

Father Solanus Casey:

Saint of Love and Humility for our Modern Age

"Were we only to correspond to God's graces, continually being showered down on every one of us, we would be able to pass from being great sinners one day to great saints the next. We are continually immersed in God's merciful grace like the air that permeates us." (from Father Solanus, Odell 1988 OSV)



Barney's Early Years

Bernard ("Barney") Casey was born in a three room log cabin, near Oak Grove, Wisconsin on November 25, 1875. He grew up on a farm in a very large Catholic family. Prior to celebrating his first communion in 1883, Barney dreamed about the rosary; the special message within his dream greatly strengthened his faith. As a young boy, though he was physically weak (as a result of diphtheria), he was strong spiritually. He prayed and helped his family in the face of crop failure and poverty. He put the needs of his family before his own. As a teenager, he saved a man from drowning, believing that the help of Our Lady made it possible. As a young man several difficult incidents brought him even closer to God: the ending of a relationship with a girl whom he loved, and being a witness to a murder. Barney decided that he wanted to devote his life to God, as a priest.

The Journey Towards Priesthood



The next eight years represented a difficult journey towards priesthood. In 1892, Bernard was admitted to a German seminary (St. Francis De Sales Seminary in Milwaukee) at the midst of an ethnic controversy involving the Germans and the Irish. All the classes were taught in German, a language that Barney could not understand. As a result he did poorly in his classes and he was eventually dismissed from the seminary. The diocesan officials at the seminary believed he did not have what it takes to be a priest (even though they did recognize he had a calling; at this they suggested that he become a brother in a religious order). Though Bernard was disappointed, he made a vow, nevertheless, to devote his life to God no matter what happened. The acceptance of the decision of his superiors was the result of Barney's great faith in God, and his spirit of humility.

With mixed feelings and uncertainty, Barney went to a Capuchin seminary in 1896 believing it to be God's will. On January 14, 1897 Barney adopted the name of Solanus, after Saint Francis Solano who was a Franciscan missionary to South America in the 1600s, and became known as Brother Solanus or *Frater Solanus*. In the seminary desired to purify his heart, while preparing for life long service for God. He wanted to detach himself from any worldly desire. He wanted to submit to God's will through prayer, and contemplation.

Priesthood

"We should be grateful for and love the vocation to which God has called us. This applies to every vocation, because after all, what a privilege it is to serve God even in the least capacity." Father Solanus (From Odell, C. Father Solanus, 1988 OSV)



The superiors at the seminary had doubts about ordaining brother Solanus as a priest as a result of his poor performance in his Latin and German courses. Nevertheless, Solanus humbled himself, accepting the judgment of his superiors. He believed that in humbling himself, the victory would be won. At the age of thirty-three, Father Solanus was ordained as a simplex priest, which meant that he could not hear confessions or preach homilies. He assumed the jobs usually performed by brothers. He acted as a porter, opening doors.

Recognizing Father Solanus's special gifts, those who came to see him did not understand why he was unable to hear their confessions. People waited in lines in order to speak to Father Solanus. He shared in their concerns and worries; praying and inspiring them. People noticed the power of Father Solanus' prayers, a man with great faith in God. Many people contributed to Father Solanus, as the cause of many miracles. Nevertheless, father Solanus, being humble in heart urged his people to thank God. Father Solanus spread the message of God's love. All could sense his wisdom and his special gift of prayer. Reports of healings and conversions became everyday occurrences in the Capuchin house. Even so, Father Solanus believed that one must first seek to follow Jesus, and in following in Jesus' footsteps, one must accept suffering as a blessing and a gift.

Throughout his priesthood, Father Solanus had several assignments which required him to move. Even up to his seventies, he still uprooted himself; submitting to his superiors. This was in accordance with the Franciscan tradition of having no worldly, personal attachments. Even with the pain and suffering he experienced before his death, he thanked God. His last words before dying were: "I give my soul to Jesus." On July 31, 1957, Father Solanus died. As a result of his faith, he was a man who submitted his will to God's will.

Father Solanus: A Man of Great Faith and Humility

Father Solanus lived a life of humility and devotion to God. His life was a true testament of his faith and his humility. While many attributed to Father Solanus as

having an inferior intellectual ability and inadequate theological knowledge, in his humbleness Father Solanus did not refute their beliefs. While his superiors and teachers explained his poor performance and grades were the result of an inability to learn, and a lack of intelligence, the more accurate explanation for Father Solanus' poor grades was that classes were taught in a foreign language, German.

As a son of Irish immigrants, Father Solanus did not speak the German Language as did most of his fellow seminarian students and teachers who were German immigrants who did in fact speak German. According to Father Solanus' nephew, as stated in James Patrick Durum's book on Fr. Solanus, Father Solanus himself attributed his poor performance to the fact that the classes were taught in German. In fact, he believed that the reason he had never received the faculties to hear confessions was because the classes he took at the seminary were taught in German. While in his heart Father Solanus believed himself to be capable of seminary work, he did not refute those who believed him to be incapable. When his superiors made the decision to make him a simplex priest, he accepted the decision with humility. Only a man of great faith in God's will could submit himself as Father Solanus had in his life. Rather than following his own desires, he took the difficult path submitting his will with trust in God.

"Like the Holy Trinity, Faith, Hope and Charity are one. Theoretically, Faith, like the Eternal Father, comes first, but in both cases they are essentially one."

(Father Solanus)