

JANUARY 7 FATHER PETER JAE CHOI

Feast of St. Andre Bessette

For those of you who have a devotion to St. Andre Bessette like me, Happy Feast Day! St. Andre Bessette was born on August 9th, 1845 in Quebec, and died on January 6, 1937. And because the Church considers the day of Saints' death as their heavenly birthday, or their entrance to eternal life, the Church designated January 6th as the feast day of our beloved Saint Andre. However, the Church in Canada celebrates St. Andre Bessette's feast day on the 7th, instead of the 6th. The reason for this is because 12 days after Christmas, which is January 6th, is the Solemnity of the Epiphany of the Lord. There is a hierarchy of feast days in the Catholic Church. Among all feast days, Solemnity is the highest ranking feast day. Solemnity commemorates crucial events in salvation history, like Christmas, Epiphany, Easter and Pentecost. So when a Solemnity and another feast day happen on the same day, the Church celebrates the Solemnity and the less important feast day gets suppressed. As a result, in order to be able to celebrate an important Canadian saint, the Bishops of Canada moved his feast day to the following day, to the 7th.

Before I tell you a bit about who St. Andre Bessette is and what he did, let me first share with you a true story that happened to Fr. John Bertao when we made a pilgrimage to St. Joseph's oratory last year. Fr. John and I took 43 pilgrims with us to St. Joseph's Oratory, Cap-de-la-Madeline, and the tomb of Blessed Frederick Jansoon, who is another Canadian soon to become a saint. While we were visiting St. Joseph's Oratory we were given a little free time. Fr. John and I went up to the 4th floor of the Oratory where

St. Andre Bessette's heart was displayed. After spending a short time praying, Fr. John took out his phone and took a photo of the heart. While he was looking at the photo he saw an image of St. Andre in the photo. It was an unmistakably clear image of St. Andre's face. I compared his photo with the photos I took and the image of St. Andre's face was not found in any of my photos. Then I looked all over the wall where St. Andre's face appeared in the photo, and the image from the photo was nowhere to be seen on the wall. We were both stunned, as we couldn't explain how his image just appeared in the photo. We then went down to the 3rd floor and I waited for Fr. John to go buy a statue of St. Joseph for his friend. Once again I saw Fr. John standing and looking puzzled. So I walked over and asked him, "Are you okay?" Then he slowly turned towards me and said, "You are not going to believe this. When I went to the cashier to pay for the statue she said, "Hi Father John." So I asked her, "How do you know my name?" And she replied, "Oh, St. Andre told me your name is Fr. John."

The following day we visited the church where there was a museum dedicated to Blessed Frederick Jansoon in the basement and his tomb in the Church. When we were finished with our tour, our group walked back and got on the bus. Everyone was back on the bus except for Fr. John. So I got out of the bus and went back to the church to look for him. Again, I saw Fr. John looking confused. When I asked him what happened, he said "I don't know what to make of this. The tour guide gently grabbed my arm as I was leaving the church and told me, "God told me to tell you not to worry about anything!" So, I assured him with a reply,

“Whatever you were praying for St. Andre is looking out for you. I think God is answering your prayers.”

St. Andre Bessette was God’s miracle worker. There are over 10,000 documented healing miracles attributed to St. Andre Bessette, but people who invoke his intercession continue to experience miracles even to this day. Just like the rest of us, St. Andre wasn’t born a saint or a miracle worker. In fact he experienced many trials in life. He was no stranger to rejections, and health issues. After his father died when he was 9 his family descended into poverty. And after his mother died when he was 13, he soon had to join the work force. But due to his frail health he wasn’t cut out for manual labour. Nobody wanted to hire him. Even when he tried to answer the call to religious life he was constantly being rejected due to his health issues and being illiterate. Only with the support of his pastor and intervention of the archbishop of Montreal at the time did the Congregation of the Holy Cross accept him.

After joining the Congregation of the Holy Cross he was given a task of being a porter, opening and closing the door of Notre Dame collage. He was often seen spending time with people, listening to their stories, and praying with them. He encouraged people who came to him to apply on themselves the oil from the lamp burning before the statue of St. Joseph, and to have faith. Miraculous healings were taking place in his presence. When people realized how saintly he was and news about miraculous healing began to spread, pilgrims began to pile in. He was eventually given permission to build a small chapel to welcome pilgrims. So he asked if the Congregation of the Holy Cross could

assign him a chaplain to hear confessions and celebrate Mass for the pilgrims. The Order refused his request telling him that they were already short staffed and they couldn't allocate any priests. The superior, however, told him that he could assign him a retired priest who was blind. He wouldn't be able to celebrate Mass but he could help hear confessions. St. Andre was very happy about that. As soon as the priest arrived St. Andre told him, "Father, get ready to celebrate Mass from tomorrow, because tomorrow morning you will be able to see!" And sure enough the priest's eyes were miraculously cured the next morning and he was able to celebrate Mass from that day on.

Even through the simple task of being a porter, St. Andre did it with great love and compassion, and became known as God's Doorkeeper. But he wasn't just opening the doors for people. He was opening the door to God's love, blessing and healing for countless people. As we celebrate the feast day of St. Andre Bessette, let us remember that we are all capable of doing small things with great love, because it is love that matters the most in life.