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Pope Leo XIV declared a 15-year-old computer whiz the Catholic Church's first millennial saint Sunday (Sept. 7), giving the next generation of Catholics a relatable role model who used technology to spread the faith and earn the nickname "God's influencer."

Leo canonized Carlo Acutis, who died in 2006, during an open-air Mass in St. Peter's Square before an estimated 80,000 people, many of them millennials and couples with young children. During the first saint-making Mass of his pontificate, Leo also canonized another popular Italian figure who died young, Pier Giorgio Frassati.

Leo said both men created "masterpieces" out of their lives by dedicating them to God.

"The greatest risk in life is to waste it outside of God's plan," Leo said in his homily. The new saints "are an invitation to all of us, especially young people, not to squander our lives, but to direct them upwards and make them masterpieces."



Relics of Carlo Acutis and Pier Giorgio Frassati, left, are displayed during their canonization Mass celebrated by Pope Leo XIV in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican

Sept. 7. (AP/Andrew Medichini)

Acutis was born on May 3, 1991, in London to a wealthy but not particularly observant Catholic family. They moved back to Milan soon after he was born and he enjoyed a typical, happy childhood, albeit marked by increasingly intense religious devotion.

Acutis was particularly interested in computer science and devoured college-level books on programming even as a youngster. He earned the nickname "God's Influencer," thanks to his main tech legacy: a multilingual website documenting so-called Eucharistic miracles recognized by the church, a project he completed at a time when the development of such sites was the domain of professionals.

He was known to spend hours in prayer before the Eucharist each day. The Catholic hierarchy has been trying to promote the practice of Eucharistic adoration because, according to polls, most Catholics don't believe Christ is physically present in the Eucharistic hosts.

But Acutis limited himself to an hour of video games a week, apparently deciding long before TikTok that human relationships were far more important than virtual ones. That discipline and restraint has proved appealing to the Catholic hierarchy, which has sounded the alarm about the dangers of today's tech-driven society.

In October 2006, at age 15, Acutis fell ill with what was quickly diagnosed as acute leukemia. Within days, he was dead. He was entombed in Assisi, known for its association with another popular saint, St. Francis.



The body of Carlo Acutis, an Italian boy who died in 2006 of leukemia, lies in his tomb in Assisi, Italy, March 1. (AP/Gregorio Borgia, File)

In the years since his death, young Catholics have flocked by the millions to Assisi, where they can see the young Acutis through a glass-sided tomb, dressed in jeans, Nike sneakers and a sweatshirt. He seems as if he's sleeping, and questions have swirled about how his body was so well preserved, especially since parts of his heart have even toured the world as relics.

Both saint-making ceremonies had been scheduled for earlier this year, but were postponed following Pope Francis' death in April. Francis had fervently pushed the Acutis sainthood case forward, convinced that the church needed someone like him to attract young Catholics to the faith while addressing the promises and perils of the digital age.

"It's like I can maybe not be as great as Carlo may be, but I can be looking after him and be like, 'What would Carlo do?'" said Leo Kowalsky, an eighth grader at a Chicago school attached to the Blessed Carlo Acutis Parish.

Kowalsky said he was particularly excited that his own namesake — Pope Leo — would be canonizing the patron of his school. "It's kind of all mashed up into one thing, so it is a joy to be a part of," Kowalsky said in an interview last week.

Much of Acutis' popularity is thanks to a concerted campaign by the Vatican to give the next generation of faithful a "saint next door" who was ordinary but did extraordinary things in life. In Acutis, they found a relatable tech-savvy millennial — the term used to describe a person born roughly between 1981 and 1996 who was the first generation to reach adulthood in the new millennium.

The Vatican said 36 cardinals, 270 bishops and hundreds of priests had signed up to celebrate the Mass along with Leo in a sign of the saints' enormous appeal to the hierarchy and ordinary faithful alike.



Pope Leo XIV celebrates the canonization Mass of Carlo Acutis and Pier Giorgio Frassati in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican Sept. 7. (AP/Andrew Medichini)

An hour before the Mass, St. Peter's Square was already full with pilgrims, many of them young millennial Italians, many with toddlers in strollers.

"I learned from different people what his professors, his teachers said about his joy and the light he carried around him," said Leopoldo Antimi, a 27-year-old Roman who got to the square early to secure a spot. "So for me personally as an Italian, even on social networks that are used so much, it is important to have him as an influencer."

Matthew Schmalz, professor of religious studies at Holy Cross college in Worcester, Massachusetts, said Acutis' canonization extends the church tradition of popular piety to the digital age.

"He becomes an emblem or model of how Catholics should approach and use the digital world--with discipline and with a focus on traditional Catholic spirituality that defies the passage of time," he said in a statement. "He is a new saint of simplicity for the ever complex digital landscape of contemporary Catholicism."

Frassati, the other saint being canonized Sunday, lived from 1901 to 1925, when he died at age 24 of polio. He was born into a prominent Turin family but is known for his devotion to serving the poor and carrying out acts of charity while spreading his faith to his friends.

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