

**Saint Brother André of Montreal (1845-1937):**

**The Man of Prayer of Mount Royal, Montreal**

**Feast day: January 7**



**His Life**

Saint Brother André, born Alfred Bessette on August 8, 1845 in Saint-Grégoire d'Iberville, Quebec, was the eighth in a family of 12 children. His father died in a lumbering accident when André was only nine years old, and his mother died of tuberculosis three years later. At 12 years of age, he was an orphan, without money or education. He was small for his age, and rather frail. He tried working as a helper on his uncle's farm and he tried learning a number of trades: shoemaking, baking, welding, and blacksmithing, but his health did not permit him to persevere in any of them. When he was about 18, he emigrated to New England, where he found work in the textile industry.

He returned to Canada in 1867, and three years later was admitted to the Congregation of the Holy Cross, in Ville St-Laurent near Montreal, where he took the name Brother André. Although

he spoke fluent French and English, he could neither read nor write. His superiors were hesitant to invite him to take vows because of his poor health, but they eventually agreed to admit him because of his profound piety. For 40 years, he was the porter at Notre-Dame College in Montreal. He also looked after the laundry and the sacristy; he ran errands and cleaned.

As his work permitted, Brother André visited the sick and met with the handicapped and the chronically ill. He would pray with them, invoking the intercession of Saint Joseph. When he was about 30 years old, people began to attribute extraordinary favours and healings to his prayers. His reputation spread throughout Montreal and many brought their sick relatives to see the College door-keeper. They came in such great numbers that there were complaints from the parents of students and Brother André's superiors as well as doctors; the compromise solution was to authorize him to place a statue of Saint Joseph on the mountainside, facing the College.

In 1904, with the help of some lay friends he built a wooden chapel on Mount Royal. The cost, \$200, came from the offerings of those whom he had helped and from the nickels he charged students for haircuts. Pilgrims flocked to the chapel, and so many people wrote to Brother André with requests for prayers that four secretaries were required to answer their letters. The chapel was enlarged in 1908 and a stone crypt was erected in 1917. Construction of the Basilica began in 1924. It was finally completed in 1967. Saint Joseph's Oratory on Mount Royal is known around the world as a place of pilgrimage. Each year, hundreds of thousands of people are drawn to this place of prayer and recollection.

Brother André died on January 6, 1937, at the age of 91. He was declared Blessed on May 23, 1982 by Saint John Paul II. On Sunday, October 17, 2010, Pope Benedict canonized him.

### **His Spirituality**

Alfred Bessette was above all a man of prayer. Father André Provençal, who had recommended him as a candidate for joining the religious of the Holy Cross, had noticed his piety when Alfred was a young man. Alfred was hesitant to present himself to the Holy Cross novitiate because he had so little education, but Father Provençal managed to persuade him that one didn't have to know how to read or write in order to pray. He went so far as to write in his letter of recommendation, "I am sending you a saint." Alfred's spirit of prayer overcame the reticence of his Holy Cross superiors. The novice master was convinced that even if Alfred turned out to be unsuitable for work, he could surely pray and teach by example.

Prayer was at the heart of his healing ministry. He prayed with the sick and involved them in praying, inviting them to reconciliation with God. He regularly prayed well into the night. He meditated on the passion of Jesus, and saw the suffering of Jesus in the suffering people who came to him for help. Like Moses on the mountain, he spent hours in intercessory prayer on behalf of those who asked him to talk to God on their behalf, often at the foot of the crucifix and before the Blessed Sacrament. That is where he found the courage, the patience, and the serenity to carry on his ministry of welcome.

He had a particular devotion to Saint Joseph. He understood Saint Joseph's life to be much like his own: a worker, at times an emigrant, fulfilling the role of a servant in an educational context. This was also the reality of many of the people who shared with Brother André their difficulties, suffering, weaknesses, and illnesses. His ministry became a movement of the people, based entirely on word of mouth and the witness of those who had received help from his prayers.

Brother André was friendly. He had good practical judgment and knew how to put people at ease. These qualities were ideally suited for his work as a porter. He remembered names, he loved to laugh, and he had a good sense of humour. “When I entered the community,” he loved to say, “my superiors showed me the door and I stayed there for 40 years without leaving!” He was attentive to people, he had empathy, and he suffered with those who were suffering. These were qualities of his spirituality. People were attracted to this aging, simple, modest and plain-spoken man. His heart moved him to visit the sick, to pray with them, and to commend them to Saint Joseph. His modesty was so strong that he protested in tears against the claim that possessed the power to heal: “I don’t heal,” he would say. “It is Saint Joseph!”

His close contact with suffering gave him insight into human nature. On his deathbed he whispered to a member of his community, “God is good! How beautiful and powerful he is! He must be beautiful, because the human soul, which is a reflection of God’s beauty, is so beautiful!”

### **For further information:**

#### **Websites:**

<https://www.saint-joseph.org/en/sanctuary/saint-brother-andre>

[http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/bessette\\_alfred\\_16E.html](http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/bessette_alfred_16E.html)

<http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/en/article/saint-andre/>

<http://catholicism.org/br-andre.html>

[http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/homilies/2010/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_hom\\_20101017\\_canonizations\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/homilies/2010/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20101017_canonizations_en.html)

<http://saints.sqpn.com/saint-andre-bessette>

#### **Books:**

*Brother André: The Wonder Man of Mount Royal*, Henri-Paul Bergeron, C.S.C.  
*Brother André of St. Joseph’s Oratory*, William H. Gregory



#### **Photo:**

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