

GREAT MEDICAL LIVES

BLESSED GIANNA MOLLA

DR ADRIAN TRELOAR FRCP, MRCPSYCH, MRCP



St Gianna Beretta Molla was a physician, a working mother, professional woman, and a loving wife. That in itself is an unusual accolade. Few working mothers have been elevated to the status of Sainthood, and even fewer women doctors. Working as a paediatrician, St Gianna found herself, while pregnant, diagnosed with a uterine tumour. This gave her a stark and simple choice. Hysterectomy in the hope of survival, or risking her life for the sake of the child whom she carried.

Gianna was born in October 1922. Her elder sister died when she was just 15. Despite illness and the bombardment of Genoa in 1941, she left school well enough qualified to go to medical school in November 1942. She also worked with Catholic Action and the Society of Vincent de Paul. In 1949 she qualified and also met Pietro, whom she would later marry.

Specializing as a paediatrician, she was engaged in 1954 and married 1955. Their son Pierluigi was born in 1956 followed by Maria Zita in 1957. Laura followed in 1959 and in mid 1962 Gianna became pregnant with Gianna Emanuela. In September 1961, towards the end of the second

month of pregnancy, she felt pain and was diagnosed with a uterine fibroma. Before the required surgical operation, and conscious of the risk that her continued pregnancy brought, she pleaded with the surgeon to save the life of the child she was carrying, and entrusted herself to prayer and Providence.

“Everything has a particular end and obeys a law. Everything develops toward a predestined end.” ...  
“Both our earthly and eternal happiness depends on following our vocation very carefully.”

She stated: *“Yes, I have prayed so much in these days. With faith and hope I have entrusted myself to the Lord... I trust in God, yes; but now it is up to me to fulfill my duty as a mother. I renew to the Lord the offer of my life. I am ready for everything, to save my baby.”* The life was saved, for which she thanked God. She spent the seven months remaining until the birth of the child in incomparable strength of spirit and unrelenting dedication to her tasks as mother and doctor. She worried that the baby in her womb might be born in pain, and she asked God to prevent that. Indeed she told her husband Pietro *“If you have to decide between me and the child, do not hesitate; I demand it, the child, save it.”*

Therapeutically there were three choices. Firstly, hysterectomy to remove the tumour. Secondly removal of the tumour and simultaneous abortion to offer the hope of future pregnancies or, thirdly removal of the tumour and leaving the child in the womb. Option two was morally wrong, and option one guaranteed the death of her child as well as relying heavily upon double effect. Gianna knew that the latter carried some risks for the child although it would probably have maximized the chance of delivering a live baby. So she accepted that option, pleading with the surgeon to do all she could to preserve the life of her child. Gianna chose the life if her child as a priority.

On Good Friday, April 20, 1962, Gianna went to the Monza Maternity Hospital to deliver her fourth child. She again asked that *“If you must decide between me and the child, do not hesitate: choose the child--I insist on it. Save the baby.”* On the morning of 21 April 1962 Gianna Emanuela was born. Gianna died a week later with septicaemia following the caesarian section. Interestingly, it’s not entirely clear if the tumour was benign or malignant. It appears that death was in

“If you have to decide between me and the child, do not hesitate; I demand it, the child, save it.”

fact due a post-partum septic peritonitis. But we should note that when she chose surgery, she could not have known if the tumour was benign or malignant. So she clearly was utterly heroic in demanding the protection of her child ahead of her own life.

In 1977 her first miracle was examined. A Brazilian woman who was very seriously ill with a vaginal abscess recovered completely after three nurses, working in a hospital founded by Gianna's brother prayed "*you who are the sister of Father Alberto [who founded the hospital], make this fistula heal and keep this woman from having to travel to Sao Luis...*". The second miracle occurred in December 2003 and involved a pregnant lady who ruptured her membranes at 126 weeks, was advised to have an abortion but who delivered a healthy baby at term after praying to St Gianna Molla.

#### WHAT DO WE LEARN FROM GIANNA'S LIFE?

"What is a vocation? It is a gift from God and therefore comes from God. If then it is a gift from God, it is up to us to do all in our power to know God's will. We must go along that way, if God wills it, not forcing the door; when God wills it, how God wills it."

"All the Lord's ways are beautiful because their end is one and the same: to save our own soul and to succeed in leading many other souls to heaven, to give glory to God."

Firstly, she sets out, in her writings the value of our vocations. Secondly, by clearly preferring the life of her child over her own she asserts the heroism to which we are sometimes called. It's true that nowadays, with modern medicine, she would likely not have died. But there are still occasions (and always will be) when the preservation of our life may be morally illicit, and cause the death of another. Gianna shows us the hope of heroism. Hopefully, by God's grace, you and I will not be called to that heroism.

Finally she was a working mother, a doctor and a woman who lived her vocations. Gianna was beatified by Pope John Paul II on April 24, 1994, during the international Year of the Family. In attendance was Gianna's 91 year old husband, her 3 children, her granddaughter, her living siblings, medical patients of Gianna, friends, etc. A saintly mother and a saintly doctor indeed.

---

#### REFERENCES

<http://www.saintgianna.org>