

The Catholic Physician is In: Dr. Gianna Beretta Molla, physician and saint

We are encouraged by our religious leaders to study and emulate the saints to receive inspiration and guidance in our daily lives. I would like to share the story of a physician, mother and saint that our local Catholic medical guild regularly prays to, Dr. Gianna Beretta Molla.

Born in Italy in 1920 to a large Catholic family, she was the 10th of 13 children. She studied at the University of Pavia, where she received her medical degree. She went on to practice medicine, concentrating on babies, mothers, the elderly and the poor. She fell deeply in love and married Pietro Molla in 1955.

When she was two months pregnant with her fourth child, she began to have unexplained pain and was diagnosed with a fibroid tumor growing next to the baby in her womb. Her doctors recommended a complete hysterectomy, which would have sacrificed her baby. She refused any treatment that might harm her unborn child. Instead, she decided to take the risk of having only the fibroid removed and continuing the pregnancy. Her baby was born healthy on April 21, 1963, and named Gianna Emanuela. Over the next week she suffered unbearable pain from complications related to the delivery. She died seven days after she gave birth, repeatedly exclaiming, “Jesus, I love you!”

Dr. Gianna Molla’s first adjudicated miracle, required for beatification, occurred at a hospital in Brazil that was founded by her brother. He was a missionary priest, Father Alberto Berretta. In 1977 a woman delivered a stillborn infant at this hospital and subsequently developed a life-threatening vaginal abscess that spread quickly. The hospital did not have the expertise on staff for the needed surgery and recommended transfer to another hospital, 600 km away. A nun by the name of Sister Bernardina joined with two nurses in prayer, asking Gianna Molla to intercede before they embarked on this long and dangerous transfer. The patient was immediately healed.

Dr. Gianna’s beatification occurred on Mother’s Day in 1994, the Year of the Family. Pope John Paul II presented her as a model for all mothers, saying, “A woman of exceptional love, an outstanding wife and mother, she gave witness in her daily life to the demanding values of the Gospel. By holding up this woman as an exemplar of Christian perfection, we would like to extol all those high-spirited mothers who give themselves completely to their family, who suffer in giving birth, who are prepared for every labor and every kind of sacrifice, so that the best they have can be given to others.”

In 1997, at the second International Celebration of the Family, Gianna Emanuela, a physician as well, gave testimony to her mother. “Dear Mom, thank you for having

given me life two times: when you conceived me and when you permitted me to be born ... My life seeks to be the natural continuation of your life, of your joy of living, of your enthusiasm, and it finds its full meaning in the engagement and dedication to whoever lives in suffering. Dear mom, intercede always for all mothers and all families who turn to you and entrust themselves to you.” Pope John Paul II was in attendance and it was reported that this prayer brought tears to his eyes.

The second official miracle also occurred in Brazil, in 2003. A young lady was 16 weeks pregnant when her water broke. She was told that there was no chance of a successful pregnancy. The doctors recommended an abortion to save her life, since infection was inevitable. She and her husband refused to accept this and asked their bishop, who had married them, for guidance. They all prayed to Blessed Gianna Molla, asking for a miracle. Despite the absence of amniotic fluid, the baby continued to grow in the womb and on May 31, 2000, was born healthy. The baby was appropriately named Gianna Maria. Their obstetrician was so amazed and inspired that he converted to Catholicism.

In 2004 Dr. Gianna Molla was canonized a saint by Pope John Paul II. Not only were her children present, but so was her 92-year-old husband.

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