

SAINT ANDRE BESSETTE (1845 – 1937)

Feast Day: January 6

When Alfred Bessette came to the Holy Cross Brothers in 1870, he carried with him a note from his pastor saying, "I am sending you a saint." The Brothers found that difficult to believe. Chronic stomach pains had made it impossible for Alfred to hold a job very long and since he was a boy he had wandered from shop to shop, farm to farm, in his native Canada and in the United States, staying only until his employers found out how little work he could do. The Holy Cross Brothers were teachers and, at 25, Alfred still did not know how to read and write. It seemed as if Alfred approached the religious order out of desperation, not vocation.

Sickness and weakness dogged Saint Andre from birth. Alfred Bessette was born Aug. 9, 1845. He was the eighth of twelve children born to a French Canadian couple near Montreal. At his birth he was so weak that his parents baptized him. When Alfred was nine years of age his father died, crushed by a falling tree. His mother found herself widowed at 40 with 10 children in her care. Three years later she died of tuberculosis, having never fully recovered from the shock of her husband's death. Much later, Saint Andre was heard to say: "I rarely prayed for my mother, but I often prayed to her."

The family was dispersed. At age 12, Alfred was forced to leave school to learn a trade and to look for work. He began thirteen years of wandering from job to job with few belongings and very little learning; he was barely able to write his name or read his prayer book.

In spite of his physical weakness, Alfred tried to make a living as an unskilled worker. He traveled from job to job and was easily exploited by those stronger than he. For a time, he worked on construction projects. Later, he made his living as a farm hand, blacksmith, baker, coachman, and so on.

In 1863, following the flow of French-Canadian emigrants, he went to the United States and worked four years in the textile mills. He spent many years in the Moosup, Plainfield, Danielson and Putnam area. Despite his poor health, he put his whole heart into his work.

"Despite my weak condition, I did not let anyone get ahead of me as far as work was concerned," he said later.

In 1867, he resumed to Canada with thousands of others who were to witness the dawn of the Canadian Confederation.

Three years later, Alfred presented himself as a candidate at the novitiate of the Congregation of Holy Cross in Montreal. Because of his uncertain health, his superiors had doubts concerning his religious vocation. Finally, he was accepted and given the name Brother Andre. He was made porter at Notre Dame college and was known to say - smiling: "When I entered the community, my superiors showed me the door, and I remained there 40 years without leaving." He also washed floors and windows, cleaned lamps, brought in firewood, and worked as a messenger.

Soon Brother Andre started to welcome the sick and broken-hearted. He invited them to pray to St. Joseph to obtain favors. Before long, many people reported their prayers were being answered. For 25 years, in his small office Brother Andre spent six to eight hours a day receiving visitors. He built a chapel with the help of friends and with the money he earned giving haircuts to the students of the college. He was certain that St. Joseph wanted a place on the mountain and he spent his whole life preparing a beautiful shrine in the saint's honor.

In the meantime, there was talk of healings which doctors could not explain. Brother Andre began visiting the sick and earned the reputation of miracle-worker. But he strongly protested: "I am nothing ... only a tool in the hands of Providence, a lowly instrument at the service of St. Joseph." He went even further: "People are silly to think that I can perform miracles. It is God and St. Joseph who can heal you, not I."

Brother Andre was always cheerful and tried to communicate his happiness to others, especially to the poor and unfortunate. He used his sense of humor to share his joy and to slip some good advice into a conversation, or to change the subject when a verbal attack on someone was brewing.

He was a man of determination who refused to compromise his principles. 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 story from one of his visitors.

During all these years, an immense project was being realized and larger crowds were swarming to the Oratory. The first small chapel became too small to receive all the people who were coming to the mountain. A larger church was needed.

In 1917, a new crypt church, able to hold a thousand persons, was inaugurated. This, however, was only the starting point of an even more important endeavor. During his whole life, Brother Andre devoted his efforts to building the Oratory, which was to become the world's greatest sanctuary dedicated to St. Joseph.

And yet, Brother Andre never referred to "my project, my work". On the contrary, he said: "God chose the most ignorant one. If there was anyone more ignorant than I am, God would have chosen him instead of me."

When crowds came to the Oratory for important celebrations, Brother Andre would go into seclusion. He would hide behind the choir and pray quietly.

His kindness and compassion were matched by a sharpness of mind which prompted him to say: "It is surprising that I am frequently asked for cures, but rarely for humility and the spirit of faith. Yet, they are so important...."

On another occasion he said: "If the soul is sick, one must begin by treating the soul." His often repeated questions were well known: "Do you have faith? Do you believe that God can do something for you? Go confess yourself to the priest, go to Communion and then come back to see me." These were the words he used constantly when asked for favors and cures. Brother Andre understood the sense and the value of suffering and spoke with depth when addressing the subject. "People who suffer have something to offer to God. When they succeed in enduring their suffering, that is a daily miracle."

To someone who was suffering, he said: "Do not seek to have these trials lifted from you. Instead, ask for the grace to bear them well."

There are people who still claim to have received the gift of healing from Brother Andre and yet he always denied that he had any gift of healing. "I have no gift and I cannot give any."

Generally, he encouraged people to see a doctor for treatment. To doctors, he said: "Your work is good. Your science was given to you by God. You must thank Him and pray to Him."

"God," he said, "is love and he loves us; that is the heart of the Christian faith."

"God gave us the commandments and it is in observing them that we show whether we love God. Pray that you may obtain a true love of God. God loves us so much. He wants us to love Him."

Brother Andre's way of speaking about God helped him succeed in sowing seeds of hope in the people he met. One of his friends said: "I never brought a sick person to Brother Andre without that person returning home enriched. Some were cured. Others died some time later, but Brother Andre had consoled them."

To live in God's house is heaven, Brother Andre said: "You know, it is permitted to desire death if one's unique goal is to go toward 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 months 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," as if referring to the Gospel ["Unless the grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone. But If it dies, it brings forth much fruit" (Jn 12, 24)].

He died Jan. 6, 1937, at the age of 92, and newspapers reported that more than a million people attended his wake and burial.

His body lies today in a simple tomb in the beautiful basilica that rises gracefully on Mount Royal. To this day, thousands of visitors come to St. Joseph Basilica to receive physical and spiritual healing.

Lord, you have chosen Saint Brother Andre to spread devotion to St. Joseph and to minister to all those who are afflicted. Grant us the grace to imitate his piety and his charity so that, with him, we may share the reward promised to all those who care for their neighbor because of their love for you. Amen

Please come to visit our church to see a little Shrine of St. Brother Andre Bessette and pray the Devotion of St. Joseph and St. Andre every Monday following 7:30 am Mass.