

COMFORTER OF THE AFFLICTED KEVELAER, GERMANY 1641

FIRST APPARITION AT KEVELAER

AT THE time of the apparition, the small village of Kevelaer was a tragic place. A fire had almost completely destroyed it in the late sixteenth century. It was further damaged by the ravages of the Thirty Years' War of 1618–1648 that raged nearby. It was considered a vast moorland and a place where few ventured, but around Christmastime in the year 1641, the Heavenly Mother looked favorably on it. It all began when Hendrick Busman, a traveling salesman (a tinker), found it necessary to pass that way on his route from the village of Weeze to the neighboring town of Geldern. According to the report to the Synod of Venio, the salesman tells his story: My name is Hendrick Busman. At Christmas in 1641 I was making my way in the course of my business from the town of Weeze when I came to the region around Kevelaer. There was a cross by the roadside and I heard a voice saying to me, "Here thou shalt build me a chapel." I heard the voice and looked about me but saw no one. I resolved to press on and put all thoughts of the phenomenon out of my head. About a week later, I passed the place again and there heard the same voice speaking the same words as before. I heard it again a third time. I was sad because I was poor and I had no means by which I might build a shrine. Nevertheless, I saved regularly from my petty cash in the distant hope that one day I should have a fund to fit the purpose.



Then, four weeks before Whitsunday, my wife, Mechel Schouse, received a vision by night. She saw a great light and in the midst of it a shrine; and in that shrine was a picture of Our Lady of Luxembourg like one she had been shown some time earlier by two soldiers passing through our village. The soldiers had offered to sell Mechel the picture but upon asking the price, she realised she could not afford it.

When Mechel told me of her vision, I connected it with my own experiences near Kevelaer and I urged her to find the soldiers and the picture.

She discovered that the picture was now in the possession of a lieutenant presently in prison in Kemen. Mechel obtained the picture from him.

Convinced that the vision experienced by his wife was a confirmation of his Heavenly assignment, Hendrick used the little money he had saved and began to construct a shrine according to Mechel's description, and with the permission of the parish priest of Kevelaer, Rev. Johannes Schink. During its construction, the Carmelite nuns of Geldern heard about the heavenly voice and the vision and asked Hendrick if they might keep the portrait for a time. The portrait was a copper-printed portrait measuring twelve centimeters tall and eight centimeters wide, which depicts Our Lady of Luxembourg, the same Lady who had been worshiped during the pestilence of 1623, as the Comforter of the Sad and Distressed.

When the Carmelite nuns returned the portrait, Hendrick placed it temporarily in his home. This proved a great inconvenience to the household because pilgrims from all over the country wanted to venerate it. Hendrick appealed to the Capuchin priests to place it temporarily in their chapel until the shrine was completed. The crowds of people who went to venerate the image were so great that the monks asked that the holy image be taken as soon as possible to the shrine that was being prepared for it. Finally, when the shrine was completed on June 1, 1642, the priest of Kevelaer, Rev. Johannes Schink, brought the image in great ceremony to the shrine where crowds awaited it.

Miracles were soon reported. On September 8, 1642, Reinier and Margaretha van Volbroek brought their invalid son, Peter, to the shrine. Although his case had been declared hopeless by physicians, Peter was found cured two days after his visit.

Another case involved a woman who had suffered for years with severe lesions on her legs that treatments could not cure. Her healing was so profound that it was reported by the Mayor of Huissen, Holland, who had it recorded by the secretary of the city on August 13, 1643. A new pilgrimage church was started that year. It still exists today and

is called the Chapel of Candles.

Before his death in 1649, Hendrick was thankful to see so many pilgrimages making their way to the shrine in accordance with the wishes of Our Lady. Five years later, in 1654, the old chapel he had built was replaced by a new chapel called the Chapel of Mercy. Within this six-sided structure is a pillar from the original chapel which bears an inscription at the base, giving credit to Hendrick and Mechel as founders of the devotion to Our Lady.

The many miracles of healing that took place prompted the Vicar General to order an investigation. As a result, many cures were declared to be miraculous and brought an even greater number of pilgrims to the shrine. In a short time, three Oratorian priests were assigned to help in ministering to the crowds that continually gathered in prayer. The Basilica was built between the years 1858 and 1864. This, together with the priests' house, the Candle Chapel where hundreds of candles burn each day, the Organizational Center, the Confessional Chapel, the Fountain Courtyard with its bubbling water and the outdoor Stations of the Cross all comprise a huge and beautiful complex that is admired by all who visit.

The little picture of Our Lady, Comforter of the Afflicted, is the source of all attention, especially when it is decorated with golden angels, golden roses, golden medals, chains and jeweled ornaments that have been donated by grateful pilgrims. In 1892, Our Lady was honored with a papal coronation for the 250th anniversary of the shrine's inauguration. During this observance, a crown studded with diamonds and jewels was placed above the miraculous picture.

Among the distinguished persons who visited the image are King Frederick William I, King Frederick William IV and Pope John Paul II. During the pope's visit on May 2, 1987, he stated: In great joy I am now come to your shrine in Kevelaer. My first in this pilgrimage to the miraculous image of the Comforter of the Afflicted. Before this picture I have prayed and commended all of you to the special protection of Our Lady. I come as pilgrim and worshiper in the series of countless people since the 1642 pilgrimage to the Blessed Mother in Kevelaer.