

Prot. N. 00867/17

Curia Generalis  
Fratrum Minorum  
Capuccinorum

Circular Letter

On the occasion of the **beatification** of brother

# FRANCIS SOLANUS CASEY

Capuchin priest

Detroit, 18 November 2017

Letter of the General Minister of the Friars Minor Capuchin

TO THE FRIARS MINOR CAPUCHIN  
TO THE CAPUCHIN POOR CLARES

Dear Brothers and Sisters,  
May the Lord give you peace.

## 1. A life formed in the faith

For the second time this year Pope Francis has given the Order a new Blessed: Solanus Casey, priest of the Calvary Province in the United States of America.

He is the first blessed of the Order from the USA. His spirituality shines in a special way with all the virtues, dear to St. Francis, which the Capuchins have been able to bring to new life in the changing situations of time and place: humility, simplicity, poverty, patience, joy, love of Christ and neighbor. For Solanus, all these virtues were put to use in his service of listening and consolation.

Bernard [Francis Solanus] Casey, the sixth of sixteen children, was born on a farm in Prescott, Wisconsin (USA) on November 25, 1870 to a simple family with Irish roots. His parents, Bernard James Casey and Ellen

Murphy, gave their children a solid religious education; three of them became priests. Finishing primary school, the young Bernard took up various occupations: prison guard, logger, and streetcar conductor. A strong person in both character and will, he was also gifted with a deeply altruistic spirit and a healthy sense of humor.

## 2. Lord, what would you have me do?

In 1892, at the age of twenty-two, Bernard entered the St. Francis de Sales diocesan seminary in Milwaukee. Not able to pay the whole room and board, he set himself up as barber for his classmates. Because he had entered the seminary as a late vocation by the standards of the time and because of his inadequate preparation, Bernard encountered great difficulties in the studies such that, after five years of seminary, the superiors advised him to abandon the idea of priesthood and suggested to him that he might become a religious.

Bernard accepted their advice humbly and trustingly, seeking to understand what God

willed for him. During the summer of 1896 he was often ill, suffering, as he did for his whole life, the lingering effects of the diphtheria he had contracted as a child. Supported by his mother and his sister Ellen in prayer, he continued to ask God to help him know what to do. An important moment came when Bernard met Fr. Eustace Vollmer, an OFM who encouraged him to test his vocation as a Friar Minor, without, however, excluding the Capuchin friars. In truth, the young Bernard did not look upon the idea of the Capuchins with much enthusiasm; at that time German was the main language of the Order and his difficulties with the language had already been revealed in the seminary. In addition, he was not attracted by the idea of having a beard for the rest of his life. Nevertheless, making inquiries with both the OFM and the Capuchins, Bernard began a novena to Our Lady to ask for some light for his path.

### 3. A novena to Mary Immaculate and a knock on the door of the Capuchins

02

On the vigil of the solemnity of the Immaculate Conception in 1896, Bernard knew that he had to go see the Capuchins in Detroit. There, on January 14, 1897, he began his novitiate in the friary of St. Bonaventure, leaving behind all doubts. At the end of novitiate, Bernard, now Br. Solanus, made his religious profession on July 21, 1889. He then took up again the study of theology at the Seraphic Seminary in Milwaukee. The German and Latin used in the teaching, however, did not favor Br. Solanus's learning. Nevertheless, despite this difficulty the superiors decided to ordain Solanus a priest, encouraged by the words of the seminary president: "We shall ordain Br. Solanus and as a priest he will be for the people a kind of Curé of Ars." Thus, on July 24, 1904 Solanus received priestly ordination as a *simplex* priest with the heavy restriction of not being able to hear confessions or preach in public. This limitation imposed on his ministry would remain a humbling and heavy cross to bear, but Br. Solanus accepted the decision of his superiors in a spirit of faith and deep humility.

### 4. Sacerdos simplex, homo simplex: from a limitation a holy life wells up

His ordination was followed by the beginning of a great adventure for Br. Solanus, *simplex* priest or, as he often signed his letters, *homo simplex*, in his total service to the friars and to the poorest and most needy who approached the friary looking for help. From now on he would be given assignments that were normally reserved for lay friars.

His first obedience brought him to the fraternity of Yonkers (1904-1918) as sacristan and assistant to the ladies who looked after decorating the church. Another obedience then called him to Manhattan (1918-1924), as porter and promoter of the Seraphic Mass Association for the support of the Capuchin missions. Here Br. Solanus transformed what might have otherwise been a simple task of filling in registers into a work of missionary animation and promotion of participation in the Holy Mass and the need to pray for the dead. Recording the name of a donor, Br. Solanus also wrote down their particular intentions. He signed up everyone, even those who did not have the small offering to give. The people began to understand that Br. Solanus was not a functionary or bureaucrat, but someone who welcomed them and listened to them, bringing everyone's difficulties and sufferings to his prayer to the Lord. The fruits of this were not lacking; Br. Solanus found himself busy all day listening, consoling, teaching, and accompanying many people. Starting in 1923, at the command of his superiors, Br. Solanus began to keep a record in which the people noted the graces received as the fruits of prayer, participation in the Holy Mass, and the celebration of the sacraments. To those who received graces he used to say that everything was possible «for the one who has faith in God, in his goodness, in his mercy, and in the intercession of Our Lady, God's Masterpiece.»

On August 1, 1924 Br. Solanus was transferred to the friary of St. Bonaventure in Detroit, where he remained until 1945, with the assignment of assistant porter. Because not many people came to the door, the official porter was also the tailor for the friars. With the passing of time, however, the bell began to ring more often and the door opened so someone could

speak with the assistant porter. During this time Br. Solanus was also assigned to presiding at the blessing of the sick, called the St. Maurus blessing, held each Wednesday and given with a relic of the Holy Cross. This blessing had been introduced before Solanus's arrival, but grew in an extraordinary way during his time. During his twenty years in Detroit, a constant stream of people hastened to see Br. Solanus, attracted by his reputation for virtue and by the extraordinary graces attributed to his prayer.

On July 21, 1945 Solanus received an obedience to leave the fraternity of Detroit, where his charity had left a real and profound mark, to go to Brooklyn (1945-1946). The transfer was made necessary in order to safeguard his health as he was suffering from a serious eczema, but above all in order to prevent his name from being used by an association that sold books. People continued to seek him out, however, and after a brief time of quiet at first, his rhythm of welcoming people and responding to many letters took off again as it had been before.

Br. Solanus Casey was already seventy-five years old, and his health was declining. Wanting to reduce his work, his superiors decided on a transfer to Huntington (1946-1956), a quiet place in the countryside of the state of Indiana. The retreat remained hidden for only a few months, and when the news got out of Solanus's new residence, the people began to arrive at the friary door in even greater numbers. On January 25, 1947 Solanus celebrated his fiftieth anniversary of religious profession in Detroit, accompanied by a huge crowd of people who wished to participate. Likewise, his fiftieth anniversary of priesthood was celebrated on July 28, 1954 in Huntington. With his health slowly declining and after various hospital stays in Detroit, Br. Solanus's superiors thought it best to have him stay at St. Bonaventure friary, where he died on July 31, 1957, at the age of eighty-seven.

##### 5. The gift of self and a welcome freely given: a life fully realized

Br. Solanus spent as many as ten hours a day by the friary door, without ever giving himself a break or a time of vacation. His ser-

vice became a genuine apostolate made out of good words, charity, and patience, all lived in obedience. His support in this each day was the desire to live, in every detail, the commandment of the Lord to love God and neighbor. Solanus simply made this command incarnate by making of himself a gift to his neighbor, whoever it was. He didn't seek to fulfill his desire to do always the will of God in a sort of external way that suits itself, for love does not insist on its own way (1 Cor 13:5), nor by the observance of an impersonal law or the realization of a personal project, but according to the free unfolding of the plans of God's love. The will of God seeks our freedom, itself a gift of God and called to join itself to God's designs. This participation is mediated by the words and human decisions which reason often struggles to understand and accept. The saints show us that when human freedom accepts God's plan with love and trust, a new human being is born, free of self, able to savor and live the fruits of the Redemption. Br. Solanus lived as a redeemed man, wishing to fulfill the will of God, following three goals that he himself noted in his diary during novitiate: to give glory to God, to be attentive in listening to Jesus, and to commit himself to the salvation of souls.

Br. Solanus was born and grew up in a Catholic family and this was his first school in the faith. It left an indelible mark on his life. There he learned to pray in every moment of daily life. His outlook and his way of thinking had been formed in the desire for the good of others, without making distinctions based on ethnicity or religious confession. Such was not taken for granted in a historical and social context like that of the United States of America at the beginning of the last century, where men and women of many different nationalities and religious confessions lived together. This coexistence led not rarely to opposition and conflict, fueled at times by claims of having to safeguard autonomy or by retreating into a defensive protection of cultural identity. Br. Solanus was attentive to all, not excluding anyone, and this itself made of him one of the 'last that shall be first' of which Jesus speaks. Someone who knocked on the door of the friary



found in Br. Solanus a man of welcome who didn't measure time and who listened above all. The gift of self began precisely from an attitude of peaceful welcome.

## 6. Something to be desired and learned

Brothers, let us recover and live this peaceful and freely-given welcome! Let us live this welcoming freedom in our fraternities and with those who approach us each day. Let us find again the joy of being not only 'friars of the people' but 'friars with the people.' In the insistent and stressful rhythm imposed on us by the society of today, and by the ever more evident idea of making the human person only a producer of profit, there is greater need for the presence of people who listen, who bend down tenderly and with discernment over the wounds of the soul, who remind the poorest and the desperate of the value of their dignity, supporting such words with the work of charity. Everything given with the utmost freedom; our joyous recompense will be to hear again that word of Jesus: "You did it for me."

Also among ourselves let us teach ourselves this spirit of giving freely! Let our daily 'so much to do' find a break for a moment of rest, of recreation with the brothers. Let us not delude ourselves that the computer screen, which tells us that we have a thousand or more 'friends' on different social networks, and which satisfies our anxiety to be always informed about everything, or the continual chat and reply of the messages that crowd our mobile devices can substitute the relational value of the brothers we meet with when we freely listen to each other, smile together, even bringing up some of the humor that often reduces drama and relaxes tensions. Br. Solanus, to entertain the friars, took up the violin and his music became a gift that everyone appreciated. Gathering together for meals and turning off the cell phone, as well as giving ourselves some time in that daily space that our tradition calls recreation, are the simplest ways to follow up on and make concrete our celebration of the Eucharist and our common and personal prayer.

## 7. What kind of well-being?

In his family Br. Solanus had learned the simplicity of needing to earn one's bread. This education allowed him to appreciate the value of things, in contrast to the individualistic character inside us that asserts only claims and rights. Often when someone has everything without any effort or personal commitment and has given himself over to the logic of entitlement, he is no longer able to perceive the needs of others but rather retreats into his own egotistical comfort. This attitude, which produces a subtle logic of marginalizing one's neighbor, has nothing to do with following Jesus Christ. Someone who sinks into this compromise is no longer able to live the obedience that is being available for the Kingdom, but the center of all his hopes becomes his own realization, the end of which is a kind of personal well-being that no thing or person is allowed to put a dent in.

## 8. The poor: sacred and dignified persons

In the moment of the great economic crisis of the 1920s, Br. Solanus was sent to Detroit. Contact with the hard realities of hunger transformed him, or better brought out of him the character of his charity in an extraordinary way: to receive the poor at the door of the friary with the greatest respect for the sacredness and dignity of their persons. To those who turned to him, Br. Solanus never asked where they came from, what religion they professed, if they were really in need or faking; he treated everyone with compassion and sensitivity, giving to each as much as he had given to the others, without favoritism or partiality. In Br. Solanus the poor person found a friend and confidant; before him the shame of revealing one's own poverty and misfortune was lightened. The eyes and words of this good friar, priest-porter, did not express any condescension or judgment but showed only the desire to understand how to help and give support. Br. Solanus understood well that what he could give to the poor was a gift of Providence manifested in the generosity and sensitivity of bene-

factors. Knowing how to manage and distribute so much Providence thus made him an 'owner of nothing', and nor did he boast of what he gave to the poor each day. His charity was not for the pride of feeling himself good or better than others, but was a way to live an encounter with the Lord in the poor, the moving certainty of fulfilling the word of Jesus, "You did it for me." Everything was lived in a spirit of gifts freely given, recalling to the people that the Lord is the giver of every good.

### 9. A happy life despite...

The humility of Br. Solanus is what strikes us about him the most. It is amazing that within being denied the full exercise of the presbyteral ministry, his docility to the Spirit brought forth an existence that was successful, beautiful, and complete! Br. Solanus accepted this reality, which was certainly difficult at times, as when he had to bear comparison with those who considered him a second-class friar-priest. But this didn't stop him from taking on and integrating the limitation that his own vocation journey had put before him. He did not contest a decision that could be and can still be seen as contrary to a person's dignity, but accepted it, living it in the crucible of faith in Jesus, the Crucified and Risen Lord. This very crucible purified merely human considerations and gave Br. Solanus a profound grounding in the person of his Lord, where our humanity finds peace and happiness. This process gave birth in Br.

Solanus to a heart able to console, support, and accompany the pain and tragic circumstances of many people.

### 10. A particular grace

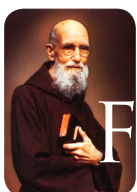
Dear Brothers, Blessed Solanus Casey is added to the already long list of the saints and blessed of our Order. Let us bless the Lord for his goodness! May he increase in us the desire to live our own vocation to holiness. On this happy occasion, I thank Br. Carlo Calloni, General Postulator, and Br. Antoine Haddad, Assistant to the General Postulator, for their generous work, and in a particular way for the marvelous triptych of holiness in which our Order has rejoiced these past few months: Blessed Arsenius of Trigolo, Saint Angelo of Acri, and Blessed Solanus Casey. I wish to thank also all the Brother Vice Postulators who give their time and energy in the circumscriptions of the Order in the many causes for canonization that are open. May Blessed Solanus Casey obtain for all the friars of the Order, and those of the Province of Calvary in particular, that authentic spirit of faith that looks upon the realities of today so as to respond generously to the various needs of the people of our time.

Faternally,

Rome, 1 November 2017  
Solemnity of All Saints



Br. Mauro Jöhri, OFM Cap  
General Minister



**F**RANCIS SOLANUS CASEY  
Circular Letter of the General Minister