

precious moments with the healer. They would describe their ills. André would stand listening to each visitor. Then he would offer a few words of consolation, and either rub the sick person with a bit of St. Joseph's oil or touch him with a medal of St. Joseph. Cures were frequent and often spontaneous.

André's superiors took a dim view of the fact that throngs of visitors kept arriving, sometimes disrupting the work of the College.

Unable and unwilling to turn away the tide of human suffering, the superiors worked out a compromise. They requested André to ask his visitors to meet him at a tiny trolley station across the street from the college.

Archbishop Paul Bruchesi of Montreal summoned the Holy Cross provincial and asked,

"Will André stop this work if you order him?"

"Yes, he is obedient," the provincial replied.

"Then let him alone," the archbishop said, "If the work is from God, it will continue; if not, it will crumble.

The controversy brought André greater distress than the adulation he sometimes received from people who claimed he cured by his own powers. He actually wept and sometimes became physically ill when people made this assertion.

"I do not cure," he said again and again; "St. Joseph cures."

It was St. Joseph, André insisted, who finally resolved the dilemma created by the presence of the crowds of sick people in and around Notre Dame.

For several years, Holy Cross authorities had attempted unsuccessfully to purchase land on the slope of Mount Royal that swept majestically towards the sky in front of their college. André and several other brothers and students began planting medals on the property. Suddenly, in 1896, the owners finally yielded and sold a beautiful tract of land to the order.

Soon after the acquisition, André and a lay friend, Mr. Jules Maucotel, approached Holy Cross authorities with a request to build a small oratory in honor of St. Joseph on the mountain.

"We will be able to receive the sick there." Brother André promised, "and finally relieve the pressure on the school."

The superiors refused the request but did grant André permission to place a small statue of St. Joseph in a simple niche on the mountain and also to save the alms he received from the sick and the few pennies he earned as a barber at the college for a future project to honor St. Joseph. By early summer of 1904, he had collected two hundred dollars, and his superiors gave him permission to construct a small three-sided chapel on the mountain. As the years passed the tiny mustard seed chapel grew into the great Basilica of St. Joseph, which hosts tens of thousands of visitors annually.

The "feeble" Brother André continued to serve until he suffered an attack of acute gastritis in late December 1936. Shortly after the 1937 New Year André had a stroke. He suffered severe pain. But in the midst of all his trials, he whispered to a companion:

"How good God is. How beautiful, how powerful! He must indeed be beautiful since the soul, which is but a ray of his beauty, is so beautiful."

He lapsed into a coma. All over Montreal families knelt in prayer. There was scarcely any one who had not been touched in some way by his merciful ministry.

After the onset of coma, hospital authorities permitted the sick to enter his room. One by one they came — the last procession of suffering — to touch the old hands that had healed so many.

Brother André died on January 6, 1937, in his ninety-second year. Newspapers reported that well over a million people climbed the slope of St. Joseph's Oratory in Montreal in silent tribute to this renowned yet humble "Little Brother." It was obvious that they had lost a friend, who over the years had helped thousands to go beyond their miseries to find new hope in their daily lives.

Brother André was beatified by Pope John Paul II on May 23, 1982. His liturgical feast is January 6<sup>th</sup>.

### **The Evangelization Station**

Hudson, Florida, USA

E-mail: [evangelization@earthlink.net](mailto:evangelization@earthlink.net)

[www.evangelizationstation.com](http://www.evangelizationstation.com)

## **Blessed André Bessette**

Boniface Hanley, O.F.M.

"Brother, I must advise you, the superiors have voted not to admit you to our congregation at this time."

A novice master's job is not an easy one and Father Guy, of the Congregation of the Holy Cross, found his office especially distressing as he spoke to the candidate, Brother André Bessette. André, twenty-six years of age, a hard worker and above all a man of prayer, had spent his year of novitiate in the congregation and was awaiting permission to make his first vows. The council of the order had considered his petition to profess these vows and ruled against it.

"You know, Brother André, our decision is based on the fact that your health is so delicate. You also know, I am sure that once the congregation accepts you as a professed member, it is responsible for you in sickness and in health. Our experience during the past year leads us to believe your health would not survive the rigors of our life."

Brother André, small and slight of stature, possessor of an incredibly childlike faith, looked wistfully at the novice master.

"I accept the judgment, Father Guy, as the will of God. I must add that I have been deeply happy as a novice, happier than I have been in my whole life.

"Well, Brother André, the superiors are willing to give you an extension of your novitiate, with the hope your health will improve."

It was the smallest ray of hope, the slimmest of straws. André, a peasant and realist, knew his health would not improve. But, because he loved his life as a Holy Cross novice so much and could not bear to leave it, he accepted Father Guy's kind offer.

"How much more time is allowed me?" he asked.

"Well, André, six months."

"Thank you Father Guy," the little novice answered.

Failure was nothing new to Brother André. It had dogged him from the moment of his birth in the tiny village of St.-Gregoire d'Iberville, near Montreal,

Canada, on August 9, 1845. Born with a severe stomach ailment, Brother André, the eighth of Isaac and Clothilde Foisy's twelve children, was so ill that the midwife baptized him immediately. His parents christened him Alfred.

### **The Decision**

Alfred, aware of his poor health and lack of education, deferred his decision to join the brothers for almost two years. No doubt, he who had known so many failures feared yet another.

The Holy Cross Brothers at St.-Cesaire aware of Alfred's physical weakness gave him little encouragement, Father Provençal, however, persisted:

"Alfred, you've got to try."

After almost two years of indecision, Alfred entered the Holy Cross Novitiate in Montreal. The year was 1870, the same year in which Pope Pius IX proclaimed St. Joseph Patron of the Universal Church.

Father Julien Gastineau, principal of the school and master of novices, welcomed Alfred. Later, he read the letter of reference Father Provençal had sent along with the candidate from St.-Cesaire.

"I am sending you," the pastor wrote, "a saint."

In December 1870, after some weeks of work and prayer, Alfred received his first religious habit and changed his name to André, after Father André Provençal. His novitiate year was a happy one. He was assigned to the laundry and linen supply for the novitiate and school, swept and mopped corridors, tended the infirmary, and generally was at the beck and call of everyone.

It was at the end of this year that Father Guy advised André that his future as a Holy Cross Brother was very much in doubt.

Several days after this disturbing interview, Montreal's saintly Bishop Ignace Bourget visited Notre Dame. André, overcoming his customary humility, sought an opportunity to speak privately with him. He pleaded:

"Bishop, please help me. I do so want to be a brother."

The bishop, seventy-two years old, white-haired and ascetic, turned his piercing eyes on André and said:

"Do not fear, my son, you will be allowed to make your religious profession."

On August 22, 1872, the bishop's promise was fulfilled. No doubt his intercession was critical to the final affirmative decision of the Holy Cross Congregation. But the novice master, Father Guy, also pleaded André's case very effectively before the Holy Cross authorities.

"If this young man becomes unable to work," he argued, "he can at least pray. Dear confreres, we are all dedicated to teaching people to pray. This man teaches mainly by his example."

### **The Porter**

"When I joined this community, the superiors showed me the door." André used to comment wryly in his later years, "and I remained here for forty years."

Thus André described his appointment and forty-year-long career as the porter of Notre Dame College.

His appointment to the porter's post was no accident. During his novitiate year André's gentleness of manner and pleasant disposition became evident to all who knew him. He had a knack for putting people immediately at ease. His knowledge of English also proved most helpful.

The porter's room at the door of Notre Dame included a narrow wooden couch which André used for his night's sleep. His bed was hardly comfortable. But that mattered little since the brother spent most of the night on his knees. Prayer revived and refreshed him, doing for the fragile André what food and sleep do for most men. In his office he had a small statue of St. Joseph on the sill of the window that looked out on Mount Royal. St. Joseph's back was to André. And people asked him why.

"Because," he replied, "someday St. Joseph is going to be honored in a very special way on Mount Royal!"

### **The Healings**

Often, while making trips to carry student's laundry to their homes, or while delivering a message

in town. Brother André would hear of someone who was very ill. Invariably he visited the person to cheer him and pray with him. He would also rub the sick person lightly with a bit of oil taken from a lamp burning in front of St. Joseph's statue in the college chapel.

André was in his mid thirties when the first cures occurred.

When the health of some of these people improved, word began to circulate of André's healing powers. People called him: "Good Brother André" and sought him out to visit their ill relatives and friends.

He had been porter for about five years when his extraordinary powers began to manifest themselves at Notre Dame College itself. He visited a boy who lay ill with a severe fever in the infirmary.

"Get up, you lazy fellow," he ordered, "You are in perfect health. Go outside and play."

The young man demurred at first but then, feeling much better, got out of bed and went out into the recreation yard. College authorities immediately surrounded André and remonstrated with him.

"You had no right to interfere," they complained: "that boy is ill."

"Please permit a doctor to examine him," André replied. "You'll see that St. Joseph cured him."

The doctor came to examine him and after a careful examination of the youth, pronounced him perfectly well.

Soon after this incident a smallpox epidemic broke out at the nearby Holy Cross College of St.-Laurent. The disease struck both students and religious. Some died. André volunteered to nurse the ill. When he arrived at St.-Laurent, he knelt and prayed to St. Joseph to protect the sick. Not one more person died.

Reports of André's healing powers circulating through Montreal brought more and more sick people to Notre Dame College. A trickle of early visitors soon grew into a flood tide that rose up around the college and threatened to drown poor Brother André. Desperately ill people, some suffering from contagious diseases, crowded into the college reception rooms and corridors, patiently waiting their turn to enter the porter's office and spend a few