

Sermon for Feast of Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati – Tuesday 4th July 2018

In his recent letter, Pope Francis wrote “the only tragedy in life is not to become a Saint”. For Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati (PGF) the only tragedy in life was to remain mediocre which means that there is no deep desire to want to know, love and be united to Christ. This is our fundamental calling in life and there is no other way unless we are happy that when we are called by God at the end of our lives we will not recognise Him. The call to holiness, beatitude, unity with Christ is the key that unlocks human history. At this Holy Mass we reflect on that part of PGF’s life which is not easy to grasp namely his engagement with the saeculum, that is the world of politics and active engagement with the affairs of every day life as it affects all citizens. Earlier, we reflected on his eucharistic spirituality and his engagement with the poor – tonight it is about the third part of the triptych.

The language of political debate today is a poor shadow of how it was for PGF in Italy in the 1920’s. Today our debate is governed by emotion, the realisation of self-will and constructing a world where the narrative of the Gospel is side-lined, considered an irrelevance and committed and zealous Christians will soon be targeted. However, the DNA of the debate is still about the inviolable right to life, the grace-filled dignity of the human person from conception to natural death and the God given beauty of every person. The difference between today and the 1920’s is that the attack against the Gospel and the committed witness of the Christian is more open and blatant – it needed the deep eucharistic faith of PGF to understand the subtleties of years past.

Rome in the 1980’s for us seminarians was very different to today. It was more settled and at peace with itself and the Church seemed to be strong, present and influential. Soon after my arrival I was introduced to two remarkable people who perfectly matched each other and are two sides to the same coin. Because of the friendship with my parents after the war, I was introduced to Nella, the niece of PGF who had as a neighbour in the flat below, a certain German cardinal who some 20 years later, was to be elected to the Throne of Peter. She then introduced me to Wanda and she to PGF in the year after his body had been exhumed. She asked me to help with some translation of his works which I suspect I did very inadequately. Not long afterwards, I came to know the Missionaries of Charity and the spirituality of Mother Teresa of Calcutta. For both PGF and Mother Teresa, their absolute similarity was in their deep abiding love and unity with Christ and for Christ in the Mass and their overarching and passionate desire to go to Jesus in Eucharistic Adoration. Mother described it as cleaving – from that, both of them reached out to the poor, the sick, the dying and destitute; not as a duty, but a privilege. It was a privilege because they had met Jesus in the Mass and they now needed to meet him in the poor. Our Lord had pleaded to Mother in her posthumous writings to “go to the dark holes and rescue from there the poorest of the poor from the grips of Satan and sanctify them by teaching them the Rosary”. For both PGF and Mother Teresa the accompaniment and consecration to Our Lady were essential in that deep uniting bond between the poor and the Eucharist.

It is difficult to explain to the well-intentioned but mediocre heart the absolute centrality of the Eucharist. But perhaps to think of it as saying that this is the genetic code of the human person, the formula of the atom or in the language of John Henry Human, the acorn that explains the oak tree. The Eucharist is where we stop and finish, no more and no less. We need PGF and Mother Teresa to help us to grasp this truth.

This also explains why PGF was so determined and resolute in his political engagement through the Catholic Student Foundation, Catholic Action, and the People's Party. His deep and abiding experience of human friendship, solidarity and companionship cemented in his mind the wonder and beauty that is humanity and our need to come together and celebrate that. When that friendship is fractured or threatened, God's plan is impaired. What he saw in fascism and Mussolini's march on Rome in 1924 was an unholy alliance of the great powers of the day, namely business, finance, the ruling classes and certain representatives of the clerical caste. This alliance would have only one consequence – that was the squashing, degradation and emasculation of the human person particularly of the weak, frail and inarticulate. It was a consequence of the exaltation of man's progress, genius and pomp as enshrined in that free-thinking masonic spirit and appeal to the enlightenment which pervaded so much of Italian life in those days. All PGF could see was a denial of Christ's deep uniting himself with the poor, weak and frail as embodied in His Incarnation and daily made present in the Mass and Eucharistic Adoration. Perhaps the experience of 1917 in Russia, the apparitions and messages of Our Lady of Fatima and the almost inevitable rise and threats of intolerant socialism were yet to be fully articulated in his mind. Certainly in the public square as he stood side by side with the flags and symbols of authentic Catholicism, he was attacked and had to stand his ground but represented a true standard bearer for the beauty, poverty and simplicity of the Gospel.

Mother Teresa did not see it as her vocation as a religious to engage in the political process. PGF supported by the Church in her rich teaching, and as a prophetic witness for John Paul II, saw it both as his right and duty. If we truly love God's creation and do so with the mind and heart of Jesus, we have no choice but to engage, argue and promote the common good – that is the God given right for all to know that each is called to beatitude. Both in the Reichstag, close to where PGF had emboldened German young Catholics to build the Kingdom of God and here at the Palace of Westminster, that next door neighbour to Nella - my entrée to PGF – Pope Benedict XVI spoke of the dictatorship of relativism which is when the bond between reason and faith are severed and unfettered human emotion and self-will will begin to strut the human stage. The consequences are clear both in our time and in the 1920's, as a human person graced by God, is trampled upon by the physical threat of fascist squadristi, materialistic and atheistic socialism or with the assaults on the unborn.

I once asked Wanda somewhat naively whether she had ever met PGF. Curiously she said yes – my O level mathematics said that was no possible – then she explained that when they exhumed him she saw that he was alive and beautiful as he was in life but now incorrupt and blessed before God. His beatitude comes from looking to Heaven in the Blessed Sacrament and the poor and thus building the Kingdom of God in the affairs of the world. That is why we pray rightly to a Saint tonight and ask him to teach us not to be mediocre but to lead us to Heaven.

Pope Francis reminds us “the only tragedy in life is not to become a Saint”.