

In Conversation with
Saint Carlo Acutis

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Brendan Leahy

NCP
NEW CITY PRESS

Published in the United States by New City Press
136 Madison Avenue, Floors 5 & 6,
PMB #4290 New York, NY 10016
www.newcitypress.com
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Cover photo: www.carloacutis.com

Cover design and layout by Miguel Tejerina

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Library of Congress Control Number: 2025930042
ISBN: (paper) 978-1-56548-667-6
ISBN: (e-book) 978-1-56548-670-6

Printed in the United States of America

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Introduction

In her wonderful book about her son who became a saint,¹ Carlo Acutis's mother tells us that he recommended we keep connected with our loved ones who have died. She recalled that he had also said it was right to converse with them. Many people converse with Carlo Acutis. They pray to him. They ask him for miracles. They have been granted miracles through his intercession. People share with him difficult situations they are going through and look for his help. In him they find consolation. They also look to Carlo as an example. He is near us in so many ways. We see photographs of him in T-shirt and sneakers; he was big into computers; he loved sports; he played videogames; he traveled... He died only eighteen years ago.

Based on what we know of his life and the things he used to say—drawing especially on his mother's book, which I recommend highly—I have imagined a conversation or interview with Carlo, asking him questions about

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1. Antonia Salzano Acutis and Paolo Rodari, *My Son Carlo: Carlo Acutis Through the Eyes of His Mother*, Our Sunday Visitor, 2023. There are many good books and articles written on Carlo Acutis's life with much material available on the Internet.

his life, listening to his views of topics, hearing his advice, welcoming his suggestions.

I invite you, the reader of this book, to imagine you are the one asking the questions and making comments. In this way, you can develop your own personal conversation with Carlo, noting what he is saying, how you are reacting to it, and what it is provoking within you.

On a technical note, while what I write is true to Carlo, generally paraphrasing his thoughts and recounting episodes from his life, I've added in a few extra points not directly attributable to Carlo but which I felt were true to him and helped the conversational style. Throughout the book I have placed in italics many of Carlo's own words and notes, and I am grateful to his mother for sharing them with us.

In a 2019 letter to, and about, young people,² Pope Francis referred to Carlo Acutis. He noted how Carlo knew how to use the new communications technology to transmit the Gospel and to communicate values and beauty. The beauty of being alive in Christ is what we see in Carlo. At the very beginning of that same letter, Pope Francis says, "The very first words, then, that I would like to say to every young Christian are these: Christ is alive, and he wants you to be alive!"

2. Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation to young people and to the entire people of God, *Christus Vivit*, 25 March, 2019.

My hope is that the pages of this book will become an opportunity for you to let yourself be guided by Carlo Acutis on what being “alive” in Christ means.

Happy Reading!

+ *Brendan Leahy*

Chapter 1

From London to Milan

Declaring My Life Plan

Let's start at the beginning. You were born in the great city of London.

Yes, I was born there. The British newspaper *The Times* announced my birth on May 3, 1991, at one of London's leading and prestigious maternity clinics, the Portland Hospital. My mother, Antonia Salzano, was Italian-born, grew up in Rome, and came from a family that ran a well-known publishing company, whereas my father, Andrea Acutis, came from Turin. His family ran a large and successful insurance company. My mother and father met in Italy in 1986 but then my father had to go to London, as he was offered a position as a consultant with the Lazard Brothers financial firm. My mother followed him to London with the excuse of improving her English. She enrolled in a master's program in economics and publishing management. They married in Rome in January 1990, and I arrived in May 1991.

Any memories of London?

I have no personal memories of London as my parents moved to Milan when I was just a few months old. My mother told me, however, how much she enjoyed shopping in the famous Harrod's department store. Indeed, she often mentions today a stuffed lamb with white fur that she bought for me in Harrod's to which I became quite attached as a small child.

Am I right in thinking, however, you were baptized in London?

True. Two weeks after my birth, on May 18th, I was baptized Carlo Maria Antonia at the Church of Our Lady of Dolours, on Fulham Road, in Chelsea. Carlo is the Italian for Charles. That was my grandfather's name (on my father's side), and he became my godfather. Of course, there are many saints by that name, such as the famous St. Charles Borromeo who was a wonderful Archbishop of Milan, a great reforming bishop who helped the poor, especially during a terrible plague. My grandmother on my mother's side, Luana, became my godmother. All my grandparents came to London for the Baptism, as well as my great-grandmother, Adriana. My mother bought a special cake in Harrod's for the occasion. It was in the shape of a lamb and covered with a white glaze and buttercream with liquor and cream on the inside. Of course, I don't remember any of that!

Most of us don't remember our Baptism. For many today, however, Baptism seems to be just a naming ceremony, an early ritual that a family likes to celebrate for a new baby. As you grew older you came to understand the importance of your Baptism.

Saint Pope John Paul II, who was the Pope for most of my life, often said that Baptism is the most important day of our lives. Perhaps we don't always think of that. *People do not realize what an infinite gift it is to receive Baptism.* They tend to think of the gifts, the white garment, the special cake. People don't stop to understand the meaning of Baptism itself. Even if we are only babies, so much happens at Baptism. Baptism eliminates original sin; it is the door that allows us access to salvation. It is the gateway to the other sacraments. Through Baptism, we become members of the new family of the Church. We are brought to share in God's life. In my view, *our time on earth would not be enough to thank Jesus for having given us Baptism.*

What I also came to understand is that every baptized person is a prophet. What I meant by saying that is that, at Baptism, each one of us is given great potential for our future. It is by living out the faith, and hope, and love poured into us at Baptism, that we can make our lives into something wonderful, really transforming the world around us.

You grew up in Milan. Your mother has said you were a blue-eyed, fair-haired child, who spoke your first word at three months, started talking at five months, and then began writing at age four. What was your childhood like?

I was always a bit of a talker! Maybe a little too much at times. Though I was shy, I was a lively child. My childhood was a little idyllic. I had good warm parents who were very kind to me. I enjoyed many conversations with my mother. My father was a wise man, a loving father, but a man of fewer words. He soon became the director of Vittoria Insurance. I really liked playing sports, especially soccer. I was a big supporter of AC Milan, though I never actually got to a game! Other sports I participated in were karate, kung fu, tennis, volleyball, skiing, swimming, and athletics. When we'd visit Assisi (my parents bought a house in Assisi in 2001), I would go swimming in the town's swimming pool and I enjoyed hikes in the local hills. As I got older, I began to realize sport is such a great help in developing friendships. It also helps you develop the willpower to achieve great goals.

You were an only child, so I suppose you had to be creative in your hobbies and sports.

True. I loved quizzes, flying kites, and watching action films! I used to collect small model cars. And I loved animals. I had two cats, four dogs, and a lot of goldfish! When I got a bit bigger, I started to cook on my own, creating my own new recipes. Music, too, was part of my

childhood. At school, they taught us the recorder, but I didn't like that very much, so I decided to teach myself to play the saxophone. I also enjoyed reading good books. They are like good friends. Things I read in literature, in books, really struck me.

There were religious moments in your early childhood that marked your life.

One important religious moment occurred when I was five. I was brought to visit the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Pompeii. It is dedicated to Our Lady of the Rosary. It's also a place of impressive charitable initiatives. It's an amazing place. During the visit that day, even though I was a child, I promised Our Lady that I wanted to give myself to her. I remember that, together with Beata Spiecznska, my Polish nanny, we said the Rosary before the image of the Immaculate Virgin Mary.

When you were seven, on June 16, 1998, the day of your First Holy Communion, you wrote in your diary, "My life plan is to be always close to Jesus." What did you mean by that?

I got special permission to receive my First Holy Communion at an age that was earlier than is traditional. The priest felt I was ready. It was a big day for me. I realized Jesus was someone really, really special, and I wanted always to be close to him. I can't really explain it, but I started going to Mass every day after that. Somehow, I got a gift from God that persuaded me it is important

to be close to Jesus, and that means to receive him in the Eucharist, live like him, and follow his teachings. I suppose you could say I wanted to play the part Jesus would play in my life situation. What's amazing is that soon my mother and some of my relations and friends who hadn't gone to church before, began to come with me. I began to realize I had a mission!

School and Friendships

Seeing Jesus in Others

You spent most of your life in school in Milan. How was that experience for you?

From the time I was seven until I was fourteen, I was at the Istituto Tommaseo, run by the Sisters of St. Mercellina. The sisters were very sad when at fourteen years of age my parents switched me to a Jesuit-run high school, the Leone XIII Institute. My parents felt it might be better for my computer talents. My experience in school was positive, in general. Though I was shy, I made friends easily, tried to study well, and got along with my teachers. I was a natural joker and managed to make my classmates and teachers laugh. As they say, you have to blossom where you're planted. I admit there were days when I was a little lively and disruptive and would have to be asked to calm down! And then, typical as a teenager, now and then, I was out of shape, a little melancholic. Overall, my teachers told my parents they were happy with my behavior in school. I sometimes had to be corrected, and I accepted what was said to me. I also managed to avoid my classmates dragging me into "mischief."

Was your school experience always positive?

Every school has its good points and its challenges. Bullying went on sometimes at school. I used to stand up for those who got bullied, including a girl criticized for wearing a sari. I also kept an eye out for those in our school who had disabilities. When little fights would break out among some of my classmates, I would try to be a peacemaker. Sometimes we had debates in class. When the topic of abortion would come up, I was quite prepared to go against the current and stand up for the protection of life from the moment of conception. Without wanting to impose my ideas, nevertheless, I felt it was important to state them firmly and respectfully and add a touch of humor if things were getting too serious.

You seem to have made many friends.

Yes. I am thankful for that. I was able to connect with my peers as well as with those older than me. My friends liked to be with me. I was reasonably intelligent and good at school but that certainly wasn't why my friends kept in contact with me. There's something deeper that goes on between friends. I could see at times some of my classmates at school were driven by competition and focused on achievement and success. And yet, there's more to life than that.

What do you think your friends saw in you?

Have you ever read *The Little Prince*, by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry? It's a great book that I've reread many times. It was written during World War II. It has to do with a pilot experiencing a crash landing in the North African desert, struggling to repair his airplane. He meets a little prince who begins to share his life story and has many experiences to tell. At a certain point, the prince tells of how he met a fragile rose that grew on an asteroid, and then later a fox who speaks about love being when you care enough to tend to someone who needs care. I especially liked the quote from the fox: "It is the time you have wasted for your rose that makes your rose so important." For me, it was the time dedicated to friends that made them special.

I think if you look out for others and draw close to them, befriending them with a kind smile and helpful actions, they respond by drawing close to you. I used to keep in contact with my friends by phone and on the Internet. I wasn't into gossip. I tried to build positive relationships, not speak ill of others or injure their reputation. After all, *why diminish the light of others, to make yours shine brighter?* I tried to be a positive influence and lift people's hearts. For instance, when a friend's parents were going through a divorce, I made a big effort to include my friend in our family life. He appreciated that very much.

I read somewhere that you said the way we look at other people will shape how we treat them.

I could go back again to *The Little Prince* book. There, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry writes, “It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye.” In other words, our inner glance will shape how we see things. I think of what Jesus says in Matthew’s Gospel: “The eye is the lamp of the body” (Mt 6:22). For me, our attitude toward life and toward other people is very important. *The eyes are a window into the soul*. I used to check if, in my heart, I was really trying to see Jesus in others, asking myself, did I see others today with love in my heart for them? Was I attentive to the people right beside me? Was my eye simple and pure in the way I approached people and in the way I found myself thinking about them?

From what I know of your life, it seems you also had friends in heaven who were big influencers in your life?

Yes, I found inspiration in the saints. I read a lot of their biographies. It’s really worth looking up their life stories. They’re all so different and so interesting. I got to know about a lot of saints, but I felt a closeness to some of them in particular. For instance, Francis and Clare of Assisi and John the Beloved Disciple of Jesus. I admired St. Anthony of Padua. He was such a missionary. And, he had a great love of the Eucharist. The zeal of St. Paul

attracted me. He just kept preaching the Gospel, even to the point of martyrdom. And then I admired very much the wise teachings of St. John Bosco, the founder of the Salesians and a saint very much associated with young people. I was fond of thinking about the three shepherd children who were around my age when Our Lady appeared to them in Fatima. The words that Our Lady spoke to St. Bernadette of Lourdes resonated in me deeply: "I do not promise to make you happy in this world, but in the next." I learned a lot from Saint Padre Pio of Pietrelcina. Having gone to a Jesuit school, I heard about St. Francis Xavier, the great missionary in Asia. From his life story, I learned the sentence from the Bible that so influenced him: "What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses himself" (Lk 9:25).



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