

# CAPDOX

Capuchin Franciscan Friars Australia

## BLESSED SOLANUS CASEY

1870-1957

## IRISH ROOTS



Fr. Solanus Casey was born Bernard Francis Casey on Nov. 25, 1870 on a farm near Oak Grove, Wisconsin along the Mississippi River. He was the sixth child in a family of ten boys and six girls born to Irish immigrant parents who left Ireland after the famine years, the scourge of the Emerald Isle.

Father: Bernard James Casey was born in 1840 at Castleblaney, County Monaghan. After his father's death, at the age of 17, he left home with a younger sister. His mother's last words to him were, "Barney boy, keep the faith." They sailed from Liverpool on the SS Curling and arrived in Boston on July 29, 1857 to meet other relatives. Bernard became quite skilled as a shoemaker in Massachusetts.

Mother: Ellen Murphy was born on Jan. 9, 1844 in Camlough, County Armagh. She was 8 years old when her family sailed from Liverpool on the Western Star. They arrived in Boston on June 20, 1852 to live with relatives. Ellen eventually found work in the textile mills near Portland, Maine.

Bernard and Ellen met at a Fourth of July picnic in Biddeford, Maine. It was love at first sight, but Ellen's mother established a 3-year waiting period before the two could marry. Ellen was 16 years old at the time. The separation was difficult and the two lost contact. With the help of his parish priest, Bernard reunited with his sweetheart and married her on October 6, 1863 at St. James Church in Salem MA.

After the Civil War ended, Bernard found shoemaking to be a dying business. Farming seemed to be the business of his future. The family bought 80 acres of government land four miles south of Prescott WI in an area known as Oak Grove. Five more children were born there. One of them was the future Fr. Solanus, then called "Barney" like his dad

Three years later, the Caseys moved to a larger farm at Big River in the Trimbelle area. Seven more children were born and Barney spent ten years there before leaving to work through the area as a logger, hospital orderly, street car operator, and prison guard.

His childhood was rich in love, steeped in Catholic tradition. The children shared a love for sports, hunting, fishing, swimming, skiing, and skating. The ten boys formed their own baseball team: The Casey Nine. Barney played catcher, usually without a glove. The other boys enjoyed boxing, but Barney would not participate. Inflicting pain on another person was not aligned with his values.

# CALL TO PRIESTHOOD

The Casey family honored their Irish Catholic Faith above all else. Barney kept good memories of daily prayer with his family. Solanus often recalled his father calling them, "Prayer, boys, prayer!" It is no surprise that young Barney learned to love the rosary as his mother did and he vowed to say it every day, remaining faithful to this custom throughout his life.

In 1883, before turning 13, Barney spent a few weeks at St. Patrick's church in Hudson WI. During instruction for his First Holy Communion, Barney first felt the Spirit stir within him, eagerly loving the lessons and the Bible. Attending Midnight Mass one Christmas Eve, Barney secretly wondered whether he could be a priest. This stirring continued to grow until the age of 21 when he entered St. Francis High School Seminary in Milwaukee to study for the diocesan priesthood.

Barney loved the discipline of his studies and he was well-liked among his classmates. The German language of the lessons, however, was difficult to comprehend. Finally, his superiors advised that he was not likely to succeed and they suggested a religious order.

Throughout the summer and fall of 1896, Barney discerned his calling. A spiritual advisor suggested he write to the Jesuits, Franciscans, and Capuchins. All three replied with letters of welcome, so which one should he choose? None of them seemed an attractive way of life, so Barney invited his mother and his sister Ellen to join him in praying a novena for the nine days leading up to the Feast of the Immaculate Conception. After Holy Communion on the last day, Barney distinctly heard the Blessed Mother telling him, "Go to Detroit" where the Capuchins were – and still are – headquartered.

Without question, Barney departed through a snowstorm for three days to arrive at the monastery door of St. Bonaventure on Christmas Eve. Exhausted from the trip, he fell asleep, but was awaked by the sound of bells and singing wafting through the air which was pungent with incense. With joy, Barney jumped from his nap and joined the procession to the chapel for Midnight Mass. In the years afterward, he would tell of the profound happiness of that night.



January 14, 1897

Clothed in the brown habit and white cord of the Capuchins, Barney was given the new name of Friar Francis Solanus after his patron. St. Francis Solano, the Spanish missionary to Peru, was a Franciscan priest who loved the poor native children and called them to prayer with his violin. Another Capuchin was named Francis, so the new friar became known as simply "Solanus."

July 21, 1898

Simple Profession of Vows, St. Bonaventure Chapel, Detroit MI. Continued studies at St. Francis Monastery, Milwaukee WI.

July 21, 1901

His grades continued to be "average" or "passing" marks which caused question from his superiors. After writing a letter to them, resigning himself to God's will, Solanus took final - Solemn Profession - vows with his class.

December 8, 1903

Brother Solanus was ordained a Sub-deacon at St. Francis DeSales Seminary Chapel, Milwaukee WI.

March 20, 1904

Still questioning his orders, but resigned to “God’s Holy Will” in all things, Solanus was ordained a Deacon, St. Francis Church, Milwaukee WI.

July 24, 1904

The superiors finally decided: Solanus would be ordained a “simplex priest” without ability to hear confessions or preach doctrinal sermons. Never showing resentment or disappointed, the seeds of humility were planted.

July 31, 1904

Fr. Solanus Casey celebrated his first Solemn Mass at St. Joseph Parish in Appleton WI.

## CAPUCHIN LIFE

After his ordination, Fr. Solanus spent 20 years in New York, Harlem, and Yonkers. He was assigned to St. Bonaventure Monastery in Detroit where he worked for 20 years, August 1, 1924-July 23, 1945.



Solanus' first assignment at Sacred Heart in Yonkers NY caused his pastor to question how a "simplex priest" might fit in. Solanus first served as sacristan, then director of the altar servers, then porter or "doorkeeper," answering the bell at the monastery door. These were minor jobs for rookie friars, but Fr. Solanus took great pride in it. How could it be demeaning to care for the church and the altar? His intense devotion to the Eucharist was fostered in the hours before the Blessed Sacrament.

It was at the monastery door, though, where Fr. Solanus became a much-loved and sought-after counselor. Eventually, visitors came and asked for Fr. Solanus. Sick people sought his blessing and remarkable cures began to take place.

## SPIRITUALITY



One of the keynotes of Fr. Solanus' spirituality might be an Attitude of Gratitude which he

called “the first sign of a thinking, rational creature.” The prayer of “Thanks be to God” poured continually from his lips. “Love for God and neighbor” is another recurring theme of his writings along with obedience, trust, humility, and patience.

During his time at Our Lady of Sorrows in Manhattan, Fr. Solanus had more time to spend on his own thoughts. He started a new notebook, writing about his favorite Biblical themes of resignation, patience, gratitude, injustice, the Eucharist, and the Blessed Virgin.

Fr. Michael Crosby in his book Thank God Ahead of Time writes, “Spirituality is the experience and expression of the nature and activity of a Supreme Reality. Spirituality encompasses how that experience and expression are communicated to others. The ‘science’ or study of that spirituality for Solanus was religion. Throughout his letters and statements, he continually returned to his definition of religion: The science of our happy relationship with and our providential dependence on God and our neighbor.”

Very early in his religious life he formed the practice of writing simple resolutions as reminders to guide him on the way of perfection. In the novitiate he began writing these resolutions in a little notebook which today is preserved among his own writings. A very important little writing that we find there is the following list of five points:

### **Means for Acquiring the Love of God:**

- I. Detachment of oneself from earthly affections.  
Singleness of purpose.
- II. Meditation on the Passion of Jesus Christ.
- III. Uniformity with the Divine Will.
- IV. Mental Prayer – meditation and contemplation.
- V. Prayer – “Ask and it shall be given to you.”

After this he noted:

### **TO PRESERVE GOD’S PRESENCE:**

- I. Raise your heart to Him by frequent aspirations.

II. Make a good intention at the beginning of each week and frequently during its execution.

All these simple admonitions form a very worthy program to help one advance along the way of holiness. We can be sure that Fr. Solanus found them to be a reliable guide on his way to perfection. If one could take just a few of these points and follow them through perseveringly, one would surely grow in love for God, be able to live in His presence, and overcome all that could keep us from our true destiny, eternal life and happiness with God.

## LOVE FOR THE SICK & POOR

“I have two loves: the sick and the poor,” said Fr. Solanus Casey. Thank God: That includes all of us! Don’t we all suffer both sickness and poverty in body, mind, or spirit at one time or another? Fr. Solanus no doubt included himself:



“Pray for poor Fr. Solanus—who like all poor sinners needs the grace of God to be fully converted.” True or real conversion, he said, couldn’t happen this side of heaven. Even during his final illness, he said, “I’m offering my sufferings that all might be one. If only I could see the conversion of the whole world.” It is Fr. Solanus’ humility, the modesty of his own importance, that sets him apart. Fr. Solanus saw in himself the limitations and weaknesses of being human.

Having not been assigned the job of doorkeeper in Manhattan, Fr. Solanus had time to consider conversion, that is, conversion from the control of his shortcomings: Sensitivity to criticism; an ego that liked to be stroked; the ability to rationalize his negative tendencies; subtle forms of pride; and insensitivity to the needs of the poor. So, how did he eventually come to count the poor among his two greatest loves?

“Inevitably, when you can’t see something in yourself, you project the quality onto someone else, either judging or admiring the quality in them.” –Sally Kempton

It was during this period of deepening that Fr. Solanus further purified his motives and dreams. His personality turned away from practical goals to visionary goals. His increasing generosity toward people was marked by enthusiasm and “zeal for souls.” His union with God was achieved through “ecstatic prayer” and the desire to encourage others to seek his union.

This move from his “shadow self” toward his “true self” opened his spirit to be even more receptive to God. Holding hands with Sister Death during an infection of gangrene further sealed Fr. Solanus’ courage to face the truth about himself. He wrote:

“I had been in agony for at least 40 hours, though no one else seemed to know it, and while I tried to thank God for it all, my principal prayer – at least 1,000 times repeated – was ‘God help us.’” Sister Death loosened her grip and Solanus left the hospital within a short time.

As much as one would like to imagine that Fr. Solanus might have been perfect, isn’t it comforting to know that he was human like you and me? His compassion and patience for people seemed to stem from a deep knowing of those anxieties in himself which he abandoned for the sake of others who needed him. And he understood them.

# MISSIONS

During his years at Our Lady of Angels in Harlem NY, Solanus gave rise to the work of the Seraphic Mass Association (today called the Capuchin Mass Association) founded in Switzerland as a means to support Capuchin foreign missionaries. Those who enrolled their name with a small donation would be remembered in the prayers and Masses of the Capuchin Friars around the world.

This excited Fr. Solanus, of course, because it inspired more devotion to the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. It wasn't long before the community noticed that, when Fr. Solanus enrolled a person, amazing results and even complete cures began to happen regularly.

Nov. 8, 1923

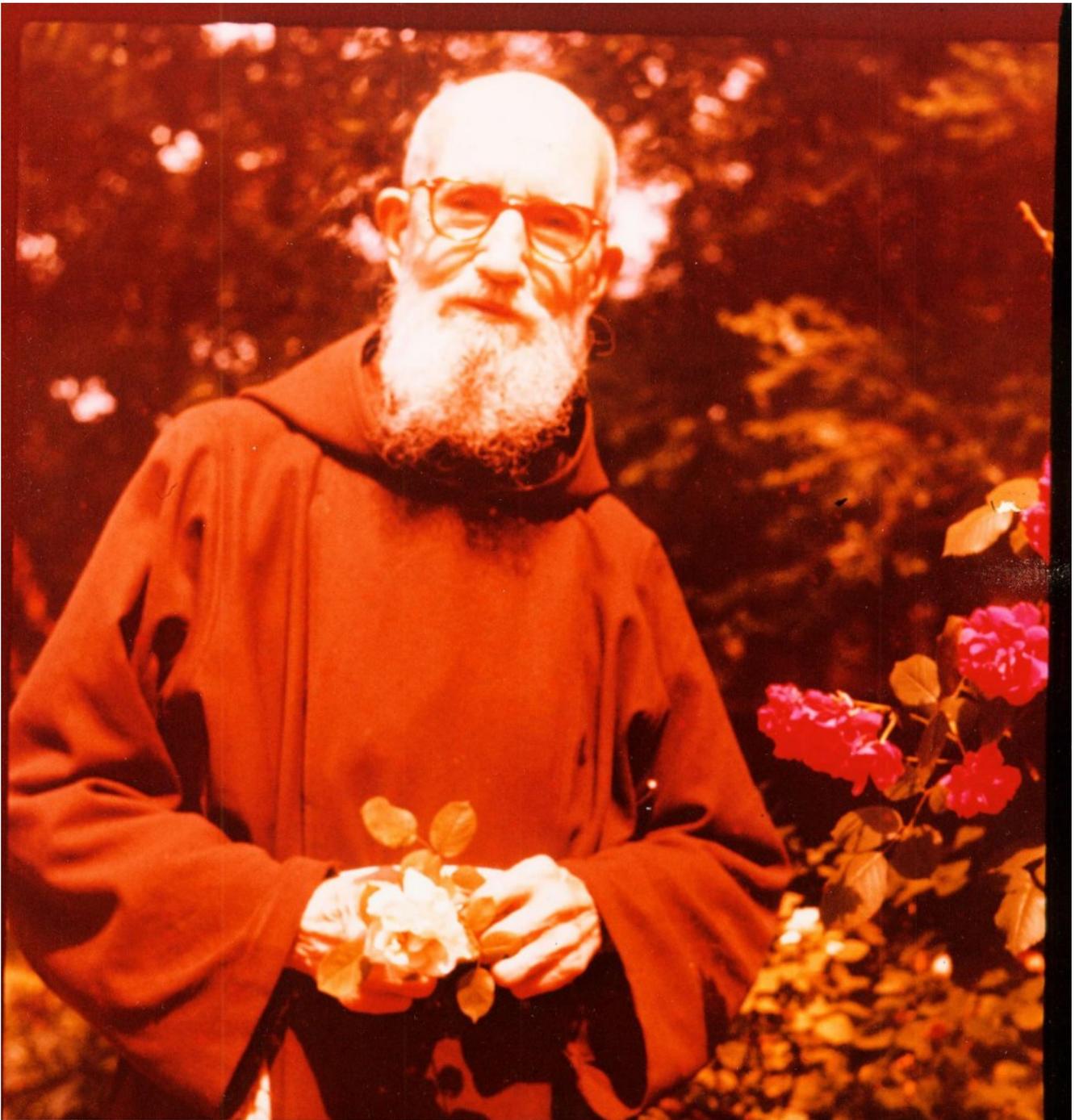
Fr. Solanus wrote in a large ledger: "Fr. Provincial wishes notes to be made of special favors reported as through the Seraphic Mass Association." He would eventually fill seven notebooks with over 6,000 entries until 1956. These favors he never attributed to himself, but always to the mercy and love of God for all His people.

March 28, 1924

"Patrick McCue enrolled for one year Feb. 9, by fellow motorman—reported today entirely cured of both gangrene and diabetes, and working every day. Doctors baffled!"

# THE MESSAGE

**The Message of Father Solanus Casey, OFM Cap**



Who was Father Solanus? A simple man; a simple priest; not a man of letters although he sometimes wrote like a poet; not a man of degrees, yet his thought reached to profound depths.

In his own time, he was far ahead of his time. Like a prophet, he was a man with a message for our times. Like a prophet, he lived a life concerned for God's people, suffering and laboring for the conversion of sinners. His message, always one of faith and trust in God, was to console and to encourage. He brought about peace by a kindly insistence on our right relationship to – and dependence on – God and neighbor.

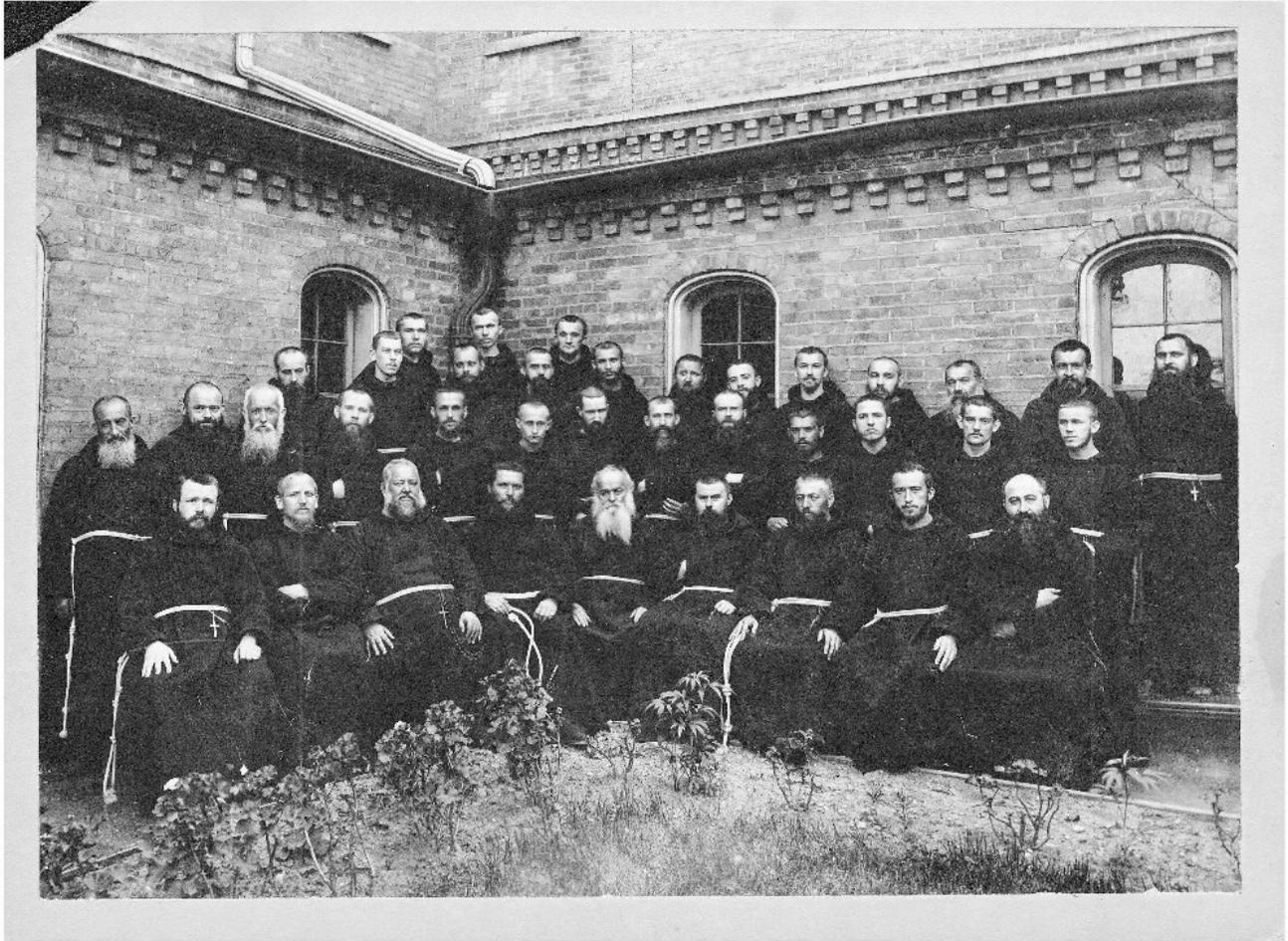
This Capuchin priest, Father Solanus Casey, was born November 25, 1870 on a Wisconsin farm along the banks of the Mississippi. He was the sixth child in a family of ten boys and six girls. His Irish immigrant parents named him Bernard after his father.



From an early age he learned obedience, diligence, and piety from his God-fearing parents. Life on the farm taught him to be practical and resourceful. At 17, eager to supplement the family income after several crop failures, Bernard willingly left the farm for other employment. In nearby Stillwater, Minnesota he worked for a time as a hand on the log-booms, as a part-time prison guard, then as one of the first streetcar operators when Stillwater installed the new electric trolleys.

In 1891 Bernard was able to pursue his long-cherished dream of becoming a priest. He began his studies at age 21 and entered St. Francis Seminary High School in Milwaukee, Wisconsin where he dedicated himself to his spiritual and academic formation. Called by God to the Capuchin Order in 1896, Bernard was given the new name of Solanus. He soon became a model of religious observance, ever-faithful to the holy vows of Poverty,

Chastity, and Obedience. Although he experienced some difficulty with his studies, he so edified his Superiors and fellow religious that he was found worthy of ordination to the holy Priesthood on July 24, 1904.



His long priestly ministry then began in New York. During the fourteen years he served at Sacred Heart Parish in Yonkers, New York Fr. Solanus fulfilled the humble duties of Sacristan and Doorkeeper besides those of Director of the Young Ladies Sodality, Director of Altar Boys, and other pastoral duties. He soon edified the parishioners by his prayerful example at Mass, by his great charity toward the sick, the children, the non-Catholics and the poor.



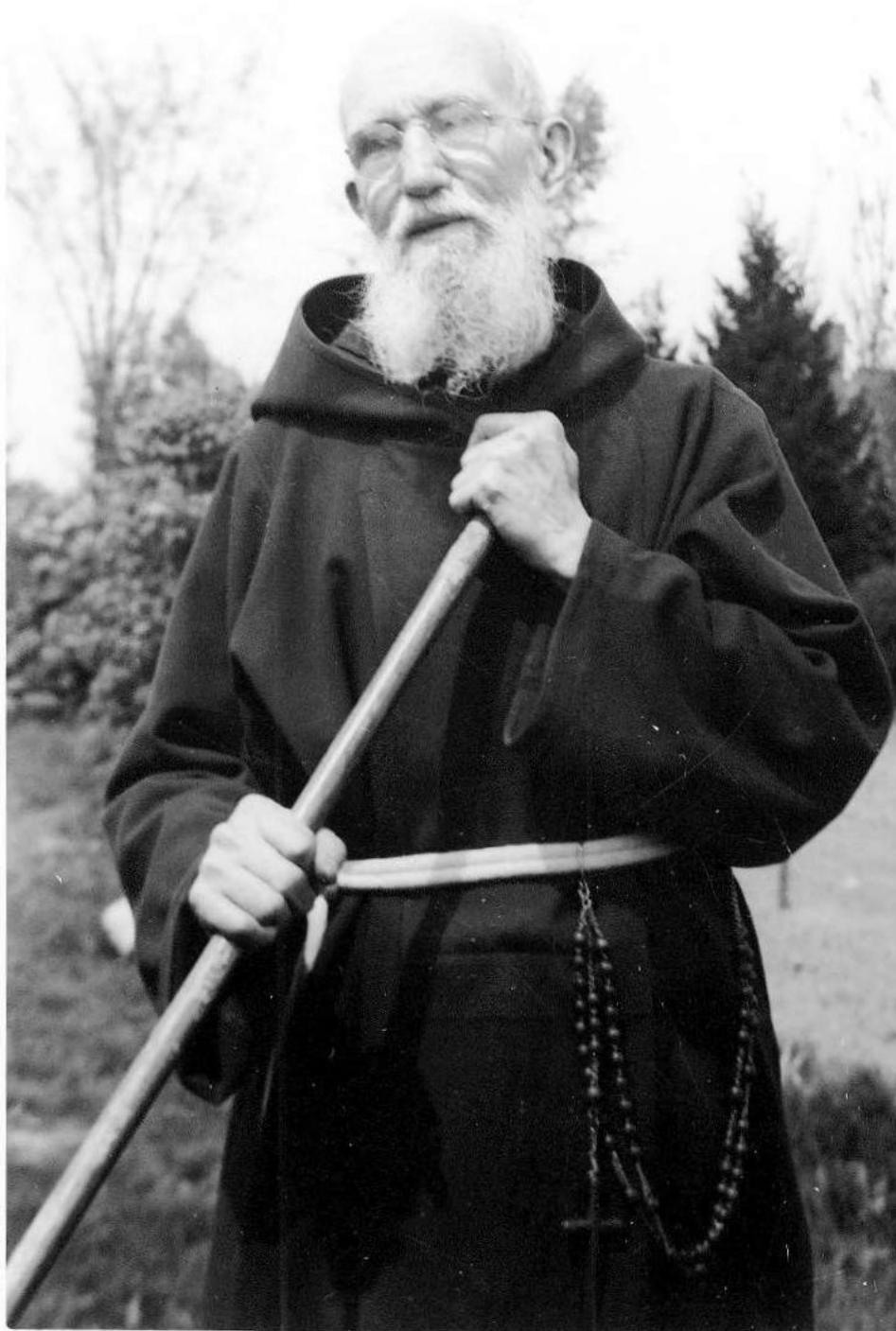
The sick especially were anxious for his priestly visits and consolation. His apostolate to the sick and to the poor continued in other places also. He was appointed to Our Lady of Sorrows Parish in New York City in 1918 and then to Our Lady of Angels Parish in Harlem in 1921. Soon after being appointed in 1924 to the Capuchin Friary of St. Bonaventure in Detroit Father Solanus became known and loved by all. Always available to the poor, the sick, and the troubled souls, he brought comfort to people from every age and walk of life. He was ready and willing to listen to anyone anytime. His ministry of charity and comfort was especially noted during the great Depression of 1929 when his concern for the poor inspired the Detroit Capuchins to establish their Soup Kitchen, a service of charity that continues to this day.



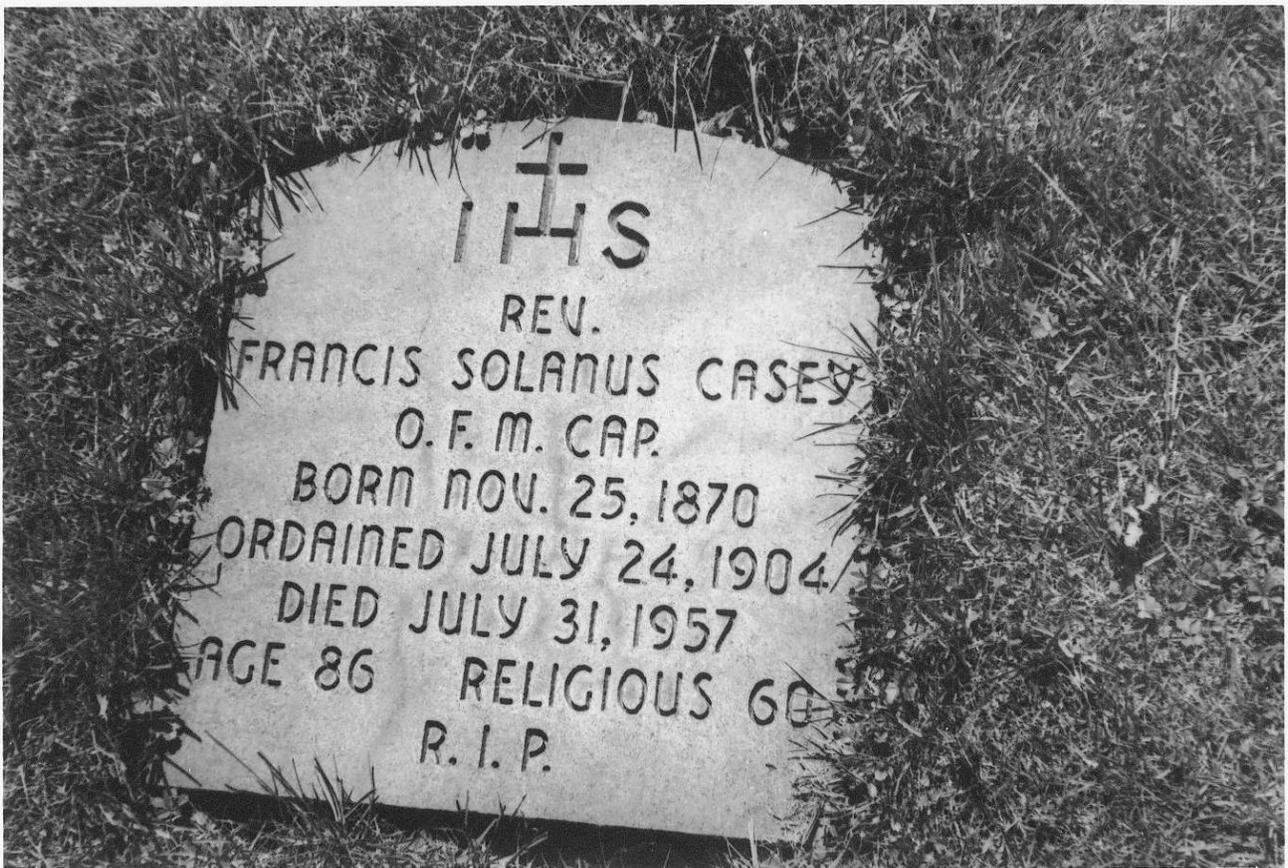
During the years of 1941-1945 Fr. Solanus' advice and prayers aided many anxious families whose sons and daughters served in World War II. Eager for the spread of the Catholic faith, Solanus actively promoted help for the Missions and showed great charity and concern toward non-Catholics. Always zealous for souls, his ministry to the sick and troubled continued unabated, even in the later years of his life when his Superiors, wanting to give him a well-earned retirement, sent him to the Friary of St. Felix in Huntington, Indiana in the spring of 1946. There he spent his time in prayer and ministry to the sick and troubled until his own infirmities brought him back to Detroit for special medical care.



Eighteen months later, after about a month in the hospital where he endured his pains with fortitude, his long life was completed. It was a life spent in total sacrifice for the glory of God by fulfilling to perfection the duties of a Christian, religious, and Priest of God.



During his final illness he remarked, "I'm offering my sufferings that all might be one. If only I could see the conversion of the whole world." His last conscious act was to sit up and exclaim, "I give my soul to Jesus Christ." Fr. Solanus died on July 31, 1957 at the age of 86. He was buried in the friars' cemetery at St. Bonaventure Monastery, Detroit, Michigan. Due to the many devotees who were visiting his grave, it was decided in 1987 to exhume his body and placed inside the St. Bonaventure Chapel. The exhumation and examination of Father Solanus' body took place on July 8, 1987. His body was then clothed in a new habit, placed in a metal casket, and re-interred in the north transept of St. Bonaventure Church.



When the Cause of Solanus was recommended the Relator Fr. Peter Gumpel stated, "While his example is relevant for all priests and religious, it would seem to be such in a particular manner for all Americans. They will be able to derive from his life an inspiration entirely based on faith and charity, and at the same time, also deeply human: Sociable, optimistic and cheerful, compassionate and active in trying to alleviate the spiritual and material sufferings of others."

# SIGNIFICANT DATES- FR. SOLANUS

Nov. 25, 1870

Born Bernard Casey in Oak Grove WI

Dec. 18, 1870

Baptized, St. Joseph Mission Church, Prescott WI

1883

First Communion, St. Patrick Church, Hudson WI

Jan. 14, 1897

Invested as Capuchin Novice Francis Solanus

July 24, 1904

Ordained as Priest, St. Francis Church

Aug. 4, 1904

His first assignment at Sacred Heart Friary, Yonkers NY

July 1918

Transferred to Our Lady of Sorrows Parish, New York City

Oct. 25, 1921

Transferred to our Lady of Angels, Harlem NY

Aug. 1, 1924

Transferred to St. Bonaventure, Detroit MI

Apr. 25, 1946

Semi-retired, St. Felix Friary, Huntington IN

1956 Spring

Returns to Detroit for medical treatments

July 31, 1957

Gives up his soul to God at St. John Hospital, Detroit MI

July 11, 1995

Declared Venerable by Pope John Paul II

May 4, 2017

Pope Francis Announces Plan for Beatification of Fr. Solanus

Blessed Solanus Casey, Capuchin Beatification Ceremony at Ford Field- Detroit November 18, 2017.

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