

**An Application of Catholic Symbolism Featuring Blessed Chiara  
Badano, Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati, and Saint Teresa of Calcutta**

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## **Introduction**

I have always been captivated by the symbolism within the Catholic Church. My involvement in my faith began with a solid religious education before I attended Colorado State University. When I received my confirmation in the 7th grade, one of my assignments was to paint a representation of my confirmation saint, St. Agnes, incorporating the symbols associated with her. I found that project to be enjoyable, and it has recently led to a commission from St. John XXIII Catholic Parish in Fort Collins to create three pieces of art featuring three holy individuals: Blessed Chiara Luce Badano, Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati, and Saint Teresa of Calcutta. These saints were chosen for the portraits because there are rooms in the Church named after these saints. In an effort to create a more meaningful decor, the campus ministry coordinator, Granger Stimpson, asked me to create portraits of these three saints to decorate the rooms named after them. This opportunity has me eagerly anticipating the chance to expand on what I learned in 7th grade. I find myself pondering: Why is art so integral to the Catholic Church? How do symbols derive their meaning? Moreover, how can I effectively apply these symbols to convey the lives of these remarkable individuals?

## **A Brief History of the Relationship Between Art and the Catholic Church**

The Catholic Church, a steadfast supporter of artwork, has always woven symbolism into its fabric, inspiring a myriad of artistic expressions. But why is art such a profound part of the Catholic Church? This brief history will quickly examine Catholic symbolism and explore the Church's profound reverence for symbolism and artwork.

The Second Council of Nicea, which occurred in 787 A.D., contains one of the earliest records of the Catholic Church's stance on artwork (Council Fathers). This council condemned iconoclasm, the "breaking of icons." This heresy stated artworks such as paintings of Jesus, the

Virgin Mary, or saints should be destroyed because they should be considered idols (Curta 395). The Council decided that using sacred images, and therefore symbolism, was lawful (Fortescue). Primary sources state, “If anyone does not *accept* representation in art of evangelical scenes, let him be anathema” (Council Fathers), stating that those who did not accept religious artwork were in direct conflict with Church canon.

The Council of Trent in 1563, which occurred after the Protestant Reformation, further explained that worship using artwork was not idolatry because the physical statue or painting was not worshiped; instead, the individual or event portrayed by the artwork was remembered. In this way, the artwork is beneficial in keeping holy events and individuals in mind while a person prays, creating a fruitful space of reflection. (Council Fathers)

The Second Vatican Council in 1965 significantly developed the Church’s relationship with artists. In its closing remarks, the Council declared all artists as friends of the Church, emphasizing their integral role. Pope Paul VI underscored the long-standing alliance between the Church and artists, stating, “The Church has long since joined in alliance with you. You have built and adorned her temples, celebrated her dogmas, and enriched her liturgy. You have aided her in translating her divine message in the language of forms and figures, making the invisible world palpable” (Paul VI). By naming all artists as “Guardians of Beauty,” Saint Paul VI accentuated the Church’s appreciation and recognition of their role in translating the invisible world and bringing beauty to all who behold our artwork.

In 1999, Pope John Paul II wrote a letter addressed to artists that detailed the importance of artists in the Church (John Paul II). Because we are made in God’s image, we can exhibit some characteristics of God. He explains that artists exhibit the craftsmen-like attribute of God the Creator. Though artists cannot bring about something out of nothing, they can take something

that already exists and give it new forms and meaning. In this way, artists create in the image of God, as we create to praise and give thanks to Him. Our artistic gift is a particular vocation that only artists are called to.

Moreover, by creating artwork, the artist reveals something of their personality. Saint John Paul II adds that an art piece tells a story of the artist's life, stating, "The history of art, therefore, is not only a story of works produced but also a story of men and women. Works of art speak of their authors; they enable us to know their inner life, and they reveal the original contribution which artists offer to the history of culture" (John Paul II). Artists reveal history when creating, adding a new depth to artwork within the Catholic Church.

Pope John Paul II stresses the importance of beauty in the world. By bringing beauty into the world through art, artists can "stir fruitful reflection" (John Paul II). Works of art inspired by Scripture can, therefore, bring about a deeper connection to God and a more concrete way of prayer and reflection. Saint John Paul II concludes by explaining why the Catholic Church needs art. Art is necessary to depict "the world of the spirit, of the invisible, of God" (John Paul II). The Church needs those who can describe this world on both the physical, such as paintings, and the symbolic level in preaching. Musicians and architects are also necessary to further the experience of worship. With an appeal to artists, Pope John Paul II pleads with artists to dive deeper into the mystery of the Church to inspire more remarkable art to deepen our relationship with the Lord (John Paul II).

Pope Francis made recent remarks on the relationship between art and the Church in 2023 during a celebration of the 50th anniversary of the inauguration of the Vatican Museums' collection of modern art. He states that the Church has an extraordinary relationship with artists that he described as "natural and special" (Francis). He describes the relationship as natural

because the artist's role has a clear place in the Church. Artists can make the intangible tangible through their art, "reminding us that the dimension in which we move ... is always that of the Spirit" (Francis). This relationship is also unique because of how long artists' works have blessed the Church and will continue. (Francis)

In summary, art is essential to the Catholic Church for many reasons. It has been recognized as a fundamental concept of Catholicism since its early beginnings, particularly during the Second Council of Nicea. The relationship between the Church and artists has deepened over the centuries. Pope Paul VI highlighted this connection at the close of the Second Vatican Council, noting that artists can make the divine more tangible through their work, which helps create stronger connections to the intangible beliefs of the Church. Additionally, artists can create more meaningful spaces for prayer and reflection. Saint John Paul II expanded on this idea, stating that artists reflect God the Father's creative nature and help convey history while provoking thoughtful reflection through their art. Recently, Pope Francis emphasized that the relationship between artists and the Church is both natural and unique due to the artist's ability to transform intangible concepts into tangible works.

### **Biographies of Bl. Badano, Bl. Frassati, and St. Teresa**

Now that we have established the significance of art in the Catholic Church and how these portraits can enhance a prayerful space, I would like to better understand the lives of these individuals. To use symbolism effectively, I want to get to know the saints I am illustrating. My goal is to create portraits that not only capture the faces of these holy individuals but also convey their values and what they held dear. Below are biographies that summarize what I have learned about the lives of these remarkable people. This research has given me a clearer understanding of their values and what I can express through their portraits.

## **Blessed Chiara Luce Badano**

Chiara “Luce” Badano was born on October 29, 1971, in Sassello in the province of Savona, Italy, to Maria Teresa and Ruggero Badano. She would be their only child, and they had struggled for 11 years to conceive her. Her mother worked in a biscuit factory, and her father was a truck driver. Her holiness was apparent since she was a very young child. Her mother once asked if she could donate some of her toys because they had accumulated a mountain. She initially replied, “No! They are my toys!” However, when her mother reentered the room, she was sorting through them. When asked what she was doing, she said, “I can’t give broken toys to the poor.” (Leahy)

She showed great maturity in her writing early in life. She contemplated intensely upon many things and wrote deeply reflective school essays. She loved the gospels and learned how to live them more fully as her life went on. When she was five, her mother asked her to help in the kitchen. She initially said no and left the room, but she returned and asked her mother about the Gospel story of two brothers. They were both asked to do something; one said yes but never accomplished the task, while the other said no and did what was asked of him. Based on that story, she helped her mother in the kitchen that day. (Young People’s Saint) Blessed Chiara’s story is relatable because she lived in a similar society. She loved sports, reading, and Bruce Springsteen. She was made fun of in school because she tried to live the Gospels. Her classmates would call her “little nun.” In the autumn of 1988, while she was playing tennis, she began suffering from severe pain in her shoulder. She was diagnosed with osteosarcoma, a malignant and dangerous form of bone cancer. (Leahy)

On a day in which many tests were performed that depicted the severity of her cancer, she arrived home and proceeded to her room in silence. She prayed for 25 minutes with the Lord and emerged smiling, strengthened by Jesus. She continued to stay strong in the faith throughout her 2-year battle with cancer, often comforting those around her. Despite the pain and fear that her illness brought, she remained steadfast in her faith and continued to inspire those around her. (Leahy). She died on October 7, 1990, and was beatified on September 25, 2010 (A Radiant Life).

### **Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati**

Pier Giorgio Frassati was born in Turin, Italy, on April 6, 1901. He had a younger sister named Luciana, born August 18, 1902. The two were very close, and their relationship was vital because their parents, Alfredo and Adelaide Frassati, had a strained relationship. Pier Giorgio had a deep prayer life since he was very young. He constantly prayed the rosary and said his bedtime prayers. This deep prayer life caused him to have a deep love for the Eucharist at a young age. Pier Giorgio had to convince his mother, who was Catholic but rarely received communion, to let him receive the Eucharist every morning at daily mass. (Di Lorenzo)

Pier Giorgio's selflessness was a defining trait. He often chose to be with his friends or people experiencing poverty instead of focusing on schoolwork. His love for people experiencing poverty was profound, and he frequently gave his money to those in need, prioritizing their well-being over his own. (Di Lorenzo)

Pier Giorgio was also deeply involved in politics. During his college career, he joined many Catholic political groups and often wore the Catholic party badge. Pier Giorgio strongly opposed World War I and Mussolini and participated in marches and protests against the rise of fascism. He once stated, "It is better to stand alone, but with a clean conscience, than to stand

with all the rest, but with a giant stain on our conscience” (Di Lorenzo 41). Pier Giorgio dreamed of pursuing an engineering degree to help miners who were outcasts in his society. He also actively participated in outreach to people with low incomes during university. (Di Lorenzo)

Pier Giorgio decided he could help people experiencing poverty more effectively as a lay Dominican. His mother would have greatly opposed him entering the priesthood (30). He was intensely devoted to the Virgin Mary. He often became so absorbed in his prayer that it seemed he could not sense the world around him. Once, he prayed beside a candle and did not feel the hot wax drip onto his head and neck. (Di Lorenzo)

Pier Giorgio loved the mountains and completed many hikes before his death. He saw the mountains as a unique opportunity to be closer to the Lord and often celebrated mass on the peaks. Pier Giorgio tried to capture this beauty with photography. On these camping trips, he went with friends and fell in love with a woman. He knew his family would disapprove of a relationship with her, and this would cause even more tension in his parent’s delicate relationship. Instead of choosing to flee the sinking ship of his family, he suffered in silence and only told a few of his situation. He chose to do this to save his family. Pier Giorgio often surrendered his dreams for his family. This sacrifice included his dream to help miners because his father wanted him to run the newspaper company he started. His father stated that Pier Giorgio “became the man he wanted to be, if only he had faith” (Di Lorenzo 27). (Di Lorenzo)

Pier Giorgio was never able to run his father’s newspaper company because he contracted poliomyelitis, most likely by helping people experiencing poverty. His family initially doubted the severity of his illness, but he continued to help others, ensuring that a low-income family received medicine and health insurance. Tragically, he passed away before the polio serum arrived to save him on July 4, 1925. Pier Giorgio’s death had a profound impact on his family, a

testament to the depth of his influence. His parents, who were in the midst of a divorce, were inspired by his life and resolved to make their marriage work. Even his agnostic father found faith. There are many miracles and graces attributed to Frassati. He was beatified on May 20, 1990, and is set to be canonized in 2025. (Di Lorenzo)

### **Mother Teresa of Calcutta**

Saint Mother Teresa of Calcutta was born on August 26, 1910, in Uskup, Ottoman Empire, now Skopje, North Macedonia. Her birth name was Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu (Nobel Prize). She grew up in a solid Catholic community that supported her spiritual life. When she was 12 years old, she decided to be a missionary. When she was 18, she left her home and became a sister with the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary, also known as the Loretto Sisters, dedicated to providing education. She took the name Teresa because St. Therese of Lisieux inspired her. She was sent to India to teach and do missionary work. (Teresa and Kolodiejchuk)

She made her first vows on May 25, 1931. She loved her missionary work and remarked, “The life of a missionary is not strewn with roses, in fact more with thorns; but with it all, it is a life full of happiness and joy ...” (Teresa 19). Throughout her life, she was known to be joyful and full of life, hiding the difficulties she struggled with from most people. When asked how to stay cheerful, she explained, “Don’t look for big things; just do small things with great love” (Teresa 34). She made her final vows on May 24, 1937. (Teresa and Kolodiejchuk)

During an annual retreat in September of 1946, St. Teresa of Calcutta felt Jesus call her to serve the “poorest of the poor” in Calcutta. She began to hear the voice of Jesus physically, and He continued to call her to serve people experiencing poverty and bring His love to them, “Come, come, carry Me into the holes of the poor. Come, be My light” (Teresa 44). Her relationship with Christ grew, and she called Him “My own Jesus,” and He called her “My own

little one” (Teresa 44). After her spiritual advisor, Fr. Van Exem, helped her establish that the Voice she heard was Jesus’s, he permitted her to write to Archbishop Perier of Calcutta in January of 1947. She pleaded much with him to get permission to start the “Indian Missionary Sisters of Charity,” which would help the poor on the streets. He was slow to give her permission as he was uncertain this was indeed the Will of God. She confided greatly in Fr. Van Exem because this caused her considerable grief as she desperately wanted to do Jesus’s will. This misunderstanding caused her to be transferred to a community on Asansol because her fellow sisters suspected her of having an improper relationship with Fr. Van Exem, who had helped her through her inspiration. She would have long conversations about this in the confessional with him, which led her fellow sisters to suspect an inappropriate relationship. Instead of being saddened by this misunderstanding, she obediently went to Asansol and continued her work there, pleading with the Archbishop alongside her teaching. The archbishop remarked about Mother Teresa, “... even in the midst of this unjust situation, she remained impressively charitable toward all” (Teresa 55). After the misunderstanding, her return to Calcutta, and her experience of a vision of Mary pleading with her to help the poorest of the poor, the Archbishop relented and allowed her to establish the Missionaries of Charity in January of 1948. (Teresa and Kolodiejchuk)

Mother Teresa wanted to petition for secularization, an annulment of her Loretto vows, because she was confident the venture, her new order, would succeed. When she and the Archbishop designed the order, she stood firmly on her conviction of remaining in absolute poverty. She needed permission from her superiors in the Loretto order and Rome to establish the new order. Her Loretto superiors approved of her secularization on January 25, 1947. She

obtained Rome's approval to start her new order in August of that year. She set off to India in her new habit, a white sari with a blue border, to begin her mission. (Teresa and Kolodiejchuk)

After many hardships establishing the order in Calcutta, she finally went into the slums for the first time on December 21, 1948. Her community grew to 12 two years later and was officially established in 1950. This new life was incredibly difficult physically and mentally. The sisters had to walk long distances and live on poor food, sometimes begging for their dinners. Her Loretto order caused her extensive grief as some sisters believed her work was the devil's. The conflict was resolved after writing to the Mother Superior, and the two congregations collaborated. (Teresa and Kolodiejchuk)

At the end of 1952, the community grew to 26, and they had to move to a new location to accommodate all the missionaries. In 1953, she revealed to the Archbishop that she had begun to feel a deep darkness and desolation as she started her missionary work. In January 1955, she began to feel immense loneliness, which lasted for the rest of her life, but she continued to be cheerful and enthusiastic amidst her troubles. She humbly accepted this darkness in her soul as a way to further bring glory to God through her suffering: "Her darkness became her greatest blessing' her 'deepest secret' was indeed her greatest gift" (Teresa 234). (Teresa and Kolodiejchuk)

She was invited to Las Vegas in July of 1960 to the national convention of the National Council of Catholic Women. She initially said no but changed her mind after talking to a close sister. After she visited the United States, she traveled to other countries to share her mission before returning to Calcutta on December 1, 1960. She later revealed that this was her most challenging act of obedience to God's will. (Teresa and Kolodiejchuk)

In 1975, the Missionaries of Charity had over 1,000 sisters in 85 foundations in 15 countries. On December 11, 1979, she received the Nobel Peace Prize. Mother Teresa's health was failing, and she was diagnosed with a severe heart condition, congestive heart failure, in 1983 after she fell out of bed in Rome. The condition became more serious, and a permanent pacemaker was put in December 1989. Against her doctor's orders, she continued to travel and bring God to the poor in the 1990s as the Soviet Union fell. She died September 5, 1997, after the power and both backup power supplies went out and plunged Calcutta into darkness—a symbolic end to the unending darkness in her life. (Teresa and Kolodiejchuk)

### **The Symbolism in My Portraits**

Since its beginnings under the Roman Empire, Christianity has used many symbols in artwork to convey meaning. (Taylor) But how are the meanings of these symbols determined? This section of the written work will explore some Christian symbols' origins and meanings.

### **Chiara Luce Badano's Portrait**

Chiara Luce Badano, a vibrant soul who cherished the gospels, is the focus of her portrait (Figure 1). Her love for the gospels, her humility, and the Christian joy that triumphed over her final, painful stage of life are the critical elements of her portrait. She is adorned with a flower crown made of laurels and violets, with four medallions at its center, each engraved with the symbol of one of the four evangelists. This portrayal is a testament to her spiritual victory, a victory that was achieved through her incredible joy and humility.

An angel symbolizes Matthew's gospel because he "emphasizes Jesus' humanity" (Taylor 102). A lion, king of the beasts, symbolizes Mark's gospel because his gospel emphasizes the kingship of Jesus. Mark's gospel starts with John the Baptist crying out in the wilderness, like a lion roaring. Luke's gospel emphasizes the sacrifice of Jesus, so a sacrificial bull is used as a

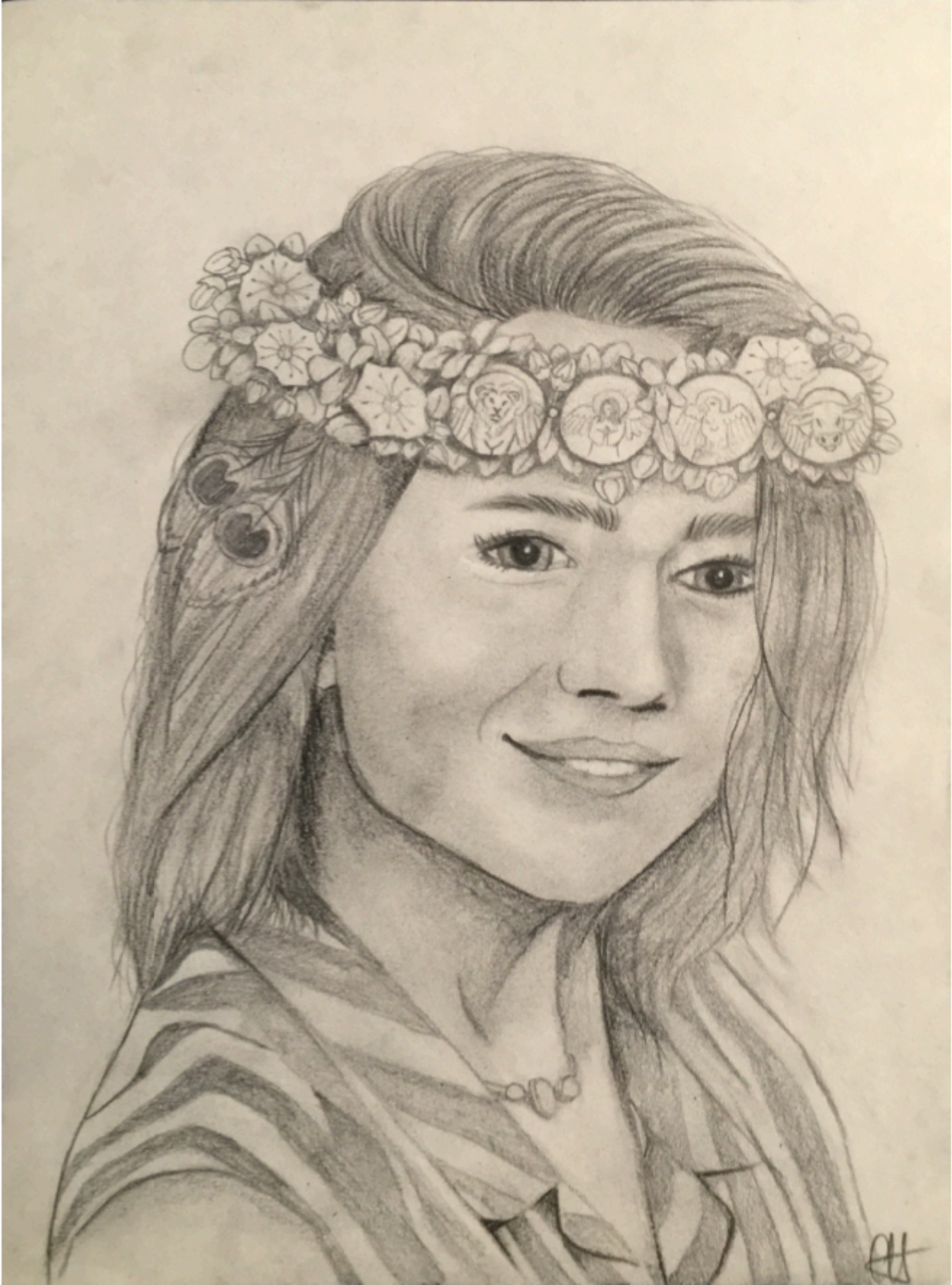


Figure 1

symbol for his gospel. An eagle symbolizes John's gospel because his gospel reveals more of Christ's deeper teachings, and the eagle is the only bird in mythology to be able to look directly into the sun. These symbols are also found in two books of the Bible: Ezekiel and Revelation.

The prophet Ezekiel writes of a vision in which he saw four angels with the faces of a cherub, a man, a lion, and an eagle. (Ezekiel 10). In Revelation, the apostle John writes of a vision in which he sees four creatures with the faces of a lion, ox, man, and eagle. (Revelation 4:7-8) These visions depict the four gospel writers as interconnected and moving together, glorifying God. (Taylor 102)

Her crown of laurels symbolizes Christian victory because her incredible joy led her to overcome the hardships of her battle with cancer spiritually. Though she did pass away from her osteosarcoma, the way she lived shows she has victory over death with Christ. (Taylor 206) This is "a crown that will last forever" (1 Corinthians 9:27). The other flowers in Badano's crown are violets. Violets are known to be a symbol of humility "because they grow low and have small flowers" (Taylor 212). Her humility and joy helped her achieve the Christian victory over death. Two peacock feathers are woven into her crown. Peacocks were often used in "catacomb paintings, sarcophagus reliefs, pottery lamps, mosaics, and marble chancel screens" (Jensen 47). It is not clear how peacocks came to be used as Christian symbols, and Jensen theorizes that peacocks could symbolize the beauties of heaven for the Christians who are welcomed into Paradise.

### **Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati**

I struggled to choose what to depict Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati with, and it was hard to narrow down what to include in his portrait (Figure 2). He is known for his love of the mountains, which he often hiked, his political activism against World War I and Mussolini's

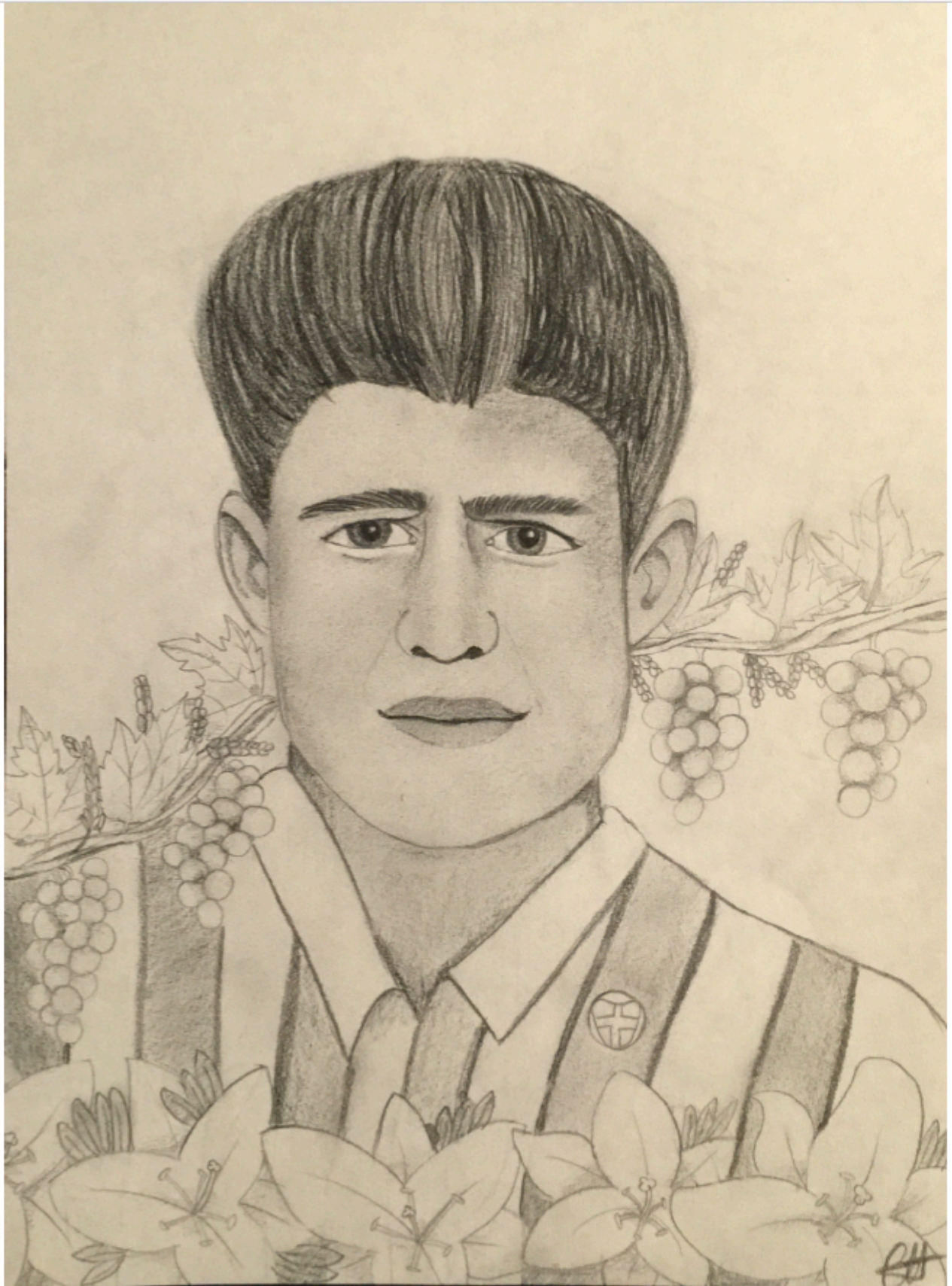


Figure 2

uprise, his deep love of Mary and the Eucharist, and his generosity toward people experiencing poverty.

In his portrait, Bl. Frassati is surrounded by a grapevine and wheat, which symbolizes the Eucharist. (Taylor 212). The grapevine is a common Christian symbol mentioned in the Gospel of John, where Jesus says, “I am the vine; you are the branches” (John 15:5). It was also a symbol in Roman art associated with the god Dionysus, the god of wine. The grapevine is also connected to the sacrament of the Eucharist, where Catholics partake in the fruit of the vine transformed into the Blood of Christ. Additionally, the vine symbolizes the Church. In the gospel of John, Jesus tells his apostles during the Last Supper that He is the true vine (John 15:1-11). He uses the vine as a symbol for Himself and explains that His Father will remove the branches that do not bear fruit and that branches cannot bear fruit unless they are connected to the vine. In this metaphor, Jesus is the vine to which the Church must remain connected to become saints. (Jensen 49-50)

Frassati’s political activism was an integral part of his life. His activism stemmed from his great love of people. In his portrait, he is wearing his pin of the Italian People’s Party, a political party based on Catholic social teaching in the 1920s. (Di Lorenzo) White lilies surround Frassati at the forefront of his portrait. These white lilies represent the Virgin Mary. The white lily “expresses her purity and virginity” (Taylor 84).

### **Mother Teresa of Calcutta**

I struggled most with designing Mother Teresa’s portrait (Figure 3). Her life began with many incredible blessings, including hearing Christ’s voice. Mother Teresa always passionately pursued the call of Christ wherever it led her. However, when she started her work in the slums of Calcutta, most of her writings tell us that she felt deep loneliness and abandonment. She no



Figure 3

longer heard Jesus's voice and felt a deep darkness inside. I wanted to focus on this time of her life because even through this deep darkness she felt, she continually brought joy to those around her.

In Mother Teresa's portrait, she is surrounded by darkness, symbolizing the profound loneliness and abandonment she felt while working in the slums. Yet, she did not let this deter her from fully pursuing Christ's call. This is why an oak branch, a symbol of strength, durability, faith, and endurance, is in her portrait's foreground. Thistles are sprinkled throughout the oak branch, representing the earthly hardships Mother Teresa continually overcame to pursue Christ's call. Her portrait is a powerful testament to her unwavering endurance in Christ's call, which she pursued despite the darkness surrounding her.

Mother Teresa is holding a rosary with a cross-anchor to symbolize her undying hope in Christ's call. Anchors are other typical symbols used during early Christianity. Nautical symbols were common in Graeco-Roman art, which surrounded the early Christians. Anchors are among the most common symbols and are found in many epitaphs accompanied by the word "hope" in different languages. Jensen suggests that the root of this symbol comes from St. Paul's letter to the Hebrews, in which he refers to an anchor "as a metaphor for steadfast hope (Hebrews 6:19)" (Jensen 48). "Since they held ships safely in place, anchors were ancient symbols of safety, and so of hope" (Taylor 41). Anchors symbolize hope for salvation and eternal life, a hope that Mother Teresa had in abundance.

## **Conclusion**

This project has truly been an incredible journey for me. As I reflect on the process, I find myself grateful for the opportunity to create artworks that resonate with a faith I hold close to my heart. The historical connections between art and the Catholic Church have interested me in

Catholic art, prompting an exploration of the vital role that artwork plays in our sacred spaces. Through the use of symbolism, artists possess the remarkable ability to craft pieces that serve as bridges between the divine and the mortal concepts. These creations not only convey complex spiritual meanings but also foster a deeper understanding of faith, establishing an inviting atmosphere for contemplation and heartfelt prayer.

In my artistic endeavors, I have sought to honor the holy individuals whose lives exemplify extraordinary faith and virtue. Each pencil mark is a conscious effort to incorporate symbols that effectively represent their unique spiritual journeys, capturing the essence of their contributions to the Church and society. I understand that each detail I choose to include is not merely decorative; rather, it serves as a meaningful engagement with the history of art within the context of the Church, reflecting on how these artistic traditions have shaped spiritual experiences over centuries.

I aspire for my artwork to enhance the environments in which it is displayed, transforming these spaces into sanctuaries conducive to profound prayer and meditation. I envision my creations as not only visual experiences but also invitations to reflect on one's own faith journey, encouraging viewers to pause, ponder, and connect with the divine amidst the business of life. Through this creative process, I aim to celebrate not only the remarkable lives of these holy individuals but also contribute to the Church's ongoing mission of inspiring, uplifting, and nurturing souls through the transformative beauty of art. I hope that in some small way, my work can serve as a conduit for grace, inspiring viewers to deepen their faith while fostering a love and appreciation for the rich tapestry of Catholic artistry that has endured through the ages.

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