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Priest provides edifying portrait of simple, saintly man

BY RACHELLE MCLINNER

THURSDAY, 22 OCTOBER 2009

"Thank God Ahead of Time: The Life and Spirituality of Solanus Casey" by Michael H. Crosby, OFM Cap. St. Anthony Messenger Press (Cincinnati, 2009). 282 pp., \$16.95.

Franciscan Father Michael Crosby is uniquely qualified to write about the life and spirituality of Father Solanus Casey (1870-1957). A fellow Capuchin, he wrote Father Casey's official biography in 1982 and was the "external collaborator to the relator" for the investigation by the Congregation for Saints' Causes that concluded, in 1995, that "the servant of God, Francis Solanus Casey, was an authentic master through his word and example."

In declaring him venerable (the first major step leading to canonization) the Vatican extolled Father Casey's "life of heroic virtue."

"Thank God Ahead of Time" draws on this intimate and respectful knowledge. Father Crosby rightly eschews sentimentality and instead persuades the reader of Father Casey's virtue through rich anecdotes, illustrative excerpts from letters and spiritual reflections, and wonderful photographs of a man who knew the happiness, peace and confidence of conformity to God's will.

Wisconsin native

Solanus Casey was the sixth of 16 children of Irish immigrant parents. He was born on a farm near Oak Grove, Wis., and as a young man worked as a logger, a motorman and a prison guard before entering the Capuchins at age 26.

His seminary education was hindered by his lack of fluency in German and Latin and a tendency to "skim the surface. If he did not grasp something immediately he tended to give up. To himself and others this indicated a lack of sufficient intelligence; to observers today he might be considered more intuitive or intellectually lazy."

Thus, when he was ordained in 1904 it was as a "simplex priest," one who is unable to hear confessions or preach dogmatic sermons. Father Casey's resignation to the will of his religious superiors was evident in the fidelity and gratitude with which he carried out the most humble tasks in the monastery.

Two years after his ordination, while serving in Yonkers, N.Y., Father Casey was assigned to be the friary's porter, or doorkeeper, a ministry he would carry out for the rest of his life.

Father Crosby shows us how, in Solanus Casey, grace built on nature. The man's natural gentleness, approachability and genuine concern for people were the scaffolding for his "unique giftedness: his keen insight into people's needs and how they fit into God's plans. These days at Yonkers found the seeds being sown which would flourish in his future ministry of healing and prophecy."

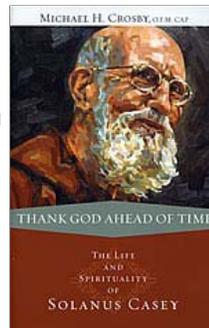
In 1923 his superiors told him to keep a record of "special cases," a rich compilation of the spiritual blessings that flowed through the decades of 18-hour days.

Almost more remarkable than example after example of miraculous healing and conversion is the evidence of Father Casey's humility, reverence, simplicity and lack of self-importance.

He was, one Capuchin explained, "constantly God-centered, on fire with love for God, and constantly God-conscious, seeming always to have his eyes on God. He seemed to see everything as flowing from God and leading back to God."

Father Casey, as Father Crosby reminds us, was a man of his time and culture, but he also exhibited a remarkable freedom that allowed him to move beyond racial, economic and religious divisions.

He believed that "religion is the science of our happy relationship with God and our neighbor" and that



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widespread anxiety and alienation were the result of "humanity's sad weakness," the "lack of faith and, consequently, want of confidence in God."

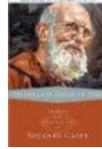
Total dependence on God

The book's concluding chapter offers an excellent overview of the theological and spiritual influences and religious practices that sustained Father Casey in his life of expansive and expensive charity, a life of ongoing conversion, renunciation and total dependence on God.

"Thank God Ahead of Time" is an example of the best kind of contemporary hagiography, combining as it does the spiritual nourishment of an edifying portrait of Father Casey and the intellectual pleasure of Father Crosby's masterful theological reflection. It is a fitting tribute to this humble and holy man and a gift to its readers.

Rachelle Linner lives in Medford, Mass., and wrote this review for Catholic News Service.

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