something you can carry away with you from this talk. Whether it's seeing that Our Lady loves us, her children, as she appeared less than 100 years after our country was founded, or that you have a pilgrimage to plan. There is something more to Wisconsin than cheese and the Green Bay Packers. I dare to say it is a truly blessed land, that Our Lady appeared there versus any other State. May we never lose sight of how she cares for us and wants to help us.

Our Lady of Champion, pray for us.

Works Consulted

Stephens, CPM, Father Anthony. "Rector's Window." *Champion*, 2026.

"The Story of Adele Brice and Mary's Apparition in Champion, WI." *The National Shrine of Our Lady of Champion*, 2026, championshrine.org/our-story/.