

The Life & Faith of St. Gianna Molla

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How I Learned About St. Gianna Molla

Over 20 years ago, I was invited to hear a talk on a woman who had become a blessed, blessed Gianna Molla. Now, I didn't know anything about her but I had heard that she was a wife and a mom and I was a mom of two young boys at the time. So I thought, why not? And I decided to go and attend the talk and find out about this woman.

When I entered the classroom where the talk was going to be held, the gentleman giving the presentation came in, carrying this beautiful satin wedding dress. And I'll never forget, he hung it up in front of us in the classroom and he said, "Someday, this dress is going to become a relic." He gave this presentation on a woman who was a doctor and a wife and a mother and a defender of human life. And I was captivated.

So when he offered us the opportunity to take some holy cards that he had brought and pressed them against the dress, making them relics, or soon to be, I took advantage of the opportunity and I took handfuls of holy cards and I walked up and I pressed them against the folds of the fabric of the dress. And I had in that moment, this amazing, beautiful encounter with a woman who was going to eventually become a dear friend of mine and a saint of the church, St. Gianna, who many of us know and love to this day.

The Life of St. Gianna

Now she has a lot to teach us about motherhood and the dignity of human life and the human person but she also has a lot to teach us about the need and the dignity of suffering. And that's what I want to talk about today in particular. My name is Claire Dwyer and I am delighted to introduce you to the life of St. Gianna. Who was she? First of all, she was born in Magenta, Italy on October 4th, 1922. Now, the date October 4th might ring a bell for some of you as the Feast Day of St. Francis of Assisi, which was very fitting because her parents were actually third order Franciscan and had named the oldest son in the family, Francesco and Gianna was actually baptized Gianna Francesca. She was the 10th of 13 children born to the family but five children died in infancy as was so often the case in those days. So, she was actually the seventh of the eight surviving children. She had one younger sister and the family was very devout and really had the Franciscan charism lived out in their home.

Living a Simple Life

They weren't poor, but they lived very simply. Their father was the administrator of a cotton mill and their mother was certified to teach nursery school but chose to stay home with the children. And they were taught by their parents to do to make do with less so that they could serve the poor. For example, they would sew their own clothes and then give the money that they would have spent on buying clothes to the missions.

So in other words, her parents really tried to instill in all of the family a spirit of complete self-giving. And this was going to become really fundamental and key to Gianna's spirituality. It was in a very real way, the spirit that would allow her to make that final sacrifice that she would become known for and be canonized for. You know, saints aren't born in vacuums. They in a very real sense, live their life in preparation for the sacrifices that God would demand of them down the road. And that was the case with Gianna. In a sense, I think of it as like the Lord setting the stage for the great final act of her life.

St. Gianna's Formation with her Family

So, the family went to mass every day. They prayed the rosary together every day and every single day, they consecrated themselves to the sacred heart of Jesus. Now, because she had such good formation at home, she was actually allowed to receive her first holy communion when she was only five years old. And from that day onward, she became a daily communicator. So the Eucharist was central to Gianna's life and education in addition to the faith was really important to the family. Among her brothers and sisters, there would be several doctors, there would be a pharmacist, engineers, two priests and a religious sister. But Gianna had to work really hard at school. It didn't come naturally for her, which makes the fact that she became a doctor, all that much more significant.

Now, when she was in secondary school and about 15 years old, Gianna lost her oldest sister, Amelia. Amelia was only 26 years old, and it was a huge blow for Gianna because the two of them were really close. In fact, it was Amelia that had prepared Gianna for her first holy communion. This was Gianna's first experience in life of deep suffering. And I read in a biography about her that it was at this time that she began to practice daily mental prayer that intimate communion with the Lord that we intentionally share our hearts with him and receive his love for us. And that key to the spiritual life really began in Gianna's life when she was 15, after the death of her sister. It was also around that time that Gianna went through an Ignatian retreat and this was going to be really pivotal in her spiritual life. We have her notes from that retreat. We have the list of resolutions that she wrote down for herself and among them was the resolution to never deliberately sin, to pray every day, to do all things for God, and to pray Hail Mary every day for the grace of a happy death.

Catholic Action

Now, when she was 12, she joined a movement called Catholic Action. This was going to be very significant in her life. It was a movement that her entire family was involved in and it was intended to mobilize the Catholic laity to first of all live a life of prayer, an intense spiritual life which would then inspire charitable and apostolic work. The motto of Catholic action was prayer, action, and sacrifice. And when she was a girl, she would from a very young age, take that motto to heart.

She would actually eventually become a leader herself in Catholic action. And so, she would devote herself to prayer. But then with all the free time that she had, she would also devote herself to apostolic work. She understood that the key to fruitfulness in our ministries and in our apostolates is daily intimacy and communion with the Lord. What kinds of apostolic work did she do while she planned retreats and conferences and outings for the younger girls? And we can't underestimate how important this would be down the road during those years of World War II, when Gianna was a leader in Catholic action.

The entire country of Italy was suffering tremendously. In World War II, hunger was a real thing. Poverty was rampant. And Gianna was giving these young girls hope even as everything was falling apart around them, which I think is so beautiful because we know that in times of crisis and suffering, there can be this temptation to kind of build walls around ourselves and turn inward in order to self-protect.

Gianna was teaching these girls and these young women that it was fundamental that we have to turn outward and serve others, especially in times of suffering. She would bring the girls into the homes of the sick to offer them food and medicine, to do housekeeping work. In fact, she would even give the poorest of these girls themselves money from her own pocket. As she was maturing in her faith and in her leadership abilities and in her studies, it was God's will too, that she would come to a deeper education in the cross because by the time she was 20, she would lose both of her parents just within four months of each other. Her mom was in her fifties, her dad was only in his sixties. So it was just this unexpected and very heavy cross that she had to bear. And because it was in the middle of the war at the time, all around Gianna buildings were being bombed. It was just chaos everywhere. And yet, even in the midst of all that suffering, she continued her studies and she continued to persevere and ended up going to medical school.

Becoming a Doctor

It was around this time that she started thinking bigger and began to pray about becoming a missionary to Brazil. She wanted to become an obstetrician and help the mothers who lacked proper medical care during their pregnancy and childbirth. And so she started to

study Portuguese and she looked into a course in obstetrics. This became a dream of hers because her brother was actually a missionary priest in Brazil. So she knew of the need for medical care there and really pursued that line of thought. In 1949, she received a degree in medicine from the University of Pavia. And then the following year, she opened up her first doctor's office even while continuing her studies because she wanted to specialize in pediatric medicine.

We have some notes of Gianna's from this time in her life and they reveal just this beautiful heart for the human person and the importance of great medical care. And I want to just read some of her thoughts to you. *"In one way or another," she writes, "Everyone in society works for the service of humanity. Physicians have opportunities that a priest does not have for our mission does not end when medicine is no longer of help. There still remains the soul that must be brought to God. Jesus says, whoever visits the sick is helping me. This is a priestly mission, just as the priest can touch Jesus. So we doctors, touch Jesus in the bodies of our patients in the poor, the young, the old and children. Jesus makes himself seen in our midst. Many doctors offer themselves to Him. When you have finished your earthly profession, if you have done this well, you will enjoy divine life because I was sick and you healed me."*

Now, she chose pediatrics because of her love of children but also because she felt the call to be near mothers. She had been mentoring young women for years. And so, this was just kind of a natural continuation of her desire to counsel women and to mentor them and to walk with them along their lives. Now, life in Italy continued to be hard even after World War II. And some of her patients had to pay her with things like chickens or eggs because they simply didn't have any money. And that was okay with Gianna. In fact, sometimes, she was the one who would leave money on the tables of her patients because she said *"If I give care to a patient who has nothing to eat, what good is medication?"*

Getting Married to Pietro Molla

And she had no share of patients because her reputation and her family's reputation preceded her. And so, people flocked to the clinic which she actually shared with her brother who was also a doctor. Now she continued the sense that she was called to be a missionary. She wanted to join her brother, Father Alberto in Brazil. But her family was getting concerned. Her health wasn't that strong. She couldn't tolerate heat, so it didn't seem like being a missionary to Brazil was something that she should pursue. And in fact, through spiritual direction, she did determine that she was called to the married state. So she let that dream go and she ended up marrying a shy engineer who lived across the street from her office and who had been noticing the attractive young doctor going in and out every day. He took advantage of the opportunity of meeting her at a mutual friend's first mass, and it went very well. And within months, she was married to Pietro Molla on September 24th, 1955. She was 32 and he was 42 years old.

On November, 1956, which was just a little over a year after they were married, Gianna became a mom for the first time. She had a baby boy named Pierluigi. Life was good, but it definitely had its sufferings. Gianna's pregnancy was incredibly difficult as were all of her pregnancies. There was a lot of stress at work, Gianna and Pierluigi had other health issues, but overall, they were happy and Gianna continued in her medical practice even while she raised her son. But before her baby was even a year-old, she was pregnant again, and she had a baby girl, Maria Zita, who was nicknamed Maria Lena. Shortly afterwards, she had Laura, and that was once again, a very difficult pregnancy in which she ended up in the hospital for an extended time, at the same time that her husband, Pietro was on a two-month long business trip to the United States.

The Death of St. Gianna

Gianna would have two more miscarriages, excuse me, before her fourth pregnancy. And her fourth pregnancy was the pregnancy and the birth that would make her a saint. She was diagnosed during that pregnancy with a fibroid tumor of the uterus early on. And although she could have opted for a hysterectomy which would've been safer for her, but would have ended up in indirectly causing the death of the child, of course. She freely and unhesitatingly chose to have a risky surgery, which would remove the tumor but would give the baby the greatest. Well, really, the only chance at life.

Before the surgery, she looked at her husband very intently and told him, *"If you have to decide between me and the child, do not hesitate. I demand it. The child, save it."* Well, the surgery was a success and Gianna's pregnancy continued and she delivered via C-section, which was necessary because of her prior surgery for the tumor. A healthy 10 pound baby girl, Gianna Emanuela on Holy Saturday, which was April 21st in 1962. But Gianna's condition immediately following the delivery began to deteriorate. Due to a severe infection in the lining of her uterus, which was a result of the C-section. She died repeating, "Jesus, I love you. Jesus, I love you." A week later on April 28th, 1962.

A Footnote Written by Pietro Molla

Now, shortly after that, first encounter of St. Gianna that I had with her wedding dress. I ended up reading a book of her letters to her husband and a short biography, the story of her life. And one of the things that struck me the most as I was reading, was actually a small footnote in the book of letters to her husband. It would've been easy to miss but to me, it was incredibly important. In this footnote, her husband tells some of her last words to him, while she was in the hospital, suffering before her death. These are Pietro's words.

"I still see Gianna when on Easter morning in 1962, in the maternity ward of the Monza Hospital. She took the child in her arms with great effort. She kissed her and looked at her with a sadness and an anguish. That to me, are the proof of her awareness that she

would soon orphan her. From that day, her pain became constant. She invoked her mother to stay near her and help her because she could not make it. Such was her pain. It seemed like a slow, dramatic sacrifice accompanying that of Christ on the cross. Her suffering became even more intense on Monday. I tried to be near her all the time. So I spent the nights in Monza in my old College of St. Joseph. And then fortunately, her sister, mother Virginia, came from India and remained at her side throughout. During the night, between Tuesday and Wednesday after Easter, her condition sharply worsened. Wednesday morning, it took a temporary turn for the better. And she told me,

“Pietro, I was on the other side already and if I could tell you what I saw one day, I will. But since we were too happy with our wonderful children, full of health and grace, with all of heaven's blessings, they sent me back here to suffer more because it is not right to knock at the Lord's door without having suffered greatly.”

This was the last time I was able to speak with my wife. Afterwards, she said a few more words, but for me, this was her testament of joy in suffering of devotion and faith in God.”

The Importance of Suffering

I think about that. I think what a powerful lesson that is for us. No one gets into heaven without the sanctifying work of suffering. Here's the thing though. This woman knew suffering. She knew war. She knew death even from a young age. She knew sickness. She knew the suffering of motherhood and hard work and sacrifice for others. And by this time, she knew physical agony without even pain medication for three long days. And it still wasn't enough, even for someone who had largely lived a blameless life. So, I remember that when I want to complain, I remember her words. It is not right to knock at the Lord's door without having suffered greatly.

You know, the Lord loves us so much and suffering is actually a sign of that love. It purifies us. It detaches us from everything that's not him. And it is in that way, even in the anguish, a holy thing. Suffering allows us to participate in the redemption of the world alongside Jesus Christ. What a sign of his love to allow us to come alongside him in the great work of redemption and restoration. Suffering is an intimate encounter with the Lord which readies us for the even deeper union that we'll experience in heaven. There just is no Christian life without suffering such that even this good holy woman would say, I'm going to say it again. *“It's not right to knock at the Lord's door without having suffered greatly.”*

So I just encourage you to remember that in your sufferings, especially this Lent and asked St. Gianna to bear them with, like her to help you bear them with great courage, grace, and self-sacrifice.

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One final note, do you remember how St. Gianna wanted to be a missionary doctor in Brazil and help pregnant women? Well, the two miracles that were needed for her beatification and canonization happened to pregnant and postpartum women in Brazil. It's just a reminder that the Lord is actually the source of our hopes and dreams, and he will bring them to fulfillment in his way and in his time. On that end, St. Gianna, pray for us.