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Local News

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Documenting Detroit's own miracle worker

Efforts to name Solanus Casey a saint continue here, in Rome

By **Gina Joseph**
 Macomb Daily Staff Writer

No news is good news when you're in the business of canonization.

"Last October we presented four cases to the Congregation for the Causes of Saints and we are waiting for the doctors in Rome to review them," said Brother Richard Merling, director of the Father Solanus Guild and whose encounter with the friar at age 15 inspired him to join the Franciscans. If any one of these cases are deemed a miracle, (the Rev. Solanus) Casey's candidacy for sainthood in the Roman Catholic church would advance to the beatification process.



Casey was beloved for his tireless efforts to serve the poor in the Detroit area, primarily as a co-founder of the

Brother Leo Wollenweber works in his office at the Capuchin Soup Kitchen in Detroit. He has been reviewing and investigating claims of miracles by the late Father Solanus Casey since 1974 as part

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Capuchin Soup Kitchen in the city.

of an effort to have Casey declared a saint by the Roman Catholic church.

"Once he's beatified, we would just need one more miracle for canonization (or sainthood)," Merling said.

Macomb Daily photo by David N. Posavetz

First saint?

If it happens any time soon, Solanus Casey, known as the could become the first American-born male to be declared a saint. Also in the running for the title, according to Merling, is Father Michael McGivney, the founder of the Knights of Columbus (1852-1890), and Bishop Fulton J. Sheen (1895-1979), a 1950s-era preacher and TV personality.

"So far we have not had a case that has stood up to their thorough examination," Wollenweber said.

The definition of a miracle is an event designed to inspire faith and salvation unexplained by the laws of nature and therefore attributed to God. These include physical or spiritual healings in which the faith of nonbelievers is restored. Healing the blind, changing water to wine and parting the Red Sea are a few familiar examples. Perhaps less striking, but no less significant to those touched by them, are the experiences of ordinary people who have shared their Father Solanus stories.

Local miracle

Consider the Clinton Township grandfather who described his experience from his childhood in the 1930s. He suffered from a severe and, at one point, paralyzing case of rheumatic fever. He was released after spending nine months in the hospital, weak but recovering. To ensure a full recovery, his mother and grandmother took him to St. Bonaventure to see Casey. The friar placed his hand on the child's head and blessed him. Years later, when physicians examined the then-grown man for enlistment to fight in the Korean War, they found no signs of heart damage, a known side effect of rheumatic fever. He passed the physical, but medical records confirming his illness exempted him from serving in the military.

Thousands of such cases were recorded during Father Solanus' life. Predominantly what Wollenweber has been investigating is the healings that happened after Father Solanus' death on July 31, 1957. The Church considers these to be a sign that he is in heaven and that he listens to the prayers of the devout and persuades God to help on their behalf.

"God is the only one who works miracles," Wollenweber said. "The saints intercede with God to obtain miraculous help for someone."

Helping others

Throughout his life the tall, lanky priest with ocean-blue eyes who co-founded the Capuchin Soup Kitchen was known to lend an ear to the troublesome in search of answers.

"He could listen to people's problems all day long, sometimes 12 or 13 hours a day. I think his gift was he was able to share his faith with people. He had a great confidence and trust in God and he was able to encourage people to do the same," Wollenweber



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said.

Bernard Francis Casey was born in Wisconsin in 1870 and worked several jobs including as a prison guard before joining the Capuchin Order in Detroit in 1897, and his ordainment as Solanus in 1904. Wollenweber worked with Father Solanus for five years before the priest died at age 86 from complications caused by erysipelas, a skin disorder.

He was known to be an advocate for expectant mothers and a friend to the poor, sick and troubled. His journals, some on display in the museum, are filled with entries describing the people he met and counseled over the years. He spoke, as one person put it, as leisurely as neighbors chatting over a backyard fence.

He made being a Capuchin wonderful, said Wollenweber, whose tone of voice and mannerism mimic the gentle but confident nature of the friar he has worked so hard to see canonized.

Even Wollenweber's steps, albeit slower than when he was 83, are still determined, as one person observed while following him to the cubby where he works. The small door leading to his office goes unseen by the pilgrimage of people who visit the tomb of Father Solanus.

Beyond the door is Wollenweber's life's work including boxes of documents, testimonials, petitions and letters (3,600 pages), not to mention a hard drive filled with e-mails attesting to the virtues of Father Solanus and the favors granted through his intervention. What's not covered with evidence is decorated with inspiring portraits, caricatures, carvings and books done by area artists and authors including Wollenweber.

"He was a very holy man," Wollenweber said.

That has been determined. Declaring him a saint is another matter.

Lengthy process

In ancient times, when Christians were persecuted for their beliefs, martyrs and those of great virtue were considered saints after their death. The method of canonization has since evolved into an arduous process. In fact, Pope Benedict XVI instructed Vatican and diocesan officials in February to use stricter criteria when assessing candidates for sainthood and beatification, according to an article by The Times in Rome: "The new instructions encourage meticulous medical investigation of miraculous cures and urge those investigating the life of a prospective saint to act objectively and not gloss over or ignore personal faults or defects or other contrary findings."

That's never been a problem for Wollenweber.

"He's very meticulous about his work," Merling said. "He's very thorough and very exacting for finding out very minute details that could help things move along. He will search out every nook and corner that he needs to clarify a report or provide the necessary documentation."

All the more reason to think these last cases could be a homerun for Casey, who loved baseball and hot dogs smothered in onions.

"I know that this is in God's hands and it will come when it is the right time," Wollenweber said.

His voice was soft and calm but his eyes said otherwise. Albeit anxious to share details about the miracles under review in Rome, he held back.

"We don't want to rock the boat or anticipate their decision," he said. "They have to be very sure and very thorough."

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