

## **A saint for our times: Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati**

Here are large excerpts from a homily given by Fr. Thomas Rosica, Chief Executive of "Salt and Light" Canadian Television Network, on the night of prayer and adoration that he presided over on Monday, July 14, 2008, at St. Mary's Cathedral in Sydney, in the presence of the relics of Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati:

Dear friends, what an honor and privilege to be with you here tonight in St. Mary's Cathedral in Sydney!... The youth from the entire world have come here to pray around the mortal remains of Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati during the course of the World Youth Day 2008.

If there was ever a time when young men and women needed authentic heroes, it is our time. The Church understands that the saints and blessed, their prayers, their lives, are for people on earth, that sainthood, as an earthly honor, is not coveted by the saints or blessed themselves.

What was so unique and special about Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati? He was born in 1901, at the turn of the last century in Turin, Italy. July 4, 2008 marked the 83rd anniversary of Pier Giorgio Frassati's entry into eternal life. Athletic, full of life, always surrounded by friends, whom he inspired with his life, Pier Giorgio chose not to become a priest or religious, preferring to give witness to the Gospel as a lay person. He never founded a religious order or started a new ecclesial movement. He led no armies, nor was he elected to public office. Death came even before he could complete his university degree. (The degree was awarded to him posthumously in 2001.) He never had a chance to begin a career; in fact, he hadn't even worked out for sure what his vocation in life would be. He was simply a young man who was in love with his family and friends, in love with the mountains and the sea, but especially in love with God...

Thanks to the World Youth Days, Pier Giorgio became the patron saint of millions of youth around the world... Let us look at three high points of the life of the young blessed who combined, in a remarkable way, his political engagements, solidarity, work for social justice, piety and devotion, humanity and goodness, holiness and freshness, faith and life.

### **The life of prayer of Pier Giorgio and his love for the Eucharist**

Pier Giorgio Frassati developed a profound spiritual life that he never hesitated to share with his friends. His friends remember him saying: "To live without Faith, without a heritage to defend, without constantly fighting for the truth, is not really living..."

The Eucharist and the Virgin Mary were two pillars in his spiritual life. He mysteriously felt a great desire to be close to the Blessed Sacrament. He followed in processions and took part with great enthusiasm in the Eucharistic Congresses. But above all, he loved to spend long hours in night adoration. And his joy was so much greater when he was able to bring his friends with him, the young people that he knew and the poor who he took care of, to adore the Blessed Sacrament. During his Eucharistic vigils, the face of Pier Giorgio was transfigured by joy and consolation to see some of these young men and women go to Communion.

His spiritual life, like ours, was based on the Sacraments. But he went beyond simply doing what is "required": Sunday Mass, the perfunctory Confession before Christmas and/or Easter, and perhaps a small Lenten penance like giving up candy.

The Rosary, the Liturgy of the Hours, lectio divina and annual retreats were as much a part of his life as skiing, mountain-climbing or cycling. His life of prayer was his "daily bread," as it should be for anyone who desires to become a saint. He was an athlete, and he knew well that in order to "reach the goal," as he was fond of saying, he had to push himself beyond the ordinary if he wanted to be a champion...

In a letter that he wrote (on July 29, 1923) to the members of the "Catholic Youth" of Pollone, a mountain village in the north of Turin, Pier Giorgio said:

**"...I exhort you with all the strength of my soul to approach to the Eucharistic Table as often as possible. Nourished with the Bread of the angels from which you draw the strength to vanquish in the battles against the passions and all adversity, because Jesus Christ promised eternal life and the graces to obtain it, to those who nourish themselves with the Holy Eucharist.**

**"And when you are consumed by the Eucharistic fire, you will be able to thank the Lord God with even more recognition, you who are called to be a member of His flock; will receive a peace that those who are happy according to the world have never tasted. Because real happiness, young people; does not consist of the pleasures of the world and the realities of the earth, but in the peace of conscience that we have only if we have a heart that is pure and in the spirit."**

These words show a remarkable spiritual maturity and a great love for the Eucharist, in particular considering the fact that they come from a young man who was only twenty-two years old.

### **The respect of Pier Giorgio for life and his sense of social justice**

During his era and life, Pier Giorgio overcame many challenges and contemporary problems. His love of God and his strong sense of solidarity brought him closer to the poor, those in need, the sick, the hungry and those without shelter. Pier Giorgio Frassati had a great respect for human life: for all of life, from the first to the final moments. He constantly defended life where it was diminished or in a state of siege.

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 assisting the demobilized servicemen returning from World War I. What little he did have, Pier Giorgio gave to help the poor, even using his bus fare for charity and then running home to be on time for meals. The poor and the suffering were his masters, and he was literally their servant, which he considered a privilege. He often sacrificed vacations at the Frassati summer home in Pollone because, as he said, "If everybody leaves Turin, who will take care of the poor?"

Pier Giorgio loved the poor. It was not simply a matter of giving something to the lonely, the poor, the sick - but rather, giving his whole self. He saw Jesus in them and to a friend who asked him how he could bear to enter the dirty and smelly places where the poor lived, he answered: "Remember always that it is to Jesus that you go: I see a special light that we do not have around the sick, the poor, and the unfortunate."

A German news reporter who observed Frassati at the Italian Embassy wrote, "One night in Berlin, with the temperature at twelve degrees below zero, he gave his overcoat to a poor old man shivering in the cold. His father, the Ambassador scolded him, and he replied simply and matter-of-factly, 'But you see, Papa, it was cold.'"

In the same letter addressed to the members of the "Catholic Youth" of Pollone, Pier Giorgio exhorted his peers in these terms:

**"The Apostle Paul says, 'Christ's charity needs us', and without this fire, that slowly but surely destroys our personality to the point that our heart beats only for the pain of others, we will not be Christians, and even less Catholics.**

**"Finally, there is the apostolate of persuasion. It is one of the most beautiful and necessary. You the youth, approach your co-workers who live their lives far from the Church and who occupy their free time not in beneficial pastimes but in vice. Persuade these unhappy people to follow the way of God, showered with thorns, but also with many roses.**

**"But if each of you possesses these gifts in a high degree, and did not have the spirit of sacrifice in abundance, you would not be good Catholics. We should all sacrifice everything: our ambitions and really the interior of our being, for the cause of Faith."**

Behind the exterior smile of this energetic young man was dissimulated an extraordinary life of a mystic. Love of Jesus motivated his actions.

### **The suffering and death of Pier Giorgio**

Just before receiving his university degree in mining engineering, he contracted poliomyelitis, which doctors later speculated he caught from the sick for whom he cared. His sickness was not understood. His parents, totally taken up by the agony, death and burial of his grandmother, had not even suspected the paralysis. Two days before the end, his mother kept on scolding him for not helping her in difficult moments.

Not even in those desperate final days could he ever forget his closest friends, the poor. While lying on his death bed he wanted the usual material assistance to be brought to them. It was Friday, the day he visited them. On July 3, 1925, a day before his death, his hand already paralyzed from polio, Pier Giorgio asked his sister Luciana to take a small packet from his jacket and with a semi-paralyzed hand he wrote the following note to Grimaldi: "Here are the injections for Converso. The pawn ticket is Sappa's. I had forgotten it; renew it on my behalf."

We know that Pier Giorgio wanted to see Jesus so much that he used to say: "The day of my death will be the most beautiful day of my life." Pier Giorgio's sacrifice was fulfilled at seven o'clock in the evening of July 4, 1925. His funeral was a triumph. The streets of Turin were lined with a multitude of mourners who were unknown to his family: clergy and students, and the poor and the needy whom he had served so unselfishly for seven years.

God gave Pier Giorgio all the external attributes that could have led him to make the wrong choices: a wealthy family, very good looks, energy, health, and being the only heir of a powerful family. But Pier Giorgio listened to the invitation of Christ: "Come and follow me." He anticipated by at least 50 years the church's understanding and new direction on the role of the laity...

During the beatification of Pier Giorgio Frassati on St. Peter's Square, May 20, 1990, Pope John Paul II described him as "man of the eight Beatitudes", and said in his homily :

**"By his example, he proclaims a life lived in the Spirit of Christ, the Spirit of the Beatitudes, is 'blessed', and that only he who becomes a 'man or woman of the Beatitudes' is able to communicate love and peace to others. He repeats that it is really worth giving everything up to serve the Lord. He testifies that holiness is possible for everyone, and that only the revolution of charity can enkindle the hope of a better future in the hearts of men... He left this world rather young, but he made a mark upon our entire century, and not only on our century."**

Tonight, together with the Servant of God, John Paul II, the young mountain climber of Pollone stands at the window of the Father's house and smiles upon us, as he intercedes for us and for the young people of the world who have come to Sydney to discover the Lord and his holy ones in the vast Communion of Saints and community of the Church. Let me conclude by speaking for a few moments directly to Pier Giorgio on your behalf.

Pier Giorgio, help us to strive for simple hearts, be attentive to the needs of others, and build friendships based on that pact which knows no earthly boundaries or limits of time: union in prayer. If we do not know the road, and if we often abandon the path, show us the way "verso l'alto" upward to heaven!

If by being superficial we have not put in our knapsack all that we need for the climb, and if we never lift up our gaze because we do not want to take the first demanding steps to set ourselves on the way, show us the way "verso l'alto" upward to heaven!

If we lack the strength to overcome the most difficult passes, and if we have the strength, but prefer to use it to turn back, show us the way "verso l'alto" upward to heaven!

If we never pause to be nourished by the bread of eternal life, and if we do not quench our thirst from the fountain of prayer, show us the way "verso l'alto" upward to heaven!

When we do not know how to contemplate the beauty of the gifts we have received, and when we do not know how to offer ourselves for others, show us the way "verso l'alto" upward to heaven!

If we have committed many sins, show us the way "verso l'alto" upward to heaven!

If we lost hope, show us the way "verso l'alto" upward to heaven!

Three years ago, in his message for the World Youth Day in 2005 in Cologne in Germany, Pope John Paul II wrote:

**"Dear young people, the Church needs genuine witnesses for the new evangelisation: men and women whose lives have been transformed by meeting with Jesus, men and women who are capable of communicating this experience to others. The Church needs saints. All are called to holiness, and holy people alone can renew humanity. Many have gone before us along this path of Gospel heroism, and I urge you to turn often to them to pray for their intercession."**

This is why we are united in this great Cathedral! May all the youth who have traveled to Sydney, and those among us who were young before, find in Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati that which the sermon of Jesus on the mount of Galilee really means.

**Pray for us Pier Giorgio Frassati. Show us the road "verso l'alto", that rises to Heaven and close to the heart of God. Teach us to be saints for the Church and for the world! Amen.**

**Fr. Thomas Rosica**