

## Blessed Brother André Bessette, C.S.C.

### *The Miracle Man of Montreal*

#### **Humble Beginnings**

Alfred Bessette was born on August 9, 1845 in a small farming town approximately 25 miles south of Montreal called Saint-Grégoire d'Iberville. He was the eighth of twelve children of Isaac and Clothilde Bessette, and was so weak at birth that his parents, fearing that he would not survive, baptized him the very next day.

This frail physical condition, caused primarily by a chronic stomach ailment, would plague Alfred his entire life. As a youth it prevented him from attending school and from engaging in normal physical activities.

While the Bessette home was loving and most devout, it was also very poor and tragic. His father was killed in a lumbering accident when Alfred was only nine, while his mother died of tuberculosis a mere three years later. Of his mother, whose deep faith and trust in God profoundly influenced young Alfred, he would later say: "I rarely prayed for my mother, but I often prayed to her."

Following his mother's death, the Bessette children were dispersed and Alfred found himself, at the age of twelve, having to face the hardships of life mostly on his own. Barely able to write his own name, he was forced to find work and learn a trade. He would spend the next thirteen years wandering from job to job with few belongings and little hope.

#### **The Laborer**

Alfred tried to make a living in spite of his physical weakness. He traveled through Quebec seeking employment as a farm boy, a tinsmith, a blacksmith, a

baker, a shoemaker and a coachman. Finally, at the age of eighteen he followed the flow of French-Canadian emigrants to New England where he would spend the next four years working in the textile mills of Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Connecticut.



*Brother André as a young Holy Cross Religious*

Though his health remained poor, he put his whole heart into his labors saying, "Despite my weak condition, I did not let anyone outdo me at work."

In 1867 Alfred returned to Quebec and with the encouragement of his childhood parish priest, Father André Provençal, decided to pursue his desire to enter into religious life. The priest would later write to Alfred's novice master stating, "I am sending a saint to your congregation."

Three years later Alfred presented himself as a candidate for the novitiate of the Congregation of Holy Cross in Montreal. However, because his health was still so fragile, Holy Cross had doubts concerning his ability to handle the demanding rigor of religious life.

Though he was finally accepted and given the name of Brother André, his poor health continued to be a concern throughout his novitiate year. It was only after making an impassioned appeal to a visiting bishop that he was permitted to make his initial profession of religious vows on August 22, 1872.

#### **The Doorman**

Standing at less than five feet tall, barely able to read and write, and in chronic poor health, Brother André was assigned to serve as porter, or doorman, at a Holy Cross sponsored boarding school called College Notre Dame. The school was located in Montreal, just across the street from the base of the city's imposing Mount Royal.

For the next forty years Brother André would fulfill his ambition "to serve God in the most obscure tasks," by welcoming visitors, washing windows, cleaning the chapel, running errands, delivering messages, and serving the students by cutting their hair and caring for them when they were ill. Talking about his early duties at the school, he used to say: "When I entered the community, my superiors showed me the door, and I remained there for 40 years without leaving."

#### **Miracle Man**

Often while running errands around town Brother André would stop to visit with those he heard were sick. When many with whom he prayed soon

recovered, word of his healing abilities began to spread far and wide. Soon the sick began to arrive in great numbers at the College where Brother André would meet them in his small office near the front door. However, as the numbers multiplied, his superiors, as well as the parents of the children attending the school, began to have great concern. After all, many of those seeking cures had contagious diseases that presented a health threat to the school's student-body.

As a compromise, Brother André was allowed to meet the sick in a small tramway station across the street. Here the frail brother would spend as many as six to eight hours a day receiving those who came to seek his healing prayers.

Though he was becoming quite renowned as a miracle worker, Brother André vehemently rejected such a title, stating: "I am nothing...only a tool in the hands of Providence, a lowly instrument at the service of Saint Joseph." He stated further: "People are silly to think that I can accomplish miracles! It is God and Saint Joseph who can heal you, not I. I will pray to Saint Joseph for you."

Brother André presented the sick with a medal of Saint Joseph and would also anoint the sick with oil that came from an oil-lamp burning in the College's chapel next to a statue of Saint Joseph. Again, in anointing the sick, Brother André would insist that the hoped-for healing was the work of Saint Joseph and not himself.

### **The Oratory**

When the crowds at the small tramway eventually became too great, Brother

André was given permission in 1904 to build a small chapel across the street. But the crowd continued to grow so the chapel was enlarged in 1908 and again in 1910. While friends of Brother André certainly helped to fund the project, he also contributed himself using the small amounts he had collected and saved over the years from cutting students' hair at the College.



*Brother André in 1920 at the age of 75*

A man of great devotion as well as determination, Brother André for years had envisioned a shrine on Mount Royal in honor of Saint Joseph. Amazingly, fearing that the property would be purchased and developed by others in a fashion undesirable to the interests of the school, the Congregation of Holy Cross purchased the Mount Royal property in 1896.

Unbeknownst to his superiors at the time, years earlier Brother André had buried a medal of Saint Joseph on the property certain that the Saint wanted to have a home on the mountain. The dream was about to become a reality.

Construction on what would become known as Saint Joseph's Oratory began in 1914, with plans that included a lower church with a grand basilica towering above. While a crypt church seating 1,000 was completed in 1917, it would take another fifty years for the basilica to be completed.

When the Great Depression threatened to derail construction and a special meeting was called to discuss the project's future, Brother André was reported to have advised: "This is not my work; it is the work of Saint Joseph. Put one of his statues in the middle of the building. If he wants a roof over his head, he'll take care of it." Within two months the funds needed to continue construction had arrived and the project moved forward.

When Brother André died in January of 1937 at the age of 91, more than a million people climbed the slope of Mount Royal to venerate the hands that had healed so many. Today the Oratory is a world famous pilgrimage destination, attracting more than two million visitors a year. Brother André was beatified by Pope John Paul II in May of 1982. In February of 2010, Pope Benedict XVI announced that he would be canonized in October of 2010.

*Special thanks to Saint Joseph's Oratory for assistance with this and the following story. Visit the Oratory's website at [www.saint-joseph.org](http://www.saint-joseph.org) for more information on Brother André.*