

Father Solanus lives on in the people and places of our diocese

By FRANZ KLEIN
Staff Writer

PRESCOTT — Pilgrims may be flocking to the chapel of Detroit's St. Bonaventure Monastery to pray before his tomb, but the first church building the Venerable Father Solanus Casey entered was St. Joseph's, where he was baptized in 1870.

The sixth of Bernard and Ellen Casey's 16 children, the future Father Solanus spent the first three years of his life on his parents' farm outside Prescott in what is now Oak Grove Heights. After that, the Caseys spent a short period as parishioners at St. Mary's Church, Big River, before moving just outside the La Crosse Diocese's boundaries to Hudson, where Father Solanus received first holy Communion.

From there, the future Capuchin friar was to spend time as a guard at the State Penitentiary in Stillwater, Minn., as a logger at the nearby mill, and finally as a trolley conductor in Superior. There he witnessed a brutal murder, an incident that led him to consider his faith and his voca-

tion seriously. Soon thereafter he entered the Capuchin order.

The simple holiness of the young man won over his Capuchin superiors, who were unsure he had the mental acumen to become a priest. Ordained a simplex priest without the faculties to preach or hear confessions, Father Solanus was assigned the most menial of tasks as a sacristan and porter.

But his simple holiness began to bear fruit in the measure of miraculous healings and simple but profound advice. At St. Bonaventure in Detroit during the final years of his life, the Capuchins had to "protect" Father Solanus from the many people who sought him out.

"I have no doubt that he's a saint," said Capuchin Father Dan Crosby, director of St. Anthony's Retreat Center in Marathon. "No Capuchin that lived with him would tell you anything different. He was totally genuine."

Father Dan's novitiate, 1956-57, came at the very end of Father Solanus' earthly life. At that time, the novices spent their first seven months at St. Bonaventure's, where Father Solanus was living.

"When he would pray, he was obviously rapt in prayer," Father Dan recalled. "There was no façade of holiness; it was real. His eyes were always sparkling.



The earliest known photo of the Venerable Father Solanus Casey is this 1892 family photo. The future Capuchin priest is the third from the left in the top row. Baptized at St. Joseph's in Prescott, Father Solanus Casey was born in 1870 outside the town in Oak Grove Heights. His beatification cause is pending with the Congregation for the Causes for Saints.

He was always smiling, even though he was in tremendous pain from the eczema that covered his body."

Father Dan said the elderly priest loved to sing and to play his violin — "neither of which he could do very well." He remembered how, his first Christmas as a Capuchin, he was on his way to community recreation when he stopped in the friars' chapel for a minute of prayer. From the adjoining public chapel he heard a "squeaky sound."

"I knew right away what it was," Father Dan said, "but I opened the door to see, and there in the choir loft all by himself on Christmas night was Father Solanus playing Christmas carols on his violin to the Christ child in the crib below. It was very tender and simple."

That Christmas would be Father Solanus' last; he died on July 31, 1957.

But the stories of Father Solanus lived on. And the reported miracles didn't diminish either.

In 1980, a friend of Ronald Shaub of Marathon City had given her a "badge" containing a third-class relic of Father Solanus. "She told me to carry it on me because I'd never know when I would need it," Shaub said.

Seven years later Shaub was in the emergency room on the verge of death from a brain aneurism. "I looked in my billfold and I found this relic of Father Solanus. I thought, Lord, wouldn't this be the perfect time to work a miracle through his intercession?"

Although the Vatican Congregation for the Causes of Saints will not consider her recovery because medical intervention could have saved her, Shaub attributes her cure to Father Solanus' miraculous intercession. "I'm very sure it was him," she said firmly.

Joan Wilikowski, the receptionist at St. Anthony's in Marathon, said Father Solanus' presence has helped her care for her elderly parents, and now for an older sister. "Father Solanus seems to come to our aid all the time to help us," she said.

Wilikowski and Shaub are members of a Father Solanus prayer circle that meets monthly to pray for the Capuchin priest's beatification. Pope John Paul II named him venerable in 1995. Their prayer circle is based on a model established by the Detroit-based Solanus Casey Guild.

Both Shaub and Wilikowski pointed out that similar prayer

circles have been started wherever Father Solanus lived. There is a group in Hudson, for example, where the future priest received his first holy Communion at St. Patrick's Church.

A member of St. Michael's Church in Stillwater, Molly Druffner heads up the Hudson-based John Paul II Sacred Art Theatre Company. A few years ago, a member of Hudson's prayer circle asked her to write a play about Father Solanus. Since 2000, Druffner's 25 cast members have performed the play two to three times a year. "We've performed it to over 7,000 people over the past seven years," Druffner said.

According to Druffner, most of the vignettes treated in the play are from later in Father Solanus' life, but it is especially fun for her troupe to perform the earlier scenes, especially those from Father Solanus' Stillwater years, since most of the actors are from that town.

"Stillwater has a great devotion to him," Druffner said. "We did a novena for his beatification just last month. People say they met him, or they prayed to him and were cured. They're just little stories that come up."

Sister Geraldyn Misura, FSPA, who teaches at the St. Joseph Parish's school, played a role in the foundation of Prescott's prayer circle several years ago. Also among the founding members were Bob and Jean Bruegl, both now deceased, who bought an eight-acre property outside town in Oak Grove Heights when they moved from Edgar.

"After I learned that Father Solanus was from Oak Grove Heights, I mentioned this to Bob and Jean," said Sister Geraldyn. "We got interested and started looking through the abstracts and plat books and pinpointed (his parents' farm) right to the property where Bob and Jean had built their house."

Sure enough, the group discovered a sunken area on the edge of a field — the foundations of a barn and farmhouse. "That's probably where the Caseys had their home," Sister Geraldyn said.

And thus does the future saint come full circle back to the place of his birth.

"Hopefully he'll be beatified soon," said Sister Geraldyn. "We're hoping to get a statue of Father Solanus and have a small shrine at St. Joseph's, and that's what we're waiting for. I've had so much peace from the first time I learned about him. He was such a simple man. I just took to that."

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