

AN
EXEMPLARY
COUPLE

SAINT GIANNA BERETTA
and PIETRO MOLLA

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and PIETRO MOLLA

Their Marital Journey and Message Today

VALENTINA DI MARCO

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Dedicated to my parents Paolo and Lucia.

*Saint Gianna,
help us to pray for a better world
where the family returns to being
the point of reference
to overcome life's adversities.*

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FOREWORD

I N every age of human history, God raises up holy men and women to light the way and inspire us to holiness of life during the days of our earthly pilgrimage with its true destiny: eternal life. Valentina Di Marco's book, written originally in Italian and now published in English translation, *An Exemplary Couple: Saint Gianna Beretta and Pietro Molla. Their Marital Journey and Message Today*, offers a striking literary portrait of this saintly couple to inspire us, especially the married, on the daily pilgrimage to our lasting home in Heaven. The book, with remarkable simplicity, presents the profound nature of the marital vocation, relationship, and life of Saint Gianna Beretta Molla and her saintly husband Pietro Molla. The author, in her study to prepare the writing of the book, was blessed to enjoy the counsel of her learned mentor Monsignor Ennio Apeciti who has the care of the Service of the Causes of Saints in the Archdiocese of Milan. She also drew great inspiration from the intimate and heartfelt witness of Dr. Gianna Emanuela Molla, M.D., the youngest child of Saint Gianna and Pietro Molla.

The book begins with a brief biographical section that includes new details about the lives of the saintly couple, especially in their families of origin. It is particularly rich in details about the life of Pietro Molla, which have not been included in previous publications. Pietro, who was a truly humble man, kept his personal life hidden as he generously shared as much as possible the details of the life of his saintly wife. As a widower, he steadfastly devoted all his energy, first, to being a good father for his young children who had lost their mother in death, and then, to carrying out with excellence

his service as an engineer of the renowned S.A.F.F.A. Company [*Società per Azioni Fabbriche Fiammiferi e Affini*—Company for the Fabrication of Matches and Related Products].

Exploring the rich correspondence of Pietro and Gianna, Valentina Di Marco illustrates the deeply grounded spirituality of their spousal relationship. In studying the language of their very personal and moving letters, she presents the depth of their love for God, for the Blessed Virgin Mary, and for each other, their family, and their neighbor. Their correspondence, much of which has been published, is a testimony to the work of Divine Grace at work in their hearts as husband and wife, father and mother, for their eternal salvation and that of their children.

You have in your hands the fruits of Valentina Di Marco's study. She shows the virtues which marked the relationship of Pietro and Gianna, distinguishing three distinct time periods of their lives together: the time during their engagement, the time during their marriage, and the time of their parenting. In a wonderful way, she illustrates the goodness of their relationship through authoritative texts of the Church's Magisterium, especially as it is presented in the writings of the Roman Pontiffs. In each of the distinct times of their exemplary relationship we see a deep prayer life and an abiding trust in Divine Providence, whether in joyful times or in times of sorrow. We know well that they experienced many difficulties and much suffering in their life together, and that their response was always steadfast faith and trust in God and in His promises. In a particular way, the author shows how deep faith and hope sustained Pietro after the death of his beloved Gianna, as a young mother, and again, just two years after the death of Gianna, when his dear child Maria Zita, called Mariolina, died in her seventh year of life.

The author illustrates the couple's struggles, their genuine human fears and challenges, and their blessings—Pietro's as an engineer and Gianna's as a medical doctor—and their strengths derived especially from their communication with God through prayer, devotion, and

the Sacraments, and from their heartfelt communication with each other. Saint Gianna and her saintly husband, Pietro, are contemporary heroes of the much-needed New Evangelization—living in Christ with new energy and new enthusiasm like His first disciples—promoted by Pope Saint John Paul II, especially in what pertains to the inviolability of innocent and defenseless human life, and the integrity of marriage and family as the cradle of human life. Reading the book, we understand how they fulfilled the call of the married to be the instruments of each other’s sanctification. We see how recognizing their own dependance upon God and upon each other, they relied upon each other and received strength from each other.

Enjoying the fruits of Valentina Di Marco’s study, we see how the solemnly declared heroic sanctity of Saint Gianna had everything to do with the holiness of life of her husband Pietro. Both Pietro and Gianna, as every married couple should be, were dedicated to work for the salvation of the spouse’s soul. Of special note is how the excellent study of the author opens a view into the dimensions of Pietro’s holiness of life. Indeed, his sacrifices and generosity, as well as his hard work on the Cause of Beatification and Canonization of Saint Gianna, enabled the world to know the most beautiful story—in all its rich details—of the life of his beloved spouse, Saint Gianna. How much more we can learn about their life as a couple now that we also have his story, beautifully woven together with that of his wife, a canonized saint. We need the example of married love, of marital fidelity and lifelong sacrifice today more than ever. Saint Gianna and Pietro Molla are truly examples for our time.

We live in a world in which the supreme goods of marriage and the family, and human life are so little known and so often violated. In stark contrast, Pietro and Gianna bring to the world a powerful testimony to the faithful, enduring, and lifegiving love of marriage. Their testimony inspires hope and renewed commitment to the family as the foundation of the life of all society. Their story can inspire

a conversion of life in those who are inattentive and careless in fulfilling the wonderful call to the married life.

With these important considerations in mind, I express heartfelt gratitude to Valentina Di Marco for her in-depth study of the heroically holy couple Pietro Molla and Gianna Beretta Molla. May her account of their exemplary holiness inspire us all to recognize and respect more fully the union of man and woman in marriage in accord with God's plan for our salvation and for the salvation of the world.

RAYMOND LEO CARDINAL BURKE

May 31, 2024.





Gianna with Pierluigi, near her car, 1957.

INTRODUCTION

“From Bernate I went to Cascina Crespi, because I was called for a medical visit, and then I went to Mesero.”¹

THIS phrase is taken from one of the numerous letters that Saint Gianna Beretta, a pediatrician, exchanged with her husband, engineer Pietro Molla. Apparently, this would seem to be an insignificant excerpt, the chronicle of an ordinary working day, no different from all the others; the letter does not go into further detail, but what emerges is the availability of a doctor always present when called for a medical visit. If this excerpt seems not very significant, or even insignificant, to most people, to this writer, this phrase is a herald of confirmations, gratitude, and inspirations for the following work.

The mentioned “*Cascina Crespi*” is a cottage situated on a country road connecting Mesero (Pietro Molla’s birthplace, where Dr. Beretta’s medical office was located, and where today both Gianna and Pietro rest in the cemetery’s family chapel) and Casate, the small hamlet of Bernate Ticino where this writer has always lived. In the “*Cascina Crespi*,” populated by several families, the family of my grandparents Pietro and Annetta also lived, with their children Antonio, Cristina, and Luigi; my father Paolo was born there on November 12, 1954, thanks to the intervention of Dr. Beretta. Saint

¹ Letter of 14 December 1955, in Gianna Beretta. Pietro Molla, *Lettere*, edited by E. Guerriero, Ed. San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo (Milan) 2012, p. 108. A new edition of the work was printed by Cantagalli Publishers in 2023.

Gianna was the doctor who took care of my family, and a friend of my grandmother; she helped her during her penultimate uncompleted pregnancy and her last one, which gave birth to my father; she was also the doctor of my uncles and my father. My uncles still remember when, in case of need, they rushed to the main road to stop her car and divert it towards their cottage; they often recall how she always complimented my grandmother for the beauty, in particular, of my uncle Luigi, and how she always said: “*If I will have a son, I’ll call him Luigi.*” Gianna and Pietro’s firstborn indeed took the name Pierluigi, in homage to his paternal grandfather, as their daughter Gianna Emanuela, whom I have had the pleasure to know, has confirmed.

Then, Saint Gianna has been part of my family history; a family that is not native to these areas, but that is the fruit of a Abruzzese (from the Abruzzo Region) “*carabiniere*” (a kind of Italian policeman) grandfather and of a saintly Piemontese grandmother transplanted to the Lombard countryside.

In December 1955, when the letter was written from which the excerpt above is taken, my paternal family was still living at “*Cascina Crespi*,” before moving to nearby Casate; it is not possible to know whom Saint Gianna went to visit that day, but I like to think that she might have gone to cure a disease of my father and his brothers.

As a result of these “family” reflections, it seemed natural therefore to dedicate my Master’s thesis in Religious Sciences to Saint Gianna.

The area that has been chosen to study in depth is more strictly biographical; I got married on May 31, 2013. As the theme of vocation, engagement, marriage, and family became increasingly important in my personal experience, I wanted to study it in depth through an exceptional document: the letters exchanged between Saint Gianna and her husband, Pietro.

It is a correspondence that is worth as much as the Magisterium of the popes and the Church because it is the simple putting into

practice of the teaching of Jesus. The letters express, with a language that is at times very poetic, all the love that, right from the start, united Gianna and Pietro, their purposes, their total dedication to the other and to the vocation of family. They are letters that exude joy, while facing the daily difficulties of every day and every family.

The publication of these letters makes it possible to enter the private life and the deepest feelings of a man and a woman who have been able to love until the end, in the absolute respect of the other and in the will to give and defend the precious and inestimable gift of life.

Faced with the objection of those who say that Gianna Beretta was canonized for a gesture (setting aside her own life to defend and save her daughter's) that many other less "famous" mothers would have done, and have done, it would be enough to read only a few passages of these letters. In this correspondence is set down, in black and white, the most significant part of a life totally lived on the teaching of the Gospel, also in the primary sphere of one's personal vocation.

It is a practical demonstration of how holiness can be lived even in everyday life, in the normal things of life, and, in particular, in married life, as Cardinal Martini reminded young people participating in Spiritual Exercises in the Cathedral at the conclusion of Gianna's beatification process:²

*"The testimonials say: she was a very normal woman, who practiced her profession as a doctor very well; she was an excellent mother; she liked being in the world; she radiated joy and enthusiasm around her. But her confidence in Providence was very strong."*³

² 21 March 1986.

³ E. Apeciti, *Voci di Chiesa per santa Gianna*, Centro Ambrosiano, Milan 2004, pp. 29–30.

This work begins with a brief biographical presentation of the protagonists, Gianna and Pietro, and with the chronicle, through direct testimonies, of the most significant moments of their married life: their engagement time, marriage, the conception of parenthood, and their experience as parents.

An effort has then been made to analyze their marital journey through their correspondence, bringing out the distinctive features of their relationship as fiancés, spouses, and parents; in each stage, the most significant and, perhaps, curious characteristics have been emphasized.

A fundamental characteristic immediately emerges: the great personality and spirituality of Pietro Molla. The joyful and profound faith of Saint Gianna, her gifts as a young person involved in Catholic Action, as a doctor at the service of neighbor, as a wife in love and as an attentive mother, have always been talked about; since the year of his death (in 2010), the figure of the engineer Pietro Molla, the worthy spouse of a holy woman, has also begun to be studied in depth.



Gianna and Pietro in London, 1961.

In the final part of this work, we wanted to compare what emerged from the daily spirituality of the Beretta-Molla spouses with the texts of the Magisterium and the messages of the Popes regarding engagement, marriage, prayer in the family, work, and parenthood. What emerges is how much Gianna and Pietro are both the forerunners and the embodiment of the magisterium that followed them.

In the conclusions, an effort has been made to highlight how Gianna and Pietro, through their marital journey, can be an example and can convey their message even today, in a society in which marriage and the family are continually diminished and denigrated.

GIANNA BERETTA

“When Gianna passed away, only her sacrifice was known. Bishop Carlo Colombo himself, in the letter sent to her brother in which he invited him to collect some testimonies, spoke of extraordinary sacrifice; after all, he did not know Gianna’s whole life. So initially we thought of the extraordinary gesture of a martyr. Then, when her life was examined, and Gianna’s writings were read and studied, we then realized that Gianna’s whole life was an uninterrupted gesture of Christian witness, of grace. Then, it was this deepening that led to the final image of a woman, of a mother beatified precisely for the way in which she was able to live all the phases of her life.”⁴

AS also pointed out in the testimony of her husband, Pietro Molla, for a long time Gianna Beretta was remembered only for the final choice of her life: to continue with her pregnancy to give birth to the baby girl she was carrying in her womb, and, therefore, to put her life at the highest risk. In September 1961, at the start of a new pregnancy, a large fibroid was found in her uterus; her brother Ferdinando (called Nando), a medical doctor, recalls:

⁴ P. Molla - E. Guerriero, *Gianna la donna forte. La beata Gianna Beretta Molla nel ricordo del marito*, Ed. San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo (Milan) 1995, p. 92. A new edition of the work was printed by Cantagalli Publishers in 2024.

“While I was examining her, I immediately realized that a large fibroid was growing next to her uterus which, among other things, was beginning to cause her intestinal colics that in a short time would have become more and more painful. I therefore had her urgently re-examined by Professor Mario Vitali, chief gynecologist of the hospital in Monza, who confirmed my diagnosis and recommended a timely operation.”⁵

Before the surgery to remove the fibroids, precisely because she was a doctor and aware of the risks, Gianna begged the surgeon to save her baby in any case.

Her brother Ferdinando himself writes this in the clinical report drawn up after the operation at which he had assisted:

“[. . .] Before the operation, in the presence of Professor Vitali, her husband and myself, the patient did not hesitate to put the life of her creature before her own, [. . .] and she begged the surgeon to be inspired, during his surgery, by this desire of hers.”⁶

The surgery seemed successful, but on the eve of giving birth Gianna remained convinced to put the new life before her own. She told her husband Pietro, “*in a firm and at the same time serene tone of voice, with a profound gaze that he will never forget:*

‘If you must decide between me and the baby, do not hesitate: choose—and I demand it—the baby. Do save the baby.’⁷

Pietro, who knew the thoughtfulness and the strength of his wife’s decisions well, felt obliged in conscience to respect Gianna’s will,

⁵ G. Pelucchi, *L’amore più grande. Santa Gianna Beretta Molla*, Ed. Paoline, Milan 2004, p. 132.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

⁷ *Santa Gianna Beretta Molla: Una Vita per la Vita*, edited by G. E. Molla, Ed. Fondazione Santa Gianna Beretta Molla, Mesero (Milan) - Associazione Amici di Santa Gianna Beretta Molla, Magenta (Milan) 2010, p. 14.

although aware of the possible painful consequences for his family. But Gianna was convinced that the new baby had the same rights as the other three children, Pierluigi (born November 19, 1956), Maria Zita called Mariolina (born December 11, 1957, who died on February 12, 1964, of acute glomerulonephritis), and Laura (July 15, 1959). She also knew that she was the only means of Providence to bring that baby into the world. For the education and raising of the children Gianna relied on Providence, her husband, and their relatives. On the morning of April 21, 1962, Holy Saturday, Gianna gave birth by caesarean section to little Gianna Emanuela at the San Gerardo Hospital in Monza. However, her condition worsened with fever and excruciating abdominal pains caused by septic peritonitis. Her ordeal then began, assisted by some relatives and her sister Virginia, a Canossian nun who had inexplicably and providentially returned from a mission in India.

*“I returned by chance to Italy, from the mission, just in time to see her again . . . I had not been well and in India my superiors had sent me for a rest in the mountains to recover. While I was up there, I thought that perhaps I could ask Mother General for permission to return to my home in Magenta. [. . .] It seemed that Mother General’s permission would never come. Finally, one day, I learned that I could leave. Immediately, some officials who knew us facilitated the necessary papers and found me a place on the first ship that sailed for Italy and, fortunately, this ship reached Italy in only eleven days instead of the usual fifteen. Without this unexpected speed, I would have arrived after my sister’s death.”*⁸

Mother Virginia recalls those moments, once she arrived at the bedside of her sister, with whom she had always had a strong bond:

⁸ G. Pelucchi, *L’amore più grande. Santa Gianna Beretta Molla*, Ed. Paoline, Milan 2004, p. 32.

*“She refused any sedative, in order to always be conscious and aware of what was happening. Not only that, but also so that she could be lucid in her relationship with her Jesus, whom she constantly invoked.”*⁹

Despite the treatments, her condition worsened. Her brother Ferdinando had accepted from Gianna the task of alerting her with a predetermined phrase when the time of her death was imminent. Lacking the courage to do so, he asked Mother Virginia, her sister, to tell her:

*“Have courage, Gianna, Dad and Mom are in Heaven waiting for you—are you happy to go there?”*¹⁰

Mother Virginia also recalls:

*“In the movement of her eyelash one could read her complete and loving adherence to the Divine Will, even if veiled by the pain of having to leave her beloved children who were still so small. Gianna, like her Jesus, gave herself up to the Father.”*¹¹

At dawn on April 28, as she wished and had previously asked of Pietro, Gianna was brought back to her home in Ponte Nuovo di Magenta, where she died at 8 a.m. She was only thirty-nine. Her heroic choice recalls Jesus’s sacrifice on the cross, but above all crowns an entire existence based on Christian principles and on following the Gospel message in her vocation as doctor, wife, and mother, and as an active participant of the Church through Catholic Action. Only an in-depth examination of her biography revealed a complete

⁹ *Santa Gianna Beretta Molla: Una Vita per la Vita*, edited by G. E. Molla, Ed. Fondazione Santa Gianna Beretta Molla, Mesero (Milan) - Associazione Amici di Santa Gianna Beretta Molla, Magenta (Milan) 2010, p. 14.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

Christian woman, who shows how holiness can be achieved by every baptized person also in the vocation of work and marriage.

*“In our own days too the Church is constantly enriched by the witness of the many women who fulfil their vocation to holiness. Holy women are an incarnation of the feminine ideal; they are also a model for all Christians, a model of the “sequela Christi,” an example of how the Bride must respond with love to the love of the Bridegroom.”*¹²

Gianna was a woman fully integrated in her time, at the forefront of thought and action: beautiful and intelligent, cultured and a convicted Christian. Always well-dressed and well-groomed, she wore the jewels given by her husband without affectation. She painted, had a driver’s license (unusual in the 1940s and 50s) and loved music, theatrical performances, and outdoor sports:

*“She knew how to enjoy the beautiful things in life; she liked art and music; she was a mountain climber and a very good skier. She was very elegant, liked to dress well, and she knew how to enjoy the beautiful things that the Eternal Father gives us.”*¹³

In one of her early letters to her husband, Gianna herself testifies, especially, to her love for the mountains and skiing:

“I get up at 8 o’clock in the morning (how lazy! by then you’re already at the office!) because at 8:30 a.m. there is Holy Mass. [. . .] After breakfast, we immediately set off on our skis and down . . . the slopes. At 11, I usually take lessons with the ski instructor and . . . modesty aside, I have learned to make even

¹² *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 27.

¹³ From the interview with her son Pierluigi Molla on the occasion of the VII World Meeting of Families, held from May 30–June 3, 2012 in Milan http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F5SQ06KaZ_I.

difficult descents. But do not worry, there is no danger because where the descent is too steep the teacher makes you go down the easiest way."¹⁴

Gianna's well-groomed, elegant, and extremely jovial appearance can be also seen from the numerous photographs available. She is one of the first saints of whom we have images taken from everyday life.

A few weeks before her fourth delivery, after which she lost her life, Gianna sought to entertain herself with fashion magazines to forget her anxieties (albeit hidden from her husband and family) regarding the difficult pregnancy; in fact, Pietro mentions it:

*"[...] the two fashion magazines you had me buy in Paris, where I had to go for work in March 1962, when you said to me: 'If the Lord keeps me here, I want to let off some steam!'"*¹⁵

Gianna's inner strength not only transformed into spiritual and apostolic commitment but also into energy for fun activities.

*"My wife, for example, loved and practiced sports: she played tennis, skied, and went mountain climbing. Another memory dear to me is that of dancing. Gianna knew how to dance well. The last time I danced with her at the Grand Hotel in Stockholm in 1961 she was admired by those present. She, therefore, had a full, overflowing life."*¹⁶

¹⁴ Letter of 23 March 1955, in Gianna Beretta. Pietro Molla, *Lettere*, edited by E. Guerriero, Ed. San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo (Milan) 2012, pp. 73-74.

¹⁵ From the testimony of Pietro Molla in *Gianna Sorriso di a Dio*, quarterly Publication edited by Fondazione Santa Gianna Beretta Molla, Year 3 no. 8, December 2004, p. 1.

¹⁶ P. Molla - E. Guerriero, *Gianna la donna forte. La beata Gianna Beretta Molla nel ricordo del marito*, Ed. San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo (Milan) 1995, p. 53.

The Family of Origin

Giovanna Francesca Beretta was born on October 4, 1922 (the feast of Saint Francis of Assisi) in Magenta (Milan) in the country house of her paternal grandparents (in the current Via Roma 89) and was baptized in the Basilica of San Martino on the 11th of the same month by her paternal uncle, Fr. Giuseppe. She was the tenth of thirteen children, five of whom died in infancy (Davide, Rosina, and Pierina were killed by the Spanish flu; Guglielmina and Anna Maria died very young). Three of her siblings consecrated themselves to God.

The secret of Gianna's holiness seems to lie precisely in her family of origin; as her husband Pietro recalls,

*"Gianna had the immeasurable gift of deeply and exemplary Christian parents."*¹⁷

Her parents, Franciscan Third Order members, were known for their simple and great faith. They were married on October 12, 1908, in the church of San Bartolomeo in Milan.

Alberto Beretta (1881–1942), her father, was an old-fashioned man, *"he spoke little and thought a lot"* as his son Fr. Giuseppe recalls.¹⁸ He lost his mother at the age of four and attended school as a boarding student at the Diocesan *Collegio San Carlo* in Milan. He worked at the Cantoni cotton mill for thirty-eight years and made great sacrifices to allow all his children to study until graduation, by reducing useless expenses, like when out of the blue he quit smoking cigars.

All the children rewarded their father's efforts by obtaining brilliant results in their educational and professional careers: Amalia, called Lucci, was a pianist but died at the age of only twenty-seven. Francesco

¹⁷ E. Apiciti, *Gianna Beretta Molla. Amare la vita*, Centro Ambrosiano, Milan 2004, p. 16.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

became an engineer, as did Giuseppe, who also became a priest; Zita was a pharmacist; Ferdinando and Gianna became doctors, as did Virginia, who became a Canossian missionary nun; and Enrico, who became a Capuchin missionary priest with the name of Father Alberto Maria. In this regard, Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini wrote:

*“I am impressed by the fact that Gianna and her siblings have all achieved prestigious professional qualifications: two engineers, four doctors, a pharmacist, and a concert performer. These results certainly reward each one’s intellectual gifts and earnest efforts, also reflecting the economic possibilities and the wise administration of the family’s assets. But I believe that their parents’ way of listening to them was a determining factor.”*¹⁹

Maria De Micheli (1887–1942), her mother, was the eldest of five daughters, and from a young age, she had thought of entering the religious life, but then she dedicated herself entirely to family. She went to Mass every morning with her husband and children and was close to each of her children, even learning Latin and Greek so she could follow them better in their studies. A skilled seamstress, she personally made clothes for all her children.

Here is a glimpse of daily family life offered by Fr. Giuseppe Beretta, Gianna’s brother:

“Mom was truly the strong woman spoken of in the Scriptures. Her day began early, at 5 o’clock, when dad got up to go to early Mass and begin his day’s work before the Lord and in the name of the Lord. He went to Mass alone, because mom stayed home to prepare breakfast for him, and his lunch she put in a briefcase.

After dad left for his workplace in Milan, mom came to our little bedrooms and, touching our face lightly with her hand, woke us up. We knew that she would soon go to church

¹⁹ C. M. Martini, *Una famiglia così*, Centro Ambrosiano, Milan 1994, p. 23.

to attend Holy Mass, and we dressed in a hurry, happy to kneel next to her to prepare ourselves to receive Jesus in Holy Communion and make our thanksgiving with her. What wonderful words she suggested to us to say to Jesus! Then, back home, we had breakfast, and then off to school.

Mom, after having tidied up the house and made our beds, sat down on her armchair with a large basket full of linen to sew and mend, and of socks to patch up next to her. She never complained, she was always smiling, and she never seemed tired. With all the work she had, she found time to do also some meditation from a booklet entitled 'The Gift of Self' by a French author. Later on, one day it came into my hands and reading it I felt like I was seeing my mom who had so deeply meditated upon it and translated its pages into her demeanor. [. . .]

And dad? A man of few words, but those few were the fruit of reflection and wisdom. He was certainly not secondary in faith and piety to our mother: a gentleman whom you could trust with your eyes closed. He came home in the evening from Milan, and two or three of us went to meet him at the arrival station of the Città Alta²⁰ funicular to carry his briefcase, and with our chatter we erased the signs of fatigue from his face. He had only to cross the threshold of the house, meet our mom's smile and the cheerful welcome of all his children to regain all his serenity. It was dinner time, and everything was already ready. After a short prayer, we sat happily at that long table. How nice it is to be so many siblings around our parents!

He liked to hear a bit from everyone about how school had gone, and when some pranks occurred, he frowned in a way to make us understand without many words that it should not happen again. After dinner, while dad smoked his cigar, our older sister Amalia, a skilled piano player, had us listen and

²⁰ This refers to the period from 1925 to 1937, when the Beretta family lived in Bergamo.

enjoy the most beautiful pieces by Chopin, Bach, and Beethoven. Then came another important moment in our family life, that of the recitation of the Holy Rosary. Dad would stand before the image of Our Lady with the older children next to him, and we younger ones around our mom, who helped us to respond until we fell asleep resting on her knees.”²¹

As emerges from this testimony, the typical day of the Beretta family was marked by prayer and participation in the Eucharist. Alberto and Maria died within four months of each other:

“They were two extraordinary people, who complemented each other perfectly. They loved each other very much. Just think that when they got married, they had recited a prayer in which they asked God to die together. They could not imagine their life separated from each other. And this prayer was answered: on April 28, 1942, my dad told my mom that he felt very poorly. ‘I’m dying, Maria,’ he insisted with anguish. My mom looked at him carefully for a moment and: ‘That’s not possible,’ she replied to him. ‘I’m very well. I don’t feel anything.’ But, just on the evening of the same day, my mom had a heart attack and died the following day.”²²

The Berettas were a rather wealthy family but did not flaunt wealth and managed money wisely, always offering their help to the needy.

Until 1924, Gianna lived in Milan, in Piazza Risorgimento 10; the family attended the church of the Capuchin Convent in Viale Piave.

²¹ Giuseppe Beretta, *The roots of a holiness*, in *Terra Ambrosiana*, bi-monthly Publication of the Diocese of Milan, year XXXXV, no. 1 January–February 1994, pp. 33–34.

²² G. Pelucchi, *L’amore più grande. Santa Gianna Beretta Molla*, Ed. Paoline, Milan 2004, pp. 25–26.

Youth

Little Gianna decisively welcomed the gift of faith and the Christian education of her parents. In Bergamo, where her family had moved in Borgo Canale (a borough of Bergamo) in 1925 because of the Spanish flu epidemic, she received her First Holy Communion (at the age of five, in the Provost Parish of Saint Grata *inter vites*) and her Confirmation (at the age of eight, in the Cathedral). She attended the first- and second-year class at the Elementary School of Colle Aperto, the third-year class at the Sisters of La Sagesse, and the fourth and fifth at the Institute of the Canossian Sisters in Via Sudorno. In 1933 she began her first high school year at “Paolo Sarpi,” State Classic High School. In 1937, the year in which her older sister Amalia died, she moved to Genova Quinto a Mare where she attended the Institute of Santa Dorotea and matured in her faith thanks also to the Spiritual Exercises preached (from March 16 to 18, 1938), by Jesuit Father Michele Avedano.

Worried about her health, her parents decided to make her take a year off by suspending her studies; Gianna had the opportunity to increase her commitment to Catholic Action, collaborating in particular with Monsignor Mario Righetti. In October 1939 she began studies at the Classical High School of the Dorothean Sisters.

In 1942, she lost both her parents a few months apart (her mother on April 29 and her father on September 10); she received her high school diploma (in June) and moved with her siblings to their paternal grandparents’ home in Magenta; she enrolled in the School of Medicine and Surgery, first at the Milan University and then in Pavia, where she took a degree in 1949, becoming one of the few professional women at that time.

Along with her sisters, she joined the life of the parish of San Martino, and she worked both for the education of youth in the youth club of the Canossian Sisters and for the needy in the Conferences of the Dames of St. Vincent de Paul.



Gianna (the first from the left), her mother, Virginia, Amalia, her father; Francesco (behind Gianna), Ferdinando, Zita, Enrico (Father Alberto), and Giuseppe, on the day of the 25th anniversary of her parents' wedding, Bergamo, October 12th, 1933.

In 1950, she opened a medical office for INAM patients (Istituto Nazionale per l'Assicurazione contro le Malattie—National Institute for Insurance against Diseases) in Mesero and substituted, if it was necessary, for her brother Doctor, Ferdinando in Magenta.

In 1952 she specialized in pediatrics and (from 1956) took on various positions within the schools of the area (in Ponte Nuovo), including working for free.

She had a predilection for the elderly, children, and mothers, convinced of her mission as a doctor and that: “. . . just as he (the priest) can touch Jesus, so we (doctors) touch Jesus in the body of our sick: the poor, the young, the old, and children.”

As Pietro recalls:

“Gianna soon became familiar to everyone with her (car) Fiat 600 that reached even the most isolated and far from the city

center farmhouses. [. . .] How many children did Gianna treat, and how many mothers did she encourage and advise!”²³

Her son Pierluigi also testified, on the occasion of the International Theological Pastoral Congress of the VII World Meeting of Families (in Milan) held on May 31, 2012 at the Congress Center of the De Filippi Collegio in Varese during the afternoon dedicated to the theme “Professional freedom and family life”:

“[. . .] Recalling the figure of my mother instead I see a person who was already modern at the time, who, although firmly anchored to traditional values, was an example of a woman who had been able to combine work and family with mastery, but above all naturalness.”²⁴

Gianna wondered and prayed about her vocation; from the exchange of letters with her Capuchin brother, Father Alberto, who spoke of the work he had to face in the mission, she reached the decision to join him in Grajaú, in the State of Maranhão in Brazil, to help him as a lay missionary.

Father Alberto, with the help of his engineer brother Francesco, was, in fact, building a modern hospital; to prepare herself for departure, Gianna attended the Mangiagalli Obstetric Clinic in Milan and studied Portuguese. She wrote to her brother:

“Dearest Father Alberto, [. . .] I am so very happy to come, and I think this is truly my vocation. I prayed, and for this purpose also, at the end of the month, I will go to do the Spiritual Exercises, so that the Lord may tell me yes or no.”²⁵

²³ P. Molla - E. Guerriero, *Gianna la donna forte. La beata Gianna Beretta Molla nel ricordo del marito*, Ed. San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo (Milan) 1995, p. 57.

²⁴ From the testimony of her son Pierluigi in *Gianna Sorriso di Dio*, year 11, nos. 30–31–32, January–December 2012, p. 36.

²⁵ Letter of 12 September 1952 of Gianna to her brother Father Alberto.

But her physical constitution was not robust and was ill-suited for the tropical heat; her family, her spiritual director, Msgr. Enrico Ceriani, and the Bishop of Bergamo, Msgr. Adriano Bernareggi (through her brother Fr. Giuseppe), convinced her that this was not her path. Curiously, her husband Pietro writes:

*“If I had known before, with my character, I would never have been able to approach a girl who had such a thought.”*²⁶

Her sister, Mother Virginia, also testifies:

*“After having accepted the advice of her Spiritual Director who had said to her: ‘Why don’t you also form a family, a holy one, like your family of origin, imitating the example of your parents?’, Gianna joined our brother Ferdinando in June 1954 who left for Lourdes with a Unitalsi train (Italian National Union to Transport the Sick to Lourdes and International Sanctuaries) to accompany the sick, because she wanted to pray to Our Lady of Lourdes to let her meet the man who should be her spouse, whom the Lord had prepared for her from eternity.”*²⁷

The Lord, in fact, had another plan in store for Gianna, another vocation.

²⁶ P. Molla - E. Guerriero, *Gianna la donna forte. La beata Gianna Beretta Molla nel ricordo del marito*, Ed. San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo (Milan) 1995, p. 43.

²⁷ Cf. *Gianna Sorriso di Dio*, year 7, no. 20, September–December 2008, p. 8.