

Excavating the Solanus Legacy: Insights on his Scripture Imagination

Edward Foley, Capuchin
Vice-Postulator for the Cause of Blessed Solanus Casey

Introduction

Long before his death in 1957, Fr. Solanus Casey was a beloved figure, first in his home state of Wisconsin and then in the three states where he ministered: Michigan, New York and Indiana. As his reputation grew beyond these geographic locations certain of his gifts and virtues were both admired and celebrated. High on this list were his widely publicized healing gifts, as well as his gentle ability to read souls and offer consoling counsel. Solanus' persistent sense of gratitude was echoed in the title of Michael Crosby's important biography *Thank God Ahead of Time* (1989). His devotion to the Blessed Virgin is captured in a famous photo of him near a shrine of Our Lady of Fatima, a devotion amplified in the Rosary Garden at the Solanus Casey Center in Detroit.

Over the past four years this author has been creating a detailed index of Solanus' writings, comprising 4 volumes (290 pages, 371 pages, 312 pages, and 272 pages respectively) and three appendices (52 pages, 76 pages, and 10 pages respectively). The first four volumes of these writings are available online at <https://www.solanuscasy.org/about-blessed-solanus-casey/writings-of-solanus/> as is a 35,000 word index on the first four volumes. The appendices and the complete index will be available on that site in early 2024.

One of the benefits of combing through Solanus' personal correspondence, retreat notes, and personal reflections is the fresh empirical evidence it gives us about the holy man's thinking and practices. For example, there is ample evidence that Solanus cherished the Rosary, mentioned 26 times across his writings. These references, however, are dwarfed by his mention of "Holy Mass," which number more than 4 times the occasions he references the Rosary. These do not include the hundreds of references to the Seraphic Mass Association, which he administered. Similarly, when we were in the process of constructing the Solanus Casey Center in Detroit, it was decided that snippets from Luke 11:9 (Ask, Seek, Knock) would grace the interior Christ Door because it was purported to be a favorite biblical passage of the Blessed. In that spirit, Luke 11:1-10 was the gospel reading proclaimed at his beatification in 2017. Ironically, of the 250+ scriptural references in Solanus' writings, Luke 11:9 never appears, and its parallel in Matthew (7:7) is only mentioned once (vol. 1:5).

While excavating Solanus' writings in pursuit of discerning the rich charism of this Capuchin healer will take decades, here I wish to share a few preliminary findings from his writings that are not often highlighted in his biographies or other reporting. In particular, we will provide some information about Solanus' rich scriptural imagination.

Scriptural imagination

To date, the indexing of his writings has yielded 227 distinctive scriptural references, some of them repeated over a dozen times. This was initially quite surprising to this author, as most of my impressions of Solanus spiritual practices were that they were rooted more in devotional practices such as prayer before the Blessed Sacrament or the Rosary than in biblical texts. Upon reflection, however, his facility with scriptural sources makes great sense, given how central the Eucharist was to his spirituality. While ordained a simplex priest, which did not allow him to exercise public sacramental

ministry – except for preaching – his private celebration of Mass as well as the privilege of serving someone else’s Mass was spiritually paramount. Holy Mass was so important to him that often he would comment in his writings about his sadness of not being able to preside, for example when he was hospitalized (app. 1:20). At that time in our liturgical history, the Roman Catholic Church employed a lectionary with very little variation over the liturgical year. Thus, in his 53 years of priesthood he would have read through the Mass lectionary over four dozen times. Combine this with his daily celebration of the Divine Office and one can more easily understand how Solanus became so scripturally fluent.

A brief analysis reveals that Solanus was very fond of Wisdom literature, with over 80 individual references to Ecclesiastes, Ecclesiasticus (Sirach), Psalms, the Book of Wisdom and Proverbs. His favorite single citation from the Hebrew Bible is from the Canticle of Daniel (3:57), which he cites 16 times: twice as much as any other scriptural text.

His favorite New Testament writer is Matthew (37 citations), with the letters of St. Paul a distant second (28 references). On the other hand, the New Testament verse or fragments of that verse which Solanus repeats the most is Romans 11:33: “Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways.” The Gospel of John (21 citations) is referenced more than Luke (19), with Mark receiving 4 nods in his writings.

Closing Thoughts

Blessed Solanus Casey was not a mono-dimensional believer or minister. He was deeply committed to his Capuchin family while maintaining very strong ties of affection to his family of origin. He experienced untold suffering in the people who visited or wrote to him, but never seemed to reflect any desolation or depression because of this unrelenting exposure to pain: only gratitude. He had the gift of healing, but never ascribed any of that gift to himself but regularly to the benefits of the Seraphic Mass Association. He had very confined ministerial experiences – mostly as a sacristan, door keeper or spiritual guide – but developed a great passion for the missions.

As devotion to Solanus blossoms in this century of his Beatification and longed for Canonization, may we continue to experience an ever richer appreciation of this multidimensional saint for the 21st century.