

***Catholic Saints & Other Christian Heroes –
The Story of Blessed André Bessette
A Simple Faith
1845 - 1937***



“I am only a man, just like you,” time after time Brother André Bessette reminded petitioners who came to him. Known as a miracle worker of healing during his lifetime, this humble lay brother insisted on giving all the credit to God, the faith of those healed, and the intercession of St. Joseph. Quietly, he said, “I will pray for you.” Time after time, healing came.

Brother André was born Alfred Bessette in 1845 in a small town near Montreal. He was the sixth of ten children of a carpenter and woodcutter. At his birth, Alfred was so frail that the midwife baptized him immediately. Throughout life, his health remained poor. No one would have predicted that he would live to the ripe old age of ninety-one.

“I Am Sending You a Saint.” When Alfred was only nine years old, his father was killed in an accident. Then, his mother died of tuberculosis a few years later. The children were all parceled out to relatives and Alfred, orphaned and nearly illiterate, was forced to find work. He apprenticed at several skills, but never completed any

for health reasons. When his parish priest introduced him to the brothers of the Holy Cross and suggested that he apply for admission, Alfred demurred at first because of his lack of education. He had never attended any school and could barely even write his own name.

But the priest persisted and even wrote his letter of application for him. “I am sending you a saint,” he wrote in his letter of reference. Alfred may have lacked formal schooling, but prayer had been part of his education from his earliest days. Before his parents died, the whole family gathered every night to say the rosary, and even as a child, Alfred loved to meditate on the Passion.

Alfred’s father, a carpenter himself, also introduced him to the great carpenter of Nazareth, and when he was only a child, Alfred placed himself under Joseph’s special protection. Later, in his travels and his work experience, his devotion to St. Joseph the laborer, who knew both exile and poverty, deepened and took firm root in Alfred’s heart. All these influences combined to form in Alfred a true love for God and a desire to serve him with his life, and none of them escaped the notice of his novice master.

After Alfred’s novitiate, the Holy Cross superiors hesitated to admit him to final vows. But when the Archbishop of Montreal visited Notre Dame, André overcame his typical modesty and begged for his help. The bishop told him, “Do not fear, my son, you will be allowed to make your religious profession.” No doubt the bishop’s intercession helped, but his novice master also pleaded his case. “If this young man becomes unable to work,” he said, “he will at least be able to pray for us.” Consequently, Alfred was accepted in 1870 and took the name of André.

The brothers taught André to read and assigned him some of the more menial tasks necessary for the upkeep of their home. André had worked at a number of unskilled jobs in Canada and the United States

before he entered Holy Cross, so as a humble lay brother, he joyfully washed floors and windows, cleaned lamps, carried firewood, and worked as a porter and messenger--all without a single complaint.

A Contagious Inner Happiness. Brother André knew how to speak of the love of God with such intensity that he inspired hope in everyone who met him. He spoke of God as a loving Father, gave people common-sense advice, and was able to empathize with those he counseled. These traits, along with his warm sense of humor, drew people to him. "You mustn't be sad," he often said. "It is good to laugh a little." Especially with the poor and the unfortunate the good brother was merry, and his own inner happiness seemed contagious.

When Brother André was appointed doorkeeper to the order's college in Montreal, it was surely no accident. His gentle manner, his pleasant disposition, and his knack for putting people at ease--along with his ability to speak English--made him a perfect choice. But there was more than logic here. As future events would reveal, divine providence was at work as well.

After his work for the day was finished, Brother André visited the sick and the elderly in their homes or in the hospital. He put all of his good nature and good humor into these outings, and some criticized him, saying he just liked to travel around in a car. But André responded, "There are some who say that it is for pleasure that I visit the sick, but after a day's work it is far from being a pleasure. Homes for the poor are filled with men and women who have been abandoned, without relatives or friends. . . . It would do healthy men good to visit the sick."

As a result of these visits, thousands of the poor, the hurt, and the unhappy came to see André in his little office. There he counseled them, cried with them, and prayed for them. At times he could be quick or sharp, especially when he was fatigued. But whenever he realized that he had spoken sharply, he would repent and remind himself, "At least they know that I am nothing but a poor sinner." Brother André did not distinguish among those who asked for his help. He prayed for everyone. "Our Lord is our big Brother, and we are the little brothers. Consequently, we should love one another as members of the same family."

Brother André had a particular love for the Eucharist and encouraged people to go to Communion frequently. "If you ate only one meal a week," he would say, with a note of sadness in his voice, "would you survive? It is the same for your soul." Although he had a deep devotion to St. Joseph, his primary love was the Passion of Christ, on which he often meditated. For André, Jesus' death on the cross was the supreme act of God's love for man.

Worker of Wonders and Friend of St. Joseph. After five years as doorkeeper, André's miraculous powers began to manifest themselves. One day, he visited a student suffering from a severe fever in the infirmary and told him, "You are in perfect health. Go outside and play." The young man did, and when a doctor came to check him, he was perfectly well. Soon afterward, a smallpox epidemic broke out at the order's college in Saint Laurent. Many had fallen ill and some died. Brother André volunteered to nurse the sick, and when he arrived he knelt and prayed to St. Joseph. Not another person died. Reports of these healings began to circulate throughout Montreal, and the trickle of early visitors developed into a flood of sick people seeking him out.

As a young man, André had a dream in which he saw a church in an unfamiliar setting. Later he recognized the place as the top of beautiful Mount Royal, and he became convinced that a shrine in honor of St. Joseph should be built there, but he kept his conviction quiet until the right time.

Meanwhile, the flood of sick people coming to the college had begun to disturb the parents of the students. So for a while André received the sick at a small trolley station--until the passengers began to

complain. In the midst of all this turmoil, the Archbishop of Montreal asked André's superior, "Will he stop this work if you order him to?" The superior testified as to his obedience. "Well then, let him alone. If the work is from God, it will continue; if not, it will crumble." When some doctors charged André with being a quack, the health authorities cleared him as "harmless."

From Porter to Construction Manager. Brother André was one of the first to count on St. Joseph as a realtor and appealed to him about property many times. For several years, Holy Cross authorities had attempted to buy land on Mount Royal, but the owners refused to sell. André, along with several other brothers and students, began planting medals of the saint on the property. Suddenly, in 1896, the owners yielded. The brothers owned the right piece of land, and André was one step closer to realizing his dream. In 1904, when André asked permission to build a small chapel to receive the sick, his request was refused. His superiors did allow him, however, to put a statue of St. Joseph in a niche on the mountain. They told him to save the alms he received and the few pennies he earned as a barber for a future project. When he had collected two hundred dollars, he was given permission to build. All he needed were laborers.

Soon afterward, a mason with a serious stomach ailment asked André for prayer. André replied by asking, "If St. Joseph cured you, would you come and work with me on the mountain? If you are willing, I shall count on you tomorrow morning." The mason obeyed, and for the first time in months was able to put in a full day's work.

And the People Just Kept Coming. Soon the first chapel was completed, and in 1908 Brother André took up residence there. Pilgrims came by the thousands. André realized that a priest was needed, and he was given a young priest with failing eyesight to help out. After a few weeks, however, the priest told André that he couldn't see any longer and would have to quit. "I feel that I have failed you," the man said, distressed. André just whispered, "Wait until morning." The following day, the priest's eyesight improved dramatically and he was able to stay on. Pilgrims kept pouring in, and André knew that the chapel-turned-shrine would have to be expanded.

During the Great Depression, enlargement of the shrine stalled for lack of funds. Undaunted, Brother André advised, "Put a statue of St. Joseph in the middle of the building. If he wants a roof over his head, he'll get it." So a statue was brought in, and within two months construction was back on schedule. The shrine which stands there today is the largest church in the world dedicated to St. Joseph. It fits André's character that throughout the entire time of its construction, he never referred to this shrine as "his" project. Instead, he said, "God chose the most ignorant one."

Brother André died peacefully in a Montreal hospital in January of 1937. An estimated one million people climbed the slope of Mount Royal through rain, sleet, and snow during the seven days set aside to pay their final respects to this humble brother. Pope John Paul II beatified Brother André on May 23, 1982. Today, many still come to ask his help. His life inspires us who remember his words "I am only a man just like you," to imitate his faithful service and his love of God.