

Bl. André Bessette

BORN 1845; DIED 1937

RELIGIOUS

FEAST DAY: JANUARY 6

THE ORATORY OF ST. JOSEPH is a huge structure that overlooks the city of Montreal, Canada, the largest church in the world dedicated to the foster-father of our Lord. The person primarily responsible for the existence of this pilgrimage church was a humble brother of the Congregation of the Holy Cross, Bl. André Bessette.

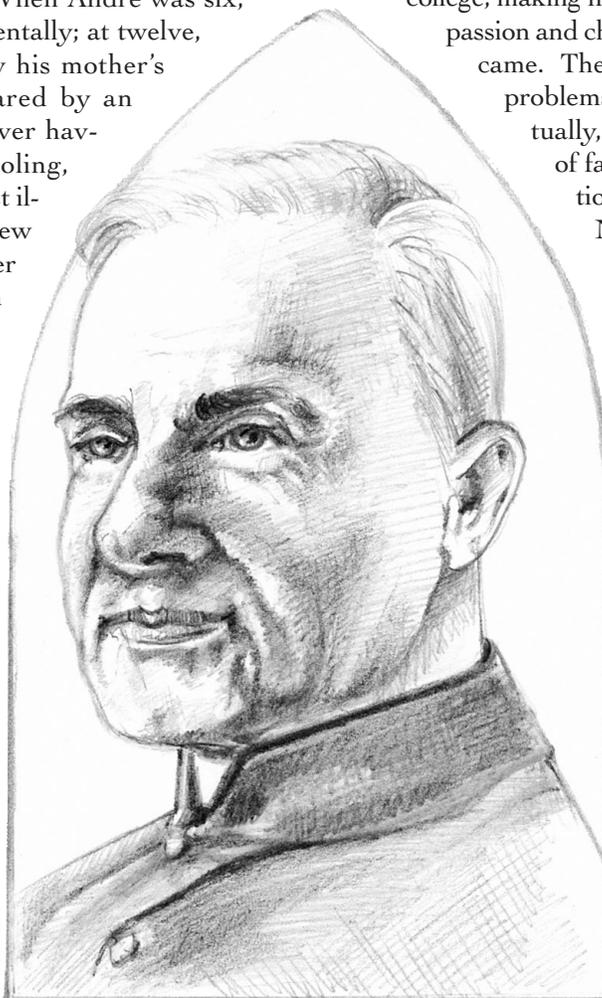
André was the eighth of twelve children of woodcutter and carpenter Isaac Bessette and wife Clotilde Foisy. He was born in St.-Grégoire, a village thirty miles east of Montreal, and was a sickly infant and child. His parents taught him his faith, and especially to love St. Joseph, from an early age. When André was six, his father died accidentally; at twelve, he was orphaned by his mother's death. He was reared by an aunt and uncle. Never having any formal schooling, André grew up almost illiterate, yet he also grew up into a life of prayer and penance. From his earliest years, he learned well the way of love and forgetfulness of self. "It is not necessary," he once said, "to have been well educated, to have spent many years in college, to love the good God. It is sufficient to want to do so generously."

On reaching adulthood, he undertook work on a farm and then in a factory. His pastor, who knew him well, recommend-

ed that he consider joining the Congregation of the Holy Cross as a brother. His transparent holiness persuaded the Congregation to admit him, but his frail health almost led to his rejection, until the bishop of Montreal intervened.

Despite frequent illness, for the next forty years he served as a doorkeeper for the College of Notre Dame in Montreal, carried out janitorial duties, was the school's barber, did students' laundry, and ran errands. When not on duty, he visited the sick and, soon, stories of miraculous healings began to circulate. He invariably attributed these healings to the intercession of St. Joseph. Soon the lame and the sick began to come to him. Following the completion of his assigned tasks at the college and his own rounds of sick calls, he met with supplicants in his tiny office at the college, making himself available with compassion and cheerfulness to anyone who came. The growing crowds created problems at the school and, eventually, André became the focus of false and malicious accusations and betrayals of trust. Nevertheless, the healings continued.

When the college purchased land on the hillside across the street, André asked his superior to permit the building of a chapel to St. Joseph. His superior agreed but provided no funds for the project. This came from André's tiny savings and donated funds and labor from numerous grateful people. The chapel was too small for worshipers, who had to remain outside. With the crowds seeking André growing ever larger, the Congre-



PAUL KERRIS



gation agreed to a proposal by his supporters to build an infirmary near the chapel. Over the years, as the number of visitors grew ever larger, buildings were enlarged and improved and, eventually, André was assigned full-time to what was evolving into the Oratory of St. Joseph. It was then that he began working toward the building of the beautiful edifice that exists today, seeing himself as nothing more than the humble instrument of God, chosen specifically because of his insignificance.

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André was, like his Master, a man for others. That is essentially what divine love is about, the love about which St. John writes: *“God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him”* (1 Jn 4:16). For André, God was indeed a loving Father, and the Passion of our Lord was God’s greatest act of love for his creatures. He led others to see God in the same way. He brought the love of the Father to whomever he met, and nourished his own prayer life with frequent reception of the Eucharist.

At his death, nearly one million people attended his wake and burial. They came to pay their final respects to the doorkeeper brother who had so little in worldly terms, and yet had so much to give.

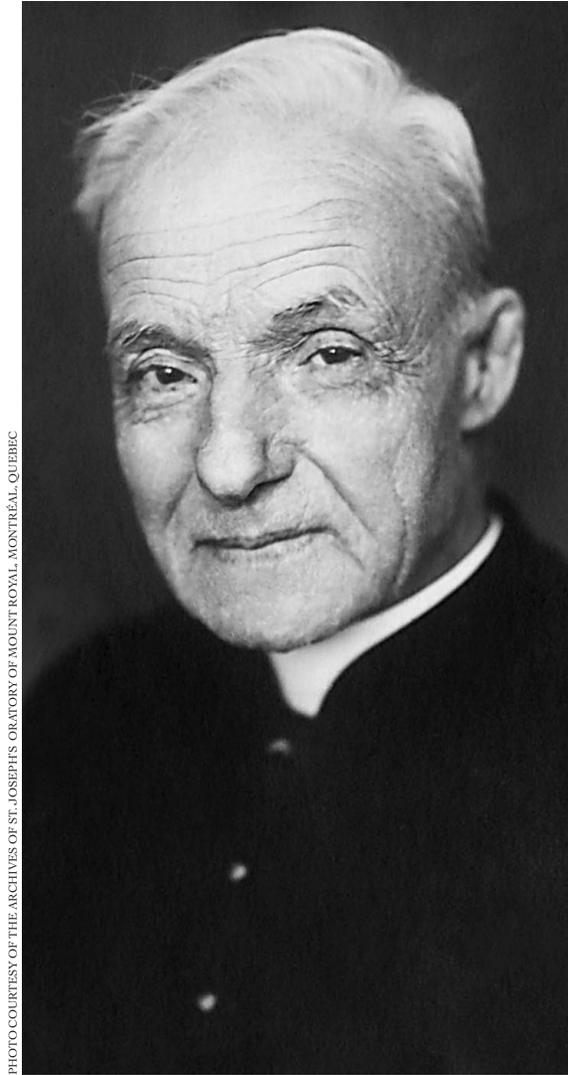


PHOTO COURTESY OF THE ARCHIVES OF ST. JOSEPH'S ORATORY OF MOUNT ROYAL, MONTRÉAL, QUÉBEC

Blessed André in 1927; photograph by Peloquin

