

# BROTHER ANDRÉ

Foreword by

Mario Lachapelle, C.S.C.



Friend of the Suffering,  
Apostle of Saint Joseph

Jean-Guy Dubuc

A friendly, readable style akin to a warm conversation telling the intriguing life of an extraordinarily simple, humble man. At the same time, it situates Brother André's life within the rich historical, cultural, and theological context that formed his compassionate and mystical spirituality. Blessed Brother André is experienced as a man of his particular time and place, the characteristic quality of beatification.

**Rev. Hugh Cleary, C.S.C.**  
Superior General  
Congregation of Holy Cross

A warm-hearted and inspiring picture of this Canadian Holy Cross brother who was regarded in his lifetime as a miracle worker, a loyal friend of Saint Joseph, and an agent of Christ's love and compassion to thousands of sick and suffering. Today, he is recognized by the Catholic Church as Blessed, the final step on the way to canonization, an honor for which this book clearly makes a persuasive case.

**Rev. Edward A. Malloy, C.S.C.**  
President Emeritus  
University of Notre Dame

Throughout her history the Catholic Church has always produced some altogether special men and women whose spiritual passion made them so different from their society that they appeared a little strange, walking their own marvelous way. Brother André was certainly one of them.

**Gregory Baum**  
Professor Emeritus of Religious Studies  
McGill University

Jean-Guy Dubuc's wonderfully accessible and insightful introduction to Brother André's life and his life's work provides its reader with a rich appreciation of this holy man's deep faith and extraordinary compassion.

**Rev. Wilson D. Miscamble, C.S.C.**

Professor of History  
University of Notre Dame

Much more than a biography of a religious brother. . . . The reader walks away from this book not only knowing about Brother André's life, but more importantly about how simplicity conquered power, how hospitality overcame rudeness. This is a biography of faith manifested in goodness; it's a story we should all hear and try to emulate.

**Rev. Richard Gribble, C.S.C.**

Associate Professor of Religious Studies  
Stonehill College

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Apostle of Saint Joseph

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Jean-Guy Dubuc

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PRAYER TO  
BROTHER ANDRÉ



André, my brother . . .

*You knew how to pray . . .*  
in the midst of your tasks, in the quiet of the night,  
deep in your solitude, or surrounded by friends.  
Teach me the words that nourish my soul.

*You knew how to welcome . . .*  
the rich and the powerful,  
the poor and the miserable,  
the scholar, and the illiterate,  
especially the simple, often the wounded.  
Teach me to love them all without exception.

*You knew how to suffer . . .*  
to hope in the future,  
without complaint, without fear,  
to stand firm, to face life.  
Teach me the meaning of suffering in silence.

*You knew how to live . . .*  
for the God whom you served,  
for his Son and for his father and mother;  
to save what is lost, to free what is shackled.  
Teach me to hope in God and his universe.



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# FOREWORD



MY FIRST CONTACT with Brother André's work goes back to 1966. I was eight years old and had a decent singing voice. My parents hoped I could become one of the Little Singers of Mount Royal and brought me to St. Joseph's Oratory to audition. I sang well but had a poor ear for music, a fact that became evident during the week of auditions. I left the Oratory after my short stay a little saddened, and yet the time there allowed me to get to know the miracle worker of Mount Royal and to see the pilgrimage place he had built in honor of his great friend, St. Joseph.

Instead of a career in the arts, I chose one in science and research. In 1989, while I was conducting research at the University of Montreal, I happened to glance out my office window one day and see the dome of St. Joseph's Oratory. It had been a long time since I had thought of it, and all of a sudden I wanted to see it again and to know more about Brother André's life and work. It was the beginning of something new in my life, which eventually led me

to ordination and the vowed life in Brother André's religious family, the Congregation of Holy Cross.

My Holy Cross superiors encouraged me to do graduate studies in theology, and I chose as a thesis to study Brother André's spirituality. I did this while ministering as a priest at the Oratory. In 2004, I was elected assistant general in Rome; the superior general of Holy Cross, the Very Rev. Hugh Cleary, C.S.C., assigned me to the overseeing of religious life and, more specifically, the causes for beatification and canonization. This is how—without my seeking it—I became the Vice-Postulator of Brother André's cause. In fact, I am the ninth person to hold that post since 1941.

## A VICE WHAT? AND WHAT WAS I TO DO?

The main responsibility of the Vice-Postulator is to assist the Postulator. This was given as my main responsibility from the very beginning. The Postulator of the cause, Dr. Andrea Ambrosi, stated more specifically what my work would entail: research, he said, all of the favors obtained since Brother André's beatification and see if any of the healings could be used for canonization. Brother André's beatification dated back to May 23, 1984, and a second miracle was needed by the Church for a possible canonization. My predecessor, Father Robert Choquette, C.S.C., Vice-Postulator from 1998 to 2004, had already prepared the way. There was one case in particular that he had focused on. A nine-year-old boy had been victim of an automobile accident, leaving him with a

serious cranial injury and putting him in an irreversible coma leading toward death. The prayers of the people closest to him, along with the intercession of Brother André, brought him back to consciousness and health, and this was deemed scientifically unexplainable by many medical specialists.

This case occurred in 1999. This does not mean that before this date no other favors were obtained by Blessed Brother André. This particular case, however, met most clearly the strict criteria required by the Church. The time between the obtaining of a favor by an intercessor and its acceptance by the pope can be quite long and, for some people, too long. One must remember here that prudence is the mother of all virtues. For a healing to be declared miraculous and attributable to a servant of God, many systematic steps must be reached and certain conditions must be scrupulously adhered to. For example, the healing under study must be declared spontaneous, long-lasting, scientifically unexplainable, and attained specifically through the intercession of the servant of God. It takes time to dismiss any reasonable doubt by a diocesan inquest before the case can even reach the Congregation for the Cause of Saints. In turn, the Congregation has to begin its own work in seeking a medical and a theological evaluation and, lastly, a third decision by a commission made up of bishops and cardinals.

WHY BE INTERESTED IN  
BROTHER ANDRÉ?

More than seventy years after his death, Brother André still has an important place in the memory and hearts of the people of Canada, New England, and beyond. His fame has far surpassed the frontiers of the places he lived. Evidence of this fame is seen in the faith of the people, expressed in thousands of letters along with millions of signatures petitioning for his canonization. All of this while keeping in mind that many witnesses who knew Brother André personally said that he never sought popularity or glory. He would rather have been in silent prayer than in the places of honor his superiors requested him to occupy. While participating in public celebrations, he was often seen among the people or behind his fellow religious—not among the dignitaries. The fresco behind his tomb signifies this by describing him as a poor, obedient, and humble servant of God. He probably often asked himself why such large crowds came and why they kept coming. Even now, each year more than two million pilgrims with different needs and ethnic backgrounds come to the Oratory in all types of weather, winter or summer, to ask for Brother André's intercession or simply to visit the shrine for the first time.

It must be said that Brother André in his life lived the gospel by showing his love of God and neighbor. He was a man of unconditional hospitality and compassion. Here let us look more closely at his words, as remembered by his friends and fellow religious.

AN INTRODUCTION TO  
BROTHER ANDRÉ'S SPIRITUAL  
MESSAGE

*God is so close to us.*

At a time when many Christians pictured God as a sovereign, Brother André told us that God was very near to us. He said that God was present in all of creation, and particularly in the human heart.

“When you say to God, Our Father, He has his ear right next to your lips.”

“There is so little distance between heaven and earth that God always hears us. Nothing but a thin veil separates us from God.”

*God is good and he loves us.*

For Brother André, God's love and forgiveness can never be spoken of too often. God is always working for our good, even when his actions seem incomprehensible to us. We must trust him because we are in his hands and he will never let us fall. God is free to do whatever he wills with all of his creation. He is not obligated to do anything for us. If God acts for our own good, it is by virtue of his immense goodness.

“How good the Good God is! He really watches over us.”

“People are worried for nothing. When help is needed, it will come in time at the right place by God.”

*No one is so small as to be excluded from God's love.*

Everyone, without exception, is called to share in God's promises, love of life, and happiness given to all humanity. But God often uses the rejected, the little ones, and the forgotten to build his kingdom. They are his dear children because they are often most able to grasp his love and his message.

“It is with the smallest brushes that the artist paints the best paintings.”

“Put yourself in God's hands; he abandons no one.”

*God invites us to become closer to him and to love him by loving each other as brothers and sisters.*

For Brother André, all people are children of God and must consequently consider each other as brothers and sisters. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph incarnate the perfect model of filial love. We are invited to become members of this family by imitating it and by allowing our beings and our actions to be inspired by theirs, for this is how God's incarnation becomes close to us.

“God loves us so much! Infinitely! He wants us to love Him.”

“Our Lord is our big brother. We are the little brothers, and we therefore have to love each other like the members of the same family.”

“Practice charity with your neighbor—and this doesn’t mean only to give money to the poor. There are many ways to practice charity. We could, for example, keep ourselves from examining our neighbor’s conscience. There is also visiting the sick, who often do not need money, but who need good advice to help them get closer to God.”

THE ORIGINALITY OF  
FATHER DUBUC’S WORK ON  
BROTHER ANDRÉ

And so, Brother André’s work has strongly influenced the history of his people. It is said that more than one million people filed by his casket in January 1937. But we actually know very little about Brother André’s interior life. We know so little because he left nothing written. Not even a line. Likewise, of the many biographies of Brother André—and in several languages—hardly any of their pages have been able to tell us about his spiritual life. There is one important exception: this volume by Father Dubuc. In this, it differs from all the others. In my opinion, those who read it will come across something substantial when it comes to the miracle worker of Mount Royal.



I got to know Father Dubuc while he served as Director of Communications at St. Joseph's Oratory from 1994 to 1999. In his long career, which began in 1967, he has produced many meditations for television, film, and radio on the subject of Brother André and his work. This volume is without doubt one of his best works. As the Vice-Postulator of Brother André's cause for canonization, I strongly recommend this book.

Rev. Mario Lachapelle, C.S.C.

Rome

July 2009

# INTRODUCTION



ONE CAN HARDLY give proof of the figures put forward for the estimation of crowds. They always remain approximate, often a very good estimate, but not scientifically foolproof. How, then, can one count the thousands of people who come to Saint Joseph's Oratory on Mount Royal, on beautiful summer days or chilly winter evenings, on foot, by car or bus? One can never measure their exact number, much less explain their very presence.

However, it is possible, without too great a risk of error, to say that some two million people visit the Oratory every year. This figure does not diminish, year in and year out; perhaps the contrary is true.

What can attract such crowds from all horizons to the Oratory?

Surely, something out of the ordinary. Or some extraordinary person.

This book wants to introduce that special person to you. At the outset, no one had any reason to place much hope in him. Yet, throughout the years, this wisp of a man embodied the hopes of millions of people. His name was Alfred Bessette; he became

known as Brother André. All those who came to him, and all those who still do today, found in him a reason or a way to live.

Millions of people know him today because they visit him at St. Joseph's Oratory in Montreal. They "visit" him? We could almost say that they "meet" him because he remains spiritually present to all who come and confide in him, telling their life stories, their troubles, and almost always their hopes. Not only in his large home on Mount Royal, which dominates the city, a main tourist attraction, but they also meet him in their hearts, memories, and prayers.

Blessed Brother André is part of all of these people's lives: they have real reasons to love him and to thank him. How many requests have been answered? How many cures have taken place here? No one can say, and we will never know for sure. Testimonies never cease to be heard in a variety of ways. It is through the generosity of these pilgrims with grateful hearts that this immense temple, the Oratory, was consecrated to St. Joseph, the father of Jesus. It is to him that Brother André gave his whole life and entrusted the cares of so many.

This small Holy Cross Brother was a most humble religious and yet very attentive to all who came to him. With very little education he became St. Joseph's "friend" and brought him the requests people confided in him. He merely wanted to build a simple devotional chapel, and yet he saw it grow into the largest shrine in the world dedicated to St. Joseph. It is also an exceptional spiritual meeting place for all seekers of faith. He never attributed any "power" to himself, and yet many wonders took place.

For a long time many of his followers have considered him a saint. As it has often happened in the history of the Church, faithful followers precede Rome's decrees.

Blessed Brother André, so small, so timid, and so silent, still speaks to those who come to him, just as he did with those who came to him in the past. It is impossible to fathom the hearts of the pilgrims who found and who continue to find hope through their encounter with the man known as the "Mount Royal miracle-worker." But one may better understand them by reading, in the following pages, the strange story of his life.

## EPILOGUE



IN THE BRIEF chronicles of Canadian history, Brother André represents a unique phenomenon. Indeed, this country has not witnessed the birth of many heroes, of many people of great renown or distinction. Of course, some stars have acquired an international reputation, and by the same token, have spawned a wealth of admirers and fans. They may inspire national pride, or even become role models to some. All countries, all people honor their heroes, and all heroes welcome public acclaim.

With the exception of Brother André. In modern language, he could be called an antihero. He never solicited admiration or honor as such, nor did he ever reap any profit from his unwanted fame. He seemed unable to grasp the very nature of the devotion he inspired in people, and was almost bewildered by the number of people who appealed to him. All his life, he simply did what he thought best: moved by compassion, he unburdened the suffering. Why? Because he loved them. And they requited his love.

There lies the difference between Brother André and other great men. While they may be admired,

Brother André was genuinely loved. And he loved without reserve. There was nothing ethereal about his love; it could almost be called a determined love, a love inseparable from the desire to help, to unburden, and even to heal his neighbor.

And his neighbor was mankind. He welcomed and visited all kinds of people, regardless of their creed, education, extraction, nationality, or social standing. All the people that streamed into his office had one thing in common, though: they were all met with the same considerate affection.

One can only summarize Brother André's work over those long years when he embodied the hopes of millions of people by resorting to the most simple, perhaps the most banal of formulations: he was good to people, he was good for people.

Many pilgrims made public the fact that Brother André had cured them or had been instrumental in their obtaining a special grace. The crutches and canes still on display in both the primitive chapel and the votive chapel of the Oratory afford silent corroboration of these often sensational claims. The witnesses to Brother André's power of intercession are by far outnumbered, though, by those millions of people whose visits were shrouded in discretion. Spectacular events were hardly a matter of routine at the Oratory. Thousands of sick or crippled people went to the Brother for a physical cure and came away with soothed souls. Again, the Brother was good to them; he was good for them.

Recoveries and sometimes even conversions are tangible signs. But how can one measure the spiritual healing that took place at the Oratory? People

graced with spiritual blessings were ordinarily very discreet about the matter. They would not, or simply could not, whisper a word about their meeting with Brother André. To the millions of people who visited him at the Oratory, the Brother offered, first and foremost, inner peace; hence the affection people had for him. He gave them a little happiness and hope in a difficult life, especially during the somber years of the Depression. Quite simply, he was good for them.

Up to this day, visitors come to the Oratory primarily in search of inner peace. Several decades after the death of Brother André, millions of people still come every year to the sanctuary to find what he originally dispensed, solace. The intimate bond between the people and Brother André is still at work today, as it was in the past. Throughout the years, it lives on.

## PEOPLE FROM HERE AND ABROAD

Today's visitors to the Oratory are quite similar to those of yesteryears. Occasional and regular pilgrims mingle with restless tourists in an atmosphere of singular harmony. Many visitors come from the Montreal area. Some come on a daily or weekly basis, others less frequently. Each year, more than half a million people come to the mountain to celebrate the Eucharist. That figure has not changed since the beginning of the 1980s. With so many of today's churches virtually deserted, how can one explain the perseverance of the faithful at the Oratory? What does it have to offer that ordinary churches do not?

Perhaps pilgrimages, in themselves, bring special meaning to people's lives, meaning that other religious activities do not. Of course, religion no longer plays a large part in most people's daily lives, or in the workings of society. This is a recent, perhaps unique, phenomenon in the history of mankind. For throughout the ages, civilization has gone hand in hand with organized religion. This is not to say that our present-day lives are totally bereft of religious aspirations. Today, people express their spiritual thirst in a manner more individual, in a manner discreet to the point of anonymity. The Oratory remains a sacred place for many people, a place where they can converse with a God that they discover in a personal, rather than in an institutionalized fashion.

People go to the Oratory, as always, to feel God's love for them. However, modern sensibility leans toward personal religious expression: today's pilgrims prefer contemplation to congregation. Private reflection is held to be more rewarding than are formal rites, which are sometimes construed as being artificial or imposed. In this spirit, people approach God as discrete individuals, knowing they will be accepted and loved for what they are, much as they were in Brother André's time.

There is also a wealth of services available at the Oratory that ordinary parish churches simply cannot provide. There are at least seven Eucharistic celebrations per day; and pastoral counseling is available all day long, every day of the year. The setting of the sanctuary still appeals to visitors. Who could fail to appreciate the symbolic ascent of the mountain, the beautiful gardens, and the very expanse of the



church, which offers quiet areas for prayer or room for individual contemplation? For harried citizens, the Oratory represents something of a sanctuary, in the secular acceptance of the word.

Places of pilgrimage are indeed essential in urban settings. The theologian André Charron so defines their role:

They allow for the observance of religious practices which may well be traditional in essence, but are now free of social constraints. They afford a loose structuring of Catholic congregations; they constitute a kind of religious bridge, whereby the individual, without relinquishing the anonymity of the big city, can focus on his personal approach to God. Thus the individual can reclaim certain rites laden with religious meaning, even if these symbolic gestures have disappeared from his daily life.

All of this by no means forbids the attendance of those magnificent ceremonies still held at the Oratory, ceremonies embellished by the harmony of the church's great organ and choir. The week preceding Saint Joseph's feast day is marked by the arrival of thousands of pilgrims, who sometimes travel from faraway parishes and dioceses to attend Mass. Such crowds bring to mind the times of Brother André. In another sense, though, today's visitors to the Oratory do differ from those of times past. People of all creeds and nationalities now come to the Oratory and visibly feel at home there. In some regards, the church has become a nondenominational house of worship, welcoming all those who would approach God. Of

course, many people no longer practice any form of religion or express any kind of religious concern. Yet, as it looms over Montreal's skyline, the Oratory still offers a most present sign of divine transcendence in today's secular society.

For believers or agnostics from here or abroad, the Oratory remains a favored site for individual or communal spiritual reflection. As they walk up the mountain, these people leave behind them a sometimes stifling and turbulent world. They know such sanctuaries are rare. They know that the Oratory is unique, an exceptional place in a troubled world.

Brother André, for all his power, was not gifted with prophecy. How could he have known the fate of his chapel, how could he have foreseen the changes that have swept over our societies? From the very beginning, though, he wanted Saint Joseph's church to be a place devoted to spiritual edification, to well-being, to sharing and peace. This explains why Brother André's presence can still be felt there, a presence as welcoming and comforting as it was during his life.

## TIMELINE



- August 9, 1845.....Alfred Bessette is born in Saint-Grégoire d'Iberville, Quebec (then Lower Canada) to Isaac and Clothilde Bessette. He is their eighth child (they will have two more).
- 1855.....Isaac Bessette dies while cutting wood in a nearby forest.
- 1857.....Clothilde dies of tuberculosis. Alfred is taken in by Clothilde's sister, Marie-Rosalie, and her husband.
- 1863.....Alfred moves to the United States, looking for work.
- 1867.....Alfred moves back to Canada. He eventually finds his way to Saint-Césaire, where he runs into Father Provençal, a priest-friend from his youth.
- November 22, 1870.....Alfred arrives at Notre-Dame College in Montreal with father Provençal's recommendation. He quickly enters the novitiate and becomes a porter. He retains this office most of his life.

- 1871.....A provincial council rejects Alfred's candidacy, citing poor health. Alfred is able to convince a loca
- August 22, 1872.....Alfred takes his first vows.
- February 2, 1874.....Alfred Bessette takes his perpetual vows, becoming Brother André. He soon begins interceding for the sick and is the source of many miracles.
- 1893.....A new tramway line connects to the College. Brother André uses the tramway stand to receive visitors and listen to the concerns of the sick.
- 1896.....The Community purchases a large tract of land, including the facing hillside. André is unable to convince his Superiors to build a chapel there.
- 1902.....Brother André falls ill and is bedridden. In the infirmary he convinces the college Superior to allow the building of a chapel dedicated to St. Joseph on the nearby mountain. Brother André begins raising money.
- October 19, 1904.....The first chapel is officially opened.

- August 1908.....A new, larger chapel is built to accommodate the growing crowds. It is still not big enough, so a new building is commissioned.
- November 22, 1908.....The new chapel is built. The steeple is added in 1910.
- 1909.....Brother André is given a private office by the chapel to receive visitors.
- January 1914.....Mgr. Bruchési authorizes the building of a much larger church to replace the already overcrowded chapel.
- July 11, 1914 .....The Superior General of the Holy Cross Order grants permission to immediately begin construction of “St. Joseph’s Church.”
- May 11, 1916 .....Boileau Construction Firm is given charge of the construction. Construction begins May 19.
- Summer 1917.....Crypt of the church is, by and large, completed. Within a few years, it is deemed too small for the ever-growing crowds.
- August 31, 1924.....Cornerstone of the church above the crypt is blessed. Construction begins.

BROTHER ANDRÉ ❖

- 1931.....Stock market collapses, workers begin to be laid off. Construction halts, although most of the main structure is complete.
- January 6, 1937.....Brother André, ninety-one, dies.
- 1937.....Construction resumes.
- 1967.....The Dome is completed. St. Joseph's Oratory is finally, fully constructed.
- May 23, 1982.....Brother André is pronounced "Blessed" by Pope John Paul II.