

# The Hidden Truth about Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati

By Maura Roan Mckeegan, July 5, 2016

**Pier Giorgio Frassati smiled and laughed so freely that he was called “an explosion of joy.”** He whistled and sang loudly and hopelessly out of tune. He loved playful teasing and practical jokes. In his early 20’s, he was the picture of strength and health, leading groups of friends into the Alps to scale mountain peaks.

His ready laughter and adventurous spirit were fountains that sprang from a well of holiness. Pier Giorgio was so filled with virtue that Saint John Paul II, who beatified him in 1990, called him the “Man of the Beatitudes.” Joy of life and love of God coursed readily through his veins. Could anyone who knew him in the sunshine of his youth, in the early twentieth century in Turin, Italy, have believed that he would die before the age of 25?

In her beautiful memoir *My Brother Pier Giorgio: His Last Days*, Luciana Frassati—Pier Giorgio’s only sibling—tells the story of her brother’s final week on earth, and of the veil that was lifted from the eyes of his family as they discovered two truths about him that they had not dreamed possible: that he was dying, and that he lived a life of immense charity that touched thousands of lives.

His family never suspected these truths, because Pier Giorgio quietly and humbly hid both his suffering and his good works.

“We were still unaware, at his death watch, that he had been late for mealtimes because he had given his tram money to some poor person and his jacket to another,” writes Luciana.

Pier Giorgio’s wealthy father was an important senator and owned one of Italy’s most prestigious newspapers, but Pier Giorgio was always broke and often begged for money from his family and friends—not for himself, but for the poor, whom he visited and served daily, and to whom he gave every cent he could find.

To his family, he was merely an engineering student—an average one, who worked hard but for whom learning never came easily. They saw him come and go from their large estate, where the discord between his parents created an atmosphere of constricted love, and where no one fully knew or understood Pier Giorgio, and they never guessed where he actually went.

It was as if a veil had been placed over their eyes, and it remained there until his very last days on earth. Until his death from poliomyelitis—a disease he most likely contracted while serving the poor—at the age of 24.

When Pier Giorgio first began to feel sick, he tried hard to hide it. His grandmother was on her deathbed upstairs in the Frassati home, and he did not want to bother anyone with his own ailments. Every time he came in the door, he inquired about his grandmother and went to visit her room. As his sickness progressed, he became less and less able to move, yet he still pushed himself out of his bedroom and down the hall to pray at his grandmother’s bedside. One sleepless night followed another, as he stumbled down the hall and back again, unable to rest, unwilling to complain.

His family, consumed by his grandmother’s illness, believed he had the flu. A doctor who came to examine him diagnosed him with rheumatism; and so, the veil remained. While his grandmother approached her death, no one knew that a few doors away, death was coming for her grandson, too.

Pier Giorgio wouldn’t have wanted it any other way. He prayed his heart out for his grandmother, and exhorted others to pray, too. “Go to Grandmother,” he told Luciana. “Pray for her because her condition is very serious,”—and then he broke down and sobbed.

When his grandmother passed away, polio was ravaging Pier Giorgio’s body and beginning to paralyze him—yet every two hours throughout the night, he made his way to his grandmother’s room, where he stood and prayed, or knelt and prayed, each time appearing more exhausted, less able to rise again.

All the while, his family thought what an inconvenient time he had chosen to get sick.

“You’re letting yourself go,” his mother told him, not knowing that he would be dead two days later. “If you want to get well, you must get hold of yourself.”

The regret with which Luciana writes about her family’s dismissal of Pier Giorgio’s sickness is heartbreaking. She spent the rest of her life spreading her brother’s story, wishing they had understood sooner and cared for him better. And yet, his family’s blindness helped to conform him to the Person he most wanted to imitate. It gave him the opportunity to be more like Christ. For as Pier Giorgio—a daily communicant who strived to live the Gospel with every breath he took—was misunderstood by his loved ones as his death came near, so was his Lord misunderstood by His loved ones as His death approached, as well.

In Mark 10:32-34, Jesus tells his apostles something that should have shocked, saddened, and stunned them: “Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem; and the Son of man will be delivered to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death, and deliver him to the Gentiles; and they will mock him, and spit upon him, and scourge him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise.”

The apostles should have wept, right? Shouldn’t they have fallen to their knees in grief? That’s not what Mark says they did, though. He says that James and John came forward to Jesus—and asked Him to let them sit at His right and His left in His glory. He had just told them He was going to be murdered, and they responded with a request for special treatment in heaven.

I imagine James and John might have regretted that move later, when they looked back and understood, in hindsight, what Jesus had been saying. But for some reason, at the time of Jesus’ words, the veil remained. Like Pier Giorgio’s family, Jesus’ apostles did not appear to understand the gravity of the situation they were in. For reasons that might only be revealed in heaven, the veil was not lifted until later.

As Saint Paul says, the Lord “will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then every man will receive his commendations from God.” (1 Corinthians 4:5) For Pier Giorgio, the time to “bring to light the things now hidden” was approaching hand in hand with the end of his earthly life.

Two days after Pier Giorgio’s grandmother died, the doctor who had diagnosed him with rheumatism returned and, deeply grieved by what he found, called for a second doctor, who called for a third, to confirm the sad diagnosis: poliomyelitis.

His family reeled in shock and grasped for quickly unraveling threads of hope while the paralysis moved into his lungs. As they struggled to comprehend the first hidden truth—that he was dying—the second hidden truth came to the surface as well: that he had been surreptitiously serving the poor in the manner of a saint.

“During his life he had kept quiet about his poor,” writes Luciana, “but at this point, having sensed his imminent death, he was forced to reveal himself.” One of his last acts was to ask Luciana to retrieve some medicine and a pawn ticket from his study. With effort that Luciana calls “impossible to describe,” he scrawled a note to ensure the items would reach the poor people for whom he had kept them. This small glimpse of charity on his deathbed was only a hint of what would come to light after his death.

Pier Giorgio took his last breath on July 4, 1925. At his funeral, thousands of people from every part of the city flooded the streets.

“The letters we began to receive and even more what was said about Pier Giorgio by unknown friends and all the strangers who turned to us constituted a revelation so imposing and so sublime that it overwhelmed us at least as much as his death,” Luciana writes. Only then did his family realize the impact he had made and the lives he had touched in the name of Jesus. Only then did they begin to understand the truth about Pier Giorgio. Only then did the lifted veil reveal that they had been living with a person of extraordinary grace.

On his feast day, July 4, and always, let us ask Blessed Pier Giorgio to intercede for us, that we, too, may live and die in humility, charity, and holiness.

Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati, pray for us!

