

CHAPTER 1

Beginnings

My brother, Pier Giorgio Frassati, was born in Turin on Holy Saturday, April 6, 1901, seventeen months before my entry into the world. Our family was rich and influential, but Pier Giorgio grew up to become a fierce defender of the poor, sick, and disadvantaged. A university student active in sports, and an energetic political protester, his private life was one of sacrifice and of deep devotion to Christ in the sacraments. He was beatified by Pope John Paul II on May 20, 1990. His short life (he died of poliomyelitis in 1925) was dedicated to challenging an Italian society in the midst of social turmoil.

Our father was Alfredo Frassati, the well-known founder, editor-in-chief, and owner of Turin's most important daily paper, *La Stampa*, the youngest senator, and later ambassador to Germany in 1921. Our mother, Adelaide Ametis, did many things, but her greatest joy was painting. Neither of our parents was devoutly Catholic: our father was agnostic and our mother was not deeply religious. Our mother and her sister Elena would not have missed Mass, but they were never seen by us to go to Communion or to kneel and say a prayer. The deeply religious person, in her own way, was our grandmother Linda Ametis. Her devotion to praying for the dead influenced Pier Giorgio, who, traveling to Germany at the age of twenty, took care to have an anniversary Mass said

for an aunt who had died before he was born and for our great-grandmother Antonia.

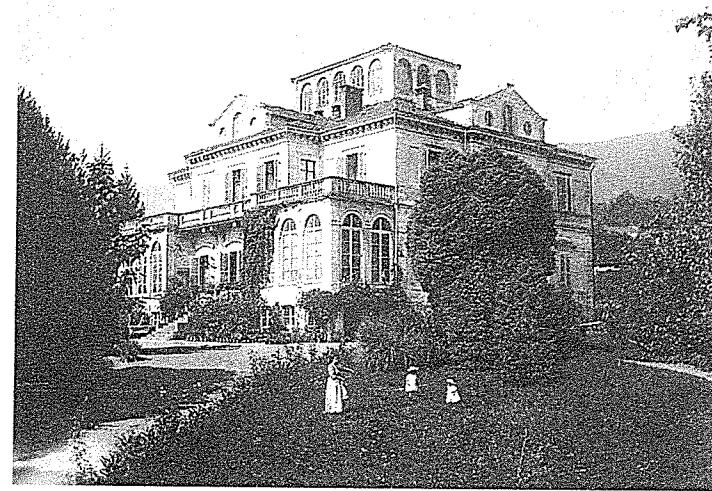
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Even at a very young age Pier Giorgio responded immediately to the needs of the weak. One day, seeing a frail woman who had knocked at the door with a barefoot child in her arms, he quickly took off his shoes and socks and gave them to her, then rapidly shut the door before anyone in the house came to protest. In the nursery school that Pier Giorgio was visiting with Grandfather, the children had lunch at midday. Pier Giorgio was intent on admiring the long marble tables with holes for the dishes, which were new to him, when at the other end of the room he saw a child in isolation because of a severe skin disorder. He went up to him and, before Sister Celeste, busy talking to Grandfather Francesco, had noticed, shared his soup, wiping out the misery on the small, lonely face.

In the evenings, Pier Giorgio often gathered wild flowers to take to his great-grandmother Antonia, who enjoyed these affectionate gifts from the little boy. Flowers were an occasion of joy but also homage to God's house. One day he met a lay worker in the garden. She had come from the nursery to pick a bunch of flowers for the chapel. Pier Giorgio ran up to her with a beautiful scarlet rose in his hand and said, "Sister . . ." "I am not a sister", replied the lay worker, but he continued imperturbably: "Sister, take this rose to Jesus for me." Surprised at the child's look, she thanked him with a phrase that sounds prophetic today: "You'll see that one day Jesus will make you a saint."

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Our childhood lives were strictly controlled and isolated. The memory of those far-off days still hurts because we lacked a mother's tenderness. Our childhood was painful: the



The Frassati family villa, Pollone

days at Pollone, which was my mother's family home, or in the Turin house where we spent our winters, were days during which we were unable to get away from the same faces, the same rooms, and the monotonous streets. We were not allowed to walk about the city, stand in front of windows, give way to little stirrings of curiosity. We had to walk briskly, without turning our heads. Our father spent those years and many others engrossed in *La Stampa*, a refuge that deprived the family day after day of his presence. *La Stampa* represented my father's glory, his private kingdom away from the Pollone household, which was the domain of my mother's family.

The emptiness created by a sea of prohibitions forced us to spend much time in each other's company. We learned endurance, the habit of discipline and obedience, and acceptance of continual sacrifices. Conversation with grown-ups

was nonexistent and forbidden. Being considered nothing or, worse, troublemakers, tempered our pride. We even suffered real hunger, presumably for the benefit of our health. However, we were capable of facing obstacles and pain with courage. At least our father, even though he rarely entered our private world, shared in our games.

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Pier Giorgio grew up to be serious, fair-minded, and very good looking, with big black eyes whose whites were almost blue. He was the picture of health. He loved mountain-climbing and, on long climbs, never complained of hunger, thirst, or fatigue. He learned from our mother to resist everything that might seem like weakness or surrender. Our mother even took him on a ten-hour climb up a 10,906-foot mountain. Pier Giorgio had no special training for these excursions, although he had hiked over the Turin hills with his uncle.

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In 1909 we suffered our first loss, when our much-loved grandfather, Francesco Ametis, died. We also had to abandon friends when we were sent to a different school. Even at this time, religion remained obscure to us as we had received superficial instruction from several priests. Pier Giorgio had to insist that one of our Latin instructors, Don Cojazzi, a Venetian Salesian, tell him the story of Jesus' life. He wanted to hear the words of the Gospel.

The eucharistic Christ was his sovereign Lord, whom he never ceased to adore.

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By the time he was eleven, Pier Giorgio had become more and more aware of poverty. He tried to overcome it with little labors, such as collecting silver paper, tram tickets, and stamps for missionaries. He continually renounced those



Pier Giorgio with his father, 1913

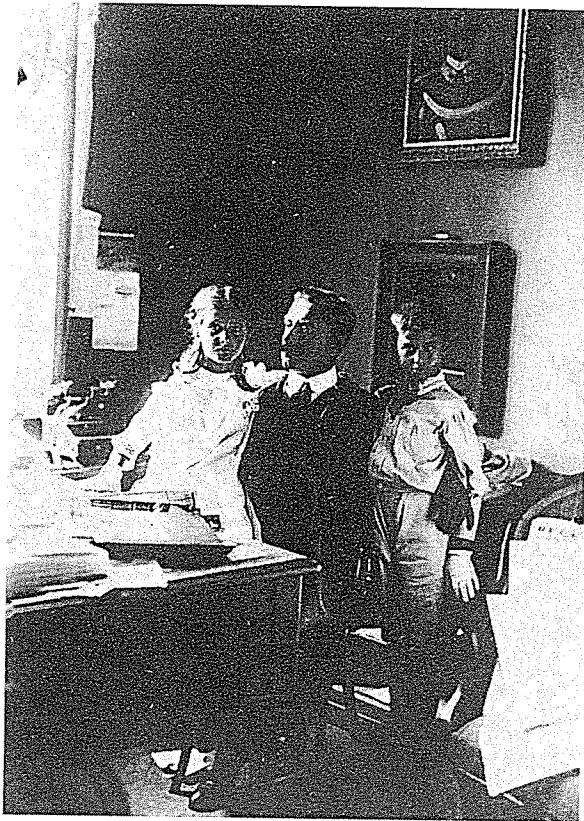
small pleasures which are everything in childhood. He gave away the small gifts of money he received from his uncle Pietro. One day, he poured his modest fortune into his old nurse's hands because he had heard her talking about her many children and consequent deprivations.

Pier Giorgio was also, even at this early age, brave. One day, while skating, an unknown girl suddenly found herself on the edge of a dangerous hole in the ice. Pier Giorgio immediately stretched out his hand to her so that she could jump to safety. He fell in the water with a loud splash. Pier Giorgio was constantly aware of the needs of others. Our mother wrote this small note for his biography:

Alfredo was in the hall when a poor man—or rather a workman—rang the doorbell. He said he was starving and out of work. My husband sent him away because he had a nauseating smell of alcohol. Pier Giorgio was there and ran to me in tears (I was on the telephone) crying: "Mama, there is a poor man who is hungry and Papa did not give him anything to eat!" He sobbed and pulled my dress. To calm him down I said: "Run into the street and tell him to come in. We'll give him something to eat." And so he did. The child was happy. Meanwhile we asked the address of the poor workman and sent him away *without* giving him money, but with the promise to Pier Giorgio that in two hours, when we had got some information, he would be helped. Of course it was a false address and the man one of the usual deceivers and con men.

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In 1912, one of our mother's paintings was bought by the king of Italy, Victor Emmanuel III. The following year our father's good work was rewarded with a seat in the Senate. Our family had become successful, though this did not affect



*Luciana and Pier Giorgio with their father
in the offices of LA STAMPA*

our simplicity. It laid, however, a new burden on Pier Giorgio as he grew older. His companions mocked him for being "the senator's son".

In spite of the burdens of office, our father, in his brief free time after meals, continued to be our companion at games. Then the house came alive as we raced about. At these times, we were able to treat our father as a contemporary, addressing him by titles unworthy of his dignified position.

He asked only a little from his children: "Love each other! Do not play cards. Study." He also told us to go back to our grandmother's house in Pollone as soon as possible. We followed this advice so literally that we started regularly to go there, not only at Easter but also at Christmas, when the house was freezing. The whole visit would have been freezing if the gardener had not distracted us with games and mountain walks. Pier Giorgio had become the gardener's right hand and chose a piece of land for himself on which to grow his own vegetables and sweet peas. He hoed, he carried flower pots, honeycombs, and bundles of wood, and he refilled cans. He halved the gardener's work.

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Father's nearness at table gave me security, but being opposite Mama made me uncomfortable. Now though, the old fear of her weeping, which for years accompanied my every evening, has given way to an infinite sense of pity.

Pier Giorgio

The one considered least important in the family was the first to be lost forever. The two Frassatis stood facing each other but divided by an abyss. One was all transcendence and the other all pragmatism. But this would be a summary judgment of both and unjust to Papa. Count Carlo Sforza, the statesman and diplomat, said to me one day in 1948: "Your father always sees what there is, never what isn't." On the other hand, Pier Giorgio, living in God, always saw what was beyond, and everything he said and did proceeded from that vision.

What did they think of one another? Pier Giorgio was too faithful to the fourth commandment to allow himself to judge his father. He admired his tenacity at work, his loyalty to his political beliefs, the brilliant ascent and the decorum with which he managed to sustain difficult positions. One day he sent him this letter:

Turin, October 26, 1922

I heard recently that you have received the highest order of knighthood, after the Annunziata. I congratulate you and I am pleased that after such a long time you have been rewarded for your work that you do with such scrupulous care.

But my brother was different from him in every way. His detachment from *La Stampa* was evident. He saw the evil in the crime news and tried to point it out one day. "Sales also

depend on those columns", was father's reply. And no more could be said.

It could not be said that wealth had changed the household's simple habits. Pier Giorgio was spiritually remote from all luxury and wealth. He had the great merit of having chosen the most difficult life when the easiest of lives was available to him. There was a sense of detached respect between son and father. "Pier Giorgio fills me with awe as if I were talking to someone older than myself. I don't know what it is, but, I repeat, he sometimes fills me with awe", he confessed one day to his editor Cassone. One evening both came home late. Our father reprimanded Pier Giorgio because he had not let anyone know and could have caused worry. My brother's succinct reply, "But where I was there was no telephone", was enough to satisfy completely someone who certainly was not returning from nighttime Adoration.

Our father had not realized that the quiet boy was upsetting all his plans with his own personality. He thought he could move him like a pawn with his strong will, which did not take others' feelings into account. Pier Giorgio was the male heir, and the house of Frassati would lose its full glory without him. But gossip began to circulate about his "pious virtues". And our father, although he did not give these rumors excessive weight, often showed irritation.

Berlin, February 1922

Dear Giorgio,
[By] always acting without reflection on things that should be extremely important to you (as in the special case of forgetting the book you needed for your next exam) you will become a man who is useless to others and yourself.

Your father

To avoid passing a final verdict on him we tried—and, exceptionally, Mama was with us in this—to keep Papa in the dark about little day-to-day incidents because, as he did not consider the reasons for them, he would not admit any extenuating circumstances and would immediately condemn Pier Giorgio.

Berlin 1922

You must persuade yourself, dear Giorgio, that life needs to be taken seriously. The way you behave will not do for yourself or your family, who care about you and are very distressed by all these things that happen too often and are painfully and monotonously repeated. I have little hope that you will change, although you really need to change immediately: take things in an orderly way, always think seriously about what you should do, have a little perseverance. Do not live by the day, as thoughtlessly as any blockhead. If you care a little about your family, you must change. I am very, very upset.

These words sound absurd today, and, if I had known about them, I would have condemned them with all my strength, even though I was only aware of a tiny part of my great brother's consistent and exhausting occupations.

Pier Giorgio had one single good point in the eyes of our parents. He was considered loyal and certainly not dangerous to the family fortune. This was in spite of the fears expressed when our parents had surprised us playing cards.

To praise what he considered the maximum expression of filial respect, our father once said about a friend of ours: "He is so good that he would marry whomever his father wanted." "Well, he's stupid then", was Pier Giorgio's prompt comment. His tone of dismissal struck our father dumb. These rare outbursts showed how he really feared Pier Giorgio, as is proved by a confession he made to one of his

employees. "I have never accepted any order, not even from Giolitti. Only one person has had authority over me, and that is my son."

No one knew what a silent sorrow it was to Pier Giorgio that my father lacked religious spirit. No one ever heard him speak about it. He was reluctant to speak or ask him anything. The first time he openly asked him a favor, sure of being granted, was on July 3, 1925. His words and behavior appeared calm, in spite of the paralysis he felt. Pointing to a plea that came out of his jacket pocket, he said: "Here, Papa, to be published in *La Stampa*."

There was never any thought of rivalry between us. Our mother's obvious detachment from me, balanced by Papa's special tenderness, served to create a single front, in which we used our respective privileges for mutual defense.

Ever since he was a child, Pier Giorgio refused candies if I was deprived of them as a punishment, whereas the humiliations he suffered wounded me deeply. I was never flattered by prognostications like that written by Mama: "Even when he is forty Pier Giorgio won't have half the good sense of Luciana." A part of a letter serves to show our relationship:

Berlin 1921

Dearest brother . . . you know that your worldly sister enjoys going about . . . and company. The good God willed that I should have only defects and you many virtues. What is to be done? You will pray to him for me and I will too, with the little I am, but from my heart. And so we go on.

I liked success; he liked poverty. If anyone reminded him of his surname, he reacted with hurt and as if defending himself from an attempt to separate him from those he considered closest to himself. "But I am poor like all the poor",

he declared to a bricklayer in Pollone, who was surprised to see him studying continually, considering his wealth.

I loved the glory of *La Stampa*. Pier Giorgio arrived at the paper soaked through, hardly better dressed than the poor who had to resort to the "Saturday charity", and he was obliged to borrow money to take the tram. Because of him they prophesied about the paper: "You of *La Stampa* will never do badly because you have a saint at home."

But no one tried to know him, not even our mother, at whom Pier Giorgio looked with great tenderness and, perhaps, despairing pity. It never occurred to her, for example, to inquire further into the real reason he came late to meals. He had run home to save the tram money and arrived so sweaty that he had had to change his shirt before he sat down to table. To his "Sorry if I am late, Mama", she replied with a reproach that basically meant: "You are fundamentally good for nothing, so you could at least arrive on time."

Pier Giorgio's silence finally confirmed her opinion about her son, whose mind was preoccupied with so many problems: a future to shatter and rebuild with religion, poetry, social duty; a fortune to find for the miseries of others. These were problems beyond her ken, not through lack of heart, but because they were not in line with her caustic mind, which considered any dilemma as the useless philosophizing of neurotic people. The things she said to her son, whom she also adored, were few and always the same, so that it was our mother who was the source of his mistaken reputation of being of modest intelligence, made worse by the accusations of his being untidy and distracted.

One of Pier Giorgio's sayings remained in the annals: there had been talk of sweet peas, and then the talk had moved on to politics, when Pier Giorgio came out with

"we'll put them all in a window box", which sounded paradoxical but a "logical" conclusion to neutralist appreciations of Cadornian generals. The other accusations were unfounded stories, which did not, in fact, diminish his solicitude for our mother, with whom he had many tastes in common.

Pier Giorgio loved sometimes to take a sip of Marsala from her glass after meals, an unheard of thing since we had grown up without any alcohol at all. He had also learned to appreciate the strong smell of tobacco. Neither my father nor I was permitted to express annoyance at that cloud of smoke, and, if I complained, Mama retorted by calling me "delicate", a sure sign of her contempt. Proud of his smoking mother, a custom unusual among women, my brother tried a cigar in the garden at Pollone with his inseparable friend Camillo Banzatti. Banzatti felt ill after a few puffs, whereas Pier Giorgio stood the test brilliantly. Much later he became a placid smoker of Tuscan cigars (the cheapest and smelliest Italian cigars). If anyone asked him the reason for his bad taste, he replied, smiling: "Even my mother smokes Tuscans." Or he proudly explained the origin of his innocent vice by saying: "My mother smoked over me when I was being fed at the breast." His love for her never held recrimination.

When he came back from his night adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, he never forgot to reassure her by putting a little note under her door: "Dear Mother, I am home." But only after his death did she remember this:

I can witness that he was always kind and patient in any family upheaval and according to his friends at school and in the University Circle. Both as a boy and a young man he mildly accepted any remarks of mine, the just and also the unjust ones. For example, I always told him he was wasting his time, without realizing all his activities in

doing good and forgetting even those I did know about. He not only accepted the reproach but never tried to excuse himself.

He never tried to defend himself from any of these accusations. Who would understand the greatness of his secret life? Humanity was his problem, which is why his mind often wandered as he went on eating calmly with an appetite that never let him down, as serene as if all the criticisms were addressed to someone else and as if there was perfect affection between those at table. No one minded when he silently refused some tidbit because it was Lent. They only teased him when he did not take any of the pudding that "trembled" or fish whose skin he could not tolerate. Until one day, in one of those final meetings, Mama suddenly said: "Pier Giorgio, do you know that Don Borla said they are talking from the pulpit about you?" "Nonsense, nonsense", was the reply.