

Mountain & Altar: Cosmic symbolism in the chapel and apartment of Saint André Bessette

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Introduction

This workshop will take place at the Oratoire Saint-Joseph and will focus specifically on the first chapel built on the site. Modest in size, the chapel expresses the humble beginnings of the shrine. Like the mustard seed, this chapel encapsulates what would expand out to such a large scale later on the site. Unique to this chapel is the apartment of Saint André Bessette, still preserved to this day on the second floor.

The experience is designed as both a guided walk and a phenomenological exploration of cosmological space, inviting participants to reflect on the relationship between the Absolute, symbolism, and perception.

The workshop will begin at the base of Mount Royal in front of Collège Notre-Dame where Saint André served as porter for many years (See point A on Figure 1). From this starting point, participants will be introduced to the symbolic significance of the altar and the mountain through selected ideas drawn from the writings of Northrop Frye¹, Jean Hani², and Joseph Ratzinger³. In particular, there will be discussion about how these symbolic types repeat throughout the bible and are present in the chapel architecture as the interpenetrative space uniting Heaven and Earth. These themes will be considered within the broader framework of the Christian understanding of cosmological levels, examining how physical elevation and movement towards unity attune to spiritual realities.

Each participant will receive a handout that includes space for notes and sketches. They will be encouraged to record their impressions during the ascent.

The group will then walk up the hill, retracing the very steps of Saint André. During the walk, participants will be invited to pay close attention to their bodily sensations, spatial awareness, and emotional responses, reflecting on whether these lived experiences reinforce or challenge the symbolic framework discussed earlier. In essence this will be a contemplative walk with a sense of ascent up the holy mountain.

Finally, we will have time to visit the small chapel and the apartment. Again, participants will be encouraged to consider the symbolic ramifications of the Saint's apartment being where it is on the second floor and with its little window that opens onto the altar below. Furthermore, it will be emphasized again to take note of the changes in the senses with respect to these spaces.

The workshop will conclude and participants will continue with the rest of the Oratory tour organized by others.

Summary:

- Meet & discuss in front of Collège Notre-Dame (See point A on Figure 1, 3776 Chemin Queen Mary) – 15mins
- Contemplative walk up to the chapel – 15mins
- Visit of the chapel and apartment of Saint André (See point A on Figure 1) – 15mins

Total time = 45mins

Materials list: Please bring a pen or pencil. If forgotten the workshop functions without one.

Max capacity: 35 people

Alternate meet point: In case of poor weather or for those with mobility issues meet at the parking near the chapel (See point C on Figure 1)

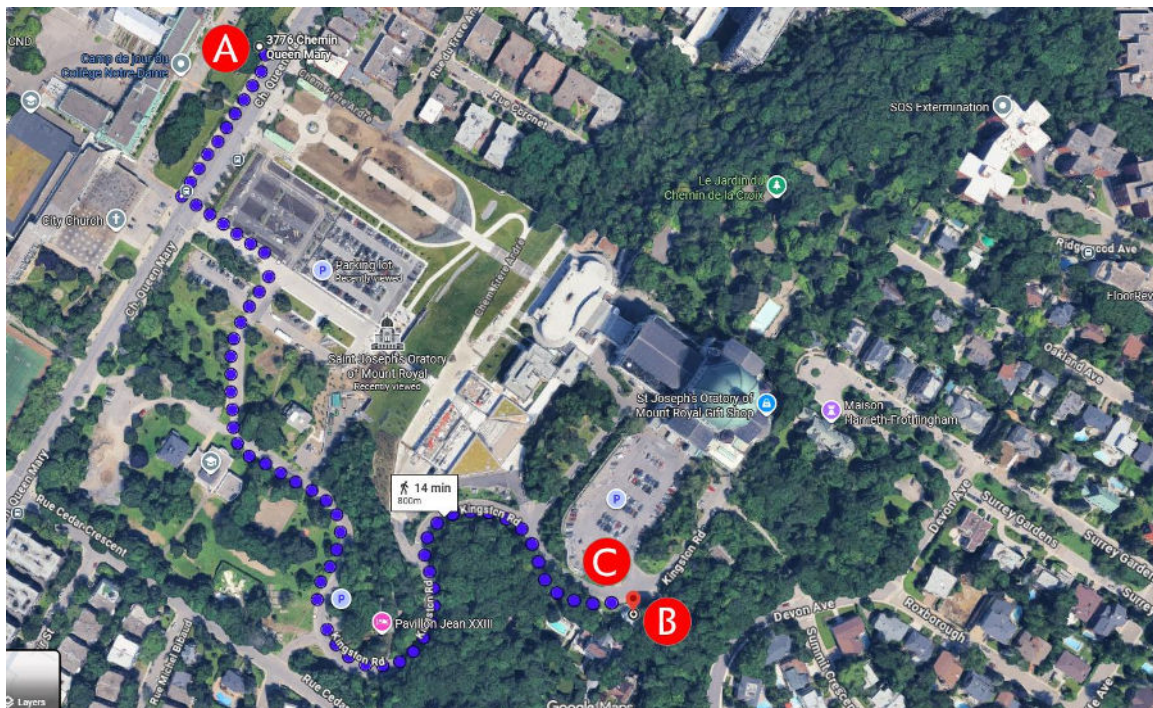


Figure 1: Map of workshop route. Screenshot from Google Maps. Accessed August 18, 2026.
<https://maps.google.com/>.

References

1. Frye, Northrop. *Words with Power: Being a Second Study of the Bible and Literature*. Toronto: Penguin Books, 1992.
2. Hani, Jean. *The Symbolism of the Christian Temple*. Kettering, OH: Angelico Press, 2016.
3. Ratzinger, Joseph. *The Spirit of the Liturgy*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000.