

Young saints for our times

On Sept. 7, Pope Leo XIV canonized two young men as saints of the Church. With this action, he recognized the holiness of St. Pier Giorgio Frassati and St. Carlo Acutis, inscribing them in the long list of holy heroes of the faith who have gone before us. After a long process of prayer and discernment, the Church acknowledges that, by God's grace, they had lived lives of exemplary faith and charity, and they now enjoy eternal life in God's presence.

St. Pier Giorgio Frassati was born in northern Italy in the year 1901. He was born into a prominent family in Turin, but the family as a whole was not particularly religious. Aside from cultural aspects of Catholicism, the Frassati household was quite secular. But Pier Giorgio charted his own path. His faith was very much alive, and he lived it with gusto. He was outgoing, athletic, and had many friends. He enjoyed mountain climbing, hiking, and swimming. He was also intensely prayerful and had a particular love for Christ in the Eucharist. He attended Mass every day, whenever possible. He was active in Catholic organizations in his parish and community, and advocated in a special way for workers and the poor. Without his family knowing it, Pier Giorgio routinely visited poor families around the city of Turin, bringing money, food, and clothing, anything that would help them in their need. His naturally friendly demeanor and devout faith were attractive to many people, and he set an example of fervent devotion and sincere charity for his friends.

One of Pier Giorgio's favorite sayings among friends was "*Verso l'alto*,"—"to the heights!" This was certainly a reference to their mountain climbing excursions, but even more so, he meant this in a spiritual way. Pier Giorgio believed that we must always strive upwards to God, reaching for holiness, directing our lives to the eternal life that awaits us in heaven. He encouraged his friends to live always according to their Catholic faith, and with God's help to keep climbing towards the beautiful calling to sainthood that we have all received. At the young age of 24, Pier Giorgio contracted polio, and died shortly thereafter. His family expected the funeral to be attended by the circle of their prominent friends and other family members, but they were surprised when thousands of people lined the streets to pay their respects, all those who had been helped and befriended by Pier Giorgio during his short lifetime.

Carlo Acutis was born in 1991 into another Italian family. Once again, aside from cultural experiences like Baptism and First Communion, Carlo's parents were not really practicing the Catholic faith. But as a young child, Carlo manifested a lively fascination with God, the saints, and especially the Holy Eucharist. Like many ordinary boys his age, Carlo loved games, sports, and had an avid interest in computer technology, but he used this interest in a unique way. He gathered all the information he could find about Eucharistic miracles, and began to share this through websites that he constructed with all his friends and classmates, and many others as well. He wanted everyone to know about Jesus in the Eucharist, and at every opportunity he attended Mass and Eucharistic adoration.

Through Carlo's influence, his family began to actively practice the faith once again, and some employees and acquaintances of the family, including a Hindu governess, were influenced to embrace Christ and join the Catholic Church. Through the ordinary things of his daily life, Carlo became an evangelist, and in his own youthful way he attracted many others to draw near to Jesus. He lived a normal, modern life, but he had his eyes on our Lord, and he wanted to be with him. Carlo said, "To be always united with Jesus, this is my life program." Then, at the young age of 15, Carlo contracted an aggressive form of acute leukemia. He died in 2006 after a short illness, but people immediately recognized the holiness of his life, that he truly was a young saint of our own time.

In his homily at the canonization Mass, Pope Leo said the new saints Carlo and Pier Giorgio understood that friendship with Jesus and faithfully following God's plans is greater than any other worldly pursuits. To the thousands who had gathered he said, "Dear friends, 'Sts. Pier Giorgio Frassati and Carlo Acutis are an invitation to all of us, especially young people, not to squander our lives but to direct them upwards and make them masterpieces.'" The pope said that "even when illness struck them and cut short their young lives, not even this stopped them, nor prevented them from loving, offering themselves to God, blessing him and praying to him for themselves and for everyone."

Pier Giorgio and Carlo were ordinary young men of their times, and in many ways they led quite ordinary lives. But each of them, in his own way, lived a holy life and brought the extraordinary adventure of friendship with Christ into the ordinariness of daily living. In that way, St. Pier Giorgio and St. Carlo are wonderful models of goodness and holiness for all of us, especially young people. Not many of us are called to be martyrs or missionaries who go to the far reaches of the earth, but we are all called to be saints. We are all called to holiness, and these two ordinary young men have shown us that it's within reach for anyone. Who knows? There might be another Carlo or Pier Giorgio among us already!