Mary appeared thrice in Wisconsin, bishop says

by Daniel Burke in the January 11, 2011 issue

In 1859, a Wisconsin farm woman recounted three mystical meetings with the Virgin Mary, who told her to pray for the conversion of sinners and teach children the Catholic faith.

More than 150 years later—December 8, to be exact—the Catholic bishop of Green Bay sanctioned Adele Brise's visions as both supernatural and "worthy of belief." It was the first officially approved Marian apparition (the Catholic Church's term for paranormal appearances by Mary) in the United States.

Of the many questions kindled by Bishop David Ricken's announcement, two seemed particularly apt: How does the church investigate mystical visions? And why does it take so long to approve them?

Brise was 28, partially blind and far from her native Belgium when she reported speaking with a woman wearing a brilliant white gown and starry crown who seemed to float above the fields. Calling herself "the Queen of Heaven," the vision gave Brise a mission: "Gather the children in this wild country and teach them what they should know for salvation." For the rest of her life, Brise did just that, trudging across the untamed frontier to catechize children, build a school and found an order of Franciscan sisters.

Since Brise's visions, tales of miraculous healings attributed to Mary have become commonplace in Champion, Wisconsin, where crutches and other tokens of cured injuries fill a shrine built on the site of the apparition, said deacon Ray

DuBois, a spokesman for the Diocese of Green Bay.

Ricken opened a formal investigation into Brise's visions in January 2009, appointing a committee of three Marian experts who followed guidelines issued by the Vatican in 1978 for judging apparitions and revelations. These committees typically consult experts in psychology, church law, scripture, history and theology, as well as take testimony from people familiar with the visionary.

In general, church investigators are more "history detectives" than "ghost hunters," to use a television analogy. Supernatural events are almost impossible to prove, said Johann Roten, a priest who has served on committees assessing apparitions, so the church is more interested in the consequences of the vision.

"It's not only the moment of seeing Our Lady that is important to determining whether a vision is true, but also what the seer actually does with that experience," said Roten, director of the International Marian Research Institute at the University of Dayton in Ohio.

The Vatican guidelines require an investigation into visionaries' moral and mental character—crackpots, degenerates and money-grubbers need not apply. Extra points are given for visions that inspire abundant "spiritual fruits," such as works of charity, intense prayer or conversion. Alleged apparitions that encourage disobedience toward the church or its doctrines are dismissed.

Bishops have the authority to approve apparitions in their diocese, though occasionally national bishops' conferences or the Vatican will step in if there is a dispute, such as the ongoing one in Medjugorje, Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Thus far, the church has approved only about 12 Marian apparitions worldwide, said Roten, with Lourdes, France, and Fatima, Portugal, among the most famous. Others—including some in the U.S.—are under investigation,

Roten said, but he declined to name them. "You don't want to start publicizing things because you are not sure they will go anywhere," said Roten.

Alleged apparitions in Bayside, New York; Emmitsburg, Maryland; and Marlboro Township, New Jersey, were investigated and declared false by the church.

In the 1950s, a farmwife's visions of Mary in Necedah, Wisconsin, about 150 miles southeast of Champion, attracted one of the largest religious gatherings in the state's history, said Sandra Zimdars-Swartz, a scholar at the University of Kansas. The church, however, dismissed the Necedah apparitions.

In general, the Catholic Church approaches stories of supernatural visions with a mixture of excitement and caution, scholars say.

On the one hand, mystical experiences can inspire believers and spark vast spiritual movements, such as in Mexico after the Virgin of Guadalupe reportedly appeared to peasant Juan Diego in 1531. Millions of pilgrims—particularly Catholics—trek to Lourdes and Fatima each year.

But Catholic leaders are also wary of hoaxes, ridicule and diviners who boast of a hotline to God. Hundreds of visions—from spotting Jesus in a grilled cheese sandwich, to weeping statues, to more sustained spiritual experiences—have been reported and dismissed over the centuries.

"I think the church quite properly plays a waiting game," said Brian Britt, a professor of religious studies at Virginia Tech University. He compared the long lag time in approving apparitions to the church's lengthy process for canonizing saints. "Better late than wrong" is the prevailing ethos.

"Once the visionary is dead and gone, if the pilgrimage site continues to have meaning and value for the church, it becomes less risky," Britt said, "and even sometimes

desirable for the church to offer its endorsement." —RNS