

A LIFE OF CATHOLIC ACTION

Pier Giorgio Frassati

'He professed his belief in God openly, regarding his religious convictions as a soldier on active service does his uniform, which he wears always and never exchanges for another dress . . . In times like these this, so to say, intransigent Christian, can teach us all a lesson.' In these words an Italian socialist newspaper summed up a student of the University of Turin who died in July, 1925, at the age of twenty-four. The man who made such an impression upon those who did not share his faith was Pier Giorgio Frassati, an engineering student, the son of a former Italian Ambassador in Berlin, an athlete and mountaineer, good-looking, gay and popular, who, during his short life had made himself so beloved among the poor and among his fellow students that his funeral was something like a pilgrimage.

The life of Frassati is a shining example of that apostolate of the laity which Pius XI calls Catholic Action, and since there is very little literature in English to make clear how Catholic Action works out in practice, those who wish to know more about it cannot do better than read the account of his life, translated from the Italian, which although rather too much abbreviated, gives a vivid picture of a most attractive personality.¹

Pier Giorgio was essentially of the laity: he had no wish to be a priest or religious. He would have proposed marriage to a girl with whom he was deeply in love, but for the fact that he knew that for some reason she would not be acceptable to his parents, and out of loyalty to them he put the thought aside, at great sacrifice to himself. He was no *dévol*, but a lively and exuberant young man with a great enthusiasm for sport; though intensely fervent in

¹ *Pier Giorgio Frassati*. Translated and adapted by H. L. Hughes. (Burns, Oates & Washbourne; 3/6.)

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his prayer and in his religious duties, no pious exercise was allowed to interfere with his university work. He never ceased to be a daily communicant from the time he was a schoolboy, though often he could only spare a quarter of an hour in the morning, and he served Mass whenever he got the chance, but to a priest who observed that he was not so frequent as he had been at the night watches before the Blessed Sacrament he replied simply that he was working for his examinations and could not come as often as he would have liked. But when he found that the time before his examinations was running short and something must be done about it, the one engagement he did not set aside for the sake of study was the weekly conference of the St. Vincent de Paul Society. For this man, who was the life and soul of the meetings of the University Club to which he belonged, spent more time and money than anyone knew except his brethren in the S.V.P. in visiting and helping the poor of Turin.

This balanced spirituality and fervent charity were due in great measure to his being, as he rejoiced to call himself, a son of St. Dominic. 'I am convinced that the high degree of spiritual perfection Pier Giorgio reached is partly due to his having been a member of the Third Order,' says a fellow Tertiary. He became a Tertiary in 1922, taking the name of Girolamo, with which he used to sign all his letters to his Tertiary friends. He called himself after Savonarola, that fiery and fearless apostle of the Kingship of Christ and social reform, for whom he felt a strong affinity. 'As a fervent admirer of this friar' he wrote, 'I wish, in becoming a Tertiary, to take him for a model.' He did in fact share the ardent and gallant spirit of the Florentine reformer: the account of the battle for the banner of his Catholic Club with the Roman police during the National Congress of Italian Catholic Youth in 1921, and the carrying of the torn flag in triumph through the streets of Rome, is quite in the spirit of the fifteenth century.

The Dominican idea of sanctification through active apostolate was entirely natural to him. 'The ideal of doing

good as an apostle of charity and faith attracted Frassati with ceaseless urgency,' says Fr. Guliani, O.P. 'The zeal of the apostolate, to work and to give himself in every way for the good of others, became a flame which devoured his inmost being, and because he realized that this fire must be fed he was drawn to that inexhaustible source of apostolic energy which is the Dominican inspiration.' His obligations as a Tertiary he interpreted in the active apostolic sense in which the Master General later set them forth in 1933; an apostolate to be exercised in the home, the parish, in society and in the intellectual sphere as well. As Fr. Gillet said of him in 1923, he 'possessed the temperament of a real apostle, and by action he meant Catholic Action, which he considered should guide his inward life as well as his outward actions.' In the midst of all his other activities he found time to give study to his religion, and it appears that he read the writings of St. Paul and St. Augustine, and had embarked on a study of the *Summa Theologica*.

His apostolate among his friends, both men and women, was mostly exercised by example, and one has recorded that the very spectacle of his ardent faith was the best remedy for her doubts and difficulties. Occasionally, however, this group of friends, 'terribly sincere,' were wont to undertake what they called a 'moral dusting' of each other, when searching criticisms were given and received with complete charity on both sides.

'Only death,' he said to a priest friend, 'will make me stop working for a cause which has become the aim of my life.' And when death came, after only a few days illness,—valiantly concealed at first, to spare the feelings of his family in great grief over the death of his grandmother—he was thinking to the end of the poor among whom he had worked, and almost his last act was to scrawl with a hand already partly paralysed a note to a friend in the S.V.P. conference about a visit he was to have made that day.

Frassati's short and unassuming life of simple devotion and faithful service has already had a remarkable effect in many countries where the biography has been published.

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Through the reading of it many have been recalled to the practice of religion, to renewed apostolate, to more fervent charity. It shows how completely a life may be given to the service of God without forsaking the duties of the world or being cut off from it. Nothing that he did was alien to his apostolate, and yet all his charitable works were carried out through the channels provided by the Church. He thus exemplifies and illuminates the idea of Catholic Action set before us by the Holy Father, to which all are in some measure called, and holds up a light for all those who desire to serve God and the Church in and through their ordinary life in the world.

M. A. BOUSFIELD.

TWO FRIENDS

John Gray: André Raffalovich

I met them five years ago, during the yearly visit south; saw them on several occasions at Bath and Bristol; stayed with them at the *Bell* in Malmesbury; and for three years spent Christmas at Whitehouse Terrace. With others who knew them, I see in their death an epoch ended.

It was not merely that they had survived from the 'nineties, not even that they had been at the centre of that society. Each of them in his way had shaped himself to the new age; they read, made friends, and generally lived, with zest, while they kept without display those gifts which they did not see renewed around them—certain courtesies, a certain social sense, certain refinements of understatement. Hence their charm, hence their elusion of many who would have courted them had they taken a conventionally veteran air. When in 1931 Canon Gray published his *Poems*, the clerical reviews observed that a well-known parish priest had written a book of verse; the secular referred briefly to