



**S**aint **Gianna Beretta Molla** (4 October 1922 – 28 April 1962) was an Italian Roman Catholic pediatrician. Molla refused both an abortion and a hysterectomy while pregnant with her fourth child despite knowing that continuing the refusal could result in her own death which later occurred. Molla's medical career went in tandem with teachings of the Church which strengthened her resolve to follow her conscience while coming to the aid of others who required assistance. These views came into focus when she decided to save the life of her final child rather than think of herself.<sup>[1]</sup> Molla also dedicated herself to charitable work amongst older people and was involved in Catholic Action; she also aided the Saint Vincent de Paul group in their outreach to the poor and less fortunate. Molla's beatification was celebrated in 1994 and she was canonized as a saint a decade later in mid-2004 in Saint Peter's Square.

## Life

Gianna Beretta was born in Magenta on 4 October 1922 as the tenth of thirteen children (just eight survived into adulthood) to Alberto Beretta (d. 1 September 1942) and Maria de Micheli (c. 1887 - 1 May 1942) - both members of the Third Order of Saint Francis. One of her siblings was the Servant of God Enrico Beretta (28 August 1916 - 10 August 2001). Beretta's uncle was Monsignor Giuseppe Beretta and one ancestor was Father Giovanni Battista Beretta.<sup>[2]</sup> Two other siblings were Giuseppe (a priest) and Virginia (a religious); another sister was Amelia (1910 - 22 January 1937). Her baptism was celebrated at the Basilica di San Martino on 11 October.<sup>[3]</sup>

When she was three the Berettas relocated to Bergamo where she grew up. Beretta made her First Communion on 4 April 1928 and received her Confirmation in the Bergamo Cathedral on 9 June 1930 from Monsignor Luigi Maria Marelli. The Berettas moved to Genoa following the death of her sister Amalia in 1937 and sought residence in the Quinto al Mare neighbourhood where she attended school.<sup>[3]</sup> She was an active participant in parish life in the parish of Saint Peter and Archbishop Mario Righetti had an active role in her spiritual formation until the Berettas returned to Bergamo in October 1941 to live with her maternal grandparents at San Vigilio. From 16 to 18 March 1938 she made the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius while 1938 to 1939 saw a suspension in her studies due to ill health.<sup>[2]</sup>

In 1942 she began her studies in medicine in Milan. Outside of her schooling she was active in the Azione Cattolica movement. Beretta later received a medical diploma on 30 November 1949 from the Pavia college and opened an office in Mesero close to her hometown where she specialized in pediatrics in 1950.<sup>[2]</sup> Beretta hoped to join her brother - a priest in the Brazilian missions - where she intended to offer gynecological services to poor women. However her chronic ill health made this an impractical dream but was content with continuing her practice. From 7 July 1952 she began to specialize in pediatrics at the Milanese college.<sup>[3]</sup>

In December 1954 she met Pietro Molla (1912 - 3 April 2010) - an engineer - and the two became engaged the following 11 April.<sup>[1]</sup> The pair later married on 24 September 1955 at the Basilica di San Martino in Magenta. The pair - on 25 September - were in Saint Peter's Square as part of their honeymoon. Molla gave birth to three children: Pierluigi (b. 19 November 1956), Mariolina (11 December 1957 - 12 February 1964), Laura (15 July 1959). Her sisters-in-law were Luigia (who was a nun) and Teresina.

In 1961 - during the second month of her fourth and final pregnancy - Molla developed a fibroma on her uterus. The doctors gave her three choices following an examination: an abortion or a complete hysterectomy or the removal of the fibroma alone. The Church forbade all direct abortion but teachings on the principle of double effect would have allowed her to undergo the hysterectomy which would have caused her unborn child's death as an unintended consequence.<sup>[4]</sup>

Molla opted for the removal of the fibroma since she wanted to preserve her child's life; she told the doctors that her child's life was more important than her own. On the morning of 21 April 1962 - Holy Saturday - Molla was sent to the hospital where her fourth child - Gianna Emanuela - was delivered via a Caesarean section. But Molla continued to have severe pain and died of septic peritonitis one week after giving birth in the morning of 28 April at 8:00am.<sup>[5]</sup> Her daughter Gianna Emanuela still lives and is a doctor of geriatrics.<sup>[3]</sup>

Her husband wrote a biographical account of her life in April 1971 and dedicated it to his children. He often told Gianna Emanuela that her mother's choice was one of conscience as both a mother and a doctor.

## Canonization

The Cardinal Archbishop of Milan Giovanni Colombo promoted the opening of a canonization cause on 6 November 1972 and it took a step forward on 11 April 1978 when Colombo and sixteen other bishops filed a petition to Pope Paul VI asking for him to initiate the cause of canonization.

The beatification process was opened under Pope John Paul II on 15 March 1980 and Molla became titled as a Servant of God; Carlo Maria Martini presided over the cognitional process of investigation from 30 June 1980 until 21 March 1986 at which stage all documents were sent to Rome for inspection. The Congregation for the Causes of Saints were convinced the process completed its investigations to an appropriate degree and so issued a decree of validation for the cognitional process on 14 November 1986. The postulation submitted the Positio dossier to the C.C.S. later in 1989 at which stage a team of theologians assessed and approved it on 14 December 1990; the C.C.S. soon followed on 18 June 1991. Molla became titled as Venerable on 6 July 1991 after John Paul II confirmed that she had lived a model Christian life of heroic virtue.

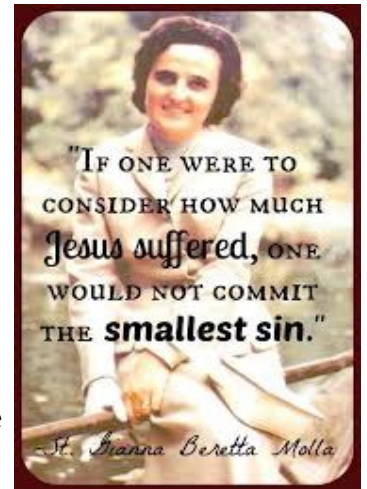
Molla's beatification depended upon a miracle - often a healing - that science and medicine cannot explain. One such case was investigated in Grajaú in Brazil from 30 November 1981 until 15 January 1982. Two additional supplementary processes were also held during this time with the first spanning from 30 October 1986 to November 1986 and the other from 8 August 1987 until 2 November 1987. The C.C.S. issued their decree of validation at the closure of these three investigations on 27 September 1991. Medical experts approved this miracle on 5 March 1992 as being one in which there was no possible explanation for it while theologians approved on 22 May 1992 the fact that the healing came after appealing for Molla's intercession. The C.C.S. members confirmed the findings of these two bodies on 17 November 1992 which allowed for them to also approve the cause. John Paul II issued his approval to this healing on 21 December 1992 and beatified Molla on 24 April 1994.

But a second miracle was needed for her to be elevated to sainthood. One such case came to the postulation's attention from Franca - also in Brazil - which promoted a diocesan investigation from 31 May to 1 August 2001. The closure of this investigation saw documents sent to the C.C.S. who validated the process later on 22 February 2002. Medical experts approved this miracle on 10 April 2003 as did the theologians on 17 October 2003 and the C.C.S. members on 16 December 2003. John Paul II granted the final approval needed for this on 20 December 2003 which confirmed that Molla was to be named as a saint; the formalization of this confirmation - in which a date was announced - came at an ordinary consistory held on 19 February 2004. Molla was proclaimed as a saint of the Roman Catholic Church in Saint Peter's Square on 16 May 2004.

Molla's husband and their children were present at the canonization. It was the first time that a husband had ever witnessed his wife's canonization.

## Miracles

A medallion painting depicting Molla in Saint Patrick Church (Columbus, Ohio). The miracle that led to her beatification involved the Protestant woman Lucia Sylvia Cirilo who gave birth to her fourth child - stillborn - on 22 October 1977. Cirilo was discharged from the hospital but began suffering from severe pains within a week that forced her brother to take her to the Saint Francis of Assisi hospital on 9 November. The doctors found an unseen complication that caused a rectal-vaginal fistula which was one that the hospital was not equipped enough to handle. She was told that she would need to be moved to the hospital at São Luís but she knew that she would not survive the trip there. One of the nurses - Sister Bernardina de Manaus - was so distressed about this that she appealed for the intercession of Molla while looking at a small picture of her. The nun asked two other nurses to follow her lead and the group soon discovered that Cirilo's pain had disappeared with the doctors amazed at the fact that the fistula had healed in full.



The miracle that led to her canonization involved Elizabeth Comparini who was sixteen weeks pregnant in 2003 from Franca in Brazil and sustained a tear in her placenta that drained her womb of all amniotic fluid. Comparini's doctors told her that the child's chance of survival was nil due to the weeks left prior to birth. Comparini said she appealed to the then-Blessed asking for her intercession and was able to deliver her child in perfect health despite the lack of amniotic fluid.

## Legacies

The late Molla's example was hailed as courageous and her tale spread after her death. Pope Paul VI hailed her protection and love of life in his Angelus address on 23 September 1973. St. Gianna Beretta Molla is the inspiration behind the Gianna Center in New York. It is the first pro-life and Catholic healthcare center for women in New York. The Gianna Center provides care with specialized gynecologic care. The saint is also the eponym of Saint Gianna's Maternity Home in Warsaw in North Dakota.



In September 2015 her daughter Gianna Emanuela read a letter before Pope Francis during the 2015 World Meeting of Families in Philadelphia. The letter - which her mother wrote to her father not long before their marriage - highlighted the Christian virtues of marriage and called him and herself as a couple to serve God in a "saintly way" through what she called "the sacrament of love".

