

A tool in the hands of Providence

*A Short Biography of Saint Brother André, C.S.C.
(We are reproducing it from the St. Joseph Oratory Website, after Fr. Guéguen, SSPX, got permission from the Oratory to re-publish copyrighted materials for his french article on Saint Brother André, which you can find in our french issue # 27).*

Difficult years

His name was Alfred Bessette. He was born on August 9, in 1845, and was baptized on condition the very next day, for he was so weak at his birth his parents feared for his life.

In 1849, with employment scarce and his family living in poverty, Alfred's father decided to move to Farnham (in Quebec) where he hoped to earn a living as a lumberman. Unfortunately, he lost his life in an accident when he was crushed by a falling tree when Alfred was only nine years old.

His mother found herself widowed at the age of forty with ten children in her care. She died of tuberculosis three years later. Much later, Brother André would say of her, "I rarely prayed for my mother, but I often prayed to her."

The ten children of the Bessette family were dispersed, and at the age of twelve Alfred found himself having to face the hardship of life. He was forced to find work. Alfred embarked on a thirteen year path of wandering from job to job without much baggage and very little learning, for he was barely able to write his name and to read his prayer book.

The Labourer

In spite of his physical weakness, Alfred tried to make a living. He travelled from job to job as an apprentice and was easily exploited by those stronger than himself. For a time, he worked on construction projects, later as a farm boy, a tinsmith, a blacksmith, a baker, a shoemaker and a coachman.

Following the flow of French-Canadian emigrants, he went to the United States and worked four years in the textile mills. Even if his health was poor, he put his whole heart into his work: "Despite my weak condition, " he would say, "I did not let anyone get ahead of me as far as work was concerned." In 1867, he came back to Canada.

In 1870, Alfred presented himself as a candidate in the novitiate of the Congregation of Holy Cross in Montréal. Because of his weak health, his superiors had doubts concerning his religious vocation. However, these reservations were soon put aside as he was finally accepted and given the name of Brother André with the responsibility of porter at Notre-Dame College. While talking about his early duties at the college, brother André was found to say: "When I entered the com-

munity, my superiors showed me the door, and I remained there for 40 years without leaving." On top of his porter duties, his daily tasks consisted of washing floors and windows, cleaning lamps, carrying firewood and working as a messenger.

The Friendly Brother

Soon, Brother André started to welcome the sick and broken-hearted. He invited them to pray to Saint Joseph to obtain favours. It was not long before many people were reporting that their prayers were being answered. For twenty-five years, he spent six to eight hours a day receiving those who came to him, first in his small office, then in the tramway station across the street from the college. He built the first chapel with the help of friends and with the money he earned giving haircuts to the students of the college, he had the certitude that Saint Joseph wanted to have a place on the mountain: thus, he spent his whole life preparing a beautiful shrine worthy of his friend in heaven.

Brother André began visiting the sick in the area and travelled as far as the United States where he had made friends. He earned the reputation of miracle-worker, but he vehemently protested such a title: "I am nothing... only a tool in the hands of Providence, a lowly instrument at the service of Saint Joseph". He went even further by affirming: "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 Saint Joseph for you."

His aloofness in the presence of strangers contrasted sharply with the carefree and humorous attitude he adopted among friends. He loved to tease and would often say: "You must not be sad: it is good to laugh a little." He made good use of his humour to share his joy and to subtly slip some good advice into a conversation, or to change the subject when a conversation was developing into nasty gossip at someone's expense.

He was a man of determination and uncompromising principles. Kindness and slightly impish wisdom were reflected in his eyes. His great respect for others was largely responsible for the respect others had for him. He was a very sensitive man. At times, he could be seen crying with the sick, or being moved to tears after hearing a particularly sad experience shared by one of his visitors.

A Man of Great Undertaking

During all these years, an immense project was underway and larger crowds were swarming to the Oratory. The first small chapel had been erected in 1904, but it soon became too small to receive all the people who were coming to the mountain. As a result, the chapel was extended in 1908, and then again in 1910. Still, this was not enough: a larger church in honour of Saint Joseph was needed.



In 1917, a new Crypt-Church was inaugurated. This crypt was able to hold at least a thousand people: but, this was only the starting point of an even greater endeavour. Brother André devoted his efforts to building the Oratory, which was to become the world's greater sanctuary dedicated to Saint Joseph.

The economic crisis of 1929 forced the construction of the Basilica to come to a standstill. In 1936, the authorities of the Congregation of Holy Cross called a special meeting to decide if the project should continue or not. The Provincial summoned Brother André to ask for his opinion on the matter. The ageing Brother André had only a few words for the Assembly: "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." Two months later, the Congregation had amassed the necessary funds to continue working on the construction.

A Kind-Hearted, Devoted Man

Brother André took great care in meeting and greeting people. He spent long hours in his office where thousands of people came to see him and, in the evenings, he visited homes or hospitals accompanied by one of his friends. His kindness and compassion were matched by a remarkable sharpness of mind. He would make the following comment concerning the numerous requests for healings he received: "It is surprising that I am frequently asked for cures, but rarely for humility and the spirit of faith. Yet, they are so important..." adding, "If the soul is sick, one must begin by treating the soul." Consequently, he would often ask the people consulting him questions such as, "Do you have faith?" "Do you believe that God can do something for you?" Then, before doing anything else, he would tell them, "Go confess yourself to the priest, go to Holy Communion and then come back to see me." Indeed, Brother André had a true understanding of the sense and the value of suffering, and he spoke with wisdom when addressing this subject: "People who suffer have something to offer to God. When they succeed in enduring their suffering that is a daily miracle!"

A Man of God

Brother André always denied that he had any gift of healing, saying "I have no gift and I cannot give any." His exhortations were always the same: to make a novena to Saint Joseph and to rub with oil or a medal of the saint. For him, these were truly "acts of love and faith, of confidence and humility."

He encouraged people to see a doctor for treatment. As to the doctors themselves, he would tell

them, "Yours is a great work. Your science was given to you by God; therefore, you must thank Him and pray to Him." Brother André had such a way of speaking about God that he succeeded in sowing seeds of hope in the people he met. One of his friends related this fact: "I never brought a sick person to Brother André without that person returning home enriched. Some were cured. Others died some time later, but Brother André had brought them peace of mind."

The Road to heaven

For Brother André, heaven is living in God's house. His views on death as life's ultimate fulfillment were often expressed thus: "You know, it is permitted to desire death if one's unique goal is to go forward to God... When I die, I will go to heaven, I will be much closer to God than I am now, I will have more power to help you." A few moments before his death, those around him heard him cry out, "I am suffering so much, my God! My God." And then, in a very weak voice, "Here is the grain," referring to the Gospel of John 12:24, "unless the grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies. It remains alone. But if it dies, it brings forth much fruit." "He spent his whole life speaking of others to God, and of God to others." In giving this testimony, his friend presented a valid assessment of Brother André's life imbued with faith, and love. In fact, it is difficult to say at what point in his life work ended and prayer began as the two seemed to flow so naturally one into the other.

On January 6, 1937 at 91 years of age, Brother André died at Hôpital Notre-Dame de l'Espérance in Saint-Laurent, a suburb of Montréal. Newspapers reported that well over a million people attended his wake and burial. His body lies today in a simple tomb in the beautiful Oratory that rises so gracefully on Mount Royal. To this day, thousands of visitors come to Saint Joseph's Oratory to receive physical and spiritual healing. Even today, Brother André remains for us a living symbol of Christian renewal to which we are all invited. Whatever Brother André was able to achieve through God's grace, we are also able to achieve through that same grace offered to us so generously and consistently. Brother André was beatified in 1980, and was recently canonized by His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI.

Saint Brother André, Pray for us!