

THE EUCHARIST IN THE LIFE OF BLESSED PIER GIORGIO FRASSATI

One of the most encouraging developments in the universal Church, in the fifty years since Vatican II, even if at times patchy, has been the spread and growth of Eucharistic Adoration in parishes, schools and communities. It led Pope Benedict to remark that

“today there is a ‘Eucharistic springtime’ in the Church. How many people pause in silence before the Tabernacle to engage in a loving conversation with Jesus!”

He continued:

“It is comforting to know that many groups of young people have rediscovered the beauty of praying in adoration before the Most Blessed Sacrament. I pray that this Eucharistic ‘springtime’ may spread increasingly in every parish.”¹

In the time *before* Vatican II, Eucharistic Adoration and Benediction were often regarded as devotional exercises, whilst in the period *after* the Council, many liturgists assumed that Adoration would die out as people developed a new spirituality based on the reformed liturgy. In fact, as St. John Paul II said, Eucharistic Adoration stems from the Sacrifice of the Mass itself, as its natural extension and as an “important daily exercise that becomes an inexhaustible source of holiness.”² Just as in the Mass, Christians worship God and join themselves to Christ in His self-offering to the Father through the Holy Spirit, so too the worship of God in the Mass continues in silent wonder, prayer and adoration in Eucharistic Exposition.³ One naturally leads to the other, the Mass to Adoration. We honour and adore the Real Presence of Jesus in the celebration of the Mass and, as Blessed Paul VI put it, we desire frequently to visit Him afterwards as “a proof of gratitude, an expression of love, a duty of adoration.”⁴

In all of this, Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati (1901-1925) was a man well ahead of his time. He instinctively saw the link. His love for the Mass and for Communion led him to spend time in Adoration; more, his love for Jesus in the Eucharist led him to love Jesus too in the poor. He summed all this up very simply in his ‘Notes for a Speech about Charity’ that he once gave to FUCI, the Federation of Italian University Students:

“Jesus because of infinite love for humanity, wanted to be in the Sacrament of the Eucharist, as our Consoler and as Bread of the Soul.

And Jesus, he adds

“... has promised that all we do for the poor for Love of Him, He will consider it as having been done for Himself.”⁵

¹ Pope Benedict XVI *General Audience Wednesday 17th November 2010*: see http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2010/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20101117.html (June 2018)

² John Paul II *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* 10: see http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/special_features/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_20030417_ecclesia_eucharistia_en.html (June 2018)

³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)* 1378-1381.

⁴ Paul VI *Mysterium Fidei* 66, cited in CCC 1418.

⁵ Pier Giorgio Frassati *Letters to His Friends and Family* transl. Fr. Timothy E. Deeter (New York, St. Paul's: 2009) 241

In discussing saints, it is easy to present their lives not in their ordinariness but in terms of the spiritually exceptional and the elements most evidently supernatural. Biographies of Pier Giorgio are no exception, even the beautiful biography *A Man of the Beatitudes* written by his sister Luciana.⁶ Just the very mention of some of the features of his spiritual life might suggest him to be an extraordinarily pious person. He *was* extraordinary, but reading between the lines, especially reading the *Letters to His Friends and Family*, as well as conversations with Wanda, he was in fact very ordinary, normal, a boy, a teenager, a young man, a university student like his peers.

Pier Giorgio loved sports, skiing, swimming. He had a zest for life. He loved going out on his bike and riding horses; later, I imagine, he loved cars. He loved hiking and above all mountain-climbing, taking lots of photographs with his camera and pinning to his bedroom door: “Mountains, mountains, mountains, I love you!”⁷ He liked a drink and having a good time. He smoked a pipe and Tuscan cigars; indeed, when criticised for this bad habit, he would jokingly respond: “Well, what do you expect? My mother smoked when she was breast-feeding me!” – which was no doubt true.⁸ A boisterous teenager at school, his classmates called him “Fracassati,” a play on his surname and the Italian word *fracasso* meaning ‘racket’ or ‘noise.’⁹ As a university student, he formed a group of close friends called the *Typi Loschi* (the “Shady Ones”) of which he was the life and soul. He played practical jokes. He failed exams. He fell in love. He also had cultivated tastes: Verdi and Dante, going to art galleries and museums, collecting minerals, debating politics. He was strong. He fell out with people, got into fights, had a sharp sense of social justice and once drove Fascist hooligans out of the house.¹⁰ In other words, it would be wrong to view him as a pious ‘Holy Joe.’ He was not.

What makes Pier Giorgio fascinating and attractive – at least to me – is his sheer ordinariness. The many photographs of him make him so easy to identify with. But it was an ordinariness founded on a uniquely deep and pure, intensely spiritual heart. Behind the bourgeois life-style, beneath the film-star looks, beyond the virile exterior, the mountain gear and Scottish beret or his fine evening clothes,¹¹ was a purity of soul with a profound religious sense, instinctively attuned to the Person of Jesus Christ and strongly devoted to the Blessed Virgin Mary. It was his interior life of union with Christ that gave him his overflowing joy, as St. John Paul II acknowledged,¹² a deep joy which he never hesitated to share with his friends and with everyone he came in contact with. Indeed, from an early age, he had a strong belief in God and a sense of God’s presence, as seen in the very first letter recorded aged 5, a letter to his father wishing him a happy feast day, that ends “I will pray to Baby Jesus for you.”¹³ Every night as a boy, dressed

⁶ L. Frassati *A Man of the Beatitudes. Pier Giorgio Frassati* (San Francisco, Ignatius: 2001)

⁷ C. Siccardi *Pier Giorgio Frassati. A Hero for Our Times* (San Francisco, Ignatius: 2016) 260.

⁸ Di Lorenzo 21; cfr. L. Frassati *A Man of the Beatitudes*. 68-69

⁹ M. Di Lorenzo *Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati An Ordinary Christian* (Boston, Pauline Books and Media: 2004) 18-19.

¹⁰ Di Lorenzo 43-44; cfr. Siccardi 275-280. Luciana speaks about the incident and the letter she received from her mother: see L. Frassati *A Man of the Beatitudes* 116-118.

¹¹ See the description of his appearance as he was setting off on an expedition, given by the painter and family friend Alberto Falchetti: Siccardi 268.

¹² Di Lorenzo 58

¹³ *Letters to His Friends and Family* 1

in his nightshirt, kneeling on the floor at the foot of his bed, he would pray the Rosary, often falling asleep during it and tumbling over.¹⁴ And at the age of 9, as Luciana recalls, he would often insist that Don Antonio Cojazzi, the Venetian Salesian who acted as a Latin tutor, finished classes with some stories about the life of Jesus from the Gospels.¹⁵ Pier Giorgio's faith developed almost 'linearly' from those childhood years, blossoming in early manhood. As he wrote once in later life to his friend Isidoro Bonini:

“Every day I understand what a grace it is to be Catholic. Poor and unlucky are those who do not have a faith. To live without faith, without a patrimony to defend, without a steady struggle for truth – that is not living, but existing.”¹⁶

Pope Benedict, in his 2007 Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis*, in speaking of the Holy Eucharist as “the source and summit” of the Church's life and mission, devotes the last third of the document to the topic of how to live the Eucharist, how to put it into practice in daily life in works of justice and charity.¹⁷ He reflects on the Blessing from the end of the Mass and the Rite of Dismissal, the *Ite missa est*, in order to demonstrate the intimate connection between what is celebrated in church and what is done, or ought to be done, in our daily life. The Mass as the “source and summit” of our Christian lives is portrayed perfectly in the life of Pier Giorgio. He had an intense love for Jesus in the Eucharist and an intense love for Jesus in the poor. As he once said,

“Jesus pays me a visit in Communion every morning, and I repay Him, in the miserable way I can, by visiting His poor.”¹⁸

Around “the sick, the poor, the unfortunate,” he said on another occasion, “I see a particular light, a light we do not have.”¹⁹ From the age of 17, he belonged to several conferences of the St. Vincent de Paul Society and it was in the evenings especially, he developed, away from the sight of his parents and others, a busy schedule of assisting the poorest and most destitute in the slums and in the Cottolengo Hospital.²⁰ Later today, Bishop John will develop this further, Pier Giorgio's love for Jesus in the poor; here, we look at his love for Jesus in the Eucharist, but it is important not to overlook the intrinsic and inseparable link between these two poles of Pier Giorgio's spirituality.

Where did he get his faith? I have often wondered about the mediation of Pier Giorgio's faith. Where did it come from? His father, Alfredo, founder of *La Stampa*, a senator and ambassador, although baptised a Catholic was agnostic. His mother, Adelaide Ametis, at whose villa in Pollone the family often spent the holidays, was an artist and a socialite, but not particularly religious. As Luciana observed:

¹⁴ Di Lorenzo 11

¹⁵ L. Frassati *A Man of the Beatitudes* 24

¹⁶ *Letters to His Friends and Family* 214

¹⁷ See Benedict XVI *Sacramentum Caritatis* 70-93: see http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_ben-xvi_exh_20070222_sacramentum-caritatis.html (June 2018)

¹⁸ “Gesù mi fa visita con la Comunione ogni mattina ed io gliela restituisco nel modo misero che posso: visitando i suoi poveri” L. Frassati *Mio Fratello Pier Giorgio: La Carità* (Torino, Effata Editrice: 2013) 25; cf. Siccardi 153.

¹⁹ L. Frassati *Mio Fratello Pier Giorgio: La Carità* 43.

²⁰ Siccardi 162

“Our mother and her sister, Elena, would not have missed Mass but they were never seen by us to go to Communion or to kneel and say a prayer.”²¹

Religion was about practices, customs and duties to be performed at set times. The one deeply religious person in the family was the grandmother, Linda Ametis. It was her death two days before that of Pier Giorgio’s that distracted everyone’s attention from what was happening to her grandson.²² His grandmother taught him the importance of praying for the dead, something Pier Giorgio never forgot; indeed in his twenties, when travelling in Germany, he took special care to have anniversary Masses said for departed relatives, although he had never known them.²³ Yet apart from her, there was no evident human lineage in the transmission of his faith. Where did he get it? I once asked Wanda this. Her instant reply is surely correct given the family context: it came directly from God. As one of his biographers, Maria di Lorenzo, puts it, from a very early age, “a sweet and mysterious Presence was already speaking to his heart”.²⁴

Pier Giorgio made his first Holy Communion with his sister Luciana on 19th June 1911.²⁵ His faith and love for the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist began to flourish then and especially when two years later aged 12, he entered a new school, the Jesuit-run Social Institute. There he came under the influence of its spiritual director, Fr. Pietro Lombardi. Lombardi encouraged Pier Giorgio to join the Association of the Blessed Sacrament, the Eucharistic League and the Apostleship of Prayer, and to receive Holy Communion every morning.²⁶ At first his mother was strongly opposed to the idea of daily Communion, fearing it would become just a habit, or worse: that Pier Giorgio might conceive of a vocation to the priesthood, something he did indeed toy with in his late teens.²⁷ After a struggle of four days, Pier Giorgio burst into Lombardi’s office saying, “I’ve won.” “What, the lottery? Lombardi answered. “No, father, you know very well,” Pier Giorgio said. “I can now receive Holy Communion every day. I insisted so much.”²⁸ From then on, Pier Giorgio received Holy Communion nearly every day for the rest of his life. He also began to feel a strong and mysterious urge to visit and be close to the Blessed Sacrament. It is notable that in that summer, when the family were on holiday at Alassio on the Ligurian coast, his mother remarked how “every evening ... he went to Benediction in the Capuchin church nearby, while we went for a stroll with our friends, and he slipped out of the boarding house before breakfast to go to Mass.”²⁹

Throughout his teenage years, Pier Giorgio kept up the practice of daily Communion, either at La Crocetta, the parish church opposite the house in Turin, or in Pollone when they were at the Ametis villa. When at Pollone, he would sometimes climb up the

²¹ L. Frassati *A Man of the Beatitudes* 21.

²² For a haunting account of those last six days of his life, see L. Frassati *My Brother Pier Giorgio. His Last Days* (Kentucky, New Hope Publications: 2002)

²³ L. Frassati *A Man of the Beatitudes* 22.

²⁴ Di Lorenzo 11

²⁵ L. Frassati *My Brother Pier Giorgio: His Faith* transl. C. Gilodi (unpublished) 20.

²⁶ L. Frassati *A Man of the Beatitudes* 10; cfr. Di Lorenzo 23.

²⁷ L. Frassati *A Man of the Beatitudes* 30-32.

²⁸ Siccardi 92

²⁹ L. Frassati *A Man of the Beatitudes* 33

hillside to early Mass at the Shrine in Oropa.³⁰ He often served Mass too, and also Benediction. The Holy Eucharist, as Maria Di Lorenzo notes,

“became the focus of his day. He fasted from midnight and got up early every morning to keep his appointment with the Lord.”³¹

While everyone else was asleep, he would slip out, composed and absorbed in prayer. When passing churches, he would greet the Lord with a solemn sign of the Cross or a respectful bow.³² He also developed the habit of frequent Confession, even two or three times a week. Some of his papers from 1918 and 1919, relating to his membership of the Eucharistic League, record his commitment to daily Communion and the Rosary; the little crosses for December 1919, for instance, indicate that he went to Mass virtually every day; he received Communion 26 times and offered 145 decades of the Rosary.³³ Later as a student among his group of friends, the *Typi Loschi*, he would always ensure that Sunday Mass was programmed into a climbing trip, often with Mass celebrated in the mountains. He would organise a priest to come along. On occasions when it was impossible to get to Mass, he would forgo the excursion. He always tried to draw others to Mass and Communion. Once at a Sunday Mass in 1919, he met a soldier from the Alpine Brigade called Gianni Brunelli and after a long conversation about mountains, he invited him to bring others from the Brigade along to Mass. The following Sunday, over twenty soldiers turned up for Holy Communion.³⁴

The Eucharist became the secret centre of his existence. He drew from it the strength he needed for the day. He also drew the energy needed to master his passions. In a speech he gave in 1923 to the youth club of Pollone at the blessing of their flag, he said:

“I urge you with all the strength of my soul to approach the Eucharist Table as often as possible. Feed on this Bread of the Angels. From it you will draw the strength to fight inner struggles, the struggles against passions and against all adversities, because Jesus Christ has promised to those who feed themselves with the most Holy Eucharist, eternal life and the necessary graces to obtain it.”

He continued

“When you have become totally consumed by the Eucharistic Fire then you will be able to thank ... the Lord God, Who has called you to be part of His flock. You will enjoy that peace which those who are happy according to the world have never tasted.”³⁵

Pier Giorgio loved spending time in prayer with Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. When he did this, he became so utterly absorbed, so wrapped in silence that those who saw him, never forgot the impression he made on them. As Luciana notes, after Communion people tiptoed past him, because he was often gazing upwards, sometimes in tears, kneeling on the ground.³⁶ A parishioner gave the following testimony:

³⁰ L. Frassati *My Brother Pier Giorgio: His Faith* 27

³¹ Di Lorenzo 18

³² L. Frassati *My Brother Pier Giorgio: His Faith* 45

³³ L. Frassati *My Brother Pier Giorgio: His Faith* 22

³⁴ L. Frassati *A Man of the Beatitudes* 55-56.

³⁵ *Letters to His Friends and Family* 129

³⁶ L. Frassati *A Man of the Beatitudes* 98

“You had to see him – any photograph, any memory is incapable of describing what was going on inside him and what his face revealed. He seemed to be super-human, someone who shared intimately in God’s life and in His infinite power, in His eternity as well as in His love. And when he ran into church and received Communion in a rush, the intensity of his thanksgiving made up for the little bit of time he had to give.”³⁷

One of the Jesuit priests at his school, Fr. Gorla, said this:

“Pier Giorgio had a quiet sense of devotion that was serene and manly, and never artificial. I remember him kneeling before the Blessed Sacrament with his arms folded. ... It was a real spiritual joy to pray near him. Everything and anything could have been going on around him, but he didn’t pay attention to any of it: he was with his Lord.”³⁸

At University, Pier Giorgio joined groups dedicated to all-night Eucharistic Adoration, often held at Santa Maria di Piazza church. As he put it:

“The rulers of the night take their turn in guarding their castles. And we owe greater honour to Jesus than to other rulers.”³⁹

In fact, some of the testimonies people gave about his love for Jesus in the Holy Eucharist, compare Pier Giorgio to a knight, as in these words:

“I saw Pier Giorgio enter the church and kneel down before the Blessed Sacrament. His bright eyes revealed a profound and joyful faith. His gloved hand touched the ground, and his entire person expressed a profound sense of adoration and dedication. To me, he seemed like one of those pure and fearless knights from long ago, who was gloriously yet humbly returning from some grand and noble mission, to present himself to his Lord, knowing that he had completed his task with the humility that comes from only having done his duty, out of love for his Lord and for the joy of being loved by Him.”⁴⁰

Pier Giorgio undertook nocturnal Adoration frequently and with enthusiasm. As with everyone else, he struggled to stay awake. A Blessed Sacrament brother observed:

“He entered the sanctuary (a privilege granted to members of the nocturnal adoration society), made a profound genuflection, and then knelt in one of the choir stalls and remained there in devout prayer. During the hour that I knelt next to him, I was immensely edified by his exemplary behaviour. I could notice all the holy tricks that he used to stay awake, despite the fact that he was tired and drowsy: sometimes he would pray standing up, or he would read, or recite the Rosary. My fellow religious who took my place after my hour of adoration can attest to the fact that he spent the whole night with us, until 4 a.m., when he requested and received Holy Communion. Then he spent an hour in thanksgiving, until 5 a.m., when the church was opened to the public. He had warmed his beautiful soul close to the Eucharistic flame that entire night, and satisfied his hunger at the Table of the Angels, and so he departed peacefully.”⁴¹

³⁷ L. Frassati *My Brother Pier Giorgio: His Faith* 24

³⁸ L. Frassati *My Brother Pier Giorgio: His Faith* 23

³⁹ L. Frassati *My Brother Pier Giorgio: His Faith* 90

⁴⁰ L. Frassati *My Brother Pier Giorgio: His Faith* 95

⁴¹ L. Frassati *My Brother Pier Giorgio: His Faith* 96

Pier Giorgio said that “after a prayer vigil, I feel stronger, safer, more secure and even happier.”⁴² Adoration refined his heart and enabled him to give his heart to the poor and needy in works of charity. But it was his fervour, reverence and instinctive love for Jesus in the Eucharist during those vigils that struck people vividly. During one of the them in the Cathedral, he was so absorbed in prayer that he did not notice a large candle nearby dripping hot wax directly onto his head and neck.⁴³ One of the priests noted:

“Pier Giorgio loved adoration during the night, and he attended not only during the nights for youth, but at times he also came with the adult men. ... I was very impressed: I always saw him in front of the Blessed Sacrament, conducting himself in a very dignified and reverent manner. ... It was a rare occasion when I saw him sit down, which meant that he was exhausted. During moments of silence, he would put his face in his hands for short periods of time; then he would look up again and gaze at the Sacred Host, as if he were speaking to Jesus. ... After he died, I often remembered his devout behaviour, because when I was with the Adoration Society, I would notice the piety of this or that young person and say to myself, ‘Pier Giorgio Frassati prayed like that.’”⁴⁴

We need to conclude and round all of this off. What, then, might you and I learn today, from Blessed Pier Giorgio and his love for Jesus in the Holy Eucharist?

Today’s context is one of rampant secularisation, pluralism and individualism, a culture in which the fires of Christian faith are rapidly being smothered. The Church in response is calling Christians to the work of new evangelisation, that is, to deepening our own Catholic faith, and to reaching out to others to offer the Good News of Christ. The Holy Eucharist is at the heart of this new evangelisation, not only the faith-filled celebration of the Liturgy but also the on-going Adoration of this Blessed Sacrament in silence, prayer and worship. It is heartening to see the spread of Eucharistic Adoration in parishes, schools and communities. Pier Giorgio clearly gives us an outstanding model here, despite the century standing between us. He shews us the right attitude we should develop towards the Blessed Sacrament and a love for daily Mass and for Adoration. His careful preparation for Holy Communion and his unhurried thanksgiving afterwards are a lesson for us, who are so often in a hurry, leaping into and out of the liturgy, ill-prepared and distracted. That his love for the Eucharist bore amazing fruit in his love of the poor is also an inspiration for us today, as well as an examination of conscience. For service of the poor and needy is a sign of Christian authenticity.

However, it seems to me that the central message to take away is this. For Pier Giorgio, the Blessed Sacrament was not only a Sacred Object to be venerated and adored, the Body and Blood of the Saviour, but a Sacred Subject to be engaged with, listened to and loved, Jesus Christ. In the Monstrance Pier Giorgio met Jesus Christ in Person. He

⁴² Cited in Di Lorenzo 61.

⁴³ Di Lorenzo 59-60. “It seemed to me to be typical, and it’s already a well-known story, about how he gave up his seat during Adoration in the Cathedral and then moved forward (to the altar rail), where I could see him praying, not moving a muscle even though a candle was dripping wax on him. I’ve been in *Catholic Action* for 54 years, but I’ve never seen anyone pray like that.” (Stefano Oliver cited in L. Frassati *My Brother Pier Giorgio: His Faith* 137)

⁴⁴ L. Frassati *My Brother Pier Giorgio: His Faith* 99

grasped the essential truth that the Catholic Faith is about relationship, a personal-passionate relationship, true friendship with Jesus Christ, *cor ad cor loquitur*, heart speaking to Heart. Remarkably, he seems to have grasped this from a very young age, and he developed that friendship with the Lord exponentially. He became ever aware of His presence in his life in a manner that many older Catholics find challenging. This is why when he met Jesus in the Eucharist he was enraptured. That is surely the heart of his spirituality, an intense centre, a joyful relationship with the Person of Jesus Christ in the depths of the Sacred Host. It was a relationship that burst forth into everything he did and which sent him out joyfully to meet the same Lord shining in the poor. Into that self-same relationship with Jesus every single one of us too is invited.

From my research, I cannot find evidence that Pier Giorgio knew the writings of the eighteenth century Redemptorist, St. Alphonsus Liguori. But if he was, I am sure he would have loved the beautiful hymn St. Alphonsus wrote *O Bread of heaven*. For me, its four simple verses express perfectly Pier Giorgio's Eucharistic love:

“O Bread of Heaven, beneath this veil
Thou dost my very God conceal:
My Jesus, dearest treasure, hail!
I love Thee and, adoring, kneel;
Each loving soul by Thee is fed
With Thine own Self in form of Bread.

O food of life, Thou Who dost give
The pledge of immortality;
I live, no 'tis not I that live;
God gives me life, God lives in me:
He feeds my soul, He guides my ways,
And every grief with joy repays.

O Bond of love that dost unite
The servant to his living Lord;
Could I dare live and not requite
Such love - then death were meet reward:
I cannot live unless to prove
Some love for such unmeasured love.

Beloved Lord, in Heaven above
There, Jesus, Thou awaitest me,
To gaze on Thee with endless love;
Yes, thus I hope, thus shall it be:
For how can He deny me Heaven,
Who here on earth Himself hath given?”⁴⁵

⁴⁵ See St. Alphonsus de Liguori *The Saint Alphonsus de Liguori Collection* (Catholic Way Publishing: 2016). This hymn was sung at the Mass celebrated by Pope Benedict XVI in Westminster Cathedral on 18th September 2010 during his papal visit to Britain: see <https://youtu.be/A2aopF3rS44> (June 2018)