

Can you appreciate it?

Solanus as a Spiritual Dialogue Partner

Igor De Bliqy, OFM Cap.

History of Christian Spirituality

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Prologue

I am engaged with the Jefferson House Program as part of my ministry as a Capuchin Friar. Jefferson House is a nine-month, ten-bed residential treatment facility of the Capuchin Soup Kitchen, Detroit, MI, for recovering men seeking to reclaim their lives from addictions. During that time, they learn to practice honesty, courage, and other virtues essential to recovery. They participate in twelve-step recovery meetings and are encouraged to develop their spiritual life. In this last year, one of the residents, we will call him J.C., engaged in conversations with me, seeking a spiritual companion. He graduated from the program but soon relapsed and was M.I.A. for days. I knew I couldn't do anything to help but pray.

During the morning prayer of Thursday, August 25th, 2022, I got the intense urge to go to the tomb of Blessed Solanus Casey and say a prayer to ask for *his* help for J.C. This was my prayer: "*Blessed Solanus, dear brother, I know you care for the people of Detroit, well one of our brothers is out there somewhere, and he needs help. Please watch over him and give him the strength to seek help. Thank you, Solanus.*" I attended Mass, and during personal prayer at communion, I was overwhelmed with a sense of peace and warmth, knowing J.C. would be ok. At 1:48 PM, I received the following text message on my phone: "Brother Igor, can you pick me up, please? I'm stranded. I'm at 7-Mile and Gratiot. You're my only hope. I put myself in a bad situation. I'm outside the dollar store on 7-Mile and Gratiot. I haven't spoken with anybody. You're the first person I talked to in a week."

I got into my car, drove to him, picked him up, and searched for the closest hospital. Arriving at E.R. – he had no shoes, his toenails had popped off, he was dehydrated, and he was in very bad shape – I feared for his life. Notwithstanding the E.R. being full, they admitted him

within minutes, treated him for dehydration and withdrawal, and a few hours later, he was in a room.

The next day, as I visited him, I was surprised at the attention I received for my Capuchin habit. After an hour of silent prayer at J.C.'s bedside, a nurse asked me why I was there as I left the ward. I told her I knew J.C. She asked, "Did you ask Fr. Solanus to help him?" Surprised at her question, I replied: "Yes!" She smiled and, laying her hand on my shoulder, said: "Ah, that is why he got the room next to where Fr. Solanus passed away." The hospital changed the room where Solanus Casey died into an office because patients kept requesting to be admitted to that specific room for the time in the hospital.

Now I am not one to easily believe in miracles, but J.C. is only alive today because he reached out, someone gave him water to drink while he waited, and he got the care he needed in a timely fashion. This is one of the many interventions Blessed Solanus Casey has helped facilitate. Or, at the least, I believe this to be true.

Blessed Solanus Casey, pray for us.

**Exploring Blessed Solanus' spirituality:the significance of appreciation as the cornerstone
of a virtuous life.**

The setting sun broke through the office windows as I opened the door to the front office. The usual warm, coffee-fragranced, stuffy office air greeted my tired face as I reached the window to crack it for fresh, cool spring air. It had been a long day. Mass in the morning, confessions, the blessing of the sick, and some paperwork, it definitely had been a long day. So, I was glad to clean and tidy the office for the next day of people with questions, concerns, hurt, and pain. I also required some time to navigate through my anguish, and tidying up consistently aids in restoring harmony. It's as if clearing the clutter and chaos from a space reorganizes things within my soul.

As I propped the door open and moved the cleaning cart in, my eye fell on something strange in the corner of the room. It looked like a pile of cloth, but this pile moved. Moving closer, I sighed with relief, it was Fr. Solanus, who had probably taken a nap to recharge after a long day. A ray of sunset hit his face as he turned, waking up from his mid-afternoon nap.

“I am so sorry for waking you, Solanus.” I promptly apologized. “Would you like me to come back later?” “No,” Solanus answered while stretching and getting up from the floor, “God probably needed me to wake up now anyway. I trust in his guidance.” He smiled, and we both laughed, and he went to the desk to put some papers in order, and I moved the cleaning cart in and started dusting. I noticed the room hadn't received a thorough dusting in a while. The golden sunlight cut through the air, forming a wall of dust particles mid-air throughout the room, and the evening breeze swiftly carried them through the room and out the door. Solanus placed his notebook in the drawer and neatly arranged his desk. He stood up and was about to leave when

he turned. I expected him to wish me a good evening or that he would see me at recreation, but instead, he asked: “What is troubling you, brother?” as if he had a prophetic insight into my heart.¹ “Oh, nothing, brother; you have a good evening; I’ll see you at recreation,” I replied, hoping he wouldn’t dig any deeper. The fact is, I was troubled, and I didn’t want him to dig around in this, especially not now, feeling so empty and tired at the end of the day.

Solanus walked back into the Front Office, closed the door behind him, and took the seat others normally sat in. Gesturing with his hand and a soft smile, he beckoned me to take his usual seat on the other side of the desk. “Now, now,” he said, “How wonderful, in the promotion of mutual and common charity that – next to our happy dependence on Almighty God himself, he has made us mutually dependent also on one another. And, incidentally, what a marvelously different society we’d have here, and what an ideal world to live in if we’d all keep in mind the assurance of Jesus, ‘What you have done to the least of my brethren you have done to me’.”² “I am here for you, brother, and you are here for me.” Smiling, yet somewhat reluctantly, I sat down in Solanus’ chair. I knew this was ‘of God’ because this wasn’t what I wanted to do, but what I needed to do. We looked at each other in silence for a while, and finally, I took a deep breath and started to share my sorrow. “You know, brother, sometimes it becomes challenging to ascertain whether I am truly fulfilling my purpose and ministering in the right way. Each day, we encounter numerous individuals who are broken and fragmented. We listen to their stories, offer prayers, and provide guidance during confession. Some days, everything seems to flow smoothly, but on other days, I worry that I am merely skimming the surface and falling short of

¹ Michael H. Crosby, *Thank God Ahead of Time: The Life and Spirituality of Solanus Casey* (Cincinnati, OH: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2009), 123-126.

² Solanus Casey, *Collected Writings Attributed to the Servant of God Father Solanus Casey*, 7 Vols. (Solanus Casey Center, Detroit, MI), 2:179.

meeting their immediate needs. How do you manage to navigate through it all?” The setting sun sent a beam of gold hitting the rim of Solanus’ red glasses. Just as gentle as the sunbeam, his words rolled into existence. “We admit that we have tried to be of service to the poorest of the poor, but must add that it was our simple duty.”³ “As Capuchins, brother, this is our duty, we love the poor and at times the poor love us, but even if they don’t, we are simply called to do our duty. Being true to your vocation, and our vocation is to embrace this simple duty of being there for the sick and the poor.” “Our day is fragmented, we hear their stories, we share their prayer, you hear their confession, and in doing that, you fulfill your duty, you embrace your vocation.” “For who can fully appreciate the privilege that Almighty God gives each one of us in just this possibility of our helping him in the work of Redemption and thus saving our own ‘destiny for eternal glory?’”⁴

This rang so true in my ears and at the same time, swept up resistance. Truth always gives us resistance, especially truth that calls us to give more of ourselves. As I looked upon Solanus shining in the golden light of the setting sun, I felt it was easy for him to say this, but much harder to do. Embracing your vocation always seems easy to say or to write down on paper, but living your vocation, living the Gospel as our Seraphic Father Francis calls us to do, is giving of self and always harder to do. Now I was sitting in front of the man who I know gives of himself all day long; no wonder I found him sleeping in the corner of the room; no wonder we find him sleeping in the chapel at night.⁵ He gives and gives and gives again. So I asked him: “Are you then never discouraged, or do you not doubt that what you say or do might not have effect?”

³ Casey, *Collected Writings*, 1:94. [you only give the full reference the first time]

⁴ Casey, *Collected Writings*, 1:248.

⁵ Daniel Crosby, *Interview by Igor De Bliqy* (Detroit, 22 February, 2023).

With a kind and understanding glance he answered plainly: “Don’t give way to worry or discouragement. That never pays. If we could only learn to appreciate the holy faith and the innumerable blessings flowing from it and the blessings otherwise surrounding us; we could never have time to worry about anything, except that we’re so little appreciative.”⁶ “We are so very blessed. In the lives we live, in the fraternity, the brotherly love we share day to day, in the ministry we have to those who call on us every day, in the many benefactors that make it possible to minister the way we do, in the providence of our heavenly Father taking care of us if we were to count our blessings, if we were to appreciate this love for us. Can you appreciate it?”

With the gentleness Solanus said this, I almost underestimated how much it touched my heart because I did not appreciate God’s goodness to me. In my path in life, amid the difficulties, in losing everything my family owned as a child, moving from Africa to Europe, losing friends, and cultures and gaining them again, I have always known God to be near: Christ as my brother with his hand on my shoulder. So why don’t I appreciate it? Why do I live life so often, forgetting he is near? “Of course, I appreciate it,” I replied defensively, “but you are right; I don’t appreciate it enough. Or at least, I haven’t made this attitude my own as you have. I can learn from you. I can easily lose heart when days are hard, things don’t seem to go my way, or I feel I’m missing the point.” Solanus sat up leaned over, and with a kind voice said: “Courage is half the battle. Keep it up. Confidence in God is courage infinitely reinforced by God’s grace to be always fostered, the very soul of prayer.”⁷ Confidence in God, I thought to myself. I joined the Navy and sailed in storms that would have made Jonah reconsider his choices. I was on the Blue Line during the 2010 Israel-Lebanon border clash. God was with me during the difficult years as

⁶ Casey, *Collected Writings*, 2:183.

⁷ Casey, *Collected Writings*, 1: 239.

a pastor of ten parishes. So why don't I have more confidence in God? Solanus interrupted my pondering encouragingly: "Instead of worrying about anything – let us foster confidence in God by thanking Him ahead of time. No creature ... can ever get within the weakest shadow of anything, like even dreaming of beating the Lord in generosity or anything else. But God loves to load confidently loving souls with supernatural, divine generosity."⁸

"Thank you, brother," I replied, "I have much to be thankful for, especially for our life as friars." "Our appreciation, our thankfulness, is the essence of my prayer and Capuchin contemplation. To sit with the Lord and be in His presence is a profound experience. It makes it possible to live this life. I see you often late at night, and even as we come in for prayer in the morning, you are always there, and no one can disturb you."⁹ Trying to move the focus away from him, Solanus blurted out: "How wonderful, in all His designs with all who confide in Him. How fortunate! How humbly grateful we ought to be!"¹⁰ "But brother," I interjected, "when I see you in prayer, arms outstretched, or," I pause because I'm unsure if I should bring this up, "and please know I say this with the utmost respect when we find you asleep on the wooden step of the altar,¹¹ I feel your relationship with the Lord is very deep."

The sun had just set and the golden beams of light were exchanged for the dusty rose of the evening sky, as if to soften the words Solanus was about to speak to me. "Oh brother," he whispered, "I see it a mercy that we really need to examine only one pair of conscience!"¹² "You

⁸ Casey, *Collected Writings*, 2:58.

⁹ Crosby, *Interview*.

¹⁰ Casey, *Collected Writings*, 1:195.

¹¹ Crosby, *Interview*.

¹² Casey, *Collected Writings*, 2:119.

need not compare, for my heart and your heart are different, and we both walk with Christ on this journey of our vocation.”

Solanus stood up, walked over to the cupboard, and asked: “Would you like a drink of water?” I gestured yes, and he proceeded to fill two ceramic cups. Setting the cups on the desk he sat down gracefully and continued: “When we think of past blessings and merciful providence, should we not foster confidence by thanking Him for the future also?... O! What God must have ahead of us if we only leave all to His planning!”¹³ Solanus removed his glasses, rubbed his forehead, took a sip of water, and gently placed the cup back on the desk. He looked at me and said: “That is how I pray. That is why I pray. And I also remember how God works so many good things in my life.” “What a wonderful gift of God is memory!” He remained silent for a moment, and just as I was about to speak, he continued: “But what is it to compare with hope! They cooperate to glorify God, with the other two of the triune virtue, faith, and charity.”¹⁴ “So when you see me so deep in prayer,” Solanus smiled and took another sip of water, “remember that I am merely recalling my memory.” “Do we appreciate the little faith we have? Do we ever beg God for more?”¹⁵ I laughed and replied: “I never have. I think I am too afraid to ask a thing like that. I know I will get it if I ask for something I need. I am very certain of that. One thing we all need is more faith. I know my faith is weak, small, definitely not bigger than a mustard seed.” Saying this, I thought, Solanus, you have a faith larger than life.

As if he was looking into my soul, Solanus said with a clear voice: “By all means, shake off that anxiety of yours. Last year it was about something that you now smile about. Today it is about

¹³ Casey, *Collected Writings*, 1:159.

¹⁴ Casey, *Collected Writings*, Appendix 1:31.

¹⁵ Casey, *Collected Writings*, 2:78.

something that will not be serious if you raise your heart to God every time it comes to your mind and thank Him for whatever is to come.”¹⁶ “Do not fear to ask for more faith. Do not underestimate yourself because God condescends to use our powers if we don’t spoil His plans with ours. God’s plans are always for the best: always wonderful. But most especially for the patient and the humble who trust in Him are His plans unfathomably holy and sublime.”¹⁷ “You sell yourself short, my brother, if we’d only appreciate our faith. If we’d only appreciate what it means to be a Capuchin.”¹⁸ “How can we ever be grateful as we ought to be for such a vocation.”¹⁹

I stood up and closed the window as the cool air was getting too nippy. I noticed that the dusty rose of the evening sky had turned to deep blue. Taking a sip of water, I sat down again and replied, “Thank you, brother, for your kind words, for lifting my heart to yours. I know God works through our hands. More often than not, his words fill my mouth in the confessional, his words that counsel and comfort the pilgrims seeking our prayers, his insights that lead in spiritual direction. I firmly believe He celebrates word and sacrament when I preside, not me. I have a small faith and dare not ask for more, because I know how much He overwhelms me, how much he takes over my life and my love and my longing for more. On days like today, when I feel I am tired and cannot do anything more, it is He all at once at work when someone calls for my ministry. So, on the one side, I have great faith in his work and action, but on the other side, I need him to take over and lead me to where I would not dare to go by myself. The more I open

¹⁶ Casey, *Collected*, 2:9.

¹⁷ Casey, *Collected Writings*, 2:163.

¹⁸ Crosby, *Interview*.

¹⁹ Casey, *Collected Writings*, 2:116.

up to His will in my life, I know I will know great joy, but in that too, be pulled to suffer with Him.”

With a glance of recognition, these words came from Solanus’ heart: “If we only try to show the dear Lord a good will, and ask Him for grateful resignation to the crosses He sends or permits to come our way, we may be sure that sooner or later they will turn out to have been just so many blessings in disguise.”²⁰ “Oh yes,” I exclaimed, “those crosses are blessings, but it takes time to recognize them for what they truly are. I am still young and have a few roads to travel, but I know that I will not go astray with Christ with his hand on my shoulder. And even if I do, if I follow my will instead of His, I know I need not fear.” Cleaning his glasses, Solanus smiled and chuckled lovingly: “How merciful the Good God! Ah! To check us now and then by letting us run up against a snag that halts us for at least a moment of reflection on the real purpose of our existence as rational creatures; ETERNITY IN GOD.”²¹ “You have a good relationship with our brother, Lord Jesus, and his pierced and sacred heart. You appreciate His love.” Standing up and straightening his habit, he said: “It is my humble conviction that appreciation is as necessary for social order and harmony as is the law of gravity for the physical world.”²²

”Look at the time, brother. Are you still going to clean this old office?” Smiling, I answered, “Yes, of course, brother, it is my simple duty.” Solanus picked up the ceramic cups, placed them on the cleaning cart, found a dusting rag, and said, “Let us clean together, brother; many hands do light work.” Without saying a word, we cleaned, and I was blessed by this moment of grace in fraternity.

²⁰ Casey, *Collected Writings*, 2:119.

²¹ Casey, *Collected Writings*, Appendix 1:34.

²² Daniel Crosby, *Interview by Igor De Bliqy*, (Detroit, 22 February, 2023).

Appreciation as a cornerstone of a virtuous life.

In this spiritual dialogue, I construct a conversation with Bl. Solanus Casey who is a revered Capuchin friar known for his spiritual guidance and assistance to those in need. This narrative aims to explore the theme of appreciation and its significance in living a virtuous life within the context of my ministry.

During our conversation, I express my doubts and struggles in fulfilling my ministry, particularly in effectively helping broken and fragmented individuals. I seek guidance, looking to Solanus for wisdom and insights. He imparts valuable advice, emphasizing the importance of embracing my vocation and cultivating a deep appreciation for the blessings and responsibilities it entails.

Solanus encourages me to have courage, foster confidence in God, and maintain a grateful disposition. He underscores the privilege and duty I have in serving others, stressing the significance of faith and the love shared with the marginalized. I acknowledge my own limitations and the need to rely on God's guidance and grace to fulfill my role effectively. Our conversation delves further into the theme of appreciation, with Solanus emphasizing the necessity of recognizing God's blessings and expressing gratitude even amidst challenging circumstances. I reflect on my personal faith journey, acknowledging the need to trust in God's plans and understanding that hardships and crosses can ultimately lead to hidden blessings.

In conclusion, the conversation with Solanus Casey reveals the profound importance of appreciation as a cornerstone of a virtuous life. Through his guidance, I gain insights into embracing my vocation, fostering gratitude, and finding strength and guidance in my faith. This reflection highlights the significance of appreciation and its role in social order and harmony,

grounding me in recognizing my duty and the blessings found within the fraternity of my ministry.

Blessed Solanus, pray for us.

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