For 60 years beginning early in the 20th century, Blessed Solanus Casey served primarily as the porter of Capuchin Franciscan monasteries and parishes in New York, Detroit and Huntington, Indiana. His main responsibility was actually to greet all visitors as a doorkeeper, whether they sought prayers, a meal or simply someone to listen to their problems.

He never served as a pastor, nor was he regarded as a great preacher. He had struggled with the rigors of academic training in the seminary. And when he finally was ordained to the priesthood for the Capuchins in 1904, he was ordered not to deliver complex homilies or hear confessions.

The conditions, however, did not deter him from his calling. In fact, they may have clarified his priestly service. He possessed “a heart that listened,” said Father Matthew Janeczko, O.F.M. Cap., who had been pastor of Sacred Heart Monastery Church in Yonkers, the first church where Blessed Solanus was assigned after his ordination.

At Sacred Heart, where he served for 14 years, the then-young friar served first as sacristan and also directed the altar boys and ladies’ sodality. A couple of years later, Father Solanus was appointed as porter, or doorkeeper. His sensitivity and cheerfulness attracted parishioners, who shared their cares and worries with him.

His gift of listening makes the friar very much a saint for our times, said Father Janeczko in a homily at a Mass in Sacred Heart Church on November 18, 2017, the same day that Blessed Solanus was beatified before more than 60,000 people in Detroit. Father Solanus became only the second U.S.-born man to be beatified, following Father Stanley Rother, who was beatified two months earlier.

People nowadays are so consumed with delivering their stories to the world by every possible means that they often fail to take the time to hear the needs of others in their midst, Father Janeczko said.
Blessed Solanus took the opposite approach. His words weren’t grand or eloquent. “He gave simple words of advice, to seek the greatest of all treasures...God is active and present in our lives, dark as the world may seem,” Father Janeczko said.

That evening, as parishioners prayed in the Yonkers church, banners standing in the sanctuary showed images of Blessed Solanus along with two of his most famous phrases, “Blessed Be God in All His Designs” and “Thank God Ahead of Time.” Gratitude to God was indeed a hallmark of Blessed Solanus’ life and priesthood, and he encouraged the attribute in others.

After Mass, parishioners had an opportunity to venerate a first-class relic of the newly beatified friar in a shrine dedicated to Blessed Solanus at Sacred Heart. “He is the simplicity that God is. Many people have been touched through him,” said Bonnie Valenti, who explained that her devotion to Father Solanus had helped to guide her return to the Church years ago when she was a young adult.

Brian Carty, a custodian at St. Gabriel School in the Bronx, said his connection was forged by reading a biography of Father Solanus, “The Porter of St. Bonaventure’s,” which was written by James Patrick Derum.

Carty and his wife, Mary, who are both natives of Ireland, said they could relate to Father Solanus’ upbringing as one of 16 children of a Wisconsin farming couple. “We’re farmers’ kids, too,” he said.

Bernard Casey Jr. was named after his father; but was more commonly known as Barney. Before entering religious life, he was employed as a lumberjack, a brick maker, a prison guard and a trolley conductor. His first seminary experience, at St. Francis de Sales in Milwaukee, ended unsuccessfully when he was sent home after a year. Several months later, he entered the Capuchin Monastery of St. Bonaventure in Detroit.

In the Archdiocese of New York, Father Solanus was also stationed for three years each at Our Lady of Sorrows parish in lower Manhattan and Our Lady of Angels in East Harlem. At Our Lady of Sorrows, he was allowed to speak more freely in public and also studied Scripture. He soon became a popular speaker.

According to a passage in “The Doorkeeper,” by Father Boniface Hanley, O.F.M., Father Solanus “suggested that a person should thank God in advance of any response to his or her petition for deliverance from suffering.” He urged visitors to perform some act of charity,
such as enrolling in the Capuchin Seraphic Mass Association, as well as performing a good deed for someone in the name of God. “This will be,” he counseled, “your sign of expectant faith.”

In the fall of 1923, the Capuchin provincial requested that Father Solanus keep a notebook with his personal accounts of special cases and reported cures related to his consultations with people. Over the years, he filled seven notebooks with such cases and cures, which wound up numbering in the thousands. Within a short period, people were coming from throughout the tri-state area to visit the friar.

In 1924, he was assigned to St. Bonaventure Monastery in Detroit, where he was to serve for the next 21 years. He counseled everyone from politicians to prelates and the poor, as well as those who were sick, oppressed and spiritually deflated. He did all this from morning until night, with hardly a moment to himself. Sometimes, exhaustion would finally overtake him and he would lay down for a catnap right on his office floor.

After the stock market crash of 1929, the Capuchins soon began serving dinner to 200 to 300 people daily during the Great Depression. Father Solanus urged everyone he encountered to support the soup kitchen, a work of charity that continues today.

After a year at St. Michael’s parish in Brooklyn, Father Solanus spent the next decade in semi-retirement at St. Felix Friary in Huntington, Ind. He died at age 86 on July 31, 1957.

A formal petition to initiate his cause for canonization was presented to Cardinal John Dearden of the Archdiocese of Detroit in 1976. Pope John Paul II officially approved the cause in 1982. In 1995, the pontiff promulgated the decree of Heroic Virtue, bestowing on Father Solanus the title of Venerable.

The healing of a woman, Paula Medina Zarate of Panama, who suffered from an incurable genetic skin disease, became the miracle that resulted in the beatification of Father Solanus, who had suffered from a skin condition that led to his death.

Ms. Zarate was visiting friends in Detroit and stopped at Father Solanus’ tomb to pray for others. She felt an urge to ask for the friar’s intercession for her own condition, and she received an instant and visible healing, which could not be explained medically, according to a Catholic News Service report about the beatification.
Pope Francis announced that the healing was authenticated as a miracle on May 4, 2017, setting the stage for Solanus' beatification six months later. The feast day of Blessed Solanus is July 30. A second miracle is needed for canonization.

The Beatification Mass was offered at Ford Field, home to the NFL's Detroit Lions. Some 35 bishops, 400 priests and deacons, and more than 200 members of the Capuchin community, were joined by 300 members of the Casey family.

“His favorite sons were the poor, the sick, the emarginated and the homeless,” Cardinal Angelo Amato, who was the principal celebrant and homilist, said of Blessed Solanus. “He spent hours upon hours patiently receiving, listening to and counseling the ever-growing number of people who came to him,” said Cardinal Amato, who is prefect for the Congregation for Saints’ Causes.

The day after his beatification, Pope Francis spoke about Blessed Solanus in St. Peter’s Square. “A humble and faithful disciple of Christ, he was known for his untiring service to the poor,” the pope said. “May his witness help priests, religious and laypeople live with joy the bond between the proclamation of the Gospel and love for the poor.”

The pontiff was speaking on the first World Day of the Poor when 6,000 to 7,000 poor people attended Mass in St. Peter's as his special guests.

Encounters with the spirit of Blessed Solanus continue today. Sometimes they happen in the most unlikely places, such as one involving this writer at the New York State Department of Motor Vehicles office now nearly nine years ago.

Stepping up to the window, a picture of then-Venerable Solanus Casey stared back from underneath a clear mat on the desktop of a worker. A quote from Father Solanus was also typed there. “Man's greatness lies in being faithful to the present moment,” it read. The words were also an apt description for the encounter at the DMV.

Upon questioning, the worker admitted that she had learned about Father Solanus from a television program and that she had only recently displayed the information about him where it could be seen.

She said she admired Father Solanus for his gentle manner, which she attributed to his willingness to listen to everyone with whom he came in contact. She said she tried to be a good listener to everyone she encountered, too. The whole exchange did not last more than
a minute, but it made me want to share the news of my own encounter with Father Solanus, and to learn more about him, too.

*John Woods is editor in chief of Catholic New York.*