

## Alberta student enjoys 'pretty cool' family connection to namesake of St. André Bessette School

Touring the magnificent St. Joseph's Oratory during a class trip to Montreal, student Noah Ethier was surprised to learn about his family connection to St. André Bessette, who helped build it.

"When my mom told the tour director, everyone kind of lost their minds," said Ethier. "I thought that was pretty cool how I was related to someone who helped build that."

Ethier's grandmother, Simone, married into the family of André Bessette, who in 2010 made history as the first Canadian-born man to be canonized.

Four years after that Montreal trip, Noah Ethier is part of the first group of students to attend St. André Bessette Catholic School, which opened in September in Fort Saskatchewan, northeast of Edmonton. At first, his classmates didn't believe he was related to the school's namesake.

"I had to get my mom and grandma to tell them," said Ethier. "When the teachers found out, they kind of lost their minds too. They were pretty excited when I told them."

The name St. André Bessette graces schools, churches, soup kitchens, parks and streets across North America, and as far as away as Bangladesh.



Assistant principal Fiona Wimmer

Assistant principal Fiona Wimmer said it's rare to have a Canadian saint, let alone to have a school named after him and family lineage in the same city.

"It's amazing," Wimmer said. "I think it just makes the connections more real and more tangible for our students. They no longer just have some distant saint attachment. It's someone that they can make a biographical connection to. It allows them to investigate that person, I think, with a little bit more curiosity and meaning."

St. André Bessette's virtues already seem to be rubbing off on the first 500 students of the Grade 9-12 school. Students started a Trick or Eat campaign on Halloween, going door to door to collect food for the needy instead of candy.

St. André Bessette also influenced the school's design. Its front doors and window frames are red, after the bright red doors of Bessette's chapel on Mount Royal, where he welcomed thousands of the sick and needy for prayer, healing, and spiritual guidance. The colour signified love, caring, and shelter

When the Elk Island Catholic School Division was in search of a name for their new school, Noah's mother, Michelle Ethier – a teacher in Fort Saskatchewan – submitted St. André Bessette's name. She was elated when it beat 100 other submissions.

Michelle Ethier grew up with photos of St André – known as Brother André Bessette before his canonization – in the family home, and her parents would talk about their holy relative.

"It felt like there was that extra connection of someone really important in our family, not only was he a brother, but he also performed miracles."

St. André credited those miracles to the intercession of St. Joseph, the husband of Jesus' mother, Mary.

Simone Bessette first heard about "Brother André from Montreal" growing up in the small central Alberta town of Legal. "I didn't know his last name was Bessette until I married a Bessette."

Her husband's grandfather was Brother André's cousin.



**St. Andre Bessette**

The saint was born Alfred Joseph Bessette on Aug. 9, 1845, the eighth of 12 siblings in a poor, Catholic family. When he was 12, they were orphaned after their father, a carpenter, was killed at a worksite and their mother died of tuberculosis.

Due to a lifelong stomach ailment, Bessette was too sick and frail to achieve his dream of becoming a priest, but he was accepted as a religious brother with the Congregation of the Holy Cross at age 25. He took the name André when he made his final religious vows, in honour of his mentor, Father André Provençal.

Bessette was assigned to be a doorkeeper at Notre Dame College, a role he had for 40 years.

“He was very amiable, soft spoken, a very calm individual,” said Simone Bessette. “Before you know it, people were telling him their concerns and he was being a coach and talking with them. It magnified and people came to the college just to see him. After a while, it was hundreds of people coming.”

Brother André would also visit the sick in hospital or in their homes, counselling them to pray to St. Joseph, go to confession, and attend Mass before returning to him for healing.

“He really wanted to help everybody,” said Simone Bessette.

Brother André’s biggest goal in life was to build a church in honour of St. Joseph, and he would cut hair for seminarians and other students for 15 cents to raise money.

Construction of the chapel started in 1904 on Mount Royal. But Bessette did not live to see the completion of [St. Joseph’s Oratory](#), Canada’s tallest church at

more than 124 metres. Brother André died in Montreal at age 91 on Jan. 6, 1937.

Bessette was beatified in 1982, and proclaimed a saint by Pope Benedict XVI in October 2010.

“As soon as the pope said ‘Bessette,’ my heart made a flip,” said Simone Bessette, who watched the ceremony on television.

Her grandson, Noah Ethier, tries to put what he’s learned about his distant relative into practice.

“I learned that he would pretty much give anything just to help one person,” Noah said. “I think it’s the right thing to do to help a certain person if they’re struggling with something. Just helping people out is just kind of naturally what I’ve adapted.”

At St. André Bessette school, Wimmer hopes that students will see their patron saint as a role model.

“When you look at who St. André was, he was known as ‘God’s doorkeeper.’ He welcomes everyone, and that’s what we do here too,” Wimmer said. “Everyone is as equally welcome and wanted ... whether there’s a hereditary connection to our St. André or not, we’re all his kids.”

St. André was short – he stood under five feet tall – and considered himself “unimportant” as a doorkeeper at Notre Dame College, Simone Bessette said. But he believed he could do great work in the name of Jesus.

It’s reflected in one of his famous sayings: “It is with the smallest paint brush that an artist creates the most exquisite and beautiful artwork”.

Simone Bessette adds: “I would hope that his legacy will go on and will grow and grow and grow.”