

St. Gianna Beretta Molla

Pope John Paul II had said to the youth in Denver, Colorado: «With time the threats against life have not grown weaker. They are taking on vast proportions... [T]hey are scientifically and systematically programmed threats. The twentieth century will have been an era of massive attacks on life, an endless series of wars and a continual taking of innocent human life» (August 14, 1993). We are faced with a «conspiracy against human life,» in which international institutions are organizing out-and-out campaigns to spread contraception, sterilization, abortion, and euthanasia, with the complicity of the media. Use of these practices is presented as a sign of progress and a victory for freedom, while the defenders of life are decried as enemies of freedom and progress (cf. Encyclical *Evangelium vitæ*, March 25, 1995, no. 17).

«Good news» for our time

In opposition to the culture of death and its dramatic consequences for civil peace and man's eternal destiny, the Church reminds us of God's Commandments which are engraved in the heart of every human being. Witness of God's love for humanity, She comes to the defense of the weakest, and stresses the importance of the fifth commandment (*Thou shalt not kill.*) «Since the first century the Church has affirmed the moral evil of every procured abortion. This teaching has not changed and remains unchangeable» (CCC, no. 2271). To give more concrete illustrations, the Church presents to us the examples of the saints. Thus did Pope John Paul II beatify **Gianna Beretta Molla**, a mother, on April 25, 1994. Her testimony for human life is «good news» for the men and women of our time.

The tenth of thirteen children (of whom five would die in infancy), Gianna was born on October 4, 1922, in Magenta, Italy, in a family where the parents, who belonged to the Third Order of Saint Francis and attended Mass every day, maintained a calm and Christian atmosphere. On Sunday afternoons, the children would accompany their father on his visits to the poor, the elderly, and the abandoned or neglected. The mother went out of her way to save money for these missions.

On April 4, 1928, Gianna made her First Communion. From then on, the Eucharist would be her indispensable daily food. At school she was an average student—only at the end of her primary school studies did she begin to excel there. She received Confirmation on June 9, 1930. Entering middle school, she was still not brilliant. Yet her Christian life was intense and radiant—a period of meditation every morning gave her the strength and the joy to love the whole day long. Of an open disposition, she forgave easily and patiently endured sufferings caused by differences of personality. She appreciated the beauty of nature and, during her vacations, took drawing or piano lessons. Gianna's spiritual formation and apostolate were strengthened by joining the Italian girls' branch of Catholic Action at the age of twelve.

An indelible mark

From March 16 to 18, 1938, Gianna attended a retreat according to St. Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises*. The many graces she received there marked her for the rest of her life. At the retreat, she went deep into the fundamental values of the spiritual life—the necessity of grace and prayer, the horror of sin, the imitation of Christ, mortification. Most of all, she began to see apostolate as an outstanding expression of charity. Among her resolutions, she wrote, «To do all

things for the Lord... To serve God, I will not go to the movies without being sure that the film is suitable and not scandalous or immoral... I prefer to die rather than commit a mortal sin... To say the «Hail Mary» every day so that the Lord might give me a holy death... The way of humiliation is the shortest way to reach holiness. To pray that the Lord lead me to Paradise.» She learned mental prayer, meaning to converse familiarly and intimately with God.

In 1942, Gianna suddenly lost her mother who was 53 years old. Four months later her father passed away. Of the Beretta children still living, four were already working, while three others were still in school. Gianna had just graduated from high school and considered becoming a missionary nun to Brazil. While waiting, she began studying medicine in Milan. Despite the difficulties at that time (Italy was at war), she worked seriously. When weary, she went to church: «When I am tired and feel I can't go on, I revive myself with a little meditation so as to speak with Jesus.» But her weak points caused her suffering. «The two shortcomings that you point out to me,» she wrote to a religious sister, «are very true. I am stubborn, I always do what I want when I should submit... I will make an effort. As to charity, I have tried for a while to overcome myself so as not to judge my neighbor, but sometimes, it's really difficult.» During her vacations Gianna skied and went mountain-climbing.

The years of her university studies were a special time for apostolate. Very active and full of initiative, she won the friendship of young women and organized outings, parties, and games with the goal of encouraging her friends in the love of God and neighbor. «She listened well and spoke little, and answered as though listening to an interior voice,» one of them said of her... «In the summer, she used to take her Catholic Action friends to her summer home for spiritual retreats.» She herself explained, «Merely speaking well doesn't lead, but giving an example does. Making the truth visible in yourself; making the truth loveable in offering yourself as an attractive and, if possible, heroic example... Don't be afraid to defend God, the Church, the Pope, and priests. We cannot remain indifferent towards this whole antireligious and immoral campaign... We must act, we must enter into all the fields of action—social, familial, political. And we must work, because all the forces of evil, dark and threatening, are joined together.»

Praying, even if everything distracts us

But action must be supported by prayer and sacrifice: «If we want our apostolate not to be in vain, but effective, we must be souls of prayer. Even if everything all around us during the day distracts us from prayer! Prayer must be made with faith in the omnipotence of God Who can help us... And if after having done our best, we suffer failure, let us accept it generously, for a failure well accepted by an apostle who did everything possible to succeed is more effective for salvation than a triumph.» She often recommended the virtue of purity and education in real love: «How can we preserve purity? By surrounding our bodies with a hedge of sacrifice. Purity is a virtue-summary—that is, it's a group of virtues... Purity becomes beauty, then also strength and freedom. The one who can resist and fight is free.»

In November 1949, Gianna received her doctorate in medicine and surgery. Then, out of love for children but also to be close to mothers, she specialized in pediatrics and opened a private health clinic in Mesero. She listened very patiently and kindly to each of her patients. When their illnesses were a consequence of a disordered moral life it greatly pained her, and she advised them with conviction to change their behavior. To particularly poor patients, she gave money as well as medication: «If I give care to a patient who has nothing to eat, what good is the medication?» Gianna considered her profession a genuine apostolate: «Everyone works in the service of man. We doctors work directly on man himself... The great mystery of man is Jesus:

'He who visits a sick person, helps me,' Jesus said... Just as the priest can touch Jesus, so do we touch Jesus in the bodies of our patients... We have opportunities to do good that the priest doesn't have. Our mission is not finished when medicines are no longer of use. We must bring the soul to God; our word has some authority... Catholic doctors are so necessary!»

All the ways of the Lord are beautiful

In the first months of 1954, Gianna again wondered what her vocation was. After much prayer, she decided on marriage and wrote to a friend: «The ways of the Lord are all beautiful, provided that the goal is always the same—to save our soul, and to bring many other souls to Paradise to glorify God.» On September 24, 1955, she married Pietro Molla; Father Joseph Beretta, Gianna's brother, received their vows. In a lecture to young female members of Catholic Action, Gianna explained, «Every vocation is a vocation to physical, spiritual, and moral maternity, because God has placed in us the instinct for life. The priest is a father (spiritually); religious sisters are mothers, mothers of souls... Preparing yourself for your vocation is preparing yourself to give life.» On November 19, 1956, a boy, Pierluigi, was born to the Beretta Molla home, followed by a girl, Maria Zita, on December 11, 1957, and another girl, Laura, on July 15, 1960. These three pregnancies were difficult for Gianna, but she was supported by her faith. To thank God after the birth of each of her children, she took from her savings to give to the missions a sum equal to six months of a worker's salary.

The moral and religious upbringing of her children was close to Gianna's heart. As soon as they could, she had them make an examination of conscience each evening, having them reflect on this or that action and observe why Jesus was not happy about it. Instead of scolding them on the spot, she waited for evening prayer to take stock of the day. She did not want to hit them or raise her voice too much, because she said, «Maybe these children will not have their mother with them for more than a short while. I don't want them to have bad memories of her.» Gianna's professional work did not keep her from her duties as a wife and mother. Nevertheless, after Laura's birth, she decided she would stop practicing medicine if she had a fourth child.

In August 1961, it appeared Gianna was pregnant again. But during the second month of the pregnancy, the mother felt a hard mass developing day by day alongside the uterus, threatening the child's life as well as her own. It was a fibroma that would have to be removed. Gianna was aware of the risks she was running. She was presented with three solutions, the first being the removal of the fibroma and the uterus containing the child. This operation would most certainly save the life of the mother, but the child would die, and she could never have another. The second option was the removal of the fibroma and an induced abortion. The mother's life would be saved and she could eventually have other children later—but this solution was contrary to God's law. The third option was the removal of just the fibroma, attempting not to interrupt the pregnancy in progress. Only this third possibility would allow the child to live, but it would put the mother's life in very serious danger.

A beloved wife and a happy mother of three beautiful children, Gianna had to choose. Would it be a solution safer for her, or the only solution to save the child's life—«her or me,» the child or the mother? She decided in favor of the life she felt developing in her—she agreed to risk her own life. Her love for the child was greater: «Nobody worry about me, as long as everything goes well for the baby!» she said forcefully to those around her.

Forgetting yourself and giving of yourself

The ascent to Calvary with Jesus crucified began. On September 6, the day of her operation, she

begged the surgeon again to do everything in his power to save the child, and not to worry about her. She confided to the priest who had come to encourage her: «Yes, I have been praying so much these days. With faith and hope, I have entrusted myself to the Lord, even in the face of this terrible word of medical science—either the mother's life or the child's. I have confidence in God, yes—now it's my turn to perform my duty as a mother. I renew to the Lord the offering of my life. I am ready for anything as long as they save my child.» The operation, which consisted of the removal of the fibroma while leaving the uterine cavity intact, was a success—the child was saved. Gianna's wish had been granted. Nevertheless, she was aware that in a few months the uterus could rupture, causing a fatal hemorrhage.

In spite of that, she radiated an intense joy, the indescribable joy of having safeguarded her pregnancy and the life of her child. She knew what it means to «be a mother»—forgetting yourself and giving of yourself. She drew this love of motherhood, love to the point of the heroic sacrifice of her life, from God, *the source of all fatherhood* and of all motherhood (cf. Eph. 3:15). Not letting the smile disappear from her face, Gianna spent the last months of her pregnancy in prayer and abandonment to the will of God, enduring great physical and moral suffering. On Holy Saturday, April 21, 1962, she gave birth to a little girl who at her Baptism received the name Gianna Emanuella. After giving birth, the mother's condition worsened. When the pain became too intense, she kissed her crucifix, «her great comfort.» She asked for a priest and fervently received the last sacraments. In her agony she continually repeated, «Jesus, I love You! Jesus, I love You!» On April 28, around 8 o'clock in the morning, Gianna died peacefully in the presence of her husband, who had agreed with her choice. Every day she had begged the Lord to give her the grace of a good and holy death. Having entered into the true Life which will never end, the Blessed, far from abandoning her family, intercedes for them with an even greater love.

Homage to mothers...

During her beatification on April 25, 1994, Pope John Paul II said: «Gianna Beretta Molla knew how to offer her life as a sacrifice so that the baby she bore in her womb—and who is with us here today—might live! As a surgeon, she was well aware of what to expect, but did not falter before sacrifice, confirming in this way the heroic nature of her virtues...[W]e would like to pay homage to all brave mothers who dedicate themselves to their own family without reserve, who suffer in giving birth to their children and who are ready to make any effort, to face any sacrifice, in order to pass on to them the best of themselves...

«How hard they have to fight against difficulties and dangers! How frequently they are called to face genuine 'wolves' determined to snatch and scatter the flock! And these heroic mothers do not always find support in their surroundings. On the contrary, the cultural models frequently promoted and broadcast by the media do not encourage motherhood. In the name of progress and modernity, the values of fidelity, chastity, sacrifice, in which a host of Christian wives and mothers have distinguished and continue to distinguish themselves, are presented as obsolete. As a result, a woman who is determined to be consistent with her principles often feels deeply alone, alone in her love which she cannot betray, and to which she must remain faithful. Her guiding principle is Christ, who has revealed the love which the Father bestows on us. A woman who believes in Christ finds a powerful support precisely in this love that bears everything. It is a love that enables her to believe that all she does for a child conceived, born, adolescent or adult, she does at the same time for a child of God. As Saint John states in today's reading: *We are called children of God, and that is what we are* (1 Jn. 3:1). We are children of God. When this reality is

fully revealed, we shall be like God, for we shall see him as He is (cf. 1 Jn. 3:2).»

In his encouraging words in the Encyclical *Evangelium vitae*, the Pope likewise shows his paternal concern for women who have had an abortion: «The Church is aware of the many factors which may have influenced your decision, and She does not doubt that in many cases it was a painful and even shattering decision. The wound in your heart may not yet have healed. Certainly what happened was and remains terribly wrong. But do not give in to discouragement and do not lose hope. Try rather to understand what happened and face it honestly. If you have not already done so, give yourselves over with humility and trust to repentance. The Father of mercies is ready to give you His forgiveness and His peace in the Sacrament of Reconciliation... With the friendly and expert help and advice of other people, and as a result of your own painful experience, you can be among the most eloquent defenders of everyone's right to life... [Y]ou will become promoters of a new way of looking at human life» (no. 99).

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