

The Poor in the life of Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati

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The Beginning of a Spiritual Friendship

My spiritual friendship with Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati began 23 years ago in June 1995. I was on retreat in northern Italy, in the Valle d'Aosta, preparing for ordination to the priesthood. Out for a walk, I found a biography of Pier Giorgio on sale in the local post office. As I flicked through the pages, I noticed he died aged 24 on the 4 July 1925, the day and month of my own birthday. I felt an immediate bond with him, one which has remained ever since.

The biography was subtitled *The Young Man of the Eight Beatitudes*, a description given to the future Blessed in 1977 by Cardinal Karol Wojtyla, the future Pope St John Paul II.¹ The first of the Beatitudes, spoken by the Lord Jesus and recorded in St Matthew's Gospel, reads: "*How blessed are the poor in spirit: the kingdom of heaven is theirs.*" (Mt 5:3) It is this theme of the poor in the life of Blessed Pier Giorgio that I want to address.

Fully Human, Fully Alive

Pier Giorgio's life is characterised by the attractive integration of someone fully alive in Christ, fully alive in himself, and fully alive towards others. "*In him,*" said St John Paul II, "*faith and daily events are harmoniously fused.*"² Pier Giorgio's "*adherence to the Gospel*" was "*transformed into loving care for the poor and needy,*" fermenting "*a continual crescendo until the very last days of the sickness which led to his* *death.*"³

Life and Faith dedicated to the Poor

Pier Giorgio was not just remarkable for his skills in mountaineering, in cycling, in rowing, in horse riding or in swimming; nor for his love for art, for music, for literature and for the theatre. What marked Pier Giorgio was his deeply real and personal relationship with Jesus and his desire and effort to live like Jesus and to love like Jesus. This is what made Pier Giorgio holy. He not only attended Mass, prayed the rosary, read the scriptures and practised charity, he also encouraged his friends to do the same, and all in the overwhelming context of joy.

From a young age, Pier Giorgio was, in Fr Benedict Groeschel's words, "*a very dedicated apostle of the poor.*"⁴ His sister, Luciana, describes how, as a youngster visiting a nursery with his grandfather, he shared lunch with a child rejected by classmates because of a disfiguring skin disease.⁵ As a little boy, when a poor mother carrying her child came to the door, without hesitation Pier Giorgio gave his own socks and shoes.⁶ From early on, this instinctive response to the needs of the poor came as naturally as breathing. There was no calculation or self-interest, just love, spontaneously put into action after the example of Jesus.

When an unemployed stranger came to ask for help from Pier Giorgio's father, Alfredo, he was unceremoniously sent packing. "*Maybe Jesus came by,*" said Pier Giorgio, "*and we chased him away.*" Chastised, Alfredo gave Pier Giorgio some money and he ran after the man. The encounter softened Alfredo's heart and he agreed to see if he could find the man a job.⁷

What stirred in the boy came to fruition in the man. In 1918, aged seventeen, Pier Giorgio joined the St Vincent de Paul Society, "*serving the sick and the needy, caring for orphans, and assisting the demobilised servicemen returning from World War I.*"⁸ Repeatedly he handed whatever he had to those in need, often running home for dinner having given his bus fare to the poor. He even resisted going away for summer holidays: "*If everyone leaves Turin,*" he said "*who will take care of the poor?*"⁹ When his father chided him for giving his overcoat to a man shivering on the street, Pier Giorgio's defence was simple: "*But you see, Papa, it was cold.*"¹⁰

So the saying goes: give someone a fish and you feed them for a day; teach them how to fish and you feed them for a lifetime. Pier Giorgio grasped this principle and put it into practice. To the beggar who no longer had the equipment to roast and sell chestnuts, Pier Giorgio obtained a burner, coal, and some tools. To another he provided all the instruments necessary to work as a tinsmith. To a seamstress forced to sell her sewing machine during illness, Pier Giorgio replaced it once she was well again.¹¹

Money had little importance for Pier Giorgio other than as a gift to be given away or spent on others. The significant gift of cash he received on his twenty-fourth birthday was spent on furniture for the poor.¹² As a graduation present his father offered him either a car or a sum of money. Pier Giorgio chose the money and promptly gave it away.¹³

It was not unknown for Pier Giorgio to keep vigil at the bedside of the sick, often into the early hours of the morning.¹⁴ He cared for families, visited those in hospital, and supported ex-prisoners. Denying himself so as to give to others, he travelled third class on the train because, in his words, there was no fourth class and he could put the money he saved to good use.

He greeted the poor with respect, removing his cap, offering his hand, and emptying his pockets, never revealing his identity as the son of a rich and powerful family.¹⁵ His service to the needy was marked by gentleness, determination and sensitivity. They deserved the best that was possible and never “rags.”¹⁶ “*What would the faith be,*” Pier Giorgio would often repeat, “*if we did not clothe it in charity?*”¹⁷

Political Activity

Despite his family’s wealthy background, Pier Giorgio’s concern for the poor shaped both his choice of career and his political affiliation. His decision to study mining engineering at Turin’s Polytechnic University was driven by the desire to improve workers’ conditions in the mines.

In 1920, aged nineteen, Pier Giorgio joined the *Italian Peoples' Party*, founded by Fr Luigi Sturzo to promote Christian democracy and social reform. It sought to implement Catholic Social Teaching, drawing on Pope Leo XIII's 1891 Encyclical *Rerum Novarum* on the '*Rights and Duties of Capital and Labour*.'

Pier Giorgio was forthright in his convictions, never afraid to carry his faith into the public square. He joined the *Federation of Italian Catholic University Students* and *Catholic Action*, motivated by what Pope Pius XI described as "*political charity*."¹⁸

In the Service of Charity

Pier Giorgio's political activism was founded on his yearning for the authentic renewal of society according to the teaching of Christ and His Church. This was complemented by his own personal 'preferential option for the poor,' spiritually rooted in membership of the Association of the Blessed Sacrament, the Marian Sodality, the Apostolate of Prayer, the Dominican Angelic Warfare Confraternity and, as already noted, the Society of St Vincent de Paul.¹⁹

It was, however, principally from the Mass and through Eucharistic adoration, often throughout the night, that Pier Giorgio gained the strength for his mission. He was a daily communicant: "*Jesus pays me a visit in Communion every morning,*' he wrote, "*and I repay him in the miserable way I can: by visiting his poor.*"²⁰ Italo Alighiero Chiusano said that "*As a perfect disciple of Christ Pier Giorgio loved human beings one by one, face by face, name by name, each person with [their] own unique voice, [their] own heavy breathing, [their] own wrinkles, [their] own bad mood.*"²¹ His capacity to do this stemmed from his interior life, rooted in the Eucharist, in the rosary, and in private prayer.

In love with Jesus throughout his twenty-four years Pier Giorgio gave selflessly of what he had: of his money – and other people's, of his time, his food, his clothes, his friendship, his encouragement; and especially he gave of his hope and faith in Christ. St John Paul II put it straightforwardly: "*In his life, faith was fused with charity: firm in faith and active in charity, because without*

works, faith is dead."²² Pier Giorgio transcribed in his own hand St Paul's great Hymn to Charity, from chapter 13 of the First Letter to the Corinthians, and always kept it close by.²³

Love of Christ expressed in charity was everything to Pier Giorgio. When his local St Vincent de Paul Society refused to help a particular family because of the bad behaviour of one of its members, he transferred his membership. He wrote to a friend that it would be better for that Society not to exist if, instead of warning parents about their situation, it prefers to abandon those in need.²⁴

Stepped in compassion, charity was paramount for Pier Giorgio - first, last and always. In his words, *"true good should be done unnoticeably, little by little, daily, confidentially."*²⁵ This conviction saw him return home wearing a poor man's slippers having swapped them for his shoes.²⁶ No wonder his mother referred to him affectionately as *'dear blockhead'* and a *'real madman.'*²⁷ Wood, coal, clothing, food, Baptism and First Communion dresses, and children's comics; precious possessions redeemed from the pawnbrokers, furniture, and copies of the Gospel and *The Imitation of Christ*: along with his time, his prayers, and his joyfulness, these were the gifts Pier Giorgio Frassati brought.

Here was someone uniquely blessed, long before his was beatified. The Jesuit theologian Fr Karl Rahner knew the Frassati family and wrote: *"At that time we were all interested in social problems; it was natural. But this social work, love for the poor, responsibility in facing the wretchedness of others were (or became) so genuine and deep, so charged with the spirit of sacrifice in Pier Giorgio as to make him an exception among the many Christian young people of the time."*²⁸

Pier Giorgio understood the need to emphasise the basis of the Catholic Faith. In notes for a speech, he wrote: *"Every one of you knows that the foundation of our religion is charity. Without it all our religion would crumble, because we would not really be Catholics as long as we did not carry out or rather shape our whole lives by the two commandments in which the essence of the Catholic Faith lies: to love God with all our strength and to love our neighbour as ourselves."*²⁹

The practical benefit this brought to ongoing conversion was not lost on Pier Giorgio: *"I think I can say" he said, "that the Conference of St Vincent, with its visits to the poor, serves to curb our passions. It gives us incentives to get on the right road, by which we are all trying to reach the great gate."*³⁰

The Testimony of Friends

Pier Giorgio's exercise of charity was experienced first-hand by his friends. Angiolo Gambaro wrote in his diary of the *"heroism"* of Pier Giorgio's apostolate, saying he had never *"received such a deep impression as that from the strong personality of this young man."*³¹ He continued: *"I think that the model of virtue offered to us by Pier Giorgio is a great thing. He goes about in silence and in secret, without applause, and to the poor he gives bread and his heart, to the orphan an affectionate caress, to the old his luminous smile, to the sick the balm of his loving care."*³²

Pier Giorgio's 'yes' to the poor had consequences, as Gambaro records: *"He almost deserts the family in which he could have all the chances, the satisfaction of all pleasures, and it is in the hard school of this world that he forges a strong soul, constancy, energy, courage, sacrifice, all that is beautiful, worthy, glorious."*³³

Gambaro commented further that Pier Giorgio ignored *"the brilliant possibilities that a high income would allow him."* He was *"not afraid to carry his singular evangelical spirit of renunciation, detachment, and poverty into a life which we humans have turned into a wild party where rude guests each grab the food from their neighbours instead of offering it around."*³⁴

Pier Giorgio's witness had a powerful impact on Gambaro, just as it can and should motivate our own efforts to be firm in faith and active in charity. *"One cannot fail,"* wrote Gambaro, *"to be moved by his generous work, his warm, pure faith, his modesty and constant good temper. This evening when I was in contact with his ardent and communicative zeal for Christian works, I was deeply moved."*³⁵

A classmate of Pier Giorgio recalls meeting him taking parcels to the poor. Accompanying Pier Giorgio into the slums, he left him to visit the worst

places by himself. *"When he came out,"* wrote the friend, *"Pier Giorgio seemed like someone who had come back from another world, another life. On his face, emotional and transformed, you could see that bright light of spirituality that must have shone on the face of saints. Standing next to him, I felt somehow smaller, yet also more human and more kind."*³⁶ This is the contagious effect of holiness in action, the radiance of sanctity.

Carlo Florio was a fellow member with Pier Giorgio of the St Vincent de Paul Society, although, he admits, much less enthusiastic. *"Pier Giorgio must have understood,"* he said, *"because it was he who taught me to do works of charity."*³⁷ Here we meet another facet of Pier Giorgio's greatness. He not only performed impressive works of charity himself, he also inspired others to do this same, another dimension of his legacy for our imitation.

Florio once asked Pier Giorgio how he overcame the stomach churning smells in the homes of the poor. His answer: *"Don't ever forget, that even though the house is sordid, you are approaching Christ. Remember what the Lord said: the good you do to the poor is good done to me."*³⁸ Pier Giorgio then offered an insight into his own mystical experience: *"Around the sick, the poor, the unfortunate, I see a particular light, a light that we do not have."*³⁹ The poor were his masters, he was their servant. They revealed Christ to him as he revealed Christ to them.

The Poverty of Unbelief

Pier Giorgio also fought another kind of poverty, the poverty of the absence of faith, the poverty of not knowing God, the poverty of not belonging to the Church.

A shopkeeper, Italia Nebbia, met Pier Giorgio delivering parcels to the poor and stored some for those who were not at home. When she offered to make the deliveries for him, Pier Giorgio replied: *"No, really, I'm so happy to deliver the packages personally, because that way I can also encourage them a bit, give them hope that their lives will change, and above all I can convince them to offer their sufferings to God and to go to Mass."*⁴⁰ When Italia admitted to Pier Giorgio that she herself didn't attend Mass, he replied, *"If you won't go for yourself, then at*

least go for the sake of your child."⁴¹ And so she returned to attending Sunday Mass, just one example of the many whom he encouraged to receive the sacraments.

Pier Giorgio called on the Catholic Youth of Pollone to combat such lack of faith and religious practice with what he called the *"apostolate of persuasion."*⁴² This, said Pier Giorgio, is one of the most *"beautiful and necessary"* apostolates. *"Young people,"* he said, *"approach your colleagues at work who live their lives away from the Church and spend their free time not in healthy pastimes, but in vices. Persuade those unfortunate people to follow the ways of God, strewn with many thorns, but also many roses...We must sacrifice everything for everything: our ambitions, indeed, our entire selves, for the cause of our faith."*⁴³

In Pier Giorgio's heart and mind, the reason for this was obvious, expressed in one of his most frequently cited quotations: *"To live without Faith, without a patrimony to defend, without a steady struggle for Truth, that is not living but existing."*⁴⁴

A Martyr for the Poor

It is not overly dramatic to call Blessed Pier Giorgio a *'martyr for the poor.'* In all likelihood the poliomyelitis, which struck him down within days, was contracted from those he served. The seriousness of his illness was only fully appreciated the day before he died. Pier Giorgio's family were caught up with his dying grandmother and he refused to bother anyone, despite his increasing suffering and pain.

On 29 June 1925, the Monday before his death the following Saturday, his sister, Luciana, recalled the effort *"he had to make in the middle of his conversation to ask...for a loan of thirty lire, for one of his poor people or for some pious commission of his."* *"Pier Giorgio's pockets were empty,"* she wrote, *"as if he were one of the most miserable ragamuffins of Turin – without a penny, without a cigarette or a cigar in his pocket, constrained to ask his younger sister for money."*⁴⁵

The following Thursday, 2 July, Pier Giorgio, now bedridden, received a visit from his great companion Marco Beltramo. As his friend came closer Pier Giorgio responded nobly, *"No, go near the window – I have the Maltese fever and I wouldn't want you to get it."*⁴⁶ It was, of course, the poliovirus, which by now, had taken hold of his body.

The day before he died, Friday 3 July, Pier Giorgio asked Luciana to fetch his wallet from his jacket downstairs in his study. She brought it and he asked her to return and bring him a box of injections, a visiting card and his pen. In his wallet was a ticket for a pawnbrokers shop. He gave this and the injections to his sister and, with a paralysed hand, managed to scribble a note to his friend, Grimaldi, with whom he was to make a St Vincent de Paul visit. Pier Giorgio wrote: *"These are the injections for Converso. The pawn ticket belongs to Sappa. I had forgotten it, renew it on my account."*⁴⁷ His last words on earth were dedicated to the sick, for whom he had obtained medicine, and the poor, whose possessions he was trying to secure from being sold. The extraordinary virtue shown by Pier Giorgio in his last days is captured in the words of Fr Rahner: *"...there must have been few who, while suffering the torments of death by poliomyelitis, would still feel it their duty to think of the poor."*⁴⁸

Commentators agree that the process for Pier Giorgio's beatification began at his funeral through popular acclaim. Thousands of people, many of them unknown to his family, came to pay their respects and line the streets as his coffin passed by. In the words of his sister: *"His astonished family was at last introduced to this multitude of his friends: the poor, the despairing, the socially rejected whose hearts he had won and warmed by this kindness, his acts of charity, his encouragement and friendship."*⁴⁹

An Example into the Future

In 1977, before he became Pope, Cardinal Karol Wojtyla spoke about Pier Giorgio at an exhibition hosted by the Dominican friars in Krakow. Pier Giorgio, he said, shows us in the real life of a young man what it means to give a concrete reply to the invitation of Jesus to *"Come, follow me."* He was *"open to the problems of culture, to sport – a tremendous mountaineer, to social*

questions, to the real value of life."⁵⁰ At the same time, the future Pope who would beatify Pier Giorgio, wrote that his life "...was that of a deep believer, nourished on the Gospel message, of a staunch, consistent character, passionately, eager to serve brothers [and sisters] consumed by charity which led him to approach, in an order of absolute precedence, the poor and the sick."⁵¹

In 1990, the year of his beatification, the Archbishop of Turin, Cardinal Saldarini said that Blessed Pier Giorgio "choose the poor, but he did not reject or condemn his rich family, nor was he ever harsh or rude to them. He did not visit the poor as a reaction to the liberal culture of his environment or for merely sociological reasons, but out of his passion for evangelical charity. [...] Above all," he said "in going out to the poor, he did not remain outside of their poverty: rich at home but personally poor, he was not ashamed to become a beggar for the sake of his beggars."⁵²

There is a quotation that says 'Evangelism is one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread.' As a supreme witness to the Gospel, in love with Jesus, Pier Giorgio did more. By his living and dying he became bread for others, as Christ, his risen Lord, was the Bread of Eternal Life for him.

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¹ Francesco Antonioli, *Pier Giorgio Frassati - Il Giovane Delle Otto Beatitudine*, Paoline, Milano, 1994. Cardinal Karol Wojtyla attended an exhibition in Krakow on Pier Giorgio Frassati in 1977. Speaking to others he encouraged them, "Go and look at these photographs. See the man of the eight beatitudes who bears in himself the grace of the Gospel, the Good News, the joy of salvation offered to us by Christ..."

² St John Paul II, Homily at the Beatification of Pier Giorgio Frassati, 20 May 1990.

³ Homily at the Beatification.

⁴ Benedict J Groeschel in the forward to Luciana Frassati, *My Brother Pier Giorgio - His Last Days*, New Hope Publications, Kentuck, USA, 2003, ix.

⁵ *Ibid*, x.

⁶ *Ibid*, xi

⁷ Cristiana Siccardi, *Pier Giorgio Frassati - A Hero for our Times*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 2016, 155.

⁸ Timothy E. Deer & Christine M. Wohar (eds), *Pier Giorgio Frassati - Letters to his Friends and Family*, St Pauls, Boston, 2009, 247.

⁹ *Ibid*.

¹⁰ *Ibid*.

¹¹ *A Hero for our Times*, 155.

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- ¹² Maria di Lorenzo, *Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati – An Ordinary Christian*, Pauline Books and Media, Boston, USA, 2004, 69.
- ¹³ *Ibid*, 69.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid*, 71.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid*, 72.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid*, 73.
- ¹⁷ *A Hero for our Times*, 152.
- ¹⁸ Pope Pius XI, Address to University Students, 1927 quoted in *An Ordinary Christian*, 133. Pope Pius XI said: “*The political field is a field for a wider form of charity: political charity.*”
- ¹⁹ *My Brother Pier Giorgio*, x-xi.
- ²⁰ *A Hero for our Times*, 153
- ²¹ *An Ordinary Christian*, 74
- ²² Homily at the Beatification.
- ²³ Luciana Frassati, *A Man of the Beatitudes – Pier Giorgio Frassati*, Novalis, Canada, 2000, 123.
- ²⁴ *An Ordinary Christian*, 75
- ²⁵ *A Hero for our Times*, 149.
- ²⁶ *Ibid*, 158.
- ²⁷ *Ibid*.
- ²⁸ Karl Rahner in the introduction to, *A Man of the Beatitudes*, 13.
- ²⁹ *A Man of the Beatitudes*, 124.
- ³⁰ *Ibid*, 125.
- ³¹ *Ibid*, 126.
- ³² *Ibid*.
- ³³ *Ibid*.
- ³⁴ *Ibid*.
- ³⁵ *Ibid*.
- ³⁶ *An Ordinary Christian*, 67-68.
- ³⁷ *A Man of the Beatitudes*, 126.
- ³⁸ *Ibid*, 127.
- ³⁹ *Ibid*.
- ⁴⁰ *An Ordinary Christian*, 69.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid*.
- ⁴² *Letters to his Friends and Family*, 247.
- ⁴³ *Ibid*, 247-248.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 214.
- ⁴⁵ *My Brother Pier Giorgio*, 7.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 62.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 94.
- ⁴⁸ *A Man of the Beatitudes*, 13.
- ⁴⁹ *My Brother Pier Giorgio*, xiii.
- ⁵⁰ *A Man of the Beatitudes*, 153.
- ⁵¹ *Ibid*
- ⁵² *A Hero for Our Times*, 158.