

# Priory for Montreal

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Dear Faithful,

It is truly a joy to announce that the Society of Saint Pius X has acquired the convent of the Sisters of the Presentation of Mary at Saint Césaire, Quebec. As a sign of Divine Providence, all obstacles disappeared on the very day of the Immaculate Conception and the Society's financial offer was accepted. On December 23<sup>rd</sup> we signed the contract and are now the rightful owners of this most beautiful site.

In honour of local tradition, we chose to name it "St-Joseph Center;" From 1857 onwards, the Sisters of the Presentation were using that place to introduce the devotion to St. Joseph: both the convent and the magnificent chapel were dedicated to the paternal care of this Guardian of the Universal Church, the foster-father of Our Redeemer.

Seven years ago the building complex was sold to the "Coopérative académique du Québec" that kept and maintained the buildings in an admirable manner. Now in our hands, it will again play an important, active role in the spiritual life of many Canadians.

This gem of Quebecois Catholic culture offers innumerable possibilities for the apostolate of the Society in the region of Montreal. Its spiritual influence will undoubtedly spread far beyond the limits of the Quebec province.

The upcoming weeks will reveal the destiny – other than that of being the priory for the region of Montreal – the Society wants to give to the

"St Joseph Center".

Father Jürgen Wegner

District superior of Canada

## Origins of the Saint-Césaire convent 1

### **Beginnings of the Saint-Césaire parish:**

The town of Saint-Césaire stands in the midst of the fertile plain between the Rougemont and St. Paul d'Abbotsford Mountains, east of Montreal. It is divided by the Yamaska River that flows northward, and the Montreal - Sherbrooke highway which runs west to east. The land used to belong to the St. Hyacinthe lordship, which was granted in 1748 to Pierre-François Rigaud de Vaudreuil, the brother of the governor of New France. When the first French-Canadian pioneers settled in 1784, they had to work very hard to clear the land in extremely difficult conditions. That is why; some settlers nicknamed the patron Saint of the St. Césaire parish -- as Saint Misery... The parish was officially incorporated in 1833.

### **The parish priest Rev. J. A. Provençal:**

The name of Rev. Joseph André Provençal is closely associated to the history of the convent of St. Césaire. Parish priest of St. Césaire from 1850 to 1889, Rev. Provençal enjoyed such a prestige among his parishioners that everybody in St. Césaire considered him to be as a living saint. His charity was so great and universal that he didn't seem to have a single enemy. He was also famed for healings and special favours. Within a year upon arrival at St. Césaire, he had already planned to open a girls' boarding school in his parish. He knew that it was through women and mothers that a people could be formed more surely. During the spring of 1856, he blessed the foundation stone; and the boarding school opened in September 1857.

### **The convent of the sisters of the Presentation of Mary:**

Rev. Provençal had called the sisters of the Presentation of Mary, a religious order from France summoned by Bishop Bourget in 1854. The sisters had already settled near St. Hyacinthe. Upon opening of the new school, the sisters already had 150 students. Many vocations came from the St. Césaire convent, as well as some conversions of Protestant girls. Moreover, the nuns took upon themselves the task of promoting the devotion to St. Joseph in the parish up to an unknown level. Consequently both the chapel and the convent were dedicated to St. Joseph. In the year 2000, the sisters sold their convent to a Cooperative Society for Education. This is the convent that the Society of St. Pius X recently purchased.

### **The Saint-André college:**

Twelve years later on, in 1869, Rev. Fr. Provençal opened a boy's boarding school, placed under the patronage of St. Andrew, and entrusted by him to the St. Joseph Brothers, of the Congregation of the Holy Cross. The college Saint André closed in 1996, and was turned into an old folk's home.

### **Brother André at Saint-Césaire:**

After Rev. Provençal, we ought to name Brother André Bessette<sup>1</sup>. Born at St. Grégoire in 1847, the young Alfred Bessette lost his parents at an early age. When he was 9 years old, he lost his father, crushed by a tree while logging in the bush. Shortly after, his mother passed away, worn out by her labours. When he was twelve years old, Alfred was adopted by his aunt Marie Nadeau, who lived at St. Césaire. It was around 1857, at the time of the opening of the convent of the sisters of the Presentation of Mary. Both his uncle and aunt were willing to take care of the education of the young boy, but the lad did not have much chance to go to school, first of all on account of his frail health, but mostly because of being poor. During his first year at St. Césaire, Alfred used to "walk to catechism class". This is how they used to call the intensive catechism class done over a two months period prior to First Communion for

children who could not get it at school. In June 1858, Alfred made his First Communion, and was confirmed by Bishop Prince, then bishop of St. Hyacinthe. At an early age, Alfred had to go out to work: he tried all kind of trades, and sometimes several different at once. When he was home at St. Césaire, he used to spend Sunday afternoons at church to pray. From 1863 till 1867, Alfred went to Connecticut, USA, to work in factories. Upon returning to St. Césaire in 1867, Alfred placed himself under the spiritual direction of Fr. Provençal. When Rev. Provençal needed Alfred for something, he used to find him at church kneeling before the statue of St. Joseph. Alfred had an apostolate with the young farm boys of his age. He used to tell them edifying stories, to draw them to St. Joseph: "Pray to St. Joseph! You ought to pray to St. Joseph! He will never fail to grant you all kinds of favours." These boys used to make fun of him, saying: "He is going nuts with his devotion to St. Joseph!" They nicknamed Alfred Bessette "the crazy guy!" Now, how started the vocation of Bro. André? Alfred was deeply convinced that he was not made to live in the world; thus Bro. André's fundamental reason for becoming a brother was to serve God and to sanctify himself. Naturally, Rev. Provençal had just to cross the street to present the young candidate to the brother superior of the St. André College. Such was the ignorant man who was the first vocation welcomed by these religious who dedicated themselves to the education of the young men from that parish. Shortly after, Alfred Bessette joined the religious brothers of the Holy Cross, where he made religious profession under the name of Brother André.

## Description of the Saint-Césaire Convent

### The Chapel:

The chapel is dedicated to St. Joseph. It was blessed on October 24, 1889 by Blessed Louis-Zéphirin Moreau, then bishop of St. Hyacinthe. The entire walls and ceiling are covered with frescoes painted by Joseph-Thomas Rousseau, a local artist. Mr. Rousseau combined the Byzantine with the Roman styles in such a way that the final result is both simple and grand. The ceiling is supported by eight Corinthian columns. The two cupolas of the nave are decorated with frescoes that represent the life of the Blessed Virgin, according to the Byzantine style. The sanctuary is capped by a canopy, and surrounded on both sides by paintings, one of the wedding of Mary and Joseph, the other one with a scene taken from the life of the Holy Family. In the side-chapels, there are beautiful crowned statues of the Blessed Virgin and St. Joseph. In the midst of the choir loft stands a Casavant pipe organ. There is also a beautiful set of the Stations of the Cross embedded in the walls. The chapel is covered with an imposing steeple surrounded by two towers. Between the two towers, there is a niche in the wall with a statue of St. Joseph and the inscription *Ite ad Joseph* along with the date of the blessing of the chapel. Let us not forget that that chapel has been for a long time a shrine in honour of St. Joseph, thanks to the good Rev. Provençal, the sisters of the Presentation of Mary and, of course, Brother André.

### The other buildings:

The chapel is only part of a compound that was used as a convent for nuns, and a girls' school. As you can see from the pictures, the classrooms seem to be waiting for more students!

1 The bulk of our information comes from the book written by Chanoine Etienne Catta Le Frère André et l'Oratoire Saint-Joseph de Montréal, Fides 1964

2 Alfred Bessette, in religion Brother André, was recently canonised by Pope Benedict XVI on October 17, 2010.

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St. Joseph Center