

# **The First Millennial Saint**

By: Johnny Vrba

## From Idea To Reality

In the summer of 2024, Johnny had just finished two years as a college campus missionary at the University of St. Thomas, in St. Paul, Minnesota with Saint Paul's Outreach. (Yes, that's a lot of saints!) During his time as a Catholic missionary he met Alli Michaels. Alli had a beautiful devotion to Carlo Acutis and shared his incredible story with Johnny. Johnny had the thought in early 2024, *"Hmmm if Carlo is beatified and soon to be canonized maybe I could make a masterpiece and deliver it myself to Mrs. Acutis."*

Johnny began work on **The First Millennial Saint** July 2024, and 400 hours later, was completed in late January 2025. During this time, Johnny traveled more than 100,000 miles to 16 countries. Johnny was leading mission trips and circumnavigating the planet on a study abroad program called Semester at Sea. In November 2024, during a leg across the Indian ocean, he heard news from home that Pope Francis announced Carlo's canonization date. Johnny immediately went to his cabin, opened his bag, and pulled out the green army figure that is now standing on top of the tank. Johnny kept this figure on him during all of his travels as a reminder of the work he would begin the moment he stepped off the ship.

Just as planned, Johnny flew home from Bangkok in December of 2024 and immediately began work on the piece in his friend's garage in Saint Paul, Minnesota. He worked from sunrise to sundown, planning, priming, painting, and placing the more than 1,000 figures. When the piece was about 80% completed, Johnny requested help from Porter, who coordinated the creation of a custom wooden crate. This crate kept Carlo safe in Porter's 15 passenger van that 11 men switched off driving for 20 hours through the night to Salt Lake City, UT for the largest Catholic conference in the USA.

When the SEEK25 conference was finished, Johnny drove the next leg of the journey by himself to Phoenix, Arizona, in a rental car with only 1 centimeter of room to spare in the trunk. Phew! Johnny carefully lifted Carlo out of the crate and revealed it to his parents for the first time. His mom said, "Oh wow! Is this for us?" Johnny smiled and replied, "I'm going to give it to Carlo's mom!" "How in the world is this thing getting to Italy in 1 piece?" "A bit of glue and a lot of prayer!"

After a few months of exercising every contact possible, from EWTN hosts to Archbishops, Johnny finally heard back from Dr. Isabel Reyes on March 17, 2025. He woke up to the WhatsApp message, "The day after the Mass you come close to us and we will make you talk to her." And with that information, Johnny began to fundraise and shipped Carlo to Porter's dorm in Rome. Johnny obsessively tracked Carlo through DHL and sent dozens of documents for two weeks until Italian customs approved the release of the painting and it was delivered safely to Bernardi. Praise the Lord!

Now it's time to ship the artist! If you're reading this...the masterpiece made it to Assisi!

Total work hours: **412**

Total distance the piece traveled: **8,744 miles/13,260 kilometers**

## Explanation

1. All of the black, light gray, dark gray, and white figures represent the culture of death who have their weapons fixed on the crucifix. The crucifix is the focal point of the piece.
2. The 187 outward facing colored figures represent Christians who are fighting against the culture of death. Carlo documented 187 Eucharistic miracles on his website.
3. The 11 standing 3 inch tall cowboys and Indians represent 11 disciples, Judas is not pictured.
4. St. Paul is depicted having fallen off his horse on the road to Damascus.
5. The background of the piece is grass with two soccer goals because Carlo loved to play the beautiful game.
6. On the four year anniversary of Carlos' death, Mrs. Acutis gave birth to twins, Francesca and Michele. Antonia attributes this health pregnancy to the intercession of Carlo.
7. Carlo had 4 dogs and 2 cats growing up which are seen relaxing around his desktop computer work station.
8. Various Pokémon are scattered around the piece, one of Carlo's favorite video games.
9. The white soldiers on Carlo's backpack straps are contained in a gate made of Nike shoe laces because this is what he wears in his tomb.
10. The white soldiers inside the gate represent sheep in the sheepfold from John 10
11. One of the miracles attributed to Carlo was the miraculous healing of a 4 year old Brazilian boy, Matheus, who was born with a malformed pancreas forcing him to vomit his food. Matheus said, "stop vomiting" as he venerated an image of Carlo's relic, immediately he had an intense hunger for steak and fries which he was able to keep down for the first time. The steaks are easy to see, the fries are more hidden. Hint: "The Eucharist is my highway to Heaven."
12. A young woman named Valeria fell off her bicycle while studying in Florence and suffered severe head trauma. The day her mother, Liliana, made a pilgrimage to Carlo, Valeria showed miraculous progress and soon her hemorrhaging entirely disappeared. The bicycle is placed on Carlo's head.
13. "The Eucharist is my highway to Heaven." This highway is depicted in the bottom left corner. The highway also shows Jesus's path to becoming our living bread. Jesus is shown carrying his cross, dying on it, and then resurrected.
14. The yellow road sign is cut directly out of Antonia's book, *My Son Carlo*. Pretty cool how perfectly it fits! The text size was not manipulated.
15. The video game controller represents Carlo's love for video games but he always played in moderation.
16. Carlos's favorite animal was the dolphin. He prayed to Jesus to see dolphins while on vacation with his grandfather and a pod of more than a dozen swam alongside their boat. Carlo's grandfather "had never seen anything like this in his life." Carlo researched

dolphins in Christian iconography, they are a symbol of Christ's salvation and protection for sailors...including me on Semester at Sea.

17. The green motherboard's of course represent Carlo's love for computers and his knowledge of coding and technology.
18. The green motherboard over Carlos's heart is connected via a single red cable (vein) to the motherboard on his mind showing that Carlo's love for God in his heart informed his mind, the two were not separate.
19. If you turn your head sideways, that same red cable is also a pulse line, forming 2 heartbeats.
20. This red cable/vein/pulseline is also exactly Carlo's height when stretched out straight, 1.82 meters, or 5 '11".
21. The 10 different adapters coming from the USB on the motherboard over Carlo's heart are "charging" Christian's who encounter the Lord through Carlos's website. The different colors and adapter heads represent Carlo being "all things to all men" and casting a wide net for the Lord to sort.
22. The ominous camouflaged white cable which comes in from an unidentified source in the bottom right corner represents the serpent, Satan, who is silently suffocating/tripping figures by comparison. Technology can be used as a weapon for God's kingdom as Carlo showed us or it can be wielded against it.
23. The blue rosary is a 3rd class relic of Carlo that Alli gave me which is wrapped around the motherboard over Carlo's heart, symbolizing his deep devotion to Mary.
24. The miniature scale represents Carlos' prophecy that he would pass away when he weighed 156 lbs/70 kilos
25. Finally, the 25th hidden Easter Egg, for we are now in the Easter season! May 1st is my 25th birthday and I could not think of a better gift than to gift this piece to Saint Carlo Acutis's mother. My favorite quote of St. Carlo is, "All people are born as originals but many die as photocopies." In honor of this beautiful quote, and the unrepeatability of this piece, never to be mass produced, we will take a polaroid photograph and glue it over Carlo's heart and I will sign the bottom.

Let us all be born and die as Jesus Christ's original masterpieces, and may *The First Millennial Saint* convict all who gaze upon it of this fact.







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