

St. Gianna Beretta Molla

BORN 1922; DIED 1962
WIFE AND MOTHER
FEAST DAY: APRIL 28

TODAY SUFFERING is thought to be the greatest evil, to be avoided at all cost. Divorce, abortion, euthanasia, in-vitro fertilization, and embryonic stem-cell

research are tolerated and even encouraged in the name of alleviating psychological or physical suffering. Some of these practices are seen as positive goods — who, for example, doesn't empathize with a childless couple or a person suffering from an incurable disease? For many married couples, the solution to a bad marriage is ending it. For a woman who has been raped, the best way to deal with a pregnancy might seem to be ending it. For a physician caring for a person facing a slow death from Lou Gehrig's disease, euthanasia might seem merciful. But when St. Gianna Beretta Molla was faced with a choice to either remove a life-threatening tumor and kill her child or endure suffering and possibly death, she firmly and deliberately chose to risk her life for the sake of her as yet unborn child. She believed that only God, the author of life, might take a life, and that preventing the grief of her husband and motherless children — should she die — could not justify an evil act.

Gianna was born to Alberto Beretta and Ma-

ria di Micheli in a middle-class home in Magenta, northern Italy on October 4, 1922. Both of her parents were devout Franciscan tertiaries (lay people who lived in the world according to the Franciscan rule). She was the tenth of thirteen children, five of whom died young and a sixth who died at the age of twenty-six, when Gianna was fourteen.

The family shunned the fascism of 1930s Italy. Initially an indifferent student and in frail health during her high-school years, Gianna began then to seek God's plan in her life. She became involved in the youth section of Catholic Action, a lay organization, soon began excelling in school, and developed a mastery of the piano. In 1942, at the height of World War II, her parents died within four months of each other. One brother was interned in a concentration camp but survived.

Catholic Action became the principal vehicle for Gianna's spiritual growth into young womanhood, focusing on prayer, grace, and the Eucharist. For her, it was an active apostolate that required personal witness of heroic virtue and sacrifice. She also mapped out a career of service as a physician (a calling several of her siblings also followed), completing her studies in 1949 at the age of twenty-seven and her specialty in pediatrics two years later. As a mature adult, she had attained vi-

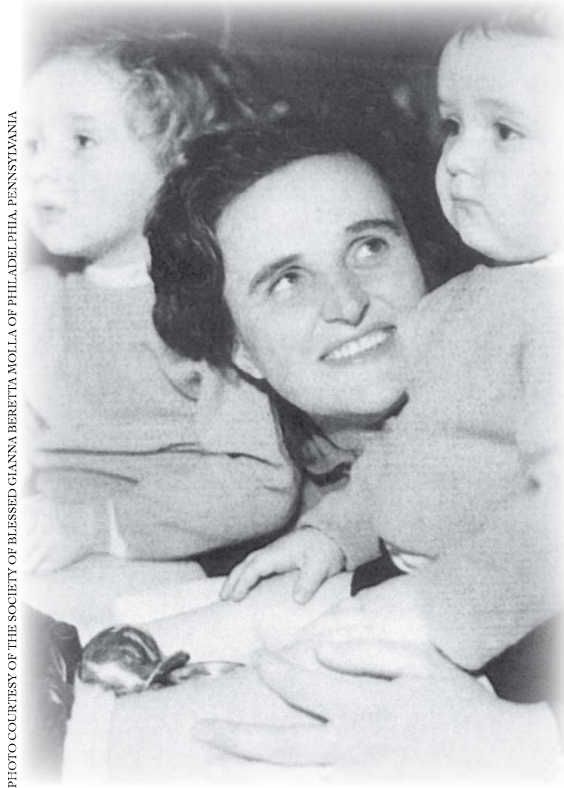


PHOTO COURTESY OF THE SOCIETY OF BLESSED GIANNA BERETTA MOLLA OF PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA

brant good health, and become athletic. She especially loved skiing and hiking.

Gianna saw herself as a healer and went beyond her tasks as a physician to help troubled patients and their families. When a patient sought an abortion or had had one, she pleaded with her to understand the enormity of this action and to respect the sanctity of life.

Pietro Molla, an engineer, first knew Gianna as the physician whose office faced his family's home. They married when she was thirty-two, and had a son and two daughters within four years. Pietro was often away on business trips but, with live-in help, Gianna continued her medical practice. In July 1961, pregnant with her fourth child, she developed a large uterine tumor. Her options were limited: completely removing her uterus, very likely saving her life but certainly killing the baby; a therapeutic abortion and surgical removal of the tumor, which might allow her to have other children; and having as much of the tumor removed as was possible while putting the baby at minimal risk. Without hesitation, she chose to save her child. After the birth of her daughter, she developed an abdominal infection unresponsive to all treatment and, after seven days of intense suffering, she died.

Pietro raised the four children with the help of his mother, one of his sisters, and one of Gianna's sisters. He suffered an additional grievous bereavement with the death of his oldest daughter, at the age of six, two years after her mother's death. After Gianna's death, Pietro wrote of her decision: "You loved our three precious children no less

*"Without hesitation,
she chose to save her child."*

certainty in the efficacy of prayer, and your abandonment to the will of God that gave you strength and support... With your decision, you offered the holocaust of your life. And you offered it with the anguish of a wife and a mother who must leave behind her children and family and everything dear that God had given you... You would not have carried out the heroic act of saving the life of your unborn baby if you had considered it an act of injustice toward our family ... You knew very well that no one could equal your maternal love in raising, educating, and forming our children. But in your humility, you trusted that the Lord would make up for the absence of your visible presence."

than you loved the baby in your womb.... It was your complete trust in the Lord's providence, your

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Gianna's youngest child, the one she gave her own life to save, is named Gianna Emanuela in honor of her heroic mother, and has since grown up and become a physician herself. Gianna Emanuela was present in Rome for the canonization of her mother by Pope John Paul II in May of 2004. In

1997, she gave a testimony in Brazil at a family conference, and said the following prayer: "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."



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