

CHAPTER 10

Miracles and Hope



AFTER ARRIVING IN DETROIT IN 1918, NONNA'S PARENTS MOVED TO the Northeast section of the city. The neighborhood was inhabited entirely by first generation European immigrants. Two-story wood or brick flats crowded the neighborhood streets. Whole families occupied one floor and rented the other floor to boarders. Such was the living arrangement the Rizzo family paid for on Helen Street; they were boarders in another family's home between Mack Avenue and East Grand Boulevard.

In the upheaval of moving across an ocean to a foreign country whose language was equally foreign, Nonna's Catholic Sacrament of First Holy Communion had been forestalled. Finally, as she reached her teen years, it was time to receive religious instructions to prepare for receiving the Sacrament. Each week Nonna would walk the mile to classes: west on Mack Avenue, then north on Mount Elliot Street, arriving at Saint Bonaventure Church. A Capuchin monastery

lay adjacent to the church. The Capuchin Friars, clad in their long, coffee-brown wool robes, humbly ministered to the community through the church and monastery. The brown monastic robes were made by the Capuchin brothers themselves at the monastery. So, too, did the Friars weave the white cotton cord (called a *cincture*) that they each tied around their waists over the robe to symbolize their solemn vows of chastity, poverty, and loyalty. A large brown wood rosary was also part of their religious garb. The beads of the rosary were uncommonly large; the size of marbles. Five decades of beads (meaning five groups of ten beads each) were strung along the rosary, and ended with a single, plain, handcrafted wood cross.

One winter evening, as Nonna made her way to Communion instructions at the monastery, she was curious about a particular Capuchin friar. Would she see him tonight? She walked north on Mount Elliot toward Saint Bonaventure. Keeping her face down, buried against the biting winter elements, she glanced briefly to her right. Hundreds of grey headstones somberly peeked from the snow-covered cemetery. As a harsh blast of chilled air forced her back into her huddled position, she barely looked up; it was only enough for her to see a short distance in front of her snow-covered and worn shoes. The large steeple of the monastery appeared in the darkened sky. Nonna looked to the left for the cement path that would lead her perpendicularly from the Mount Elliot sidewalk into the monastery. From there she could see him. The folds of his long robes were whipped by the bitter wind against his tall, thin silhouette. The white snow, wild and horizontal from the force of the wind gusting off the Detroit River, gathered on and contrasted against his brown robes. Again and again, Brother Solanus stooped to dig his shovel into the wet, white powder, and scooped up a heavy load of snow to reveal the path to the monastery. Ignoring the bitter wind, Nonna watched as he dutifully cleared the path so that she and others could pass safely and enter the monastery.

“Oh, the poor man. He must be so cold. Only in his robes. Outside for so long.”

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With head kept bent to the ground, she passed the tall, thin Brother. *Ohhhh!* She was aghast. Her eyes still looking toward the ground, she noticed that open sandals were the only covering on the Brother's feet. As it was at that time, the Capuchin Friars also made their own sandals. Essentially, only four pieces of hard leather were used in their construction. The brown leather was in one-inch wide, quarter-inch thick pieces. One piece came across the toes, two pieces crisscrossed over the top of the foot and the remaining piece came around the back of the heel. Leather formed the bottom sole. It was not until the 1950s and 1960s that the Brothers started using old tires to form the soles of their sandals. In any event, the essentially open-footed Capuchin sandal was definitely not suited for Michigan winters. Nonna's big, dark eyes stared agape as she passed the Brother. She felt sorry for the monk as snow filled every open space between the sparse sandal straps, totally encasing his bare feet. Decades later, the vision remained vivid in her memory. Each time she told me the story she would shake her head in sorrow and click her tongue against the back of her front teeth in horror.

Nonna had heard the stirrings in her neighborhood of special "favors" granted to people when Father Solanus had interceded in prayer on their behalf. Miracles were not strange to Nonna. Remember, Nonna's own mother had witnessed a miracle.

The sixth child born to parents with sixteen children, "Barney" often missed elementary and secondary school to help out at home and on the farm in Wisconsin. In 1891, at the age of 21, Barney Casey entered the Seminary at St. Francis de Sales High School in Wisconsin. Barney struggled academically. After four difficult years of seminary, his school superiors dismissed him. Disappointed but not discouraged, he traveled to Detroit, Michigan, to the Capuchin Order at St. Bonaventure Monastery. He was invested as a Capuchin novice and was given the name Brother Francis Solanus. With his whole soul, Solanus wanted to become a priest, but the question of his poor academic abilities again plagued him. So fervent and committed to God was Solanus that his Capuchin superiors eventually allowed him to be ordained.

Coraggio! Courage to Believe in Miracles

His ordination, however, was only as a “simplex priest” on condition that he never preach doctrine, never hear confession, and never grant absolution.

In 1904 he received his first assignment, to serve at a church in New York. He was given menial duties not ordinarily given to a priest. He cared for priestly vestments, sacred vessels and the altar. Returning some time later to St. Bonaventure in Detroit, Father Solanus became the humble doorman of the monastery, the “porter” in monastic terms, at which he served for two decades. It was in the late 1920s and early 1930s that Nonna would observe the simple monk about his other doorman duties: sweeping the floors in the long hallways of the monastery.

Nonna noticed that many people would flock to speak to Father Solanus, their faces stressed with desperation and urgency. The word was spreading that Father Solanus had the gift of healing and prophecy. No matter how busy or how tired, Father Solanus would listen, his piercing blue eyes meeting theirs, with compassion, leaving the plaintiff with a sense of peace that their plight had been heard and that this pure, holy man would intercede. Nonna heard that a desperate father had sought out Father Solanus to pray for his son who had been in the hospital and in a coma for sixteen days, fourteen of those days beleaguered by fever. The doctors had told the father to go home and make arrangements for the child’s death and funeral. At once Father Solanus went with the father to Providence Hospital where he laid his hands on the child and prayed. After he finished his prayer, Father Solanus looked at the father and told him not to worry, that his son would be better by the next day. Another prophecy that became true. Within a few hours the boy’s fever broke. Another healing miracle. Within twenty-four hours the boy awakened from his coma.

“Will my wife get well?”

“Can you help me find a job during these Depression times?”

“I beg you to pray for the protection of my son at his World War II station in Europe!”

Such were the pleadings of so many who asked Father

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Solanus for his intercession for healing and prophecy. Father Solanus worked sixteen hours a day and filled seven notebooks with the more than 6,000 intercessions he had asked for on behalf of others. Father Solanus worked tirelessly, often to the detriment of his own health.

Inevitably, when Nonna told someone she had been in the presence of Father Solanus, that person would have their own story of healing or miracle or prophecy. Nonna's across-the-street neighbors, Mary and Don, knew the woman who had an inoperable brain tumor. The doctor told her there was nothing left to do. The woman and her husband went to Father Solanus at St. Bonaventure. After hearing her story, Father Solanus said,

“Don't worry, don't worry. When you go back to the doctor you will see that the tumor is gone and you will have been cured.”

Remarkably, when the woman returned to the doctor he could find no tumor! The doctor asked what had happened and the cured woman told him Father Solanus had prayed for her and predicted the miracle. The inoperable brain tumor miracle story was one I was assured to hear each time neighbor Mary stopped over for a visit when she spotted my car in front of Nonna's house.

In fact I heard countless stories about the miracles attributed to Father Solanus throughout my life. Nonna often spoke of the irony that it was not the high-speaking theologians in the monastery to whom people in need were flocking, whose intercession produced miracles, who were heralded as possible saints. Rather, people turned to a simple man who performed the humblest of duties at the monastery, who was forbidden from preaching doctrine; they beseeched this man who was supposed to be of inferior intellectual capability. Nonna just knew that it was from the humble simplicity and conviction of his soul that Father Solanus would pray for the needs and requests of others; this was the key to the success of his intercession. Every time she spoke of it to me, I could only shake my head in agreement.

From as far back as I can recall Nonna kept a photo of Father Solanus on the wall behind the rust-colored velour

easy chair that was “her place” in the front room of her home. Framed in a plain dark brown wood frame, the 8 inch by 10 inch photo stood guard above her head. Nonna and her sister Victoria also kept photos of Father Solanus close to their hearts – literally! The oval 1½ inch by 2 inch photo had his last words printed on the back, “I give my soul to Jesus Christ.” With a speck of brown robe cloth that had been touched to his tomb, the photo was encased in clear plastic, and secured by delicate hand embroidering. As they advanced in years, Nonna and her sister Victoria required help dressing and undressing. To those of us who assisted them, their secret was revealed: the plastic-encased photo and relic was dutifully pinned inside their bras! After my diagnosis with rheumatoid arthritis and the severity of my condition became apparent, Nonna and Aunt Victoria gave me a scapular with Fr. Solanus’ photo and relic strung on a brown ribbon to wear around my neck. Even though I was in my early twenties and living in California where my peers wore low cut tees and bikini tops, I wore the brown scapular. It did not matter that the thick brown ribbon could be seen from the neck of my shirt. Nonna believed in the miracles that had occurred as a result of Father Solanus’ prayers. Aunt Vicki believed in the miracles that had occurred as a result of Father Solanus’ prayers. They had lived and moved among Father Solanus and so many who experienced miracles. As I lived and moved among these believers of miracles I, too, became a believer in healing miracles.

Nonna connected with Father Solanus. Nonna and Father Solanus were both simple human beings. Yes, simple, but both of their souls brimmed with faith. Most importantly, both Father Solanus and Nonna shared a common spiritual theme – they both held a firm belief and confidence that God was good and God cared. As a novice with the Capuchin monks, Francis Solanus meditated on the Bible passage:

“Ask and it shall be given” (Matthew 7:7).

Tragedy claimed the lives of loved ones of Father Solanus. Two of his sisters died of diphtheria, two of his brothers died in a single car accident, and two of his cousins drowned in the Mississippi River. Yet his faith in God’s goodness was

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unwavering. So was Nonna's belief through the challenges and tragedies she experienced: God was a benevolent God, present in her life to help her; always there for her to lean on.

There are too many studies and publications on the link between spirituality and healing for me to ignore that there is a connection. If nothing else, the belief in God's benevolence and the existence of miracles fosters hope. My dear friend Maureen Dyar was struggling with severe rheumatoid arthritis when we met at Aquinas College. It was 1979, two years before I would be diagnosed. Never ever would I, or could I, have imagined that I would share the same fate and so imminently. Maureen told me that her mother took her to visit shrines dedicated to holy, earthly people whose prayers appeared to produce healing miracles. One such shrine was St. Joseph Oratorio in Montreal, Canada. Maureen and her mother had silently marveled at the stacks of crutches, canes, and walkers hanging on the walls outside the Chapel of the Oratorio. These crutches, canes, and walkers were left by those who came and prayed, or were prayed for, and who, by miraculous healing, were able to leave without their ambulatory aids. Brother Andre, C.S.C., was another humble soul that lived and moved among many in the twentieth century with miracles being attributed to his intercessory prayer. For Maureen and her mother, surrounding themselves in the location where miracles had occurred brought hope that healing from Maureen's rheumatoid arthritis would also occur.

I believe that the fact that I continue to be alive is a miracle! I believe the fact that I can walk on my own and work full-time is an extraordinary miracle! And the miracles I have experienced bring hope to what health challenges may lie ahead! Miracles abound! We need only believe and keep watch for them... especially in unlikely places!



May you possess the courage to:

- Believe in miracles and hope.
- Believe you will experience a physical or emotional healing miracle.
- Believe your loved one will experience a physical or emotional healing miracle.
- Visit a shrine, light a candle, and in the stillness and sanctity, pour forth your joys, your concerns and your sorrows.