



Raising saints:

LESSONS FROM THE MOTHER OF BLESSED CARLO ACUTIS

BY ANNE-MARIE WELSH



“I felt like I was living in a dream. I thought that only a few days prior, everything had been so different! In that room, Carlo joked, played, laughed, lived his teenage life. And now look at him, lying lifeless in a wooden box.”

With these words, Antonia Salzano Acutis — the mother of Blessed Carlo Acutis, who is likely to become the first millennial to be canonized by the Catholic Church — describes the unthinkable moment.

“When I saw the coffin leave the room with my son inside,” she continues, “I thought of his words: ‘Mom, even if all our dreams were to fall apart, we could never allow cynicism to take over and harden our hearts. From each disappointment, a new dream is born.’”

Antonia’s words come from the dramatic first chapter in her book, *My Son Carlo*, (Mondadori Libri S.p.A., Milan) first published in 2021 and made available in English earlier this year (Our Sunday Visitor). In it, she shares the deeply personal story of her son’s death from promyelocytic leukemia, a devastating disease known for remaining hidden until days before death. Carlo’s final day of school was Sept.

30, 2006. By Oct. 7, the illness his pediatrician first thought was a flu, then mumps, had fatigued him to the point that he could not get out of bed. Five days later, Carlo left his earthly life.

Faith magazine of the Diocese of Erie had the opportunity to meet with Antonia when she spoke at the 2023 Eucharist Congress in Philadelphia on Sept. 30. After a lengthy day of meetings and prayer, followed by her keynote presentation, she was generous, thoughtful and at times even humorous as she sat for the interview.

“I am the secretary of Carlo!” she admitted with a laugh, acknowledging that her life’s work is now driven by his.

It is well-known that Antonia grew to embrace the Catholic faith as a direct result of Carlo’s desire to understand his own. Like her son, she was an only child. She was educated in a Catholic school,

partly because it was nearby, partly because her parents wanted her to receive a Catholic education. Looking back, she knows it also was providential.

“There are no coincidences,” she asserts. “Nothing that happens to us is casual.” Despite her schooling, Antonia had only ever attended three Masses: her first Communion, her confirmation and her wedding.

“I was terribly ignorant,” she says, referring to the Catholic faith. “And then came Carlo, who was like a savior for me.” He was bright and always a step ahead — he started speaking at five months — and was not yet 4 when he began asking his mother questions about the Catholic faith. Many came as a result of conversations he’d had with his devout Polish nanny.

“He asked me about very serious matters I couldn’t answer, and this made me uncomfortable,” Antonia says. Just around the same time, her father died of a heart attack, a sudden and unexpected occurrence.

“I started to contemplate the future, about what happens after life,” she says. At this point, Antonia reveals the depth and ease with which both she and her son took their faith — and supernatural experiences — in stride.

“Two months after the death of my father, Carlo told me his grandfather had appeared to him, asking for prayers because he was in purgatory,” Antonia says. “This made me worry and I started really contemplating all these things.” Confiding her concerns, she acted upon a friend’s recommendation to visit Father Ilio Carrai, whom Antonia describes as the Padre Pio of Bologna.

“He told me straight away when he saw me that Carlo had a special mission for the church — and so many beautiful things,” Antonia says. “Of course, he didn’t tell me that Carlo was going to die,” she says, leaning forward and widening her eyes conspiratorially.

What did she think Father Carrai meant when he spoke of this special mission?

“I started to think maybe he would become a priest,” she says. “My mother joked, ‘Ah, Carlo will become pope!’ But Father Carrai had the gift of discernment of the spirit, so he heard my confession and it was a scary confession! I think of this as the beginning of my conversion.”

But it is Carlo whom Antonia credits with helping her to embrace the fullness of the Catholic faith.

“He was the one who made me understand that the Blessed Sacrament is the body and soul of Christ, the real presence of Christ.” Until

then, she had thought of the Eucharist as a symbol that didn’t mean anything. Now she says, “This was the most important discovery of my life. To discover that in the Blessed Sacrament there is the real presence of God.” She began on that path with Carlo and continues to feel they are united in their journey.

Which brings us to another supernatural moment. In *My Son Carlo*, Antonia mentions that Carlo reported having had a conversation with St. Jacinta.

“Yes,” she confirms. “For us it was normal. But Carlo didn’t make a big deal about it. He was very concrete each day, going to Mass,

Eucharistic adoration, reading the Bible. It was not (like this), she explains, throwing her head back and raising her hands to her face in ecstasy. “He was a computer geek. A computer geek has a different attitude.”

But after that experience, Antonia acknowledges, Carlo was scared.

“He said, ‘Jacinta told me that there are no words on earth to describe the horror of hell.’ He had read the memoirs of Sister Lucia and knew that Mary told the children of Fatima that the reason many souls go to hell is because nobody was praying and doing sacrifices for them.”

Carlo couldn’t help but respond.

“He started to really pray and to do little sacrifices, maybe renouncing Nutella, Coca-Cola,” Antonia remembers. “He started to pray more, maybe not going to see a film he liked — whatever he could offer, appropriate for his age. Of course, as he got older, he started to do bigger things but in a very natural way, without making a fuss. He was very discreet with his faith. Very simple.”

But the encounter with St. Jacinta remained with him.

“He used to tell me, ‘Mother, can you imagine, let’s try to think of forever. Forever, forever, to be in hell. Forever, forever, forever!’ He once asked if it was more important to save souls from damnation or to do

works of charity. He decided doing good works was important, but that it is more important to save souls. Eternal life! We are here as a pilgrimage. We are to do our best. Jesus has infinite mercy, but there is the possibility of losing your soul forever.”

Antonia moves comfortably into her own views.

“This is not a joke,” she says. “This is a very serious matter. People don’t think about the eternal. They always have the earthly things. They try not to contemplate. They should contemplate more.” Having visited Fatima, Antonia is well-versed in the events that transpired in 1917.

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“Jacinta used to say, ‘If people would understand what eternity is, they would do everything they could to change their life.’ And instead, we continue to do the same thing. Think about COVID,” she says. “Have you seen any changes? Very little change after COVID. Even with something that dramatic, that should have touched us, should at least push us to contemplate: ‘What is life after death? Why am I here?’ Carlo used to say that we should live each minute of each day like it was the last day of our life. That’s a good way to live, to always be ready to go. With your luggage!” she says, lightening the mood.

Four years to the day after Carlo’s death, Antonia and her husband Andrea welcomed fraternal twins, Michele and Francesca. Antonia accepts this as an extraordinary grace through the intercession of Carlo. The children are now entering their teens.

“Of course, my son and daughter, they’re very different from their brother. They are more like my husband, more reserved, more shy. But they have a very big sense of eternity,” Antonia says. “They fear in the sense that they understand the importance of living a life consistent with the commandments of God. So they go to Mass each day, they pray the rosary each day, they participate in Eucharistic adoration.”

How have she and Andrea managed to introduce them to a life of faith?

“Of course, to arrive at this, the family is very important. We started to pray with them when they were 3 years old,” she says. “We started to read them the stories of the saints, the story of the Virgin Mary. The family is very important. What happens if the family never prays with the children?”

Antonia says her family simply is committed to this way of life.

“We started, and then they wanted to pray the rosary each day. They read a lot. And, of course, as a family, we did pilgrimages. We speak about faith matters often and, most especially, we pray together. For example, we announce in the morning sometimes, instead of waking up at seven, we’re going to wake up 30 minutes before and pray the liturgy of the church. They love this. They want it because they think praying is very important. You see, it is the example of the parents. It is easy to be lazy because we are tired and we are working. But when we arrive home at night, we have to impose on ourselves a moment of prayer together. We might renounce a little bit of television, wake up a little early. But we have to try to transmit faith. Faith is the most important thing.”

Antonia acknowledges many children might not want to go to Mass.

“They don’t want to go because the parents are not consistent with

their faith. The children see this,” she observes. She and her husband follow the parenting advice of St. John Bosco, known for reforming many young people who were on the wrong path in the late 1800s. His method, referred to as the Salesian Preventive System, is based on the three pillars of reason, religion and loving-kindness, as opposed to constant correction and punishment. He believed it was important to treat young people as persons, always focused on their formation as human beings and as Christians.

“Many parents always say, ‘Yes, OK my dear, yes, yes!’” Antonia says. “Instead, to say no is very important. We have to understand that if we love our children, we also have to educate them. We have to say no sometimes.”

The Salesian system posits that it is easier to prevent poor behavior than to correct it.

“We do prevention for breast cancer,” Antonia points out. “We do the scans. St. John Bosco was an enlightened educator. He says we have to teach our children to do everything for the love of God. And so, all our life becomes a continuous prayer.”

And for parents who may not have begun this approach early on?

“There is always a moment to start,” Antonia assures. “Of course, we have to pray. We have to offer our sacrifice to God. We have to be very, very strong in our prayers and faith that God will hear us and will help us and that our prayer will save our children. It’s very important to pray for our children, to sacrifice for them. The Virgin Mary told us that many people go to hell because there was nobody to pray and do sacrifices for them. This is in the holy Scriptures as well, and Jesus says we need to pray continuously not to enter into temptation. We really have to pray, pray, pray!”

According to Antonia, the place to begin is with ourselves:

“When you change yourself, people around you will change. The first conversion is our own conversion. When

we are filled with Jesus, we will be contagious. It is a chain reaction, like nuclear fission. But first, we need to live this friendship with God. We need to pray, to have this intimacy with God. How can we speak about God if we don’t live with his presence inside us? We have to be the witness, the salt of the earth and the light of the world.” †



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A

UNIQUELY CATHOLIC

DEVOTION

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DEVOTION

BY VINCE DRAGONE



St. Manuel González García, who has come to be known as the Bishop of the Abandoned Tabernacle, adopted a divine mandate to love and serve Jesus on behalf of a town that didn't. His life was a testament to drawing strength from the Eucharist, providing an example of faith during modern disbelief.

Blessed Carlo Acutis, the first millennial to be beatified, became known for his digital evangelization, cataloging Eucharistic miracles, which continues to make an indelible imprint on the global Catholic community. His passion radiated the presence of Christ in the Eucharist, reflecting a deep devotion shared by these holy figures.

The Diocese of Erie was among 39 dioceses and organizations in the United States privileged to host the relics of these two men whose understanding of and passion for the Eucharist inspired hundreds of Catholics in the Diocese of Erie during their 10-day pilgrimage in May. This was a spiritual voyage that enlightened hearts and knitted communities closer to the true presence of Christ in the Eucharist.

As the sacred relics journeyed across different locations, the unifying power of faith was strikingly evident. Parishes within the diocese embraced a level of unity and cooperation, using social media platforms to effectively communicate the relics' schedule to as many people as possible. Simultaneously, they seized this opportunity to educate parishioners about the lives of St. Manuel and Blessed Carlo, focusing on their remarkable contributions and the fact that they lived their lives pointing to Christ. These teachings were incorporated into homilies, not only enriching the knowledge of the parishioners but also fostering a deeper understanding of the sanctity of the Eucharist. It was an unparalleled period of communal spiritual education and shared excitement that underscored the beauty of collective faith.

Central to this spiritual journey was the director of the diocesan Office for Divine Worship, Father Matt Kujawinski, who, along with Coordinator Maripat Grant, shaped the pilgrimage across the diocese.

"As many people know, we're in the midst of the Eucharistic Revival as a process of reinvigorating devotion to the Eucharist so that it can bear fruit in our lives by what we do. Blessed Carlo has been named one of the patrons of that process, and his relics were made available to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops for the purpose of the revival," says Father Matt.

Father Matt traveled to Syracuse, New York, where he received the relics which had just been in Manchester, New Hampshire. On the day they arrived, Bishop Lawrence Persico offered a private Mass for the families and friends of employees of St. Mark Catholic

Center, during which he officially accepted the relics from the hands of children and teenagers in a beautiful testament to faith being passed down through generations.

“As we began to craft the schedule and plan the celebrations, we felt it was necessary and important to keep our young people in mind. So, when the relics were received by the bishop, we decided to ask children to be the ones who would present them to the bishop at the Mass that began this whole celebration,” he says.

As the relics traveled through the diocese, they inspired touching moments of faith. This was especially true for Dr. Jaci Phillips-Sabol, who regularly delivers presentations on Eucharistic miracles. These miracles, cataloged online by Blessed Carlo, have a scientific basis that Jaci is passionate about discussing.

“Three years ago, when I started these talks, I dedicated them to Blessed Carlo. At the time, people weren’t even really talking about him. Now, his relics are here. It’s a part of his actual heart, just like Jesus’s heart is in these Eucharistic miracles. I feel like I share the platform with Blessed Carlo whenever I give this talk. But this time, I felt that in a more powerful, palpable sense. It was an incredible experience to give this presentation with his relics here and to venerate them,” says Jaci.

Veneration of relics, as explained by Father Matt, is more than an act of respect; it is a connection with the holy lives of the saints and their teachings.

“Finding value in relics stems from the days of the persecution of the Christians in Rome where early Christians hid in the cemeteries and celebrated Mass on the tombs of the martyrs,” he says. “It then became custom to make sure that the relics of martyrs were in the altars where Mass was celebrated. And so, the idea of venerating and being physically close to the saints has been with us since the first days of the church.”

The relics stirred the faithful for various personal reasons. Lou

Serafini of Erie, for instance, sought a deeper relationship with Christ in the Eucharist.

“St. Manuel and Blessed Carlo had such a strong devotion to the Eucharist. If I could only have a small piece of that, I’d be OK with it,” Lou explained. “When I knelt before the relics, I felt a warm feeling in my heart. To me, it’s like Jesus holding my heart. That’s what he wants. It’s hard to explain, but it really is the power of the Eucharist. It’s Christ’s body there. It gives me a deeper connection with my faith,” he said.

The relics also served as symbols of hope and healing. Beverly



The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops requested that the relics come to the US as part of their ongoing three-year National Eucharistic Revival. Archbishop Domenico Sorrentino of Assisi, Italy, where blessed Carlo is entombed, personally accompanied Blessed Carlos’ relic to the United States.





Vento, of Erie, experienced in the world of relics, was among the many who sought solace and healing through her veneration.

"Relics have a powerful resonance that I've seen in action multiple times. One instance that comes to mind is when a woman collapsed during a choir session. I placed a prayer card that had been touched to one of St. Faustina's relics on her, and she revived immediately. On another occasion, my aunt was suffering from total kidney failure. I prayed for her using a Lady of Fatima statue containing the relics of saints Jacinta and Francisco Marto. Her health was restored. These experiences have only reinforced my faith in the power and importance of these holy relics," Beverly explains.

The arrival of the relics at St. Stephen of Hungary Parish in Erie for a bilingual Spanish Mass painted a picture of faith's universality. Deacon Miguel Alvarez illustrated the relevance of the saints in his homily. Stressing that they are always ready to pray for us, he encouraged the congregation to draw strength from their intercession. Deacon Miguel's homily not only testified to his own faith but also highlighted the invaluable spiritual support saints provide in Catholic life.

After Mass, Deacon Miguel shared that his prayer to St. Manuel and Blessed Carlo was to be able to continue his ministry.

"I've been a deacon for 29 years, and without God's help, it wouldn't have been possible," he says. "I asked them to pray for me that I may continue my work to serve God and to help those in need."

The pilgrimage also played a significant role

in Catholic schools, introducing students to the lives of Blessed Carlo and St. Manuel and, for some, providing their very first interaction with relics.

Father Matt says, "Blessed Carlo Acutis, being young, drew his mother back to faith. And young people can do that too. They have a lot to offer, and we have to keep that in mind. We sometimes forget when doing the work of ministry that young voices have insight too."

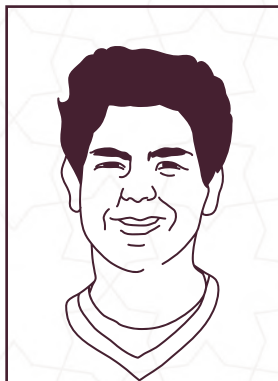
Rayn, a junior at Mercyhurst Preparatory School, was inspired by Blessed Carlo's use of technology to evangelize. "You can really express yourself and what you believe in. It just shows how crucial it is in today's age that even a blessed or a saint could use the same tech as we do, enjoy it, and use it to spread our faith," she said.

Cathy Dornisch of St. Marys was overjoyed by the presence of the relics for the students at Elk County Catholic High School. She said that she has three children in the school and constantly seeks Blessed Carlo's intercession for them.

"It was overwhelming having those relics here at Mass," Cathy shared as she wiped a tear from her eye.

This pilgrimage was an enlightening journey of faith, deeply connecting the community with the teachings of Christ in the Eucharist.

In his homily at Elk County Catholic School in St. Marys, Deacon Luke Dagher drew parallels between St. Peter's journey of faith and the short but impactful life of Blessed Carlo Acutis. He referred to Blessed Carlo as a 'modern Peter,' a model for students to navigate their own spiritual paths.



BLESSED CARLO ACUTIS, the first millennial to be beatified, was known for his devotion to cataloging and sharing Eucharistic miracles worldwide via his website. To learn more about Blessed Carlo Acutis, read *Through the eyes of a millennial: Jesus still with us in the Eucharist* in the December 2022 edition of *Faith*.



Artwork/Matt Walters-Faith Catholic



Deacon Luke painted a vivid picture of St. Peter, the fisherman who stumbled and faltered but kept coming back to his faith, becoming the 'rock' of the church. He likened this to Blessed Carlo, a young man deeply in love with the Eucharist who turned to his faith even when faced with terminal leukemia. He argued that, like Peter, Blessed Carlo showed that it was possible to stay steadfast in faith despite life's ups and downs.

Deacon Luke ended his homily with a simple, powerful challenge for the students: to follow the path of Blessed Carlo, a 'modern Peter,' who allowed Jesus to guide him. In doing so, he reminded them of the importance of staying close to Jesus.

Bonnie Housler from St. Marys visited the relics at Elk County Catholic School. She firmly believes in the importance of the Eucharist but also sees the value in venerating relics. She said that while the Eucharist is essential, venerating relics provides an opportunity to receive special graces. Her prayers during this event were primarily focused on her family. Specifically, she prayed for vocations to the priesthood within her family. It's something she and her husband have been praying for 43 years.

The relics may have moved on from the diocese and will soon leave the United States as other countries across the globe eagerly await their turn. Their profound impact will endure not

only in the hearts of those they touched, but also by anyone who feels drawn to read more about them and to pray for their intercession.

Blessed Carlo, pray for us.
St. Manuel, pray for us. †



LEARN MORE

Faith magazine is pleased to note that holy cards of both

Blessed Carlo and St. Manuel, created for the pilgrimage in the Diocese of Erie, are still available for anyone who would like them. Each card was touched to the relics while they were in the diocese. What better gift to share with your loved ones? Simply send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to *Faith* magazine, St. Mark Catholic Center, 429 E. Grandview Blvd., Erie, PA 16504.



A reach across eternity

I was always close to my dad. We understood each other.

A professor at Penn State, he spent years patiently mentoring me as I learned to write at his elbow. Later in life, he loved sharing the articles he was writing for the newspaper of the senior community where he lived with my mom, gladly accepting my insights and edits.



ANNE-MARIE WELSH is the director of the Office of Communications for the Diocese of Erie

Dad passed away on Feb. 5, 2020. At the time, we did not know how blessed we were that our extended family was able to share in the celebration of his well-lived 90 years of life by worshiping together at Mass and sharing meals. Within about six weeks, such gatherings would come to a halt, even as COVID meant so much unexpected loss.

The months that followed were filled with tasks and family conversations, as well as a



My dad, Gerry Brault, enjoying a meal at *Faccia Luna* in the photo that showed up on my phone.

Photo/AM Welsh



new level of accompaniment for Mom, alone for the first time after 66 years of marriage. It was a challenge to suddenly find ourselves limited to video contact and occasional outdoor visits involving headsets and booths arranged through the memory unit where she now needed to reside.

We spent more than a year in this new normal, which also included a period of no public worship. As I waited for my turn to be vaccinated, I continued attending Mass via livestream until April of 2021.

About a week before Good Friday, in a moment of prayer and reflection, I told my father that I had not expected such silence on his part. I'm not sure what I had in mind, but I did ask that he might somehow let me know all was well with his soul.

And so it was that on Good Friday, at the very second I

received the Eucharist for the first time in more than a year, the choir at St. Peter Cathedral began singing *Finlandia*, one of the hymns my father had asked us to include at his funeral Mass.

My dad was deeply committed to his Catholic faith. He embraced the truths he learned from his family and from 16 years of Catholic education, passing them on through his example. But I have to say he outdid himself with that loving reach from across eternity.

When I got to my car and opened my phone after the service, up popped a "memory" thoughtfully provided by my phone carrier. It was a photo of Dad at *Faccia Luna*, a favorite restaurant where we had shared many a happy meal as a family.

Honestly, he might as well have been waiting for me in the passenger seat. †