

Translation from the original text

SPECIALE CARLO ACUTIS. ADOLESCENTE E SANTO NEL 2000.
DA MILANO AD ASSISI PER INCONTRARE LA SANTITÀ ORIGINALE DI CARLO ACUTIS,
IN «NOTE DI PASTORALE GIOVANILE» 2 (2025) 49-60



ENGLISH

**SPECIAL FEATURE: CARLO ACUTIS
A TEENAGER AND A SAINT
IN THE 2000s.
FROM MILAN TO ASSISI
TO DISCOVER THE UNIQUE HOLINESS
OF CARLO ACUTIS**



STUDIES

CARLO, WHO WAS HE?

Letizia Gualdoni

There is a light that unites Carlo Acutis, through prayer, with Milan — his city — and Assisi, where he spent long periods of time. Carlo was born in London on 3 May 1991, where his family had moved because of his father's work. Later that same year, they returned to Milan, where he attended primary and middle school with the Marcelline Sisters and later studied at the classical lycée of the Leone XIII Institute. He was an ordinary boy who, in the vibrant simplicity of everyday life, loved playing football and video games, playing the saxophone, and cultivating a marked passion for computer science. He used his talents to create websites aimed at spreading the faith and designed an exhibition on Eucharistic miracles. At the same time, he showed extraordinary concern for others, especially the homeless people he encountered in the streets, treating everyone with kindness and generosity.

The secret of his spiritual strength lay precisely in his friendship with the Lord — a remarkably deep faith for someone so young — expressed through his devotion to Our Lady and through his relationship with the Eucharist, which he famously described as “my highway to heaven”. He would often remain in prayer before the Eucharist in the parish church of Santa Maria Segreta, learning to place God at the centre of everything. “Not I, but God” became his motto.

Just as he was entering adolescence, Carlo died at the age of fifteen on 12 October 2006 after being struck by an aggressive form of leukaemia. He lived his suffering by offering it for the Pope and for the Church. Through his witness — which reached people throughout the world — and through the signs that continued to emerge after his death, he became a model of holiness and a powerful point of reference for children and young people, especially pre-teens and teenagers.

Carlo himself had expressed the desire to be buried in Assisi, where he had encountered the charism of Saint Francis. His remains were later transferred from the cemetery to the Sanctuary of the Spoliation, now the destination of countless pilgrimages. Beside his body burns perpetually the Lamp of the Oratories, fuelled by oil offered by the young people of the Ambrosian Church: a light that remains a permanent sign of the bond between sister Churches united in the name of Blessed Carlo Acutis.

Following his beatification in Assisi in 2020, Pope Francis approved the decree concerning the miracle attributed to Carlo's intercession. Carlo Acutis was to be canonised during the Jubilee of Adolescents on 27 April 2025. It would be young people themselves who would celebrate in Rome, together with thousands of their peers, the canonisation of this young man from Milan whom they feel especially close to, and who continues to encourage them on the path to heaven. Carlo was born “an original”, and in order not to die “a photocopy”, he made this the programme of his life: “to remain always united with Jesus”.

In order to encounter and better understand the personality and spirituality of Carlo Acutis, who was soon to be proclaimed a saint, several questions were posed to the Archbishop of Milan, Mario Delpini, and the Bishop of Assisi, Domenico Sorrentino. Their reflections reveal the model of attainable holiness embodied by Carlo: a holiness expressed in his courageous decision to go against the current, refusing conformity and joyfully witnessing to his love for the Lord Jesus and his eagerness to serve those in need.

His was a brief life, yet a wonderful one — a life that did not end with death. Carlo lives on in the hearts of many, and above all in those of the boys, girls, and young people of Milan, Assisi, and the entire world who entrust themselves to him.

THE PARADOX OF HOLINESS

*Interview with the Archbishop of Milan
Mario Delpini*

Question. *What strikes you most about Carlo Acutis, first as a boy and only afterwards as a saint?*

Answer. There is something enchanting about being a boy, an adolescent: life is at once a surprise and a game. It is beautiful to discover the possibility of running, of walking, of reaching a goal, of learning how to use a computer, of making one's parents smile with an original photograph, a funny expression, or a phrase in dialect spoken with a London accent. There is something enchanting in discovering one's own potential. At that age — it seems to me — one notices less what is lacking and more what is already present. There is joy in feeling capable of making others happy. There is joy in feeling suited to life just as one is, in finding it natural to enjoy good health and to feel cared for in sickness. There is joy in appreciating what one is able to do without suffering excessively over one's limitations. At that age — the age of childhood and adolescence — there dwells the simple joy of bringing happiness to others, of being together with friends, of dreaming about the future, of telling true stories and imaginary adventures. And there is also the feeling that the world is inhabitable and life itself desirable. What strikes me most is the enchantment of a life full of promise.

Question. *Carlo is a saint not only of the Archdiocese of Milan, but also of the city of Milan and of contemporary Milan itself. What does Carlo's holiness say to the Milan of today?*

Answer. Milan truly is a city of saints. Take the Duomo, for example. How could one imagine Milan without the Duomo? And the Duomo is crowded with saints: they have climbed right to the tops of the spires — I only hope they do not suffer from vertigo! Yet they have remained there for centuries. The saints have hidden themselves in every corner of the cathedral. Who knows what stories they tell as they watch the crowds of tourists and pilgrims pass below? Everywhere in Milan there are streets named after saints, churches, chapels, memorials. Milan is a city of saints. Among the young people and adolescents I know, holiness often sounds like a strange word, a vague and confusing idea. I imagine that in Milan people do not speak much about holiness; it seems an abstract and somewhat exotic subject. Instead, people speak of the emotion awakened by the smallest gesture, of compassion before the unbearable sight of someone sleeping beneath an arcade, of irritation at empty rhetoric, of admiration for a holy priest, a holy woman, a holy religious sister. Carlo's holiness is convincing in the same way as the holiness of Candia, Enrichetta, Lazzati, and Giussani: saints without fanfare and without spectacular miracles. Saints who are simply people taking life seriously. Milan is still a city of saints.

Question. *A teenager of today becoming a saint in such a difficult season for the Church: young people are abandoning Mass, seminaries are increasingly empty, and many adolescents experience profound inner unease. What challenge does Carlo Acutis's holiness pose to the Church and to society more broadly?*

Answer. Conformism is boring. Allowing oneself to be carried along by "the prevailing atmosphere" is almost inevitable — and the atmosphere today is polluted. The prevailing atmosphere pushes people towards sadness, and many voices insist on conformity. They say: "Do not believe it is possible to be happy. Do not be naïve: prayer is pointless. What is the use of it? It is forbidden to desire adulthood — can you not see how unhappy adults are? Do not deny yourself what you enjoy. Do not ask whether something is good or evil; simply enjoy whatever you can. Do not try to be original, otherwise you will become the target of ridicule and every kind of bullying. Do not say, 'I went to Mass.' You would only make yourself look ridiculous." And so on. It seems, then, that one is obliged to conform and to live in a dull grey world. And yet there is always someone who raises a hand and says: "Still, it seems to me that

it is better to seek the path of joy, even if it means being different.” One can imagine everyone turning to look at him with surprise — and not without a certain contempt. But he continues, with his bold and smiling manner: “Still, it seems to me that it is better to begin the work of improving the world, and I have already started doing so, in my own small way.” One can imagine the mocking smiles appearing on many faces. Yet he goes on, with astonishing courage: “Still, I know that I can trust God, and I pray to him every day.” At that point there are those who insult him openly. But there are also those who cannot hide their admiration and their desire to become his friends. This, it seems to me, is how Carlo Acutis presents himself to young people today: without unnecessary insecurities and with a contagious joy in living his friendship with Jesus.

Question. *Carlo Acutis teaches us to place ourselves before the Eucharist, which for him was the “highway to heaven”. How can we help adolescents and young people rediscover that the path of life passes through an encounter with Jesus?*

Answer. We must begin with trust. Jesus says, “I will draw everyone to myself.” I am therefore convinced that everyone is drawn to Jesus in ways and at times beyond our control. We can either facilitate or hinder the work of Jesus. Even when we are inadequate servants of Christ’s attraction, Jesus continues to draw everyone to himself and does not want anyone to be lost. If it is not the Spirit who works in the heart, no proposal, commandment, or strategy will ever convince someone to seek an encounter with Jesus — or rather, to open the door to the One who stands knocking. Can we do something to encourage openness among adolescents? I would suggest three things. The first is silence. We can offer adolescents opportunities for silence; we can invite them, organise moments for them, and encourage them to step away from the endless chatter of social media and the invasion of distractions. Within the silence of adolescents there may dwell anxiety, unhealthy fantasies, fear of nameless monsters, the burning pain and shame caused by old wounds or embarrassing sins. For this reason, proposing silence is not painless. Yet something can still be done. For the Spirit of God dwells in silence, and only in silence can its whisper be heard. And the Spirit never ceases to inspire. The second is friendship. True friends are those who help one another become better people. If, within a group of adolescents, some friends encourage one another in prayer, Eucharistic adoration, and participation in Mass, they may gradually influence the entire group. Carlo Acutis was only one person, but he involved his companions and now encourages many others. The third is the wisdom of adults. Adults who know how to speak personally with adolescents and to listen to them can explain how one learns to pray alone and how one discovers joy in communal worship. A priest, an older friend, a religious sister, a young catechist — anyone capable of speaking personally with an adolescent — can bear witness to how the word of Jesus in the Gospel is sharp, illuminating, consoling, and challenging. They can also teach young people how temptations may be overcome, how necessary it is to be patient with oneself, and how important it is not to be crushed by one’s failures.

Question. *Three expressions taken from Carlo’s writings are particularly well known: “Originals, not photocopies”, “Infinity is our destination”, and “Not I, but God”. What did these words mean for Carlo, and what might they mean for children, adolescents, and young people today?*

Answer. There are short phrases that are easy to remember and function merely as slogans — like advertising billboards. They make an impression, but there is nothing behind them. Then there are short phrases that are easy to remember because they are titles: they are like gateways, the title of a chapter in life. They open up a world and inspire a journey. One naturally begins to ask: which phrases inspire me? In what words is the message I have received from Jesus condensed? What are the compelling and challenging titles that open the way into my own mystery and into the mystery of God? This is the first message Carlo Acutis offers to his peers: to discover their own motto, the phrase that expresses their deepest convictions and gives direction to their lives. What Carlo summarised in these expressions invites us to understand life as a vocation. Beyond banality and confusion, the presence and love of God — who comes before all things (“Not I, but God”) — calls every person to be original and to fulfil his or her

own vocation (“Originals, not photocopies”). Jesus calls us to follow him because only he has words of eternal life; only his word offers a hope that truly promises fulfilment (“Infinity is our destination”).

Question. *Carlo’s human and spiritual journey unfolded within ordinary daily life: family life, school, ordinary friendships, and parish life. In each of these settings he encountered significant adults who gave him much, but who also listened attentively to his own human experience. What lessons and challenges does Carlo’s story offer to educators within today’s Christian community?*

Answer. A “client-centred therapy” — to borrow the title of a book from another era — seems to me a form of encouragement towards that unhealthy individualism which condemns people to loneliness and despair. The same can happen with an education centred exclusively on the young person. Education is a relationship, not merely a service. It is an interpersonal and asymmetrical relationship that calls adults to assume the responsibility of being adults and of offering young people good reasons to desire adulthood. Educators must reveal to children, adolescents, and young people the promising yet dramatic, beautiful yet unpredictable nature of life. Adults become personally involved in this relationship because they not only possess self-respect, but also esteem, trust, and confidence in the potential of every young person. They therefore encourage others to live, to love life, and to desire to bring life into the world. At the same time, they challenge each individual to recognise his or her talents and to embrace the vocation of putting them to fruitful use. In their educational mission, educators — parents, priests, consecrated persons, teachers, and young people themselves — act as witnesses. They do not draw attention to themselves; rather, they point towards the source and foundation of the beauty of life and of each person’s vocation, which is the Lord. For this reason, I believe it is difficult to be an atheist or agnostic educator, as some openly claim to be, even while displaying admirable qualities of dedication, competence, and relational ability. Sooner or later one is confronted with the fundamental question: does life have meaning? Is there, or is there not, within life itself a promise of eternal life? The educator as witness understands both the importance and the limitations of his or her work. The educator does not stand before a block of wood from which to carve a human figure, but before a free and determined person. Education does not consist in transmitting rules or ideas as though they were a possession to be inherited. Rather, the educator-witness seeks to awaken and challenge a free person, helping him or her to develop self-esteem, to feel capable of facing life, to receive rules, ideas, and proposals with gratitude, and ultimately to make responsible decisions about life itself. The educator also helps by making the person entrusted to him aware of his limitations, by correcting transgressions, by encouraging him in moments of discouragement, and finally by helping him move beyond the educator himself. I believe Carlo Acutis moved beyond. The world advances because many young men and women move beyond, towards the Kingdom.

The Saint of the Millennials

*Interview with the Bishop of Assisi
Domenico Sorrentino*

Question. *A saint at the age of fifteen — something very rare in the Church among non-martyrs. So it is possible, even in the turbulent years of adolescence, to live and bear witness to the fullness of love. What does holiness mean for a fifteen-year-old?*

Answer. It means nothing other than what holiness means for every saint, as Carlo himself expressed through the programme of his life: “To remain always united with Jesus.” This divine-human union takes on countless different forms according to age, personality, and circumstance. Jesus is Emmanuel, God-with-us, and he walks beside us. He adapts himself to the life of a child and to that of an adult, to the lives of ordinary people and to those of great intellectuals who become theologians and Doctors of the Church. He adapts himself both to lives marked by dramatic conversion after serious sin and to lives in which the relationship with God has unfolded peacefully, apart from the venial weaknesses known even by the saints. In short, it is Jesus who adapts himself to us. In Carlo’s life, everything was so normal and yet at the same time so extraordinary. There is a beauty in holiness that makes it appear attractive — and attainable. The fact that Carlo is buried in a Franciscan sanctuary inevitably invites comparison with the Saint of Assisi. At first sight, such a comparison may seem impossible. I addressed this specifically in my book on Francis and Carlo — or rather on Francis, Clare, and Carlo — precisely because this element should not be overlooked. They are not together by chance. God’s plan united them as a “team”, a group playing God’s game together. They embody two very different forms of holiness, yet they are linked by many threads that reveal the rich variety of holiness in both its differences and its convergences. In one section of the book, dealing with poverty — something lived very differently by Francis and Carlo — I conclude by saying: “If you cannot do as Francis did, then at least do as Carlo did.” The issue is not the depth of holiness, which is always union with Jesus, but the way in which holiness is lived. Carlo represents a holiness that is possible for everyone. He captures your heart. Once you have encountered him, you can no longer say: “Holiness is not meant for me.” I believe that after him there will be other adolescent saints. And for a generation like today’s adolescents, living in a world that has become one immense challenge, this is a great sign of hope.

Question. *Milan, the great metropolis of Italy, and Assisi, the universal capital of spirituality: Carlo Acutis seems to connect two contrasting worlds. Is there perhaps a message here?*

Answer. Perhaps there is — and it is a very beautiful message. Although Carlo felt spiritually drawn towards Assisi, even in death, he never renounced his identity as a Milanese. Even his identity as a young computer enthusiast seems perfectly at home in a city that is the capital of economics and technology. Who says that holiness belongs only to small towns and not to great cities? Carlo remained profoundly Milanese. At the same time, he became spiritually a fellow citizen of Francis, above all because he chose to follow in Francis’s footsteps. In a certain sense, Milan calls out to Assisi, and Assisi calls out to Milan. The comparison between the two cities also helps us understand two dimensions of holiness: holiness needs silence and smallness, yet at the same time it can become leaven even within great metropolises. Wherever authentic humanity exists, holiness is called to fulfil its mission — a mission that also consists in humanising the world and making it more divine.

Question. *You once described Carlo Acutis as “a boy standing on the shoulders of a giant”, referring to Saint Francis. Carlo was not a Franciscan saint in the strict sense, yet there is clearly a connection between them. What similarities do you see?*

Answer. I must admit that the comparison between Francis and Carlo — as I explain at the beginning of my book — was inspired precisely by young people. More specifically, it was inspired by a group of American teenagers with whom I happened to speak about Jesus several years ago. The conversation flowed so naturally, perhaps because of the expression in their eyes. I begin with the profound desire for life that Francis and Carlo both reveal. Who would Saint Francis have become if there had not first been the young man from Assisi, the “king of festivities”, always searching for new adventures because he loved life and wanted to live it to the full? Holiness is first and foremost an immense desire for life. Francis and Carlo express this in different ways. I then move on — and here adolescent sensitivity immediately comes into play — to the meaning of the body. Both saints had a relationship with the body that revealed its beauty, a beauty not satisfied merely with outward appearance. Then there is the “road”, in the sense that both were dynamic saints, tireless travellers: Francis walking the roads of a medieval world opening itself to the acceleration of modernity, and Carlo inhabiting even the pathways of the Internet. Then there are the more explicitly spiritual dimensions: above all the Eucharist, which for both was the very soul of their lives, and their love for the Blessed Virgin Mary. Finally, there are themes I deliberately approach in a provocative way, such as economics and ecology. These are subjects especially dear to our own age, and in Francis’s case people sometimes go so far as to force interpretations, pulling him onto the platforms of contemporary debate while overlooking what mattered most to him: his passion for Jesus and for the Gospel. Yet economics and ecology also belong within a Christian vision of life, and both Francis and Carlo have something to say — and above all something to witness — regarding these matters. It is no coincidence that one chapter of my reflection on them is entitled “Economists Without Knowing It?”, where I refer to the pact signed by Pope Francis on 22 September 2024 together with thousands of young economists and entrepreneurs in Assisi, aimed at renewing the economy by restoring its soul. Nor could there fail to be a chapter on the Internet — a theme that concerns not only the young saint of the third millennium, but also the saint of eight centuries ago. The title itself suggests the perspective: “The Internet of the Eucharist”. In the book I argue that we must move from “inter-net” to “Jesus-net”. If the Internet is not inhabited by Eucharistic values, it may still achieve wonders by informing us about countless things and enabling real-time communication. But the real challenge is to move from communication to communion. The Internet can serve both war and peace. Francis and Carlo stand for peace.

Question. *What do you witness in Assisi around Carlo’s tomb? What are the adolescents and young people seeking when they pray before Carlo Acutis?*

Answer. What strikes me first of all is that everyone who stands before Carlo’s tomb feels compelled to pause, almost as though entering into conversation with him. For our volunteers, this creates the difficult task of ensuring that the flow of visitors continues moving. People speak with Carlo. Each person, naturally, speaks in his or her own language and brings personal concerns and questions. Young people in particular bring their questions — or begin to ask them there. Standing before a young saint whose body in life must have measured around six feet tall, now smiling in the stillness of death, one inevitably begins to question the meaning of life and of death itself. At the same time, one experiences the extraordinary vitality radiating from that lifeless body. Feelings are lifted upwards; questions about faith emerge; one learns to love the Eucharist. Perhaps one also begins to reflect on the demands of moral life, especially in a culture that has largely lost its sense of sin — a challenge faced by everyone today, but especially by the young. I would love to spend some time inside the minds of all those who pass before that body. Whenever I arrive while people are praying there, it often happens that someone recognises me and approaches me. Many ask for a blessing, almost as though Carlo himself were giving it. Others share with me some personal problem to be entrusted to his intercession. Around this tomb there exists a phenomenon I could never have imagined. Of course, one should not exclude more ordinary

explanations as well: curiosity and interest generated by publicity and by the desire to know more. But overall, what I perceive above all is an atmosphere marked by the supernatural. It is a message for the Church and for the world. Perhaps we are only at the beginning.

Question. *Why should a teenager today look to Carlo Acutis for inspiration?*

Answer. Carlo inspires people. He makes them think. He conveys the sense of a life lived fully and joyfully while doing the ordinary things that fascinate adolescents: sport, nature, computers. Carlo is also a challenge. There will certainly be adolescents already caught up in hedonism, casual sex, and similar lifestyles for whom Carlo appears a distant and impossible model. Yet I see so many young people — especially those who come in parish groups — left speechless before this story that speaks directly to the heart. That was precisely what happened to me with the American teenagers who inspired me to write my book about Carlo. What particularly unsettles them is Carlo's statement that all are born originals, yet many die as photocopies. To question originality is ultimately to question freedom. This is a fundamental issue for everyone, but especially for young people. Encountering someone who claims to have found authentic freedom cannot fail to provoke reflection. One chapter of my book dedicated to both Francis and Carlo bears the title "Rebels in Their Own Way". Is this not an exciting idea for young people who have not yet surrendered to an ageing world without hope?

Question. *Carlo's human and spiritual journey unfolded within ordinary daily life: family life, school, ordinary friendships, and parish life. In each of these settings, he encountered significant adults who offered him much, but who also listened attentively to his own experience. What lessons and challenges does Carlo's story offer to educators within today's Christian community?*

Answer. What is truly striking is that Carlo felt the need to live his adolescence — despite all his interests, dreams, and creativity — within the settings of family, school, and parish life, while also seeking dialogue with trusted adults. He seemed to understand the role of wisdom that adults are called to fulfil, even in an age when young people often surpass older generations in technological and digital competence. The experience accumulated over years of life cannot be replaced by computers. Life is not merely information. It is also a depth of humanity that requires time to mature. Of course, age alone is not enough to guarantee this kind of maturity. Some adults remain childish. But when someone has acquired genuine life experience, then he or she truly has something to offer to today's young people. Carlo understood this. He entrusted himself to the Church's ancient pedagogy, even relying upon a spiritual director as well as a confessor. He did so while drawing deeply from the experience of his own family in a remarkable exchange of giving and receiving. It is well known that his parents have testified that Carlo himself inspired them to rediscover the faith. At the same time, they undoubtedly gave much to him as well, including through the people who accompanied and guided him. And here too — if I may emphasise it once again — there is a thread connecting him to Francis of Assisi. Few people know that Francis himself, during his path of conversion, was accompanied by Bishop Guido. Zeffirelli's film does not portray him particularly favourably, but history tells us that the bishop was a true friend and counsellor to the young Francis both before and after his renunciation of worldly possessions. This was one of the reasons that led me to place Carlo's body in a sanctuary connected directly to the bishop's residence. When the parish priest to whom I entrusted the sanctuary founded a youth oratory, he dedicated it to Carlo long before the beatification cause had even begun in Milan. When the decree recognising Carlo's heroic virtues was issued and it became necessary to transfer his body from the cemetery to a church, that earlier dedication appeared to me as a sign that the Lord desired Carlo to rest in this church in Assisi. Guido for Francis, Don Ilian and many others for Carlo: the path to holiness followed by both saints was never a solitary journey. God's companionship also reaches us through human companionship — through men and women capable of becoming, for young people, the voice of God.