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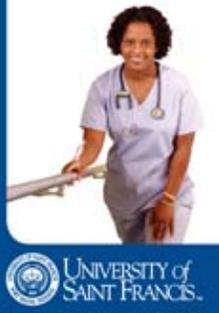
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Solanus Casey: A priest to remember

*By Gerald M. Costello,
The Christophers*

If the name Solanus Casey doesn't mean much to you you're not alone. More than 50 years after his death his memory seems to be as humble and low-key as his life—and yet his impact was nothing less than profound. Those people beyond number who sought him out for help and guidance, many of them still alive, revere this man so much that one day he might become the first male native-born American saint. If that sounds a little overdone, read on.

His real name was Bernard (Barney) Casey, born in Wisconsin in 1870. "Solanus" was the name he received when he entered the Capuchin religious community in 1896. He would become Father Solanus Casey, O.F.M. Cap., but with a catch: his superiors decided that because of his academic difficulties he would be ordained a "simplex priest" – one who could perform most priestly duties except preaching on doctrinal matters and hearing confessions. It's a discipline no longer in use, but at any rate the restriction presented no problem to Father Solanus. He just wanted to get on with whatever humble assignment he was given, and that's where his story really begins.

The job was indeed menial. For most of his priestly life, Father Solanus would be a porter, a doorkeeper—the person who would welcome visitors to the monastery. And that's where he would meet people, at the door. They liked talking to him, and the way he made them feel at ease. They began asking questions, and they liked the advice he gave them. Others heard of this and they started showing up as well, whether they had business at the monastery or not, simply to hear what he had to say. It didn't take long for the word to get around—this doorkeeper was quite a remarkable man.

That's how it began. Father Solanus kept counseling visitors, praying for them, inspiring them with his holiness, blessing them, even healing them. Some came for private consultations. A co-worker once said between 100 and 200 visitors would turn up every day, and no matter where his assignments took him—to Manhattan, to Yonkers, N.Y., to Detroit—he had time for them all. When he wasn't at the door, he could be found on the



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soup line, serving the homeless and the needy.

By the time of his death in 1957, tens of thousands of people had experienced firsthand the holy presence of Father Solanus. It took two full days for the lines of people to file past his body. The cause for his canonization has gone ahead with the full cooperation of the Detroit Archdiocese and, in 1995, Father Solanus was declared Venerable. The next step is beatification, perhaps to be followed by sainthood itself.

That's a moot point for now, of course, but as David Nantais pointed out in a recent article in America magazine, Detroit has been through some rough economic times and is ready for its own patron saint. Might it be Father Solanus? Maybe. Nantais says that while the priest would be saddened by modern-day Detroit, "he would not stand idle." Instead, Nantais continues, he would want people to search for "the budding grace of God" that is present all around them, even in the crumbled remnants of the city.

In changing the lives of others, the saintly Father Solanus truly changed the world. In this Year of the Priest, here's a priest to remember.

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