

Canonisation Celebration: Two New Saints for the Church

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Welcome to our Celebration of the Canonisation of our two young saints, St Carlo Acutis and St Pier Giorgio Frassati – it feels so good to finally be able to call them saints! There is no more fitting way to celebrate these two young men of heroic virtue than by immersing ourselves in their two great loves: the Eucharist and Our Lady.

St Carlo is the first Millennial saint – born in 1991 in London to Italian parents, who later moved back to Milan where he lived out his fifteen years before his death in October 2006, less than a week after a diagnosis of an aggressive form of leukaemia. In many ways, Carlo was an ordinary teen who used modern technology, supported AC Milan, loved superheroes... but in his short life his depth of faith and service to others set him apart as extraordinary.

St Pier Giorgio, born 90 years before Carlo in Turin in 1901 to wealthy and influential parents, was in many ways so similar to his peers: he played pool, visited bars, smoked cigars, climbed mountains and played practical jokes on his friends. Yet his deep faith, love for the poorest of the poor and disciplined life were extraordinary, and still an inspiration 100 years after his death at the age of just 24.

How did these young men achieve sainthood? Where did that profound faith come from?

Surprisingly, neither young man actually picked up their faith from their parents. Carlo's mother admits she had only attended Mass for her first Holy Communion, Confirmation and her wedding day. It was a young Polish girl employed by the Acutis family who often took the little toddler to visit churches and light candles, and it was little Carlo himself who asked his parents to pray at night with him, and asked for a bible and books on the saints. Antonia, his mother, has since said that Carlo was her saviour. Later when they employed Rajesh, a Hindu man from Mauritius as an au pair, the boy's deep devotion for the Eucharist and gentle explanation of the faith actually converted Rajesh to Catholicism.

Alfredo Frassati was agnostic and his wife Adelaide a lukewarm Catholic who disapproved of her son's daily reception of communion, afraid his Catholic devotion would make him weak and narrow-minded. Both parents were strong characters and Pier Giorgio and his sister were brought up in a strict and controlling environment. The Frassati home was often filled with tension and arguments as the couple moved steadily closer towards a divorce, something which pained their son greatly. He did all that he could to maintain peace in the home. When his daily praying of the rosary and devotional practices bothered his parents greatly, Pier Giorgio spoke less and less at home so as not to cause friction. He learned to pause *before* entering the dining room to bless himself since his praying grace caused tension at the dinner table. Pier Giorgio was sent to a Jesuit school, but only because he was failing Latin. Providentially it was there that his faith deepened, nurtured by the authentic witness of the priests and the religious instruction he received.

Neither Carlo nor Pier Giorgio were indifferent to the injustice and suffering they saw, even if they themselves had been born into wealthy, comfortable lifestyles.

Both from a young age displayed an acute sensitivity to the suffering of those around them and did all that they could to help others. Even as a small child, when Pier Giorgio answered the Frassati door to a poor lady with her barefoot son, he was immediately moved to take off his own shoes and socks to give to the little boy, closing the door quietly behind him so his family would not know. From the little allowance that his father gave him to pay for first class train tickets, he chose instead to ride third class, or forego the train ride altogether and walk instead, so that he could give the money to the poor and sick. He was actively involved with the St Vincent de Paul Society and other charities. Italy was struggling greatly from the ill effects of World War I: poverty, sickness and social inequality were rampant. He did not shy away from politics but was actively involved with political parties such as Catholic Youth, fighting for social reform, opposing Fascism and the anti-Church rhetoric of the day, even from his college professors.

The teenager Carlo was a tireless volunteer with the poor and homeless as we'll hear later. He was also a courageous witness to his friends, warning them of the dangers of pornography and immodesty. He was not afraid to speak out for life in class debates or challenge his friends to treat the girls of their acquaintance with respect.

Both Carlo and Pier Giorgio chose to live simply despite the lifestyle they were born into. Carlo thought of money as "ragged paper" and had no interest in expensive toys or clothes. He never wanted more than one pair of shoes – he said he only had one pair of feet, and he preferred the money to go to those in need. He used his own allowance to buy sleeping bags for the homeless in Milan brought food to the hungry and insisted that extra portions be included in family meal prep, rather than just bringing leftovers.

Pier Giorgio, son of the famous La Stampa newspaper owner, could have enjoyed a life of wealth and pomp himself, but chose to forego family summer holidays because he did not want to leave the poor of Turin with no-one to care for them. He was often without a coat or shoes because he had given them to someone more in need than himself. Shortly before he died, Pier Giorgio was offered the choice of a car or money for his graduation gift. He chose the money so that he could share it with the poor whom he felt it his honour to serve and once said: *"All around the sick and all around the poor I see a special light which we do not have."*

Carlo too chose to live a disciplined, simple life. Like most teens, he loved computer games but limited himself to one hour per week because of the dangers of addiction. He used the internet wisely, seeing its potential as a tool for evangelisation, but did not allow it to distract him from prayer or service of others. Before he died, he was able to say, ***"I am happy to die, because I know I lived my life without wasting even a minute of it doing things that wouldn't have pleased God."*** What an incredible statement for anyone to make, especially one so young.

Far from being shut off in an isolated world of pious devotion, both Carlo and Pier Giorgio valued friendship greatly. Pier Giorgio surrounded himself with a group who nicknamed

themselves “The Shady Characters”, led by none other than himself. He was a genius for practical jokes, often challenged his friends to a game of pool (of course if they lost, they had to pray the rosary or attend Mass with him!). He was there for his friends in a true and authentic way, not just superficial fun, offering advice, comfort, practical support too.

Carlo also had a great gift for sincere friendship. Often, he invited classmates to hang out after school at his house and stay for dinner. Usually these were the very students who were struggling, or whose parents were going through a breakup. He looked out for those who were being bullied and was sensitive to the needs of others. Teachers often noticed that those who were mostly likely to spend lunch time on their own were the exact ones found in the company of Carlo.

Jesus told us he came that we may have life and have it to the full. Both Carlo and Pier Giorgio believed in living life in all its fullness.

Carlo, as a Millennial, enjoyed a life so familiar to us today. He wore Nike and jeans, played soccer and computer games like Super Mario and Halo, collected Pokémon, loved quizzes, photography, and making videos (even making his cats the stars of the productions). Like many of us he had a weakness for Nutella and ice-cream, he loved action movies and was even a Spiderman fan. He taught himself to code as well as any college graduate and designed numerous websites. He loved to travel, and spending time with his friends gave him great joy.

Pier Giorgio never wanted to simply exist but to really *live*. *“To live without faith, without a heritage to defend, without battling constantly for truth, is not to live but to ‘exist’; we must never just ‘exist’.”* He loved music, poetry, theatre and the opera. He also loved to smoke cigars! He especially loved the outdoors: skiing, hiking, horse-riding and kayaking with his friends and family. Often, he would persuade his friends to join him for a very early morning Mass before climbing and it is a testament to his friendship and character that they did! The higher he climbed, the closer he felt to God. It was undoubtedly in the silence of nature and his time in front of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament that Pier Giorgio's call to serve the poor was revealed to him.

Alfredo Frassati wanted his son and heir to take over the family business at La Stampa. Pier Giorgio's heart lay elsewhere. His great dream was not the newspaper business, or even priesthood, as many would have suspected, but serving the poor as a lay man, as a mining engineer to be precise, because then he could help the miners working in the worst conditions at the time.

Carlo was young and had his whole life ahead of him. He had thought about priesthood and could surely have been a great computer programmer. His dream, his great project, however, was realised even at such a young age. Carlo was a computer genius and wanted to use the internet to help spread stories of Eucharistic Miracles, so he researched the Church-approved miracles from around the world and catalogued them brilliantly as a display still used internationally, and also as a website he himself built which is still in existence today.

Carlo described the Eucharist as his *“highway to heaven”*. As a teenager, he was able to say, *“The more we receive the Eucharist, the more we become similar to Jesus and already on this*

earth we foretaste Heaven!" - such wisdom from someone so young. From the day he made his first Holy Communion, Carlo never missed daily Mass. Carlo described the Virgin Mary as *"the only woman in my life!"* with whom he never missed his daily appointment, the rosary. As a child, he often brought flowers to her statue in the local church. Carlo also went to confession weekly and shared his faith, becoming an assistant catechist in his parish for those preparing for confirmation.

Pier Giorgio also was totally devoted to the Jesus in the Eucharist. He received permission as a teen to become a daily communicant, never missed daily Mass and was often found kneeling in the church in adoration late at night or early in the morning. Pier Giorgio's faith was straightforward but profound: *"Jesus is with me. I have nothing to fear."*

He also had a special love for Our Lady and often brought flowers to the statue of Our Lady of Oropa. He prayed the rosary daily, was never without a rosary in his pocket and often fell asleep with it in his hand. What a simple but beautiful example for us all.

Their strong faith did not spare them from suffering in their short lives. Pier Giorgio's grandmother was dying in the Frassati home, at the same time as Pier Giorgio himself contracted a fatal form of polio from one of the poor he visited in the slums. Not wanting to draw attention to himself, Pier Giorgio's brief period of sickness went largely unnoticed, except to be a source of annoyance for his mother at the timing of it, who like the rest of the family, didn't realise the severity of his illness until it was too late. Before he died, although almost fully paralysed, he managed to write a note with instructions for medicine and assistance to be given to some poor people, whom he did not want to be forgotten. At his funeral, the streets were lined with thousands of people unknown to his parents, but dear to the heart of Pier Giorgio and who loved him dearly in return. Very few, if any, would have guessed their angel of mercy was actually the heir of the famous Frassati Family. His parents realised they had never known their son's heart, never knew the extent of his charitable actions. This realisation and their painful loss eventually brought great fruit as their marriage was saved, and his father began practicing the Catholic faith.

Carlo's brief but painful illness took his family completely by surprise. Initially what they believed was the flu claimed his life less than a week after his diagnosis. Carlo bore his intense pain with heroic virtue, offering his suffering for the Pope, the Church and so that he would not spend time in Purgatory but go straight to heaven. His funeral too, at his beloved Assisi, was attended by thousands who lined the streets outside the Church; thousands whose lives had been touched and inspired by the fifteen-year-old boy. His actions are still influencing young and old across the world today to engage in social action, to use social media for evangelisation, to live a life of authentic Catholic witness. His Eucharistic miracle website is still bringing people from all around the world to a deeper love of the Eucharist.

Carlo's life plan was simple: *To be always close to Jesus*. Pier Giorgio too sought closeness to God – his motto, *"Verso l'alto"*, to the heights, was not just a mountain climber's cry, but an attitude of life – always upwards, higher and higher to where we hear the voice of God more clearly.

As we know, Carlo was originally meant to be canonised on 27th April, and Pier Giorgio on 3rd August. Heaven had different plans and so here we are today celebrating their canonisation just this morning in Rome by our new Pope, Leo XIV. All over the world, celebrations are taking place and in heaven an explosion of grace is surely pouring out, as these two great witnesses for youth are raised to the altar and finally, we can call them saints. Now, more than ever, we need witnesses like these.

Carlo and Pier Giorgio are role models for youth – their faith, courage, zeal, discipline, above all their authenticity in being exactly who God created them to be, and that to the fullest.

They give us hope precisely because their parents were not practicing. More and more we come across young people like this, stepping up in faith, and actually becoming the catalyst for their parents rediscovering the faith of their baptism.

Carlo and Pier Giorgio show us that modern day sainthood is a real option – something achievable in the everyday situations we find ourselves in, despite of or even because of the challenges we face.

Today we ask their intercession for all the many intentions we carry in our hearts today... Today we ask for their friendship as we journey in faith.

St Carlo Acutis, pray for us. St Pier Giorgio Frassati, pray for us. Amen