

Daredevil Athlete

Roguish Prankster

Unrelenting Activist

Unexpected Mystic

Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati

An Ordinary
Christian

Maria Di Lorenzo



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Chapter 1

Idyllic Days

On Holy Saturday, April 6, 1901, in Turin, Italy, the first and only male child was born to Alfredo and Adelaide Frassati, one of the most well-known families of Turin. The couple's first child, Elda, had been born in 1899, but died eight months later. Alfredo Frassati wished to name his son after his own father, Pietro, who had died only two years before, but Adelaide disliked the name. They finally compromised and added the name Giorgio, after the warrior saint who had slain the dragon.

Pier Giorgio showed signs of asphyxia at birth and the family quickly summoned the parish priest, Father Alessandro Roccati, to come to baptize the infant at home. A few months later, on September 5, this "private" ceremony was followed with the pomp and circumstance of a public celebration at the parish church of Pollone.

Alfredo Frassati was born on September 28, 1868, in the town of Pollone in the Biellese province of the Piedmont region of Italy. He became the successful founder and director of the liberal newspaper, *La Stampa*. Adelaide Ametis, born in 1877 in Pallone, had

a great passion for art. A student of some of Italy's most prominent artists, one of her portraits received critical acclaim while on display at Venice's Biennale Art Exhibit in 1912. Alfredo fell in love with Adelaide, who was his cousin, and they were married on September 5, 1898.

At the age of twenty-two, Alfredo Frassati graduated from university with a degree in law, but his real interest lay in the world of printed news media, which, in his opinion, represented a "new force" at the dawn of the twentieth century capable of guiding "all peoples to achieving the common good."

Alfredo demonstrated notable managerial skills in the publishing field and took over the newspaper, *Gazetta Piemontese*, reissuing it on January 1, 1895 under the new title: *La Stampa-Gazetta Piemontese*.

By 1907 *La Stampa* was publishing eight pages and reached the watermark of 100 thousand copies. From the end of the nineteenth century to 1915, the newspaper went from fifty thousand copies sold daily to some 300 thousand copies. In an effort to modernize production, Alfredo began using linotype, and enriched the paper with numerous supplements: *La Stampa sportiva* (1902), the first Italian sports journal; *La Donna* (1904), a bi-monthly supplement dedicated to women's issues; and *La Stampa agricola* (1912), dedicated to agricultural concerns. The Turin-based daily newspaper became one of the most respected in Italy.

Contributors to the newspaper included some of Italy's most prestigious figures of the time, including Guido Gozzano, Giuseppe Antonio Borgese, and the economist, Luigi Einaudi. Alfredo, a man of liberal

ideas, was deeply loyal to the liberal politician, Giovanni Giolitti. Alfredo threw all of his energy into the paper, so much so that people thought of the two as one entity and it was often said: "*La Stampa* is Frassati!"³

Alfredo's complete devotion to his work and Adelaide complete absorption in her painting soon made it clear that they had few common interests. Their marriage dragged on for years between arguments and misunderstandings, often bringing them to the verge of separation. Adelaide was a whimsical, hasty, and energetic character, and she could sometimes be spiteful. Alfredo, an authoritarian, recognized the many ways he and Adelaide were so much alike. The two clashed even before their marriage, and Alfredo had written to Adelaide, "We are far too similar to avoid these storms."

The delicate family situation, which was the source of much tension and pain, had a profound effect on Pier Giorgio's life, as well as that of his sister, Luciana, who was born at Pollone on August 18, 1902. Years later Luciana would recall the heavy atmosphere that hung over the Frassati home as "an ill-defined nightmare."



When Pier Giorgio began talking, he gave himself the nickname "Dodo." He began kindergarten in Pollone at the age of three, and it was there that he had his first contact with religious sentiments with lessons from the *Compendium of Christian Doctrine*, later known as the *Catechism of Saint Pius X*.

One day at school, Pier Giorgio was deeply troubled to learn that Saint Joseph was Jesus' foster father. He brooded over this at home for some time before finally asking his mother if that meant Jesus was an orphan. When Adelaide explained that, far from being an orphan, Jesus had two fathers, Pier Giorgio became happy once again.

Pier Giorgio was a lively, active child. At home, the Frassati's called him "Sonntagskind,"⁴ a German nickname meaning "life of the party." Pier Giorgio loved noisy toys, racing, soccer, and bicycling. Luciana, always in tow, became his inseparable "partner in crime." When their maternal grandmother, Linda Copello Ametis, wanted to describe a heightened state of noise and confusion, she used two words: "*Casa Frassati* (the Frassati household)."

From his earliest years, Pier Giorgio demonstrated a strong and somewhat impulsive character. An exuberant and affectionate child, he always seemed to be in a good mood and, despite his young age, was very sensitive and compassionate toward others. Once, while he was in kindergarten, Pier Giorgio noticed an unhappy child sitting alone at lunchtime. The other children had shunned him because of his badly scarred face, the result of a terrible skin disease. Pier Giorgio immediately sat down beside the lonely boy and cheerfully shared his meal, even using the same spoon.

On another occasion, four-year-old Pier Giorgio heard someone knocking at the door at home and when he opened it, he saw a feeble woman holding a child in her arms. Pier Giorgio noticed the child's bare feet and he immediately took off his own shoes and

socks and gave them to the woman. Then he quickly closed the door before anyone in the house realized what he had done.

Pier Giorgio prayed each night before going to bed. Dressed in his nightshirt, he would kneel on the mattress at the foot of his bed. With his rosary in hand little Pier Giorgio would pray—until he fell fast asleep and tumbling off the bed!

A sweet and mysterious Presence was already speaking to his heart.

On June 11, 1910, Pier Giorgio and Luciana made their first confession at Turin's Corpus Domini Church. A year later, on June 19, 1911, they received their First Communion in the chapel of the Auxiliary Sisters of the Souls in Purgatory. The strictly private ceremony was followed by a simple reception consisting of a cup of hot chocolate. "They seemed like two newlyweds," was their mother's excited and somewhat frivolous comment that day. Adelaide was rather formal in matters of religion, which for her consisted of set practices and customs and duties to be performed at certain times, much like paying one's taxes. She taught her children prayers that they were to say on their knees in the morning and at night; she never missed Sunday Mass, but Pier Giorgio would later say that he had never seen her receive Communion.

For his part, though he was an agnostic, Alfredo agreed to allow his children to receive religious instruction. A sensible and progressive man, he placed all his faith in the secular values disseminated in his newspaper. Even as a child, Pier Giorgio could not have differed more from his father. One afternoon, in 1908, the seven-year-

old Pier Giorgio ran up to his mother in tears. “Mama,” he cried, “there was a poor, hungry man at the door and Papa did not give him anything to eat!” Alfredo had encountered a man begging for charity at the entrance of the house, but seeing that he was drunk, Alfredo sent him away immediately. Pier Giorgio witnessed this and was terribly disturbed because he was convinced that Jesus had come to the house and that his father had sent him away hungry.

Adelaide tried to calm Pier Giorgio, but could not. Only when she sent someone to fetch the beggar back to the house to give him something to eat and drink was Pier Giorgio satisfied. Later, Adelaide found that the man had indeed been lying about his neediness, and she said as much to her son. This did not deter Pier Giorgio, however, and he persisted: “But what if it *was* Jesus who sent us that poor man?”

Luciana recalls that “his personal relationship with God helped Pier Giorgio to mature more quickly, and ended with his gradual detachment from the rest of the family.”⁵ In fact, given the situation at the Frassati home, when it came to matters of faith Pier Giorgio was always self-educated. Pier Giorgio loved to pray, curled up with his small prayer book in hand, to mediate in silence, and to sit in adoration of the Blessed Sacrament where he found his very best friend and the Teacher who spoke to his heart. No one taught this to Pier Giorgio; he learned it from God, as we read in the prophet Jeremiah: “I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts” (31:33).



The Frassati children spent all their time together. In fact, their parents did not allow them to play with other children, not even as they became older. They were raised in an atmosphere of prohibitions and sacrifices—early to bed at night, a splash of cold water early in the morning whether winter or summer—they were even forbidden to walk the streets of the city by themselves, or to linger in front of newsstands or store windows. Discipline and obedience was the principal rule in everything. Dialogue between parents and a child at that time was virtually nonexistent, and so honor, respect, and fear governed their relationship.

In the autumn of 1907, Pier Giorgio and Luciana began their schooling at home with Rosina Buratto as their tutor. The arrangement lasted until 1910 when the Frassati children entered the Salesian Institute in Alassio to complete their elementary school studies.

When he learned to write, Pier Giorgio felt duty-bound to pen brief letters to his parents and relatives for various occasions. Pier Giorgio wrote his first letter when he was about six years old:

My dearest little daddy. I love you so much and to make you happy, I won't hit Luciana anymore. Happy holiday. I will pray to Baby Jesus for you. Kisses, your Dodo.⁶

Actually, Pier Giorgio did not care much for writing—a real nightmare to him because of his dislike for grammar and punctuation. He preferred to spend time playing and in the mountains.

The Frassati home was a common gathering place of well-known authors, journalists, and other important

personalities including Guido Gozzano, Giuseppe Antonio Borgese, and Salvatore Gotta, but Pier Giorgio had little interest in such company. Alfredo Frassati had high expectations for his only son, but he soon found himself disappointed in the boy. Pier Giorgio lacked his father's ambition and seriousness. He was rarely "at his books," preferring to have fun with his friends. He was becoming a very different son from the one Alfredo dreamed of, and Pier Giorgio was growing apart from the world into which he was born.



At the beginning of the summer each year, the Frassatis left for some vacation time in Pollone, their charming hometown with its narrow, winding streets lined with antique houses and high walls and gates that protected quaint villas bathed in flowering gardens. One of these villas belonged to Adelaide's father, Francesco Ametis. A pharmacist, who had volunteered to fight in the Crimean War, Francesco had later immigrated to Peru and made a modest fortune. When Francesco returned to Italy, he built the villa in Pollone, and planted a giant South American sequoia tree in its lovely garden.

The time the Frassatis spent at their villa at Pollone, in the cozy atmosphere enriched with luxuriant greenery and flowers, was a treasured haven. "Peaceful Pollone," as Pier Giorgio referred to the villa, was always a happy place for him, a place where he could dream, restore his spirit, escape the stress of city life, and be in touch with the nature he had grown to love.

The family had a small “zoo” at the villa with pet dogs, cats, birds, and a goat, and the Frassatis raised sheep, horses, poultry, and other barnyard animals. Pier Giorgio loved animals and he had special affection for Mime, Wotan, Uadi—the dogs and cats he named after characters from operas by the German composer, Richard Wagner.

From his bedroom, Pier Giorgio could see the Mucrone River, which dominates the entire town of Pollone. When the weather was good, Pier Giorgio would go down into the garden, climb a tree, and balance himself on one of the larger branches. He made this his desk, reviewing his homework aloud and reciting favorite lines from Dante and the Psalms from the tree. Pier Giorgio would also sing, quite out of tune, at the top of his lungs so that neighbors and passersby could hear him.

The days spent at Pollone were idyllic. Pier Giorgio enjoyed playing, digging in the garden, carting wood, baskets of fruit, and fertilizer to help the gardener. Each evening he insisted on giving the gardener a hand in watering the grounds—a difficult task that meant carrying 120 cans of water—so that the work was shared equally.



In October 1910, the Frassati children, both dressed in “sailor suits,” began classes at the *Massimo D’Azeglio*, one of Turin’s most prestigious public middle schools. Some time later, Father Antonio Cojazzi began tutoring the Frassati children. The Salesian

priest, originally from Friuli in the province of Udine, was an excellent teacher and a jovial man. Father Cojazzi, Blessed Pier Giorgio's first biographer, remembered how "hurrying to complete his homework, Pier Giorgio would get up from his seat, plant himself in front of me with his arms folded, and, looking at me with his big, dark eyes, would ask, 'And now will you tell me a story about Jesus?'"⁷

The Gospel was a magnet pulling on Pier Giorgio's heart and predisposing him toward works of charity. Luciana recalled, "He was barely eleven years old, but already his mind was occupied with the thought of others' sufferings, which he tried to alleviate with small gestures, like collecting foil paper, tram tickets, and stamps for missionaries."⁸ Often Pier Giorgio's uncle Pietro gave him money, which always promptly went into the pockets of the poor. The same thing happened with the money he asked of his paternal grandmother Giuseppina. The ten or twenty lire she suggested Pier Giorgio deposit in the bank he would quickly invest in another "bank" that returned one hundred to one.