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DAVID CRUMM

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Father Solanus still inspires the faithful

50 years after his death, the Capuchin friar brings crowds to Detroit

July 7, 2007

BY DAVID CRUMM
FREE PRESS COLUMNIST

In addition to the world-famous celebrities in music, sports and auto design who draw international visitors to Detroit, there's also a popular spiritual celebrity: a bearded old man with a talent for prayer.

He died 50 years ago, but Father Solanus Casey, a Capuchin friar who started a soup kitchen and prayed individually with thousands of people, is *still* drawing crowds to the city.

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Mary Chapp, 62, of St. Clair Shores arrived at the Solanus Casey Center on Detroit's east side last week during a downpour to find 100 other slightly damp people awaiting a healing service led by the friars.

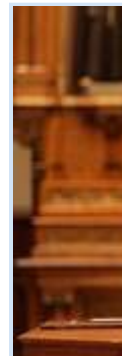
"There were always crowds to see him," she said. "As a girl, I went to his funeral with my family and the mass was over capacity, so they set up loudspeakers outside and we sat across the street on tombstones in Mt. Elliott Cemetery for the mass."

Her brother, Don Rotarius, 72, of St. Clair Shores said he recalls one of Father Solanus' last Palm Sunday masses. "He tried to pass out palms, but he could hardly do it because people wanted to

reach out and grasp his arm or his shoulder just to touch him. He was so patient with people."

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Among the international visitors last week was Deirdre Daly, 52, from Carrickmore in Northern Ireland. She's been inspired by Father Solanus' story for many years. Finally, she decided to visit the Detroit center where pilgrims leave prayer requests on slips of paper on his tomb.

"I'm here because I appreciate his example of loving the poor and sharing God with other people," Daly said.

Father Solanus' story is not widely known in Ireland, she said, even though he has taken a major step toward sainthood. In 1995, the late Pope John Paul II declared him venerable. That's a spiritual endorsement that could lead to canonization, if interest in Father Solanus continues to spread and if Vatican officials are able to link miracles to his spiritual intervention in people's lives.

"Right now, I don't think too many people know about him in Ireland, but I want to help change that," Daly said, holding up two shopping bags from the center's gift shop. They were filled with 100 copies of paperback books about Father Solanus that she plans to distribute at home.

His memory also will get a boost this month via the Catholic-run Eternal Word Television Network, which will debut an hour-long documentary about his life, "The Healing Prophet: Solanus Casey." The debut will be at 10 p.m. July 25, then the film will be repeated at other times.

Father Solanus died on July 31, 1957. Starting on July 23, the Detroit Capuchin Monastery, where he lived, is sponsoring a novena, a cycle of nine daily masses dedicated to him.

"One of the most important things he taught is that not everyone who prays for healing will be healed," Audrey Geyer, the Brighton filmmaker who created a documentary about his life, said as she watched people walk through the center.

"Solanus himself lived for years with a painful skin condition" similar to eczema, Geyer said. "He wasn't healed, but didn't complain about it. One of his greatest gifts was helping people learn to live with the problems in their lives."

Whether there's healing or not, it's important to keep praying, said one of the youngest pilgrims last week, 14-year-old Kristina Nuculaj of Sterling Heights. She said she loves coming to the Detroit center with her family a couple of times each month.

"I express many of my feelings in prayer, and in other places people might look at me like I was strange for doing that," Nuculaj said. "But not here. Here, I feel comfortable, like it's home."

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