

BLESSED SOLANUS CASEY

by Betty Lee White

Born November 20, 1870, Solanus Casey was the sixth child of an Irish Catholic family of ten boys and six girls. Named Bernard Francis Casey and nicknamed Barney after his father, he lived with his family in a three-bedroom log house in Wisconsin. His parents approached life with purpose and intensity. Each child contributed toward clearing and tilling the land, erected fencing, harvested and bundled the crops, often working from dawn to dusk. Yet his parents also promoted schooling and recreation. The children ran races against each other, played baseball, and ice-skated on the frozen pond during winter months. In 1881, diphtheria struck the family and two sisters died. Barney recovered, but was left with a raspy voice that lasted the rest of his life.

After Barney's brother left St. Francis de Sales Seminary in Milwaukee, Wisconsin without completing his studies, Barney applied. He was 21 years old and six years older than the other candidates. After much deliberation, the superior accepted him despite his age and unfamiliarity with German, which was the common language of the seminary and a required subject. The seminary schedule was almost militaristic and physically onerous. Rising at 4:00 a.m. the seminarians would assemble in choir, participate in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, then recite several hours of the Divine Office. A 20-minute breakfast provided a brief respite before the day filled with chores and studies commenced.

When Barney was preparing to start his fifth year, the seminary authorities informed him that he would not be able to continue his quest toward the priesthood at their seminary. They doubted he would be able to master the upcoming mandatory coursework in philosophy and theology although they did not doubt his evident display of virtue, especially his strict adherence to obedience. The priest in charge suggested his vocation might be better fulfilled in a religious order such as the Capuchins.

During that summer and fall Barney prayed to know God's will. He sought the advice of Fr. Eustace Vollmer, a Franciscan priest whom he had gone to in the past for spiritual advice. The priest agreed that he should consider a vocation to the priesthood within a religious order and suggested the Franciscans or Capuchins. Shortly afterwards, Barney received a letter from the Provincial inviting him to enter the St. Francis de Sales Capuchin seminary in Detroit. He was hesitant to do so, in part because the seminary was German-speaking. He made a novena to the Mother of God for guidance, and on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, felt an intense awareness of her presence and a command to go to Detroit.

He entered the friary on Christmas Eve after two days of train travel through blizzards of heavy snow. He was invested in the simple brown habit on January 14, 1897 and was given the name Solanus after Franciscan St. Solanus who died in 1525. The new life of Bernard Francis Casey had now begun, a vocation which would last sixty years.

Progression toward Holy Orders continued despite mediocre scholarship. Fr. Anthony's powerful support overruled any objections to his being ordained a subdiaconate, the first of the major orders. "We shall ordain Father Solanus as a priest," he said, "and he will be the people's champion much as the Cure of Ars was." (It should be noted that St. John Vianney, the Cure of Ars, also struggled with his studies.)

In 1904 the seminary superiors convened at a meeting at which they decided to withhold the faculties of formal preaching and administration from two friary candidates for the priesthood, one of them being Father Solanus. At that time, a candidate could be ordained a Simplex priest, a sacerdotal designation

rescinded after the Vatican II Council in 1965. The determination is made by a superior who recognizes a person's quest for holiness and call to pastoral life but who has scholastic difficulties in mastering the nuances of philosophy and theology for which the textbooks were printed solely in Latin.

In his role as a Simplex priest, Fr. Solanus was put in charge of the sacristy and answering chimes at the friary front door. The end result proved fortunate for the tens of thousands seeking spiritual direction who would come to depend on his counsel and compassion during his long priestly career. People waited in long lines for the opportunity to encounter Friar Solanus and divest themselves of doubts and fears, receive counseling and try to regain clarity in their spiritual lives.

This thin, ascetic friar with the raspy voice had the uncanny gift of prescience. He could predict even the day or hour some suffering soul would recover from an illness or disease that physicians had predicted to be incurable. Many times, he was able to predict recoveries from ailments and even cured physical afflictions. At times he had to predict that a person would die, but accompanied this forecast with urgent counseling for resignation to God's will. He kept up unbelievable amounts of correspondence with hundreds of recipients. He deprived himself of food and sleep in order to be available to meet their needs. He put in 18-hour days, sitting at his desk and endlessly counseling everyone who came to him.

By the time he reached age 75, his health was failing and he was sent to St. Felix Friary in Huntington, Indiana. In January 1946, he returned to Detroit to observe his fiftieth anniversary as a Capuchin. The chapel and reception overflowed with well-wishers. Fr. Solanus himself wrote the message on his invitation to the Golden Jubilee Mass. which concluded with the words: "Fifty years in the Order – almost unnoticed - have slipped away from me into eternity. Thither I hope to follow before half another fifty, trusting in the merciful goodness of God!"

He died on July 31, 1957 and was beatified on November 18, 2017 by Pope Francis I.

Rev. Joseph Tuscan, OFM, a Capuchin monk stationed in Pittsburgh, PA, was at the beatification of Fr. Solanus Casey. He dedicated the parish outdoor Stations of the Cross on May 31, 2017.

In 2020, construction began on the Blessed Solanus Casey Gatehouse, the second building in our parish complex. It will be completed in 2021.