CHAPTER 6

UNWRAPPING UNDERSTANDING

Understanding denotes a certain excellence of a knowledge that penetrates into the heart of things.

It is the rule of moral definition, the door to learned thought, and the key to heavenly contemplation. And such understanding is indeed a gift.
—St. Bonaventure, *Collations*
The human capacity to understand and the intellectual virtue of understanding that perfects it are in themselves natural gifts from God of the very highest importance. Understanding is one of the fundamental ways through which we are elevated above all other species of living beings on earth and in which we were made in the image and likeness of God. St. Thomas tells us, “The nature of each thing is shown by its operation. Now, the proper operation of man is to understand; because he thereby surpasses all other animals.” In other words, we are the only species on earth that is capable of true understanding. So, what is this thing that you, my reader can do, that your dog or your cat could not begin to understand?

In a nutshell, the virtue of science relates to the grasp of cause-and-effect relationships, while understanding pertains to the comprehension of fundamental and overarching principles. Let’s get a little closer to the heart of the matter by repeating St.

122 ST, I, Q. 76, art. 1. For a detailed summary of Thomas’s analysis of the nature of the human capacity of understanding and how it builds upon both the five external senses and the four internal senses, see chapter 1, “Understanding ... Understanding,” in my Unearthing Your Ten Talents or, for a brief version, chapter 3, “What Does a Soul Do?” in my One-Minute Aquinas.
Thomas's pithy quotation with which we started this chapter: “Understanding denotes a certain excellence of a knowledge that penetrates into the heart of things.” Understanding, per Thomas, implies an “intimate knowledge, for intelligere (to understand) is the same as intus legere (to read inwardly). This is clear to anyone who considers the difference between intellect and sense, because sensitive knowledge is concerned with sensible qualities, whereas intellective knowledge penetrates into the very essence of a thing.”

Our dogs and cats have the same five senses that we do (in fact, their senses of hearing and smell are more acute than ours), yet they cannot grasp the heart of things, fundamental essences and underlying principles. Dogs and cats can see and interact with other sensible, individual dogs and cats, but they cannot grasp the concept of “dogness” or “catness,” let alone talk about, write about, or argue with each other about such things. It is through the powers of human understanding that we can penetrate to the essence, the quiddity, the “whatness” that makes a thing the kind of thing that it is. And our powers of understanding are not limited to small furry creatures or to any objects of the senses at all, because we can also come to understand to some extent the essence of important abstract concepts, such as truth, virtue, or indeed, the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Our powers of understanding begin with self-evident principles, such as Aristotle’s law of noncontradiction in logic, that “one cannot say of something that it is and that it is not in the same respect and at the same time.” Ethical principles guiding human conduct include the precepts “Do the good” and “Avoid

123 ST, II-II, Q. 8, art. 1.
UNWRAPPING UNDERSTANDING

the evil.” These kinds of fundamental principles are the start-
ing points for all the kinds of detailed chains of reasoning that
take place when we employ the intellectual virtues of science
and wisdom.

So, with that extremely brief primer on the nature of natural
understanding, let’s jump in to understanding as a gift of the Holy
Spirit that brings us yet closer to the God in whose image and
likeness we were made.

THE PENETRATING LIGHT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

St. Thomas reports that understanding flows from the infused
virtue of faith and proceeds to perfect it with deeper penetration
and a confident sense of certainty in belief. St. Gregory, he notes,
has stated that “understanding enlightens the mind concern­
ing the things it has heard.”124 In his treatment of the gift of
understanding, the Seraphic Bonaventure cites Daniel 2:21–22:
“He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have
understanding; he reveals deep and mysterious things; he knows
what is in the darkness, and the light dwells within him.”125

Still, while sojourning here on earth we can never completely
understand the mysteries of God, but the gift of understanding
can help us better grasp even this limitation. It can make us
more aware of God’s unfathomable awesomeness. Please allow
me to offer this simple analogy. Imagine you are in a pitch-dark
room and in one corner lies a bottomless pit, or perhaps a black
hole. (We assume for our purposes that the black hole has not
sucked you in!) Surrounded by darkness, you have no clue that

124 ST, II-II, Q. 8, art. 3.
125 Collations, p. 173.
the pit is there. Now imagine that you have been given a very powerful flashlight. Scanning the room, you now become aware of this fascinating, mysterious phenomenon. There it is! And yet, when you shine your light into the pit, the light does not have the power to penetrate fully “into its heart” and show you just what it is. The pit remains mysterious and unfathomable, yet now you understand that it certainly exists, that it is right there with you, and that its awesome mystery exceeds your powers of full comprehension.

The gift of understanding is like a powerful supernatural light that illuminates our capacity to know God through faith and reason, to know that He is there even in our darkest hours and to help us understand the very limits of our understanding. Of course, God is not too dark to fathom. On the contrary, His light is too bright for the eyes we have now, but just wait for that glorified body with eyes that will behold God in the beatific vision! While the essence of God Himself exceeds the power of our light of understanding, the penetration that the Holy Spirit’s gift of understanding provides for us can help us on our way toward that face-to-face meeting when we’ll see God more clearly than ever before.

The gift of understanding, although most lofty, abstract, and speculative, has practical uses as well. Thomas notes that “‘faith worketh through charity,’ according to the Apostle (Gal. 5:6).” Faith works, understanding perfects faith through the stirrings of the Holy Spirit, and therefore, understanding also works: it works to guide our actions to a deeper understanding of the principles of God’s eternal law. Indeed, “the eternal law surpasses human reason; so that the knowledge of human actions, as ruled by the

126 Ibid., art. 3.
eternal law, surpasses the natural reason, and requires the supernatural light of a gift of the Holy Ghost.”

UNDERSTANDING THE SACRAMENTS

Truly then, understanding is among the most outstanding gifts that the Holy Spirit has given us. So how might we use the sacraments Christ gave us to grow in the use of this gift? Like the other gifts, understanding is bestowed in its primitive form in the sacrament of Baptism. It is strengthened at Confirmation, and the timing is very appropriate: Baptism is most often conferred in infancy, although an infant is not able to understand the language and significance of the rite. A school-aged child, a teen, or an adult, however, has developed the language and reasoning capacities to understand the language and the significance of the Confirmation rite.

Of course, if we are to be open to the Holy Spirit’s guidance in understanding the truths of the Faith at deeper levels, we must remember that we have been graced with such a gift. We must make an effort to apply our natural powers of understanding to growing in our comprehension of the things of the Faith, including the sacraments, not only by receiving them but through spiritual reading and contemplation. Thomas has told us that since “grace does not destroy nature, but perfects it, natural reason

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\(^{127}\) Ibid.

\(^{128}\) We should especially apply our understanding to the greatest sacrament: the Eucharist. Thomas notes that understanding penetrates truths that remain hidden to the senses, as he has expressed most beautifully in his Prayer *Laude Sion Salvatorum* (Praise, 0 Zion, thy Savior) for the feast of Corpus Christi (the Body and Blood of Christ): “Look! upon the altar lies, hidden
should minister to the faith as the natural bent of the will ministers to charity.” 129 It’s our job to use our natural thinking capacities to give that gift of grace something to build upon!

IS HEBETUDE OF THE SENSES DULLING YOUR UNDERSTANDING?

We saw that ignorance was a vice directly opposed to the gift of knowledge because it represents a lack of effort to know the things of the Faith that we should know. Now, hebetude is a word we don’t hear too often these days. It derives from the Latin word hebes, which means “blunt” or “dull.” When we fail to employ our capacity for understanding, our minds—the greatest and potentially sharpest implements God has given us—become blunt, dull, and unable to “penetrate into the heart of things.” We render ourselves spiritual dullards when we live our lives at the level of the pleasures of the sense without engaging our intellects to think about deeper and higher things. We fail to achieve our spiritual potential when we live too much on the plane of the animal. We fail to feed our intellects when we feed only our senses.

If we want to employ our powers of understanding so that they may be perfected by the Holy Spirit’s gift, we need to sharpen the blades of our minds by penetrating into the things of the Faith, focusing less on our pop culture of death and more on the Church’s culture of life, spending less time learning about the lives of criminals or celebrities (which are too often one and the same) and more time learning about the lives of the saints.

129 ST, I, Q. 1, art. 8.

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deep from human eyes, bread of angels from the skies, made the food of mortal man.”
St. Bonaventure notes other ways we can hinder or foster growth in the gift of understanding. He starts with some verses from the Psalms: “I will bless the Lord who has given me understanding” (see Ps. 15:7, Douay-Rheims) and “The declaration of your words illumines, and gives understanding to the little ones” (see Ps. 118:130, Douay-Rheims). Further, regarding Christ’s saying, “You have hidden these things from the wise and the prudent and revealed them to the little ones” (see Matt. 11:25), St. Bonaventure explains that the little ones are those who are humble and that “nothing darkens the understanding about matters that pertain to God as much as does presumption.” The person who presumes that he already knows it all is not in a position to submit to the Holy Spirit to receive the gift of understanding! Indeed, St. Bonaventure elaborates the point later, citing the kind of verbal outspokenness and imprudence that flows from such presumption: “It is written in Sirach 5:14: ‘If you have understanding, answer your neighbor; if not, put your hand over your mouth.’”

In addition to the humility that wards off presumption, Bonaventure highlights that ingratitude can block the flow of understanding, recalling how King David blessed God for his gift of understanding. Indeed, we should feel and express gratitude for every one of the gifts, thereby disposing ourselves to receive and utilize each gift best.

PRAYER: AN ACT OF THE INTELLECT

St. Thomas notes that prayer itself is a powerful act of the intellect possible only to man among all of the creatures on earth.

\[13\] Collations, p. 161.
“According to Cassiodorus, prayer (oratio) is spoken reason (oris ratio).”

Speech is a function of the intellect, so prayer is an act not of the lower, sensitive powers, but of the intellectual powers unique to humans. Thomas explains that prayer starts with and is essentially “the raising up of one’s mind to God” and that the “parts” of prayer include supplications (humble requests) for particular blessings from God (including the gifts!) and thanksgivings (thus showing gratitude) for the blessings He has already provided.

As for the prayer the Lord Himself gave us, the Seraphic Doctor links the sixth petition, “and lead us not into temptation,” with the gift of understanding. It is those temptations of the world, after all, that lead to hebetude of the senses, that dullness of the capacity of our intellects to penetrate into the heart of truths that really matter. Indeed, this point will be made more sharply below when the Angelic Doctor chimes in about understanding’s beatitude. Let us pray with St. Alphonsus Liguori: “Grant me the spirit of understanding to enlighten my mind with the light of Thy divine truth.”

THE PURE OF HEART UNDERSTAND

St. Thomas cites St. Augustine as follows: “The sixth work of the Holy Ghost which is understanding, is applicable to the clean of heart, whose eye being purified, they can see what eye hath not seen.” Thomas goes on to explain a “twofold” kind of cleanliness of heart. The first is a cleansing of inappropriate affections

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131 ST, II-II, Q. 83, art. 17.
132 Ibid.
133 ST, II-II, Q. 8, art. 7.
for things of the world that is produced by the virtues and gifts “belonging to the appetitive power.”\textsuperscript{134} The other cleansing “is a kind of complement to the sight of God,” in which the mind is purged of sense-based images and of intellectual errors, so that we may rise above sense-based images to a higher view of God and avoid the misrepresentations promoted by heresies against the truths of the Church. Further, there are two ways in which we see God:

1. imperfectly on earth, where we cannot see His essence but can see what He is not, thereby deepening our understanding of how He surpasses human understanding
2. perfectly in heaven, where, in the state of perfection, God will reveal to us His essence, thereby producing the unimaginable bliss of the beatific vision

I can’t help but observe that both St. Thomas and St. Bonaventure were blessed in an extraordinary way on earth with their gifts of understanding, no doubt because they so purified their hearts, turning their eyes from the things of creation to focus their vision upon the Creator.

And as for the fruits that flow from understanding, Thomas addresses the paradox that while the gift of understanding flows from the theological virtue of faith, faith is also its end or its fruit. St. Thomas’s insight in unraveling this spiritual conundrum comes from a gloss\textsuperscript{135} on Galatians 5:22 that says “faith

\textsuperscript{134} Ibid. For example, temperance, fortitude, and justice among the virtues, and fear, fortitude, and piety among the gifts.
\textsuperscript{135} The Glossa Ordinaria Thomas often refers to was a widely used medieval commentary on all the texts of the Bible, pulling primarily from the writings of the early Church Fathers. Thomas would later go on to compose his own catena aurea (golden
THE SEVEN GIFTS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

which is a fruit, is certitude about the unseen.” Therefore, the fruit of faith that derives from the gift of understanding is that special certitude and confidence about the things a person believes through faith. This experience of certitude is much more gratifying than doubt, so it also contributes to the experience of the fruit of joy.

MOTHER MARY’S UNEARTHLY UNDERSTANDING

When Fr. Formby looked at how the Blessed Mother modeled the gift of the spirit of understanding, he harked back to some of the oldest books of Jewish Scripture, where, in Exodus and Deuteronomy, God gave Moses the Ten Commandments. Fr. Formby highlighted the third, whereby we keep holy the Sabbath Day. Although we toil for our livelihood up to six days a week, that seventh day was to be set aside to contemplate and honor the Divine Creator. It was a day set aside to grow in our understanding, in part through the study of Sacred Scripture. Fr. Formby notes that the evangelists who wrote the four Gospels did not explicitly tell us what a typical Sabbath Day might have been within the Holy Family, but he gathers plenty of evidence that Mary must have spent that day helping herself and her family grow in understanding of the ways of the Lord. Although the words of her great Magnificat were inspired by the Holy Spirit, they built upon her understanding derived from sacred study. When she exclaimed, “He has put down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of low degree” (Luke 1:52), for example, she echoed the

136 ST, II-II, Q. 8, art. 8.
words that the Lord spoke to King Nebuchadnezzar before he drove him away: “the Most High rules the kingdoms of men and gives it to whom he will” (Dan. 4:17).

Further, pay heed to Mary’s zeal for understanding when the shepherds came into Bethlehem and told of the wondrous things an angel of the Lord had told them about the birth of Christ the Lord. While the inhabitants “wondered at what the shepherds told them . . . Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart” (Luke 2:18, 19) striving for deeper levels of understanding to penetrate into the heart of those things. When Mary and Joseph found the child Jesus in the Temple, He said to them, “Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house? And they did not understand the saying which he spoke to them” (Luke 2:49–50). Yet it was noted specifically of Mary that regarding Jesus’ deeds and words of that day, “his mother kept all these things in her heart” (Luke 2:51). She would not be satisfied until she could understand. We too should ponder Christ’s teachings as Mary did, treasuring them in our hearts.

BURNING WITH UNDERSTANDING ON THE ROAD TO EMMAUSS

In treating of the relationship between faith and the gift of the spirit of understanding, St. Thomas wrote that “Our Lord opened the scriptures to His disciples, that they might understand them. Therefore, understanding is compatible with the faith.” 137

In the amazing scriptural account to which St. Thomas refers, we find Cleopas and another disciple sharing their faith with an apparent stranger, telling the then-brand-new story of Christ’s

death and glorious Resurrection, “but their eyes were kept from recognizing him” (Luke 24:16), so they did not know at first that the man they journeyed with as they walked toward the village of Emmaus was the risen Christ Himself! Christ then began to open up the Scriptures for them, explaining how Moses and the prophets had said so many things concerning His life, death, and Resurrection. Relishing the stranger’s company and His great depth of understanding, they invited Him to stay and eat supper with them. Then, “when he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them” (Luke 24:30)—words we know so well from the Mass. It was then that they saw, through the eyes of faith, what had been hidden to their earthly eyes. They recognized that the stranger to whom they spoke about Christ was the Lord Jesus Christ! At the moment of their realization, though, He disappeared from their sight. In their amazement they recalled to one another how their “hearts burned” as Jesus had opened the Scriptures to them.

When Jesus appeared to His apostles soon after, they were frightened and confused, but Jesus showed them the wounds of His hands and feet and even ate some broiled fish to show them that He was no disembodied spirit, but Jesus returned in the flesh. Again, “he opened their minds to the scriptures,” proclaiming His death and Resurrection “and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations” (Luke 24:47).

If we are to surrender to the Holy Spirit so that His gift of understanding might open our minds and set afame our hearts, we would do well to ponder prayerfully Christ’s life in the Gospels and to receive regularly the Real Presence of His body, blood, soul, and divinity in the Eucharist He has provided to give us eternal life.
In the past, when writing about virtues and about the Dominican Order, I have offered Sts. Augustine of Hippo and Catherine of Siena as models of understanding. Augustine, after all, is, along with St. Thomas Aquinas, a pillar of the Catholic Church, as may be seen by Thomas’s almost countless references to him, and the Catechism’s almost countless references to both of them. Further, it was Augustine who argued that the three primary powers of the human soul—memory, understanding, and will—mirror, in a dim way, the Holy Trinity. As for St. Catherine of Siena, we know that “understanding penetrates into the heart of things,” and that “the pure of heart shall see God.” She was blessed with many visions of God, and in one mystical experience Christ even exchanged his heart with hers. Catherine has been called the Seraphic Virgin, since the seraphs look upon God. For our purposes here in this book, what better saintly model could we use for the gift of understanding, then, than the “Seraphic Doctor,” St. Bonaventure?

St. Bonaventure (1221–1274), was St. Thomas’s almost exact contemporary, and we have seen glimpses of just how well the great Franciscan understood all the gifts of the Holy Spirit—indeed, through those very gifts grafted onto a lifetime of saintly study. While the two great saints differed at times in matters of philosophy, they shared in their theologies and in their saintly lives a passion to understand and penetrate into the heart of the things
of God, including, of course, His great gifts. St. Bonaventure used his God-given sanctifying and gratuitous graces to lead us all to a deeper understanding of things of the Faith through his voluminous writings on theological and spiritual matters, as well as in a biography of his order’s founder, St. Francis of Assisi (1182–1226). The world lost the Seraphic Doctor on July 15, 1274, only four months after the Angelic Doctor rose to heaven.

St. Bonaventure’s feast day is July 15.

St. Bonaventure, pray for us, that through the Holy Spirit’s gift of understanding, we may penetrate into the heart of the things that matter most and come to see and share the heart of Jesus Christ.
THE GIFTS AND THE BEATITUDES

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.
Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.
Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.
Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.
Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.
Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

—Matthew 5:3-10

Certain things are included among the beatitudes that are neither virtues nor gifts, e.g. poverty, mourning, and peace. Therefore, the beatitudes differ from the virtues and the gifts.

—St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica, I-II, Q. 69, art. 2

St. Thomas devotes four articles in question 69 of the first part of the second part of the Summa Theologica to an examination of the beatitudes, examining issues such as what he called the “merits,” and the “rewards” of each beatitude, whether they are numbered correctly, and whether they pertain only to our life on earth or also to life in heaven. To serve our gift-centered focus in this brief analysis, I will simply address St. Thomas’s
first article, "Whether the Beatitudes Differ from the Virtues and Gifts," and then provide a sneak peek at just which beatitudes flow from each gift (along with a small free gift—a table that sums it all up!).

So then, to determine whether beatitudes differ from gifts, since we've already looked at just what the gifts are, it's time to zoom in on these eight special blessings described most fully by Christ in His Sermon on the Mount. Thomas notes that each beatitude involves a merit, an act prompted by the virtues and gifts that leads to a specific reward, a state of imperfect happiness in this life or perfect happiness in the next that flows from those meritorious behaviors prompted by the virtues and the gifts. Regarding differences between the beatitudes, the gifts, and the virtues, Thomas notes that Sts. Augustine and Ambrose assign the beatitudes to the gifts and virtues, as acts are ascribed to habits.

In the beatitudes then, Jesus shows us the kinds of blessed states of happiness that God provides to reward those who act virtuously, although Thomas notes, according to St. John Chrysostom, "all these rewards are one in reality, viz. eternal happiness, which the human intellect cannot grasp. Hence it was necessary to describe it by means of various boons known to us, while observing due proportion to the merits to which those rewards are assigned." So beatitudes are blessed rewards that we would

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138 Luke 6:20–22 offers a briefer version, detailing only four of the Beatitudes, that was delivered to the multitude when Jesus came down from a mountain after praying with His disciples. The full rendering Jesus delivered on the mountain to His disciples is found in Matthew 5:3–10, the verses we used to open this chapter.

139 Emphasis added, with acts referring to beatitudes and habits to virtues and gifts.
do well to act to obtain. In what ways might the gifts of the Holy Spirit help us to obtain them?

WHICH BEATITUDES FLOW FROM WHICH GIFTS?

Some of this material is provided within our chapters on the individual gifts, so I'll simply provide the table here. You might want to ponder a bit about what Thomas saw as their critical connections. I'll note too that sometimes Thomas mentioned ways in which more than one beatitude was related to a gift. Also, regarding the fact that there are seven gifts, but eight beatitudes, Thomas concludes that the eighth beatitude, "blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven," is a "confirmation and declaration of all those that precede," a summary of sorts that all the beatitudes produce.

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<th>GIFT</th>
<th>BEATITUDE</th>
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<td>Fear of the Lord</td>
<td>Poverty of spirit</td>
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<td>Piety</td>
<td>Hunger for righteousness</td>
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<td>Fortitude</td>
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<td>Bearing persecution</td>
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The gifts of the Holy Spirit themselves flow from the virtue of charity, and the waters of the virtues and of the gifts nourish and refresh the soul, producing, in addition to the beatitudes, the most holy and succulent fruits. We will harvest the spiritual lessons from this orchard of spiritual fruits in our last Angelic Analysis and Profile in Grace at the end of chapter 7.

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<th>GIFT</th>
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<td>Counsel</td>
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<td>Understanding</td>
<td>Purity of heart</td>
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<td>Wisdom</td>
<td>Peacemaking</td>
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You don’t have to take my word for it that Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati (1901–1925) was “the man of the eight beatitudes.” Pope Saint John Paul II said so on March 27, 1977, while touring an exhibition of photographs of the young man in Krakow, Poland. Thirteen years later, on May 20, 1990, John Paul II beatified the man of the beatitudes in St. Peter’s Square.

We saw that St. Brigid, truly a woman of the eight Beatitudes, chose mercy as the one dearest to her heart. If Blessed Pier Giorgio were to choose one for his motto, although an argument could be made for any of the eight, poverty of spirit seems the most likely candidate. He was born into a wealthy family in Turin, his father the founder and owner of the still extant newspaper *La Stampa*, but Pier Giorgio’s heart always went out to the poor—and his feet and the rest of him always followed his heart! He spoke of seeing a special light around the poor, and in one of the earliest of his sister’s recollections of their childhood, when young Pier Giorgio once answered a knock at their front door and saw a poor woman holding a child without shoes, he promptly took off his own, gave them to him, and slammed the door so that his parents could not see what he had done!

Throughout his young life he saved his allowance and collected things to sell so that he could give his savings and profits to people in need, whom he sought out in poor neighborhoods. He often arrived to meetings and events covered in sweat, having...
ridden his bike to save the train fare, and when forced to ride the train to faraway events, he always rode third class. Indeed, his sister reported that when he was asked why he did that, he responded, “Because there is no fourth class.” Not only did Blessed Pier Giorgio contribute continuously in such one-on-one acts of mercy toward the poor, but he also became involved in political activities to advocate for the needs of the poor and for fair treatment from those blessed with plenty.

It appears that Pier Giorgio’s love for the poor led to his early departure from earth and early arrival in heaven, for he contracted a rare, fatal form of poliomyelitis, most likely from visiting the sick in poverty-stricken districts. Persevering in the beatitude of poverty until his life’s end, when he knew his hours on earth were numbered, he handed this note to a friend from the St. Vincent DePaul society: “The injections are for Converso and the pawn ticket belongs to Sappa; I had forgotten it. Please renew it on my account.”

Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati’s feast day is the Fourth of July.

Blessed Pier Giorgio, pray for us, that we too may share our gifts as Christ has instructed and become men and women of the Beatitudes.

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