

Saint of the Month for January 2014

(A monthly series compiled by Tom Quinlan)

Saint André Bessette, Religious **Monday, January 6**

This month I picked a saint who was canonized relatively recently (2010) but who may not be too well known. However, he is a person to whom I feel some personal connection (described below), and whose work lives on in a special way with some present members of his order. He is the first native-born male Canadian to be named an official (canonized) saint.

André was born Alfred Bessette in 1845 of rather poor French-Canadian parents. He was one of a large family, and suffered from various illnesses as a child and was thought likely not to survive until adulthood. He did, but never enjoyed good health; he was a rather small man, about five feet tall, but very tall in the spiritual life.

Both of his parents died before he became a teenager, and he was thus left an orphan to make his way in the world.

He made two friendships early in life: Saint Joseph, and a priest named Fr. André, whose first name he adopted as his own first name.

In his times physical strength was held in high regard and was necessary for the work that most men might obtain. Machines were becoming more common, but human muscle was still the main energy source. André traveled around Canada and New England for work, but never held a job for long because of his lack of strength.

He later decided he was being called to the life of a religious, and applied to the Congregation of Holy Cross in Montreal. Unlike today, there were an overwhelming number of vocations to the religious life for many orders, so it seemed unlikely that André would be accepted. However, by his perseverance and good humor he was taken in, a surprising result for an uneducated man applying to an order with a focus on education. (These traits served him well for his entire life.) He was given a low-level job, the doorkeeper at the Collège de Notre Dame in Montreal, a job which brought him eventually in contact with thousands.

Brother André was a kind of receptionist and greeter in modern terminology, and slept on a bench in his Spartan office-bedroom. He had a great gift for listening to people and their problems, and encouraged them to pray (especially for the intercession of Saint Joseph). He sometimes gave sick people holy oils or medals to take home. Many people obtained cures, although not all who asked. Much of his “after-hours” time was spent in prayer.

An article in a Montreal newspaper dubbed him the Miracle Man, which title humiliated Brother André. He said this was not so, that any cures were demonstrations of the power of God through the intercession of Saint Joseph, and not of his doing: he was only an agent.

His fame seems to have upset his superiors, but they managed to deal with it!

The number of people coming to visit this doorkeeper kept growing, and he put up a sign in his office “Be Brief!”

Some people were kept waiting until the end of the day as a test of their faith- not always first-come first-served!

At one point Brother André thought he should have a chapel built to honor Saint Joseph, and managed to raise money from his friends. It was wooden, and built on a nearby hill, Mount Royal, in Montreal. Not long after it was done some 7000 people came in one day! This chapel was enlarged at least three times, and continued to draw huge crowds.

Later he planned a much bigger structure, which became known as the Oratory of Saint Joseph, on the same site, and it is the largest shrine dedicated to Saint Joseph in the world. Construction started early in the 20th century, but was interrupted several times, including for World War I and the Great Depression. Brother André did not live to see its completion.

The lower level (crypt) has a large chapel and the tomb of Brother André. There are also many sets of crutches left by people who no longer needed them, and who attributed their cures to God through the help of Saint Joseph and Brother André. An even larger church is upstairs.

Brother André died in 1937, and his funeral was attended by an estimated 1,000,000 people. Quite good for a doorkeeper! He was considered by many to be a saint before his death, and Pope Benedict XVI completed this process in 2010 with his canonization.

The commemoration is given the rank of Optional Memorial. (**Daily Roman Missal, Third Edition** (Scepter Publishers); *God’s Doorkeeper: Brother André of Montreal* (movie by Salt + Light Television, distributed by Ignatius Press); **Magnificat**, January 2014)

Collect from the Mass of Saint André Bessette:

Lord our God, friend of the lowly,
who gave your servant, Saint André Bessette,
a great devotion to Saint Joseph
and a special commitment to the poor and afflicted,
help us through his intercession
to follow his example of prayer and love
and so come to share with him in your glory.
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever. (**Roman Missal, Third Edition**)

Brother André helped thousands of people while living a low profile life: he was famous in his lifetime, but not because of a desire for fame on his part. Perhaps we should periodically check on how we all are doing in seeking to do God’s will without excess monitoring of our image! Saint André Bessette, pray for us.

My indirect connection with this recent saint is twofold. First, my parents took me to Montreal when I was fairly young (we lived in New Jersey, so it wasn't too big a journey, and certainly not by Montana standards!) and I remember seeing the great Oratory. It might have been the biggest church I had ever seen! I also remember seeing people ascending the steps on their knees, something which occurs at Fatima and in Mexico (Our Lady of Guadalupe) and at many other shrines around the world. That was my first encounter, however, with this practice.

Second, some in his order (with volunteers and friends) continue to minister to the lowly in special ways. One featured in the Salt + Light movie mentioned above, and which I have visited, is the Downtown Chapel Catholic Parish in Portland, Oregon (now named Saint André Bessette Catholic Church). This Holy Cross parish helps all in their neighborhood, especially the homeless, the addicted, those recently let out of prison, and many others at the edge of society. Among many ministries, they have a Wednesday washing of feet, which helps street people (who often have foot problems), and calls for courage and humility from those who do it.