

Pier Giorgio Frassati

Those who think of saints as shy and reclusive people who disdain this life while pining for the next world will be surprised by the figure of Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati

A practical joker, known as “Robespierre” or the “Terror” by his friends, whom he united in an association called “The Shady Characters”, Frassati was a friend to the poor, in whom he saw Christ. And today’s laity, especially young people, who are looking for a role model, find someone to identify with in this strapping young outdoorsman who combined political activism and work for social justice, who lived his short life “to the full”.

Pier Giorgio Frassati was born in Turin, Italy on April 6, 1901. His mother, Adelaide Ametis, was a painter. His father Alfredo, an agnostic, was the founder and editor-in-chief of the liberal newspaper “La Stampa”, and was influential in Italian politics as a Senator and as well as Ambassador to Germany.

He was educated at home with his sister Luciana, who was one year younger, before attending with her a state school and finally a school run by the Jesuits. There he joined a Marian sodality and the Apostleship of Prayer and obtained permission for daily Communion, a practise which he kept till the end of his life..

Pier Giorgio developed a deep spiritual life which he never hesitated to share with his friends. The Holy Eucharist and the Blessed Virgin were the two poles of his world of prayer. At the age of 17, in 1918, he joined the St. Vincent de Paul Society and dedicated much of his spare time to serving the sick and the needy, caring for orphans and the demobilised servicemen returning from World War I. He decided to become a mining engineer studying at the Royal Polytechnic University of Turin, so he could “serve Christ better among the miners”, as he told a friend.

Although he considered his studies to be his first duty, they did not keep him from social and political activism. In 1919 he joined the Catholic Student Federation and Catholic Action. Participating in a Church-organized demonstration in Rome, he stood up to police violence and rallied the other young people by grabbing the banner which the Royal Guards had knocked out of someone else’s hands. He held it even higher while using the pole to fend off their blows. Like his father he was strongly anti-Fascist and did nothing to hide his political views. On several occasions he was involved in fights, first with anticlerical Reds and later with the Fascists. Independently of his father’s political ideas he became a very active member of the Popular Party which promoted the Catholic Church’s social teaching. He even thought about merging the Catholic Student Federation with the Catholic Workers Organization. “Charity is not enough: we need social reform,” he used to say as he worked for both.

What little he did have, Pier Giorgio gave to help the poor; even using his bus fare for charity and often running home to be on time for meals. The poor who were without God and those who were suffering were his masters; he was literally their servant, and he considered this a privilege. This charity did not involve just giving something to others but giving of himself completely, a self-giving that was nourished by daily Communion with Christ in the Holy Eucharist and by frequent nocturnal adoration, by recitation of the Rosary, by meditation on St. Paul’s “Hymn on Charity” (I Cor 13). He often sacrificed vacations at the Frassati summer home in Pollone because “*If everybody leaves Turin, who will take care of the poor?*” In 1921 he enthusiastically helped to organize in Ravenna the first congress of the “Pax Romana”, an association which has as its purpose the unification of all Catholic students throughout the world to work together towards world peace.

Mountain climbing was one of his favourite sports. These outings, which he organised with his friends—The Shady Characters—were also for him occasions for apostolate. He often went to theatres, operas and museums; he loved art and music and could quote whole chunks of the poet Dante. The fiery sermons of Savonarola and the writings of St. Catherine of Siena propelled him into

the Third Order of St. Dominic in 1922; he chose the name Girolamo (Jerome), not after the Bible scholar, but rather after his personal hero, the Dominican preacher and reformer of Florence's Renaissance, Girolamo Savonarola: *"I am a fervent admirer of this friar, who died as a saint at the stake,"* he wrote to a friend.

Just before receiving his university degree Pier Giorgio contracted poliomyelitis, which doctors later speculated he caught from the sick whom he tended. Neglecting his own health because his grandmother was dying, he died after six days of terrible suffering on July 4, 1925 at the age of 24. His last concern was for the poor. On the eve of his death, with a paralysed hand, he scribbled a message for a friend remembering the injections for Converso, a poor man he had been assisting.

His funeral was a triumph: the streets of the city were lined with a multitude of mourners, unknown to his family—the poor and the needy whom he had served so unselfishly for seven years. Many of these poor people, in turn, had been surprised to learn that the saintly young man they knew was the heir of the Frassati family.

Pope John Paul II, after visiting his tomb in Pollone in 1989, said: *"I wanted to pay homage to a young man who was able to witness to Christ with singular effectiveness in this century of ours. In my youth, I also felt the beneficial influence of his example, and as a student I was impressed by the force of his Christian testimony"*.

On the 20th of May 1990, in St. Peter's Square, filled with thousands of people, the Pope beatified Pier Giorgio Frassati, "Man of the Eight Beatitudes". His mortal remains which were found incorrupt in 1981 were transferred from the family tomb in the cemetery of Pollone to the Cathedral of Turin.

THE CRONOLOGY OF HIS LIFE

1901

Born in Turin, 6th April, Holy Saturday.

1902

His sister Luciana is born.

1910

With his sister he attends a State school in Turin.

1911

He receives the First Communion.

1913

*Having failed his exams he is sent to a private school run by the Jesuits.
His father is appointed Senator of the Kingdom.*

1914

He enrolls in the "Apostleship of Prayer" and in the "Company of the Most Blessed Sacrament".

1915

He is confirmed.

1918

*He receives his high school certificate.
He enrolls in the Faculty of Industrial Mechanical Engineering at the Royal Polytechnic of Turin, with specialisation in mineralogy.*

1919

He enrolls in the Italian Catholic Students Federation and in the St. Vincent de Paul Society.

1920

*His father is appointed Italian ambassador to Berlin.
He enrolls in the "University Students' Nocturnal Adoration Group."*

1921

He attends the 1st "Pax Romana" Congress in Ravenna.

He is with his family in Berlin and later is the guest of the Rahner family in Freiburg.

He attends the Young Catholic Workers Congress in Rome and is arrested during a demonstration.

He enrolls in the Popular Party (the newly founded Catholic Party).

1922

He joins the "Milites Mariae" Circle of the Young Catholic Workers.

He becomes a Dominican Tertiary, taking the name Girolamo after Savonarola.

1924

He founds with his friends the association "The Sinister Ones".

1925 - 4th of July -

Suddenly stricken with poliomyelitis he dies after five days of terrible suffering.

1989

Pope John Paul II flies to Pollone to pray at his tomb.

1990 - 20th May -

Pier Giorgio Frassati, the "Man of the Eight Beatitudes" is beatified by Pope John Paul II in St. Peter's Square in Rome, in the presence of thousands of young people.

"I shall be a mining engineer to serve Christ better among the miners"

Studies

Instead of choosing to study subjects which would have won him an easy career on his father's newspaper, Pier Giorgio chose the more difficult course of engineering to enable him to share the hard life of the miners.

In 1918 he enrolled in the Royal Polytechnic of Turin with a specialisation in mineralogy. Young, rich, sporting and vigorous, on the way to a brilliant future, admired and sought after, sole heir of a well-known family which was held in high regard, he heard and paid attention to the voice of Christ calling him to a mission of charity.

From his earliest, study was the threatening cloud hanging over him. Yet up to the very day of his death it was also for him the "duty of his state", the first duty therefore and the one before which other activities had to give way.

"The battle is rugged. Pray that God may strengthen my will so that I shall not give way or default. Just now I'm going over the whole of my metallurgy and doing the best I can with the designs of the principal drawings". (to A. Severi, 6.1.1925)

"The mind filled with arid science sometimes finds peace and spiritual enjoyment in the reading of St. Paul. I would like you to try and read St. Paul. It is wonderful, and the spirit is cheered and ennobled by reading him. It spurs us on to follow the right way and return to it whenever we leave it through sin". (to I. Bonini, 29.IV.1925)

I beg you to pray for me a little, so that God may give me an iron will that does not bend and does not fail in His projects" (to A. Severi, 13.IV.1925)

EQUAL TO HIS PHYSICAL RESISTANCE WAS HIS WILL. PHYSICAL STRENGTH AND STRENGTH OF SPIRIT DESCRIBE THIS BIG BROTHER TO US. HE REMAINS THE EXAMPLE OF VERY STRONG WILL-POWER, OF A GRANITE-LIKE NATURE. GOD, THE SECRET OF HIS YOUTH ENDOWED WITH THESE

**FORCES PIER GIORGIO IS MODERN AND YOUNG.
Mons. Giovanni Battista Montini (Paul VI), 4.VII.1932.**

Charity

"Around the sick, the poor, the unfortunate, I see a particular light, a light that we do not have"

"Jesus comes to me every morning in Holy Communion: I repay him in my very small way by visiting the poor".

"Seeing daily the faith with which families often bear the most atrocious sufferings, their constant sacrifices, and that they do all this for the love of God often makes us ask why I, who have so many things from God, have always been so neglectful, so bad, while they, who have not been privileged like me are infinitely better than me?"

"We have the duty of putting our health at the service of those who (do not possess it) haven't it. To act otherwise would be to betray the gift of God."

When Pier Giorgio died, Mrs. Converso came to me weeping and told me that the strongest ally had left her. She told me that thanks to him she was able to stay longer in the maternity department of the hospital since Pier Giorgio would accompany her. She also told me how Pier Giorgio acted as godfather to her daughter and how he bought her a dress for her baptism. How he met her husband when he came out of prison to take him to a factory where they would accept people who had a prison record, since he had the habit of getting drunk and not working. (I.Nebia)

One of his favourite haunts was the Cottolengo (a hospital for the physically and mentally handicapped). He would wander thorough the corridors with a secure and steady spirit of charity consoling the wretched and stopping to talk to them as though they were really his brothers. He would bring them money, candy and clothes and would never forget to kiss them warmly as though they were the closest of friends, not even stopping to think of the possible risk of infection or having any hint of human repulsion. (M:Ghemlera).

How many times I saw him coming out of the pawnbroker's, his hands full of boxes of clothes that had been pawned which he would return to the poor. (M.Cerutti)

Amazed, people saw this young man drag hand carts through the streets of Turin filled with household goods of the poor who were looking for a home. He would enter the most squalid houses and give all the money he had so that he did not have enough money to take the bus home.

**PASSIONATELY EAGER TO SERVE BROTHERS AND CONSUMED BY BURNING CHARITY WHICH LED HIM TO APPROACH, IN ORDER OF ABSOLUTE PRECEDENCE, THE POOR AND THE SICK.
John Paul II-Turin, 15.4.1980**