

INTERVIEW

How I raised a saint, by the mother of teenager Carlo Acutis

London-born teenager who died of leukaemia is set to become the Catholic Church's first millennial saint

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All parents hope to bring their child up to be a kind and decent person, but Antonia Salzano and Andrea Acutis quite literally raised a saint.

Carlo Acutis was born in 1991 in London and brought up in Milan by his Italian mother and half-English, half-Italian father. Less than 18 years after his sudden death in 2006 from leukaemia aged 15, he is set to be the Catholic Church's first millennial saint, the Pope has [announced](#).

"I am nothing special," Antonia, 57, said on Friday at her family's second home in Assisi, where Carlo's body lies visible within his tomb as a site of veneration for Catholics. "I was just an instrument. Having a child like Carlo was special for me."



Antonia Acutis said Carlo began reading the Bible and asked "very profound questions"

The Vatican has officially attributed two miracles to Carlo, declaring that a Brazilian boy and a Costa Rican woman owe their lives to miraculous recoveries after their families prayed to him in heaven for healing.

This proves to Antonia that, although her child may have departed the "material world" while still a teenager, he remains present. "Surely he can see from the sky what is happening," she said. "He is more alive than we are, surely he is happy."

Asked if Carlo acquired his devout Catholic faith from his parents, his mother said it was the other way round. She “never went to Mass” while growing up and was “more of a Protestant” as she did not believe Jesus was truly present in the bread and wine at Holy Communion.

His father, Andrea, 60, who worked in London as a merchant banker when Carlo was born and now runs his family’s insurance business, was raised a Catholic but his faith was “tepid” at best.

Carlo, however, appeared drawn to faith from a very young age. While still living in London, he said his first word, “Dad”, at the age of three months, his mother said, and was “very advanced”, adding: “From the age of three, when we were out walking he would always want to go into churches and ‘say hello to Jesus’. He seemed naturally religious.”

Carlo started to read the Bible and ask “very profound questions” about faith that Antonia felt “ashamed” at being unable to answer. Shortly before he turned five, Antonia’s father, who worked in publishing, died from a heart attack, prompting her to “start asking myself questions about the afterlife and where my father was — it was a big shock to me”.

She added: “Carlo told me he saw my father who asked

him for prayers, and he started to pray a lot for dead people. He was only five.” From the age of six, Carlo started to notice things near his home that troubled him.

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“We lived in the centre of Milan, a town full of beggars, and he would stop and say, ‘I have everything, a bed and meals, and these people are suffering with nothing’.” At nine he said: “Mama, can I buy some sleeping bags for them, some blankets?,” said Antonia, who worked in her family’s publishing business. “He made us save money. If I bought him a pair of shoes, when he already had a pair, he would say, ‘I don’t need new shoes, there are people who are starving, why don’t we save it to give to the poor people?’

“He was older than his age, not a child of nine years old when he was nine, he was very mature.” While at school, he was “very bright and nice” and made a special effort to “defend bullied people” and help “classmates that were shy or reserved and had problems getting on with others”.

Carlo was an amateur computer programmer who enjoyed making websites

RICHARD NEWTON/ALAMY

He was also troubled by the difficulties faced by Milan's large migrant population and "made friends" with the porters, waiters and maids in nearby buildings, she said.

Carlo was born in the private Portland hospital in London on May 3, 1991 and was baptised a fortnight later in the Church of Our Lady of Dolours in Chelsea. His parents lived near Knightsbridge, moving back to Milan when Carlo was four months old.

On October 2, 2006, Carlo, 15, fell ill with suspected flu. Within days he had deteriorated and was taken to a clinic in Milan where he was diagnosed with acute myeloid leukaemia. On October 11, he suffered a brain

haemorrhage and slipped into a coma. He died the next day.

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“During the funeral, the church was so full that a lot of people had to remain outside,” Antonia said. “Many of these people were the migrants and they were all friends of Carlo.”

Carlo's body lies in Assisi, Italy, where he was carried in a procession before being beatified

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When he went into hospital, Carlo told his parents that he believed he “would not come out alive”, but told them he was “not scared”, she said. “During his agony, that lasted five or six days, the doctors asked him: ‘Are you suffering?’ He said: ‘There are people suffering much

more than I am.' He was never complaining, even though he had terrible pain." Antonia was consoled by their faith and said: "We know it is not saying goodbye for ever, but we will see each other soon, so I accepted it. I was prepared."

His devout faith and altruism can sometimes mask the fact that Carlo was just "a normal child", Antonia said. "He enjoyed sports, he liked basketball and football, though was not a fanatic, and he liked computers, creating websites and programmes."

He developed a website documenting miracles from around the world, creating an exhibition that has travelled around the world since his death. This love of computing has led his growing army of devotees to call him "God's influencer" and suggest him as a more modern "patron saint of the internet" than the holder of the title, Saint Isidore of Seville, a scholar who compiled a pioneering encyclopaedia and died in AD636, some 1,300 years before the internet was born.

Cardinals, bishops, friars and priests attended the St Francis Basilica for the beatification ceremony

VATICAN/GETTY IMAGES

Asked what advice she would give to parents hoping to raise a saintly child, Antonia said parents must set a

good example: “From when they are small, if they want to grow their children in faith, they need to start to speak about God, to pray together, to speak about values, about respect. Sometimes they have to say ‘no’. You can’t say ‘yes’ to everything. Sometimes parents are a little scared to say ‘no’.”

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She said this could build resilience in children growing up in a world of “bullies, drugs, alcohol and violence against children” and warned parents not to park their children “in front of the TV or with a smartphone or Facebook” and think “I can relax”.

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In 2013 Matheus, a Brazilian boy, was unable to eat without vomiting because of “annular pancreas”. He weighed 9kg at the age of four and was expected to die when a priest prayed to Carlo. The boy developed a healthy appetite that same day, it was reported, with scans showing his condition had vanished Antonia said.

Carlo’s body was exhumed in 2019 as part of the investigation process leading to a possible canonisation. In 2020, his body went on public display ahead of his beatification, visible through the glass side of his tomb.

Worshippers were shocked to see that his body appeared to be “incorrupt”, meaning it had not decayed, but church officials said it had experienced “the normal process of decay” over 14 years and that his face had been “reassembled with art and love” using silicone.

In 2022 Valeria Valverde, 21, a Costa Rican woman studying in Florence, suffered a serious head injury in a bicycle crash. She had to undergo an emergency craniotomy to alleviate pressure on her brain, but remained in a critical condition. Six days later, her mother visited Carlo’s tomb in Assisi to ask for healing. The church said that, on the same day, Valverde began to breathe unaided. She was discharged from intensive care ten days later and scans apparently showed that the brain contusion had disappeared.

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“I had the chance to meet [Valeria], she is a very nice girl,” Antonia said. “She was between life and death and if she survived, doctors said she could have tremendous [brain damage]. But her mother had an impulse to go to Assisi and prayed to Carlo.”

One other miracle that Antonia attributes to Carlo is the birth of her twins, Francesca and Michele, at the age of 43. Carlo died an only child. “I tried to have other children, but they never came”, she said.

“I was starting to lose any hope as I was nearly 43, but I dreamt Carlo told me: ‘Don’t worry, you will become a mother again.’ And after one month I became pregnant. And the date of delivery was the [anniversary] of his death. They feel he is like a brother and they address him as one of the family. They are religious too, but a normal young boy and girl. Of course, Carlo was a little special and the mission he had was a special mission.”

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