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FR. CHARLES DESJOBERT, OP

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## Introduction

# Who Is Pier Giorgio?

**P**ier Giorgio was born on April 6, 1901, into a well-to-do family in Turin. His father, Alfredo Frassati, was the founder and owner of *La Stampa*, one of Italy's leading daily newspapers. Adelaide, his mother, was a painter. His only sister, Luciana, was born a year after him. Family life was not straightforward: His authoritarian and strict parents showed little love. As a child, Pier Giorgio was joyful, if also stubborn, sometimes shutting himself off in total silence. He was impetuous—you could say, incorrigible—and fights with his sister were not uncommon.

Pier Giorgio's time was divided between Turin and the family villa at Pollone, about 40 miles to the north, nestled under the Alps and close to the Marian shrine of Oropa. He was very young when he first discovered the mountains. His love for the snowy heights would never stop growing. Walking and climbing, treading new

paths along rock faces still out of his reach—all this was the stuff of his dreams. There, way up high, he would sing his heart out, always a little out of tune, but who cares!

The Turin that Pier Giorgio knew was growing rapidly—a rich industrial city, but with squalid slums as far as the eye could see. Turin could dazzle the world as it welcomed the Universal Exhibition, in 1911. It was, however, the poverty of the workers that struck Pier Giorgio. One morning, opening the door to a child who was barefoot and begging, he immediately untied his shoes and handed them over. Such caring deeds toward those who suffered would become ever more frequent in his teenage years.

Giorgio—as Pier Giorgio was also called (but never just “Pier”)—was homeschooled in his early years, taking his exams with the Salesians. He then continued his education in a state school, along with his sister. It did not work out well: He misbehaved and got expelled twice. So his parents moved him to the Jesuit *Istituto Sociale*, in the autumn of 1913, to avoid his having to repeat a school year. Alfredo was disappointed in his son, whom he thought of as worse than useless.

When the war broke out in 1914, Pier Giorgio, the son of a senator, found himself caught up in the arguments between supporters and opponents of Italy’s neutrality—to the point of being



excluded from some lecture courses because of his father's views. He was horrified by the total devastation of war. So there grew in him a great desire for peace, a peace built upon more than merely human justice. True peace would require something more from us, something even more beautiful: to answer evil with good. When his bicycle got stolen, he simply reacted: "*Perhaps it was someone who needed it more than me!*" In 1923, he was appalled by the French occupation of the Ruhr and the exorbitant reparations taking their toll on Germany. Such injustice could only lead to further war.

At home, he found little support for his faith: Though his grandmother was very devout, his father was agnostic, and his mother practiced mostly out of social habit. And yet, Pier Giorgio deepened his personal prayer life, especially through the Rosary. He received Holy Communion daily, despite his parents' worrying that he might become a *bigotto*, "holier-than-thou." Pier Giorgio asked himself whether he might be called to the priesthood—maybe as a missionary?—but he felt that becoming a priest in Italy at that time risked cutting himself off from the poorest and from wider society. He was to find another way to give his life.

Early in 1921, his father was sent as ambassador to Berlin and settled there with his wife and Luciana. Remaining alone in Turin, Pier Giorgio made several trips to Germany, a place

he loved very much. But high society life held no appeal for him. While his sister enjoyed the receptions at the embassy, he would make himself scarce, spending his time with the less fortunate. This pained his father, who had hoped that Pier Giorgio would take up the family newspaper and assume his place among the great and the good of postwar Italy. The ambassador observed with bitterness that his son was following another path. But which? He had no idea.

Pier Giorgio then made the acquaintance of Fr. Carl Sonnenschein (1876–1929), nicknamed the “St. Francis of Berlin.” This maverick priest and founder of a Catholic student movement lived the Gospel values with remarkable integrity, including a keen social commitment. Long hours visiting the poor with Fr. Sonnenschein left a lasting mark on the young man.

His stays in Germany increased his desire to become a mining engineer. Having attended some classes at the Polytechnic University of Turin from 1918 onward, in the early 1920s, Pier Giorgio enrolled in a civil engineering degree course. But the studies were a real chore; it took him enormous willpower just to stay at his desk. This was hardly surprising since Pier Giorgio was otherwise doing a bit too much. He had joined all sorts of societies: He was a member of The Italian Federation of Catholic Universities [*Federazione Universitaria Cattolica Italiana*, or FUCI], in the *Cesare Balbo* circle; he took part in

the Italian Alpine Club [CAI] and joined many young adults' groups, Eucharistic congresses, prayer vigils, and so on.

His student life could have been anyone else's. Unremarkable, then? And yet . . . from the age of seventeen, he had been a member of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul and regularly visited the marginalized. The rendezvous was at 6 p.m. at the foot of the bell tower of the Church of Our Lady of Consolation (*la Consolata*). From there, he would walk down Via Santa Chiara, attend to the sick at the Cottolengo Hospital, and care for the elderly in the neighboring hospices.

So, from that time onward, he impressed people with his joyfulness, his purity, his humility, his simplicity, and his faith. Many spoke of his good example and regarded him with astonishment and admiration. They were struck by his attitude: determined and courageous, authentic and generous. And yet, Pier Giorgio kept quiet about all he did. Humbly he served, at ease with everyone, no matter their condition. And his humility did not cramp his style: It made his way of life more contagious.

His desire to follow Christ blossomed into a fuller commitment. On May 28, 1922, aged twenty-one, Pier Giorgio became a Lay Dominican in the Church of St. Dominic, in Turin. He took the name Brother Girolamo (Jerome) in honor of the Dominican friar, Girolamo Savonarola, whose ardor and

determination appealed to him. He also deepened his faith through reading his favorite authors: St. Paul, St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, and of course, Dante, of whom he could quote entire stanzas. From then on, his letters began to teem with references to these writers. *The Dialogue* of St. Catherine of Siena, which he particularly loved, would inspire him in his adult years.

His activities were not limited to good deeds but also included political activism. Pier Giorgio took part in meetings of the Catholic trade unions, meeting the workers, and it was not uncommon to see him at the factory gates during strikes, defending the employees against pressure from Communist leagues. He signed up with the Italian People's Party despite his father's disapproval. When the Fascists took power in October 1922, Pier Giorgio persevered in his Catholic political activism. Although his participation in religious processions earned him a great deal of ridicule, he did not hesitate to join them. It even cost him some hours in police custody. He understood the dangers of Fascism and, when the politicians of the People's Party joined Mussolini's government, he was profoundly disappointed. His opposition came to a head when the Frassati family home was attacked by Fascists in June 1924. It was a rare moment of appreciation from his family: Pier Giorgio's bravery was praised by all, even as far as a mention in *The Times* of London.

In his spiritual life, Pier Giorgio relied on invaluable friendships. With his best friend, Marco Beltramo, and six other young men and women, he founded the Society of Shady Characters (*Tipi Loschi*), on the occasion of a memorable mountain climb, May 18, 1924. A mixed group of men and women was unusual for that period, but they met around common interests in sports, prayer, and simple fun. They did not take themselves very seriously. Pier Giorgio gained the nickname Robespierre, for a laugh, and the letters they exchanged were enlivened with “cannon shots” expressing their sheer joy.

Among the members of the Society of Shady Characters, there was one Pier Giorgio fell in love with—Laura Hidalgo. He tried to introduce this young woman, an orphan from humbler origins, to his family. But he realized, sorrowfully, that he would not be able to marry her: His parents would never give their consent. Thus began a very dark period for him, as witnessed in his letters: How could he live through this renunciation?

The year 1925 began with the opening of the Jubilee doors by Pope Pius XI in Rome. This Holy Year, Pier Giorgio’s last on earth, would be decisive. His sister’s marriage to a Polish diplomat on January 24, which took her away from the family, was a real wrench for both siblings. Pier Giorgio remained alone in a family that was falling apart: His parents’ recurring

arguments had little by little transformed into silent warfare. They were on the brink of separation. Along with all this came the end of his studies and difficult life choices ahead. It's at this time that he wrote his most beautiful letters, those in which joy resurfaces after the storm. Despite the rough going, he had an interior certainty: He wanted to serve God through his brothers and sisters. It was full of this confidence that Pier Giorgio died suddenly, on Saturday, July 4, 1925, aged twenty-four, carried off by a violent bout of polio. No one had suspected anything . . . just a bit of fever, that's all. His grandmother was dying at that time, and all eyes were on her. As in life, so in death, Pier Giorgio went unknown by his own kin. And yet his charity was alive right to his last moments. At his burial, hundreds of people turned out from all sections of society, especially the poorest. And so the truth came out about the immense love of Pier Giorgio, a model of how to live the Gospel for all.

## Preface to the English Edition

**P**ier Giorgio is one of those fiery, passionate souls who keeps his eyes on the prize. Convinced that he cannot merely get along but that he must live to the full, he set out on the demanding way of the Gospel. His life was lived beautifully, in service of the weakest and in humility. This simple and true gift of self, inhabited by a deep joy, was something he achieved in barely twenty-four years.

Pier Giorgio did not keep a spiritual diary. Most of his writing consists of letters to his friends or his sister. In reading them through and letting them recount to us the beauty of his love for all, we discover who this young adult from Turin was. In addition to his writings, we have hundreds of little anecdotes, like the *fioretti* of St. Francis, which bear witness to Giorgio's charity in action. To discover the faith that inspires Pier Giorgio, we will also walk with the saints he was particularly fond of—St. Paul

and St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Catherine of Siena—but also Dante and his *Divine Comedy*. Extracts from the Psalms, which we sing morning, noon, and night in the Divine Office, will be like little prayers to uplift our meditation throughout the book.

I must admit that writing this book on (and with!) Pier Giorgio was no easy task. Firstly, because I'm not a writer, and maybe also because Pier Giorgio wasn't either! No long treatise on theology, no splendid spiritual ideas: He did not preach by writing, but it is rather through his whole life that he evangelizes us.

His deeply interior life was constantly challenged by the needs of others. As a Dominican friar, I have been particularly touched by this young lad who goes out to meet everyone and who sees in everyone, whatever kind of poverty they suffer, a child loved by God. Pier Giorgio always acts with great humility, and I hope I have been able to convey in these pages his simplicity, his enthusiasm, and his warmth, too. His life is a reminder that one is not born a saint but one becomes a saint by grace and by perseverance: "Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brethren, I do not consider that I have made it on my own; but one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the



prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil 3:12-14).

There are many people, “shady characters” or not, who pray to Pier Giorgio and have taken him as a companion for the journey in the footsteps of Christ. Among the many benefits attributed to his intercession, two healings have been recognized as miracles, confirming the shining sanctity of his life. In 1933, Domenico Sellan was completely and definitively restored to health after having had a terminal diagnosis of bone tuberculosis. In 2011, the young Kevin Becker, who had suffered an extremely serious head injury, was healed without any aftereffects at all. The canonization of Pier Giorgio in 2025, exactly a century after his death, is the ultimate recognition that his Christian witness is ever relevant to everyone, everywhere.

I would like to thank Wanda Gawronska, Pier Giorgio’s niece, for her numerous clarifications and her easygoing hospitality in Pollone. Thank you to my brethren in the English Dominican Province, especially to Fr. Matthew Jarvis and Fr. Joseph Bailham, remembering fondly our days walking in the footsteps of Pier Giorgio in Turin and Oropa. Thank you, Matthew, for your translation—a marathon effort to convert my poor French into such elegant English!

Finally, thank you, Pier Giorgio, you who are drawing us to the heights when we seem to get stuck in the mud. I entrust you with the call

to holiness of Clément, the youngest of my four nieces and nephews, of my godchildren Louise, Athénaïs, and Antonin, and of each one of us.

## Abbreviations

**A**ll passages in italics are the spoken words or writings of Pier Giorgio. In the case of extracts from letters, the date indicated is the date of writing. For the other quotations and episodes of Pier Giorgio's life, an acronym or surname followed by a page number refers to the works below.

**SIC:** Christina Siccardi, *Pier Giorgio Frassati: A Hero for our Times*. Translated by Michael J. Miller. Ignatius Press, 2016.

**LFC:** Luciana Frassati, *La charité de Pier Giorgio, mon frère*. Conquistador, 1953.

**LFJ:** Luciana Frassati, *Pier Giorgio Frassati: Les jours de sa vie*. Le Sarment-Fayard, 1990.

**COD:** Marino Codi, *Pier Giorgio Frassati, una valanga di vita*. Portalupi, 2001.

The passages from the Bible or other classic books loved by Pier Giorgio are indicated using standard references after the following abbreviations.

***Confessions:*** St. Augustine, *Confessions*. Translated by R. S. Pine-Coffin. Penguin, 1961.

***Dialogue:*** St. Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue*. The Classics of Western Spirituality. Translated by Suzanne Noffke, OP. SPCK Publishing, 1980.

***Paradiso:*** Dante, *The Divine Comedy, 3: Paradiso*. Translated by John D. Sinclair. Oxford University Press, 1939.

***Summa:*** St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiæ*. Translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province. Second and revised edition. Burns Oates and Washbourne, 1920–1922.

## Translator's Note

**T**his translation follows the French text, except when citing from English editions of works noted above. Biblical citations have been taken from the Revised Standard Version: Catholic Edition, with the Psalms from the Grail Psalter (using the Greek/Latin numbering). Citations from Pier Giorgio's letters have been freshly translated from the original Italian. For further reading, consult the English edition of *Pier Giorgio Frassati: Letters to His Friends and Family*, translated by Fr. Timothy E. Deeter, and edited by Fr. Timothy E. Deeter and Christine M. Wohar, St. Pauls, 2009.

I would like to extend my own thanks to Frère Charles for having written this marvelous little book and for his friendship since our early years in the Dominican Order. Fr. Joseph Bailham, OP, was the first to introduce me to Pier Giorgio as a real friend, for which I will always be deeply grateful. My heartfelt thanks also go to Br. Vincent Löning, OP, who worked

with me on the earliest drafts, and to Dr. Paige dePolo, who very kindly read the whole script and helped me refine it on many points.

## To the Heights

*I left my heart on those mountains with the hope of finding it again this summer when making the ascent of Mont Blanc. (March 4, 1923)*

*Sunday was one of those magnificent days and, from the top of the glacier, my thoughts ran to faraway friends; I would have wanted them all here to enjoy together with me that marvelous spectacle. The last stretch was the most entertaining because we made the ascent to the peak from the side where the rocks were steeper, but at the same time more solid. And now I must not think any longer of these beautiful things and regrettably apply myself again to thermal engineering. . . . Again, a thousand thanks for your pickaxe which has served me very well. (July 9, 1923)*

Pier Giorgio was athletic. He enjoyed horse riding and sea excursions. He practiced a bit of fencing, cycling, and especially skiing. But, far and away, he preferred climbing mountains. Approaching the snow-capped peaks, he ascended toward higher and purer places with breathtaking scenery, where he could contemplate the Creator.

Nailed here and there on the back of his bedroom door, poems evoked his love of mountains. From his window, he could see them stretching away into the distance. *"With every passing day, I am falling madly in love with the mountains; their fascination attracts me"* (SIC 258). The mountains echoed back the declaration of his love for God: *"Mountains, mountains, mountains, I love you!"* (SIC 260): love of the infinite, of the purity and simplicity of these great open horizons; love of freedom to be won and of the new challenges that spring up at every point; love, too, of the men and women on whom one relies to reach the goal. Climbing steep mountains is never a solitary task: There is no hike without a team and a rope that holds, supports, and protects you. He knew that, in the mountains, one has to be able to rely on others, and that is also how he found happiness.

Conscious of what a blessing it was to have such a strong physical constitution, Pier Giorgio lived his passion to the full: *"See how important good health can be! . . . Our good health must be put at*



*the service of those who lack it, as otherwise we would be betraying the very gift of God and his Providence”* (LFC 214). So many people suffer in their bodies, so Pier Giorgio, in the full flush of health, did not wish to waste his good fortune. His body was a means to give thanks to the Creator. When soul and body work together, the person becomes great, upright, and closer to God. That is why Pier Giorgio loved sports, especially the kind that pushes us upward, whether in the heat of the day or the fresh air of the great starry night.

How did he discover this so early on in life? Our flesh so often feels heavy and burdensome, but he understood that the love of God can spread into our body. The athletic Pier Giorgio was well ahead of his time and a breath of fresh air in that still quite puritan period of the early twentieth century. He reminds us of the newness of the Christian message, which affirms that the body and the soul go together. If God became incarnate in Jesus Christ, if we believe in the resurrection of the body, it is because the body is precious and good. Mountaineering taught Pier Giorgio that the soul sustains the suffering body during those steep hikes. And that body, which expressed itself freely in sports, gave his sometimes-melancholic soul a real taste for this space and time in which God has planted us.

Pier Giorgio did not use his physical capacities only for himself. Despite enjoying a challenge, he did not take part in the race undertaken

—not without fatalities—by European nations in the interwar period to conquer the highest Alpine peaks. Although he could boast of his exploits, he preferred to organize expeditions with less able friends. In first position on the rope, he was also the first to stop when one of his friends ran out of breath. Instantly, without being asked, he would cheer his friend up and add their baggage to his own. He might even hand over his own coat, as his friend Riccardo Bordi recalled: “I put on the cape that he had immediately lent to me when he learned that I lacked one and would not have been able to participate in the excursion. I had accepted, thinking he had another, but then he was left without one. ‘As you see,’ he told me, ‘I am not cold!’” (SIC 265).

Reaching the summit, he would pray the *De profundis* (Psalm 129) for anyone who had died in the mountains. He would then give thanks openly to God, in a moment of recollection and joy in the gentle breeze: “*When you go into the mountains the first task is to set your own conscience straight, because you don’t know if you will ever come back. Yet despite all this, I am not afraid, but desire more than ever to climb mountains, to conquer the most daring peaks, to experience that pure joy which is only to be found in the mountains*” (August 13, 1923). When he went climbing and braved such adventures, it was not to look down on others nor to stand out from the crowd. Up there, he