



*A Moment of Grace*

PREPARING FOR THE CANONIZATION OF  
BROTHER ANDRÉ



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NATHALIE DUMAS

✠ SAINT JOSEPH'S ORATORY

# *"This Is the Seed"*

## **PREPARING FOR THE CANONIZATION OF BROTHER ANDRÉ**

The following text is an excerpt from a letter published in 1981 in preparation for the beatification of Brother André, which was celebrated on May 23, 1982, in Rome by Pope John Paul II. The letter — A Moment of Grace — was written by Father Thomas Barrosse (+1994) to the religious of Holy Cross. At the time, Father Barrosse was superior general of the Congregation of Holy Cross. He was a premier scholar of Basil Moreau in particular and of Holy Cross in general.

In this excerpt, Father Barrosse explains the meaning of beatification, provides an overview of Brother André's life, and offers some thoughts on what André's life and ministry mean for us today. Though written almost 30 years ago, Father Barrosse's insights are applicable even now as we prepare for the canonization of Brother André by Pope Benedict XVI on October 17, 2010. The canonization will be yet another moment of grace for the Family of Holy Cross, for the church and the world.

Following Father Barrosse's text are comments and questions that can be used for prayer, reflection and discussion.



HENRI LARIN

✠ PERPETUAL RELIGIOUS PROFESSION, 1874

# *A Moment of Grace*

BY FATHER THOMAS BARROSSE, CSC

St. Joseph's Oratory, Montreal  
November 30, 1981

Dear fellow religious,

The process for Brother André's beatification is nearing its completion. Though the final judgment rests with Pope John Paul and is still to be made, we can surely consider a favorable judgment likely and, indeed, very likely to come soon. Hence, it is appropriate that we give thought to what such an event should be for ourselves and for the Church.

We can, I think, say quite simply that the eventual beatification of Brother André should be a moment of grace for all of us his fellow religious. It should be, even more, a moment of grace for God's people, the Church.

Beatification is not an award given to someone for a Christian life well lived. Nor is it meant to give status to the religious community or other group to which he or she belonged.

Beatification is intended for the spiritual good of the Christian community as a whole. By it the Holy Father proposes to the admiration, encouragement, imitation and veneration of the Christian people a person who has lived a heroic Christian life (or, in the case of a martyr, died for the Christian faith).

Surely a heroic Christian life stirs the admiration of sincere believers. I mean a life which has, over the course of many years and despite trials and difficulties, been constantly and consistently guided by a solid faith and unflinching hope, motivated by a sincere and self-sacrificing charity, and characterized by Christian prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance.

Surely such a life is an encouragement to serious Christians, whose weaknesses and failings sometimes make them wonder whether a life of total generosity towards God is possible. Particularly encouraging is a heroic Christian life in which they can perceive the humanness, limitations and weaknesses of the servant of God, as is usually the case with the saints of our time.

Surely the example of such a life suggests to sincere Christians many ways in which they may better serve the God in whom they believe and the neighbor whom they want to love. This is especially so when abundant details of the life of the servant of God are known, as is generally true after the detailed study of the person's life demanded today by the Sacred Congregation for the Causes of the Saints.

Surely the assurance given by Church authority that a particular individual is now with God after having lived a most generous Christian life is an encouragement not only to “go and do likewise” but also to respect, venerate and befriend this friend of God — which, after all, is what devotion to the saints means. The numerous favors which an unending succession of people say they receive through Brother André's intercession show that, for many, he is already such a friend. His beatification will encourage others to befriend him too.

Let me recall briefly a few of the details of his life and indicate how I think his beatification can be a moment of special grace for the people whom we serve and for ourselves. For the details of his life, I draw on the *Positio*, or principal official document for his cause, and on Canon Etienne Catta's monumental *Le frère André et l'Oratoire Saint-Joseph du Mont-Royal* (Fides, Montreal, 1964). I have been able to refine some of this information with the help of religious at the Oratory.

## **I. HIS LIFE AND WORK**

Born on August 9, 1845, in the little village of Saint Grégoire d'Iberville, Québec, Alfred Bessette was the eighth of his parents' twelve children, two of whom died in infancy. His father Isaac, a quiet man with so little schooling that, like many of his contemporaries, he could not even sign his own name, found it difficult to support his large family. Their plight worsened when he met an accidental death. His wife Clothilde Foisy, a simple and very devout woman, broken by the loss of her husband, died two years later. Alfred was then twelve years old. Already this shy child, so frail at birth that he had been baptized immediately, had known sickness, hunger and dire poverty. He had also learned to pray from a family that had regularly recited the rosary together and, more particularly, from a mother who had taught him to love and depend on Saint Joseph.

After their mother's death, the orphans went to stay with various relatives. Alfred lived in Saint-Césaire with the family of an aunt. But he was with them only long enough to prepare for his first communion and his confirmation and to learn to sign his name and read a little. Then he moved from one employ to another in southern Québec and the northeastern United States, never able, because of his poor health, to find and keep a job that would provide him an adequate livelihood. To his other sufferings, that of loneliness was added, and he found prayer progressively become his only resort, especially prayer to Saint Joseph.

At the age of twenty-two or twenty-three, he returned to Saint-Césaire. There the pastor, Father André Provençal, eventually helped Alfred discover the religious vocation that was his. The young man applied for admission to the Brothers of Holy Cross, still widely known as the Brothers of Saint Joseph, who had only the year before opened a school across from the parish church. Alfred was then twenty-five.

In 1870, less than three weeks after Pope Pius IX had proclaimed Saint Joseph patron of the universal Church, Alfred Bessette received the habit of the Brothers of Holy Cross at Saint Joseph's Novitiate in Montréal. He was given the religious name André, the name of the priest who had sent him to the congregation, as also of the very first Brother of Saint Joseph to make religious profession, Brother André Mottais, an outstanding figure in the earliest history of Holy Cross.

A year later, still without vows because of his precarious health, the novice found himself at Collège Notre-Dame in Montréal with the responsibilities of doorkeeper and infirmarian, care of the entire building's oil lamps and the task of sweeping "the chapel, corridors, rooms, stairs, etc." and of seeing that each room had its needed firewood. He later also became the school barber. All this remained his officially assigned responsibility until 1909. He would afterwards comment: "[Soon after I entered Holy Cross,] my superiors showed me to the door, and I stayed there for forty years."

During the months of uncertainty as to whether he would be admitted to profession, he had a lengthy conversation with Father Narcisse Hupier. This priest had been chaplain to the Brothers of Saint Joseph when Father Moreau was named their superior in 1835 and, having become a priest of Holy Cross, remained faithful to our founder to the end of his life. The providential conversation with this elderly religious, passing through Montréal from France on his way to an assignment in New Brunswick, profoundly marked the young novice. From him Brother André learned the importance of welcoming God's will even when it means suffering and hardship. The joy of making profession finally came on August 22, 1872.

The doorkeeper's duties often made it impossible for Brother André to be present for community meals. This kept the other religious from noticing too often the bread soaked in milk or the mixture of flour and water, which longstanding digestive problems gradually turned into his principal nourishment. His duties sometimes kept him from community prayer too. Though his thoughts turned repeatedly to God throughout the day, he was not rarely in the chapel late into the night engaged in the prayers that he had missed with the community earlier or in his personal devotions.

Always ready to accept additional responsibilities, the doorkeeper often found himself taking groups of students on walks. The youngsters saw him as a kind and jovial religious hardly ever without a quip or pun, but also able to maintain their

respect and keep discipline. The parents of the boarding students, when they came to visit their sons, found the doorkeeper a pleasant man, with whom they always enjoyed exchanging a few words. The poor who came to the door to beg food or other assistance (they were his responsibility too) recognized him as a compassionate man ever ready to provide a meal, encouragement and advice. Indeed, he eventually began to visit families in difficulty in their homes.

When smallpox had broken out in the congregation's school in Saint-Laurent just north of Montréal, Brother André, still a novice, suggested a procession in which Saint Joseph's statue would be carried about the school and the saint invoked. The contagion immediately diminished and soon disappeared. Later his frequent recommendations to the sick to pray to Saint Joseph or to rub affected members with a medal of the saint or with oil taken from a lamp that burned before his statue (sometimes he did this himself) were at times followed by an unusually quick or wholly unexpected recovery.

Sick people began to seek him out at Collège Notre-Dame. As they increased in number, parents of the students began to fear for their children's health, doctors began to accuse him of quackery, and some of his fellow religious manifested their displeasure at a situation for which they held him responsible. He was forbidden to receive the sick. He obeyed. But they came all the same and waited in silence. Finally, he was granted permission to receive them across the road from the school in the little shelter built for people waiting for passing trolley cars.

Though the numbers of sick people continued to mount, Brother André kept his assorted duties of doorkeeper, infirmarian, housekeeper and barber. This was the situation in 1896, when the congregation obtained a piece of land on the mountain which rose directly across the road from Collège Notre-Dame and just behind the shelter where the sick came to visit the brother doorkeeper. Brother Alderic, cured eighteen years earlier of a seriously infected leg wound by the use of "Saint Joseph's oil" recommended by Brother André, had attempted to assure the purchase by burying a medal of Saint Joseph on the property, and the road leading up the mountainside, after the purchase, was christened "Saint Joseph Boulevard." Brother André told Brother Alderic of his conviction that Saint Joseph wanted to be honored on the mountain. However, as he later informed the archbishop of Montréal, he had this conviction not from any vision or special revelation, but simply from his strong devotion to the head of the Holy Family. He himself began to scatter medals of Saint Joseph on the mountainside.

Eventually superiors permitted the construction of a tiny place of prayer — a minuscule "oratory" — inaugurated on October 19, 1904, and pilgrimages to the spot began. Successive enlargements followed, demanded more often by the lay people who were increasingly associated with him than by Brother André himself. In 1909, just before his sixty-fourth birthday, the doorkeeper of Collège Notre-Dame

was finally released from all his duties at the school and named full-time “guardian of the oratory,” where he was already receiving those who wished to see him. In 1910, the Blessed Sacrament was permanently reserved in the little chapel, and the provincial named Father Adolphe Clément to provide full-time priestly ministry. Within months, ground was broken and construction begun on a house for a resident religious community to serve this growing center of prayer and devotion to Saint Joseph. By this time, hundreds — at times thousands — of people came on a single day during the summer months, and tens of thousands of letters arrived each year. In 1915, work on the crypt of the present Oratory began.

Brother André rose each day to be present with his religious community for meditation at 5:30 a.m. and to assist at Mass. He spent most of his mornings and afternoons in a little office receiving people individually, two or three hundred a day, sending them off to pray to Saint Joseph or to go to confession or communion, at times healed, encouraged or converted, at other times abruptly dismissed for what he judged improper behavior or dispositions. On occasion he regretted, even to the point of tears, the impatience he had shown importunate visitors. The day’s work was broken at 11:45 a.m. for prayer with his fellow religious and a light meal. He spent evenings visiting the sick or otherwise afflicted who could not come to visit him, carefully following the list of names and addresses prepared for him by his superior. Apart from occasional trips and rare periods of sickness, this is how he would spend the rest of his life. He was always present, of course, at the big celebrations at the Oratory. But he regularly occupied a choir stall behind the altar where he could not easily be seen.

Though Brother André’s relationship to Saint Joseph was very personal and the key to the great work of his life, it cannot be called his principal devotion. His relationship to the person of Jesus was much more central to his life and, in particular, his relationship to Christ in his passion. Perhaps all that he had suffered in his younger years had helped attract him early to the suffering Christ. Surely the sufferings of the people who came for his help occasioned many a thought of the Savior who had suffered for them. The passion was his preferred subject of meditation and topic of conversation. He spoke of the Savior in his sufferings often and at length, and his hearers never seemed to tire of listening. He made the way of the cross daily, at first alone, then with others especially on Fridays, taking as much as forty minutes to an hour to move about the fourteen stations.

Daily Mass provided him the opportunity of associating his own sufferings and burdens with the sufferings of Christ and it offered him an intimate communion with the Savior which he prolonged during half an hour of deeply recollected thanksgiving. His visits to the Blessed Sacrament were frequent and often lengthy. His holy hours were not limited to the one required each week by the rule and often ran much beyond sixty minutes. Before the tabernacle, he seemed absorbed in prayer, and when he had to be disturbed, the one interrupting him felt he was

intruding on a very personal conversation. When Brother André led small groups in a late evening hour of adoration, he spent the first half-hour doing a meditative reading on the passion and most of the second having someone else do the same. Finally, he obtained permission to have the Blessed Sacrament exposed for a weekly public holy hour at the Oratory, and this regularly drew hundreds of people.

His devotion to Mary, whose right to our homage he summed up in the simple statement, “She is the Mother of God,” showed itself most especially in the rosaries with which he filled the otherwise “empty” moments of his day: traveling time, time spent in passing from one activity to another, moments of waiting ... It showed itself too in the importance he gave the feasts of her Immaculate Conception and, of course, her Sorrows.

In November 1936, though the crypt of the Oratory had been in use for almost twenty years, the upper church was still without even a roof. The means had not been available to complete the building. Brother André, ninety-one years old now, advised putting a statue of Saint Joseph in the unfinished structure: “If Saint Joseph wants to put a roof over his head, he will take care of it.” By the end of the next year, the entire exterior was completed and the concrete structure of the dome cast. But Brother André was not there to see it.

On the Sunday after Christmas, December 27, 1936, an attack of acute indigestion began the series of afflictions that first confined him to his room and then, on the evening of December 31, necessitated his being transferred to the little hospital of Notre-Dame de l’Esperance in Saint-Laurent. The next evening, paralysis of the right arm set in. The sick man’s pain increased. He murmured: “What suffering! My God, my God!”

On Monday night, January 4, when he seemed to be slipping into his last agony, the humble religious, who had spoken almost never of himself or of the Oratory, suddenly began: “You don’t know how much good the good Lord can do at the Oratory! ... How much unhappiness there is in the world! ... I was the right one for that ... I had to be everything: lawyer, doctor, priest ... But the good Lord was helping. See how powerful the good Lord is!” He recalled healings, conversions. “See how powerful the good Lord is! ... How good the good Lord is! How beautiful! ... Yes, how beautiful because the soul, just a reflection of his beauty, is so beautiful!” His last words before he slipped into his final silence were: “This is the seed ...” Was this the seed that must die in order to bear much fruit (John 12:24)? or the tiny grain of mustard seed that grows into a tree in which the birds of heaven take shelter (Matthew 13:31-32)?

He was anointed. The agony subsided. He slipped into a coma, and crowds began to gather in response to information spread by newspapers and radio. Between nine and eleven o’clock on the night of January 5, it was clear that the end was

imminent. With the doctors, the sisters of the hospital, some of the religious of the Oratory and a close lay friend of the dying man, Father Cousineau, who was then superior of the Oratory and would be elected superior general of the congregation the following year, began the prayers for the dying. Then the litany of Saint Joseph. A period of calm, and then clearly the last agony. Father Cousineau began the Magnificat “to thank the good Lord for the graces he had given Brother André during the course of his life” and to thank God for having given Brother André. At 12:50 a.m. on Wednesday, January 6, the dying man’s breathing stopped.

The wake began that morning when the body, not embalmed, was transferred to the Oratory. A huge crowd joined the procession, and a seemingly endless flow of people, interrupted only during the first four nights of the following week when the doors of the Oratory were closed for a few hours, came for a last visit to the “little brother,” to pray for a moment before his body, to touch a religious article to his remains. Many extraordinary cures were reported, and priests were kept busy with penitents in ten confessionals. This was certainly a moment of grace!

An estimated one million people came over the course of the week despite the very harsh winter weather. Some had to wait in line four or more hours to reach the body, which had to be guarded against relic-seekers. Newspapers across Canada and the United States announced or described the events, and not a few newspapers in other parts of the world. Special trains brought crowds from distant regions.

On January 10, a funeral procession accompanied the body to the cathedral for a solemn funeral Mass and then returned it to the Oratory. On January 12, the burial Mass was celebrated by the bishop of Mont-Laurier with the assistance of many dignitaries, ecclesiastical and lay. The sermon was preached by the cardinal archbishop of Québec City.

Even a brief visit to the Oratory or a short conversation with the religious who serve there shows how much Saint Joseph and Brother André are present to the people who come, how much the Oratory is a place of pilgrimage and prayer, how important the work begun by Brother André still is today to so many, especially the sick, the suffering, the afflicted, and sinners.

For the work of the Oratory, Brother André’s beatification will certainly be a confirmation. For the hundreds of persons still alive who knew him personally but also for hundreds of thousands of others, his beatification will be an occasion of joy and surely also a moment of grace.

## **II. HOW A MOMENT OF GRACE?**

Brother André was a man of the people, a man who knew poverty and suffering, a man whose natural gifts, though real, were limited and who knew failure and severe limitations, a man whose principal activities for half of his long religious life

were among the least esteemed and were considered the least important. He was a man for whom the cross was real and dependence on God's providence his principal resource.

Though he was a man capable of great activity and capable of insisting when he knew he was right, even in the great task of his life he always waited for the decision of his superiors and often found himself pushed by others, in particular his many lay friends, to advance the work of the Oratory. In this work he associated with himself a large number of lay people, so much so that it could well be called their work as much as his.

He was an apostle of Saint Joseph. Fostering devotion to this saint was the great work of his life. His name is as inseparably linked with that of Saint Joseph as the name of Saint Bernadette is with that of Our Lady of Lourdes. In certain ways he resembled Saint Joseph, who himself was a man of the people, a laborer, and knew poverty, suffering and exile.

Brother André's piety was the piety of the people: Saint Joseph, the way of the cross, the Blessed Sacrament, the rosary. This is what he bequeathed to the persons whose lives crossed with his own.

He was certainly a wonder-worker. Or, rather God chose to work wonders through him. More precisely yet, as he often explained, God chose to work wonders principally through Saint Joseph and only used an "old thing" like himself to help people discover the saint who was a father to God's own son.

His availability to his neighbor — to the school community of Collège Notre-Dame at first and then to the thousands who came to him or to whom he went out later and his compassion for his neighbor's ills need no commentary. Suffice it to note that the more favored among the people who came, the ones with whom he spent more time and for whom he showed more love and concern, were always the poor and the lowly. He explained his behavior: "The rich don't have much time to spare; they have so much to do. The poor have more time to dispose of."

As for the moment of grace which this beatification can be for ourselves, I suggest that it might be of greatest profit to the renewal of our prayer life.



## FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

The following is based on Brother André's own words of wisdom that continue to be a challenge for us today.

Among Brother André's most profound convictions was that God cares for us and loves us — always. That care and love highlight our relationship with God. André tells us:

“God never forgets us. God knows your needs. Show that you are generous in accepting whatever he may send to you in the future. Nothing will happen to you without God knowing it.”

This is the basis of our relationship with God as André understood it and taught it to others. Such an understanding and teaching call us to have confidence in God, to trust God in all situations. We can ask ourselves:

*In which aspects of my life are God's loving presence and activity most evident?  
Which experiences or situations in my life challenge me to a deeper confidence and trust in God?  
How do I invite those whom I serve in ministry to confidence and trust in God?*

Brother André often recommended prayer as an especially significant means of nurturing our relationship with God. It was said of André that he always prayed as if he was in the presence of someone from whom he was expecting an answer. He instructs us:

“An hour-long conversation is not really a long time. We have so many things to say, and it is so good to say them. I may happen to repeat things I have already said. But what do you want? It is so good to talk about the things we love, and to say to the good God, ‘I love you because you have loved us so much.’”

As we reflect on our own relationship with God in prayer, we can ask:

*Which types of prayer have been the most effective for me in sustaining and developing my relationship with God?  
What other practices have I made a regular part of my spiritual life?  
Which aspects of my prayer do I share with others (family, ministry, colleagues)?*

The highest priority in Brother André's life was to complete God's will in all things. He acknowledged that Saint Joseph was responsible for the services and activities of the Oratory, but he always insisted that it remained God's work above all. He was convinced that God would provide whatever was needed for the continuation of the work to which he had been called. Brother André tells us:

“God only asks of us to be good Christians, to obey the commandments, especially the ones on the love of God and the love of our neighbor. God does not ask the impossible, but he wants everyone to offer their good intentions, their day’s work, and some prayers; that will help them a lot.”

God asks of us only what we are capable of doing, and gives us the grace to do it. The challenge before us is to respond to the graces that are offered to us. We can ask:

*How have I experienced God’s providence — grace at work — in my everyday life?  
What experiences in my daily life have demonstrated that God does give me the graces to do what I am asked to do?*

*How do I encourage others to see God’s providence and grace at work in their lives?*

Brother André’s life and work are expressions of his love for God and others. His life-long commitment to serving others was the means through which God’s will and Saint Joseph’s work were accomplished. André says:

“If indeed we loved the good God as we should, it would be a lot easier for us to put into practice the Christian virtues of patience and charity, for we cannot love God without loving our neighbor.”

Patience and charity will be necessary in dealing with all that unfolds in our daily life if we are sincere and serious in our efforts to love God and others. We can ask:

*How does my present work fulfill the gospel mandate to love and serve others?  
How are my love for and service to others a means of transformation for me?  
How are my love and service an invitation to transformation for others?*

Brother André knew that God’s promises were sure and that God would remain faithful to them. Thus, he could live in hope and with anticipation of all that God had said. André articulated his conviction in this way:

“One day the good God will welcome us into eternity, in the company of all those who wait for us there.”

If we want to live in hope and joy, then we, too, must be convinced of God’s promises to us; we, too, must be confident that God will not abandon us. We can ask ourselves:

*On what do I base my hope in God and my confidence in God’s promises?  
How do I express that hope and confidence in my daily life?  
What qualities of my life mark me as a person who brings hope to others?*



UNKNOWN

✠ ORATORY, 1904

## “THIS IS THE SEED”

These four words were Brother André’s last. As we celebrate the canonization of André, we are called to recognize in ourselves a seed, the beginnings of new life. That seed will grow and flourish to the degree that we strive to be a means of transformation — a work of resurrection — in our families, in our neighborhoods, among our colleagues, and in our world. That will give us a large share in the continuing and healing work of Brother André.



UNKNOWN

✠ BROTHER ANDRÉ READY FOR A VISIT

## APPENDIX

From a homily of Pope John Paul II on the occasion of Brother André's Beatification  
May 23, 1982

We venerate in Blessed Brother André Bessette a man of prayer and a friend of the poor, a truly astonishing man.

The work of his whole life — his long life of 91 years — was that of “a poor and humble servant” — Pauper, servus et humilis, as is written on his tomb. A manual laborer until the age of 25 years on the farm, in workshops, and factories, he then entered the Brothers of Holy Cross, who entrusted to him for almost 40 years the task of porter in their school in Montréal; and finally for almost 30 years more he was custodian of Saint Joseph's Oratory near the school.

Where then does his extraordinary influence, his renown among millions of people, come from? A daily crowd of the sick, the afflicted, the poor of all kinds — those who were handicapped or wounded by life — came to him. They found in his presence in the school parlor or at the Oratory a welcome ear, comfort, faith in God, confidence in the intercession of Saint Joseph. In short, they found a way of prayer and the sacraments and, with that, hope and, very often, manifest relief of body and soul. Do not the poor of today have as much need of such love, of such hope, of such an education in prayer?

But what was it that gave Brother André this ability? It was God who was pleased to give such an ability to attract, such a marvelous power to this simple man who had himself known the misery of being an orphan among twelve brothers and sisters, of being without riches or education, of having poor health, in short, of being deprived of everything except a great confidence in God. It is not surprising that Brother André felt himself close to the life of Saint Joseph, that poor and exiled worker who himself was so close to the Savior and whom Canada and especially the Congregation of Holy Cross have always greatly honored.

Brother André had to put up with misunderstanding and mockery because of the success of his apostolate. Yet he remained simple and joyful. Turning to Saint Joseph or in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament, he himself prayed long and earnestly, in the name of the sick, doing as he had taught them to do. Is not his faith in the power of prayer one of the most precious signs for men and women of our time, who are tempted to resolve their problems without recourse to God?



UNKNOWN

✠ SCULPTURE BY BROTHER ROBERT WEINMANN, CSC

Lord our God, friend of the lowly,  
you gave your servant, Brother André,  
a great devotion to Saint Joseph  
and a special commitment to the poor and afflicted.

Through his intercession  
help us to follow his example of prayer and love  
and so come to share with him in your glory.  
We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son.  
Amen.

*(Prayer from the Roman Missal)*



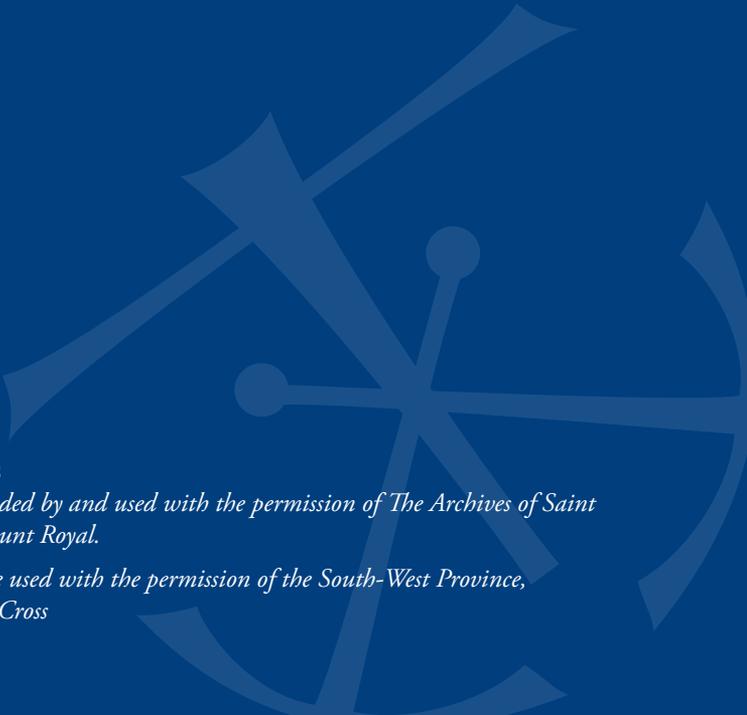


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