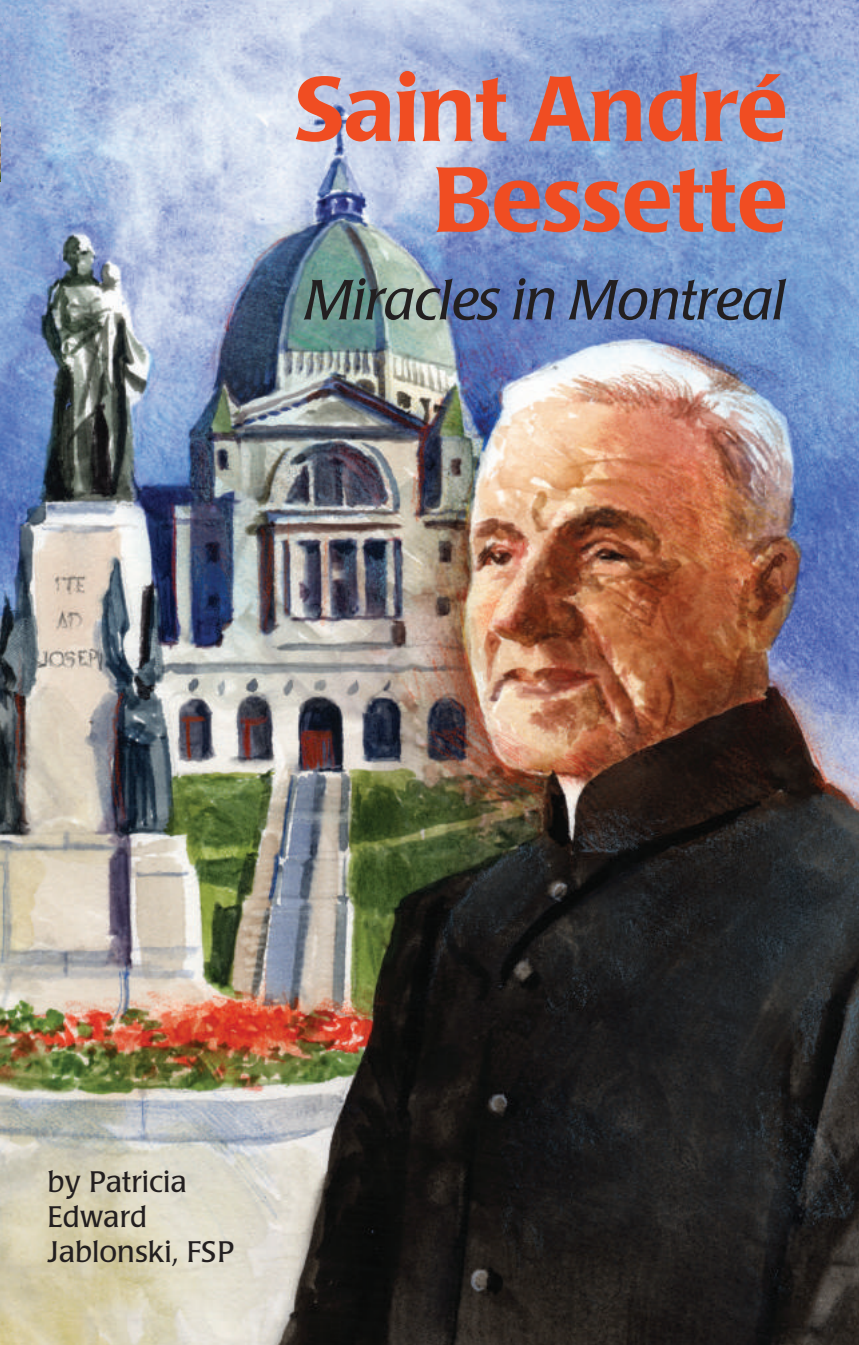


Saint André Bessette

Miracles in Montreal



by Patricia
Edward
Jablonski, FSP

SMILES AND TEARS

Isaac Bessette waited impatiently. When would the midwife let him in? A baby's feeble cry finally broke the silence. Then, "Isaac . . . where's Isaac?" The nervous father hurried to his wife's bedside. "I'm here, Clothilde," he softly reassured her. "Everything is all right. Rest now."

But things were far from right. The midwife cradled a whimpering baby boy in her arms. She fixed her gaze on the tiny form. "He seems very ill, Clothilde," she murmured. "Shall I baptize him for you? If he lives, you can take him to the priest. He will do what can't be done now in an emergency."

"Yes, please! Do it right away," the exhausted mother cried. "If my child is not to stay with us, I pray that he will go straight back to God. At least he will have been baptized."

That night seemed endless. Clothilde and Isaac worriedly hovered over their baby. They watched and prayed. By the next day, August 10, 1845, the crisis had passed.

Joy filled the one-room cabin on the outskirts of the Canadian village of Saint-Grégoire.

“It’s time to bring baby Alfred into town,” Isaac happily notified his brother Edouard and sister-in-law Josephine. They would be the godparents. Because there was no permanent church in Saint-Grégoire, the ceremony was held in a building that served as a schoolhouse and meeting hall. That was where the local pastor offered Mass on a portable altar every Sunday. Father Sylvestre completed the Rite of Baptism. He blessed the baby, anointed him with chrism, and wrote his name in the baptismal record book. Alfred Bessette was now not only a child of God, but also an official member of the Catholic Church.

Little Alfred was born with a serious stomach problem. It bothered him all his life. Even though foods such as white bread, fruits, vegetables, and meat were expensive, Mr. and Mrs. Bessette made sure that Alfred always had whatever he needed.

Isaac Bessette was a hard worker, but the times were not the best. All of the Bessette children did what they could to help earn money. Isaac, a carpenter by trade, often took his older sons with him to cut trees from the nearby forest for timber. When he

was old enough, Alfred would beg, "Papa, can't I come with you today?" But his father's answer was always the same. "Your mother needs you at home. You're the man of the house while your brothers and I are away." It was a kind way of saying that Alfred was too frail and small to help with the lumbering work.

Two more children were born to Mr. and Mrs. Bessette after Alfred. That brought the total to ten. Young Alfred was very happy to be surrounded by such a large and loving family. After all, it was fun to have so many brothers and sisters to play with! The Bessette family lived a simple but joyful life. They loved to sing together, especially in the evenings when the day's work was done. Every night, the family also prayed the Rosary together. Alfred would sit by his mother's side and finger her beads along with her. "My mother was always smiling," he would remember years later. "She had such a lovely smile." Alfred also recalled his mother's devotion to the saints. "She's the one who gave me my devotion to Saint Joseph."

When Alfred was ten, an unexpected tragedy changed his family's life forever. One blustery day in February 1855, Mr.

Bessette and his older boys went out to cut down some trees. Not long after they left, there was a frantic knock at the door. Mrs. Bessette opened it to find a solemn-faced neighbor. The man nervously wrung his cap in his hands. "Clothilde," he began, "I have some very bad news . . . There's been a terrible accident . . ."

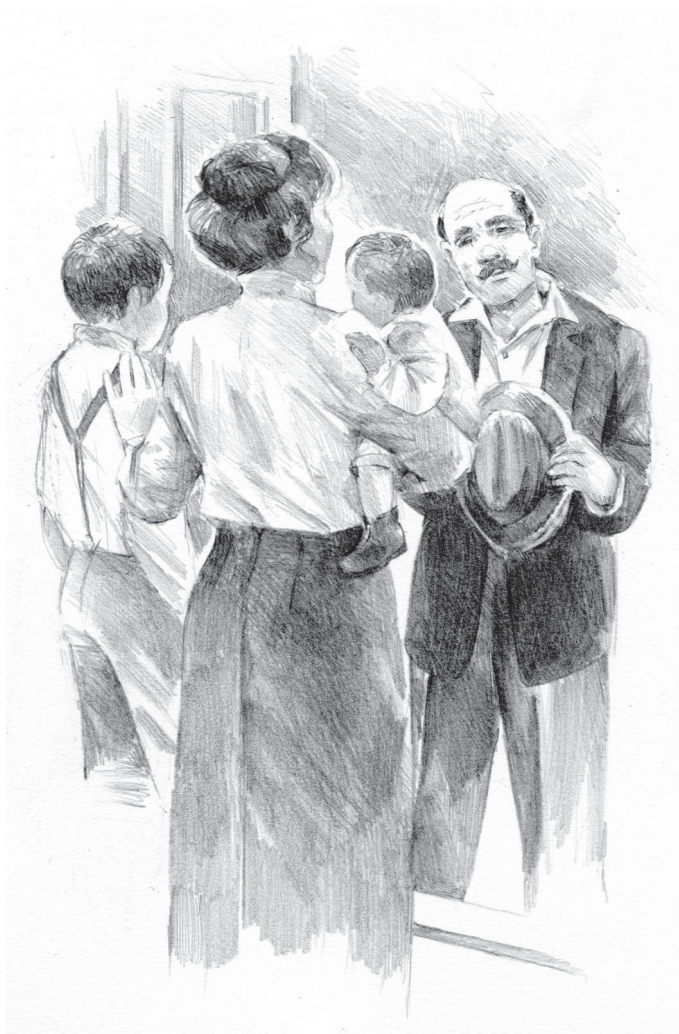
"An accident? Where? How? No—no it can't be my Isaac!" Mrs. Bessette wailed.

"A tree fell on him, Clothilde," the neighbor quietly explained. "The men are bringing him home now. Your sons are with them. You'd better call the doctor. I'll . . . I'll be praying for you all."

The doctor arrived soon after Isaac was carried in on a makeshift stretcher. "I'm so sorry, Mrs. Bessette," he said after examining Isaac. "There is nothing I can do for him. It will be best to send for the priest . . ."

The pastor came and administered the last sacraments. By the next day, Isaac Bessette had gone to meet God.

Clothilde tried her best to provide for her children. But the effort proved to be greater than her strength. She soon came down with tuberculosis of the lungs—a serious disease. Clothilde had to send her children to live with friends and relatives



"Clothilde, there's been a terrible accident..."

who could care for them. She kept only Alfred with her. The two of them had always had a special relationship, and he needed more care because of his poor health. Alfred and his mother moved to the town of Saint-Césaire. There they lived with Marie-Rosalie, Clothilde's sister, who was married to Timothée Nadeau.

Clothilde worried that Alfred was not getting an education. He could never attend classes in the village school for more than a week without getting sick. This left him far behind the other children his age. Between Alfred's physical weakness and his mother's illness, little could be done. So at the age of twelve, he still couldn't read or write.

Clothilde Bessette fought her dreaded disease courageously for two years. But in those days, there were no antibiotics to treat people with tuberculosis. In the late fall of 1857, Clothilde died. She was just forty-three years old.

Alfred was heartbroken. Now he was an orphan. *What should I do, Lord?* he prayed. *What's going to happen to me?*