Saint André Bessette

(1845-1937)

During His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, “Knock and the door will be opened to you” (Matthew 7:7). In many ways, these words summarize the life of Saint André Bessette. The only caveat is that Brother André was the one opening the door for countless thousands of others during his life, not having the door opened for him. For forty years, Brother André was the doorkeeper at the Collège Notre-Dame in Côte-des-Neiges, Quebec, while serving as a professed Religious of the Congregation of the Holy Cross.

He was born Alfred Bessette in Saint-Grégoire d’Iberville, Quebec, Canada, and was the eighth of twelve children. His father was crushed by a falling tree and died when Alfred was only three. His mother died three years later of tuberculosis, leaving him and his siblings orphans. From birth, Alfred was a sickly child and remained so throughout his life. Most people thought he would die at a young age, but he lived until he was ninety-one!

Alfred had a distinct smile. It was serious, warm, welcoming, pleasant, and calming. He was a hard worker, but his poor health made it difficult for him to maintain a steady job. At the age of twenty-five, Alfred sought spiritual direction from his pastor, who encouraged him to present himself to the Congregation of the Holy Cross in Montreal for acceptance into religious life. The pastor sent along a letter to the superior, which said in part, “I am sending you a saint.” The problem was that Alfred could hardly read, and the order was a teaching order of well-educated men. After some initial hesitation, the superior welcomed him into the novitiate at the encouragement of the bishop.

Upon making his vows, Alfred chose the name Brother André, and his first assignment was one he would keep for the rest of his life—doorkeeper. In addition to minding the door, he spent his time washing floors and windows, cleaning lamps, carrying firewood, and delivering messages. He was a humble servant content to carry out the most menial of tasks.

How does an illiterate doorkeeper become a saint? Brother André’s path of holiness consisted of living the most attractive virtue of humility, of listening attentively to troubled hearts, of showing a compassion that lifted countless burdens, and of showing a gentleness that put even the worst sinner at ease. Above all, Brother André showed a love of God and trust in the intercession of Saint Joseph that was calm, steadfast, and more certain to him than life itself. In his role of doorkeeper, Brother André had the joy of interacting with countless people for forty years. Over and over, Brother André inspired faith in both the saint and the sinner, the proud and the humble, the well-to-do and the poorest of the poor. Through his lowliness, soul after soul was drawn to God. Every time a life was changed, Brother André gave the credit to Saint Joseph. “Go to Saint Joseph, he will help you,” he would say throughout his life.

Not only was the soul of Brother André filled with the most beautiful virtues, his prayers also worked countless miracles. When people spoke to Brother André and asked for his prayers, a surprising pattern began to emerge—his prayers were answered! The sick were healed, the lame could walk, problems did disappear, and hearts were converted. By the time of his death, the brothers of his order attributed as

many as 10,000 miracles to his intercession. But, according to Brother André, it wasn't he who worked the miracles but Saint Joseph.

At first, word of Brother André's powerful prayers slowly trickled from person to person, but eventually his renown flowed like a river, roaring from one end of Canada to the other. Lines of people came streaming to him. He prayed for the sick, spent time with those who visited, went out of his way to speak to souls in need, and dispensed mercy and compassion to all. Towards the end of his life, this holy man who struggled with reading received as many as 80,000 letters each year from people asking for his prayers. He entrusted them all to Saint Joseph.

"It is with the smallest brushes that the artist paints the best paintings," Brother André was fond of saying. The artist was God, and Brother André was the smallest and most humble brush. The living work of art God painted with Brother André was on full display at his wake and funeral. It is estimated that a million people paid their respects during the week that his body lay in state outside of St. Joseph's Oratory! Brother André's beautiful legacy was memorialized in a humble chapel he built to Saint Joseph. Over time, that chapel has been transformed and enlarged into the massive St. Joseph Oratory on Mount Royal near the Collège Notre-Dame. The Oratory sits on a hill and towers over its surroundings. It is crowned by one of the largest domes in the world and remains a place of pilgrimage and prayer. On the walls of its crypt hangs a moving testament to Brother André's healing powers—hundreds of pairs of discarded crutches. The humble are not always exalted in this world, but Brother André truly was.

Prayer: *Saint André, you were not given any monumental tasks in this world, but you were given great responsibility. You were responsible for loving those who came to you, listening to those who needed to be heard, and praying for those who needed your prayers. Please pray for me, that I may learn from your humble service and live my daily duty in deep love and fidelity to the will of God. Saint André, pray for me. Saint Joseph, pray for me. Jesus, I trust in You.*

Patron saint of family caregivers in Canada

Canonized by Pope Benedict XVI on October 17, 2010

Liturgical Color: White