

**WORLD-PRAYER-CONGRESS FOR LIFE  
in Fatima, Portugal, Oct. 4th – 8th, 2006**

„Mary, We Entrust You with the Cause of Life" (H.H., Pope John Paul II., *Evangelium Vitae*, #105)

**Conference Nr. 7**  
October 5, 2006,  
of Madre Virginia Beretta f d c c

**Gianna Beretta Molla – Mother, Doctor, Saint**

First of all, I would like to thank Mr. Pius Stössel for choosing Gianna to be the patron saint of the Foundation “Yes to Life – International”, and also for inviting me to be here at the congress today, to give testimony for her life in Fatima.

I would like to greet all those present most cordially, also on behalf of my brother-in-law Pietro and on behalf of Gianna Emanuela.

I would like to ask Our Lady of Fatima to bring Gianna’s message to all the mothers in the world, regardless of their creed.

### **Gianna is a Wonderful Gift from God**

My sister Gianna was born at **Magenta (Milan)** at our paternal grandparents’ house on **October 4<sup>th</sup>, 1922**, the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi. **Our parents were fervent Christians. They both belonged to a third order society of the Franciscans.**

She was baptised and given the name **Gianna Francesca** on October 11<sup>th</sup>. at *St. Martin’s Basilica in Magenta*.

She was **the tenth of 13 children**, five of which died at an early age. Three of us have chosen the religious life: my brother Enrico, who as the Capuchin Father Albert, worked as a doctor in the mission at Grajaù (Brazil); Giuseppe, who is still living as a priest and engineer in the diocese of Bergamo and I as a doctor and Canossian Missionary Sister in India.

Until 1925 our family lived in **Milan**, where we regularly visited the Capuchin Church in Corso Monforte.

In 1925 three of our brothers and sisters died of the Spanish flu at a very young age, and after our sixteen-year-old sister Amalia had a tuberculosis infection, we moved to **Bergamo**, where the air was better for our health than in Milan.

Our **father Alberto**, who like Gianna, had been born at Magenta, was employed at the Cantoni cotton factory. He made great sacrifices to make it possible for us children to study to get our doctorates. He cut all expenses which he considered unnecessary.

I remember that he suddenly stopped smoking the cigars he used to relax with in the evening. He was a person with deep faith and honest, convinced and joyful piety. He was a model for us all: daily he got up at 5 o’clock to go to Holy Mass and so to begin his daily work in the Name of the Lord.

Our **mother, Maria de Micheli**, was also a woman of deep faith, who zealously did works of

charity. She had a humble and at the same time, strong and steadfast character. She also went to Holy Mass daily with us children, after our father had taken the train to work in Milan. Mama Maria treated each child as if it were the only child. She brought us up in such a way that we should realize ourselves, the mistakes we had made. Sometimes one look from her was enough. She was always there for us: she even learned Latin and Greek, so that she would be able to help us with our studies better.

## Her Childhood

From her earliest childhood, Gianna accepted the faith and the Christian education of our excellent parents.

The parents guided her with wisdom and attentiveness in her human and Christian growth and so they conveyed to her, to accept **life as a wonderful gift from God and to put her trust in God's immeasurable providence**. In that way, they let her understand **the necessity and effectiveness of prayer**. The parents raised her completely in the Franciscan spirit: to realize what is essential, to love the poor and the missions.

In this family atmosphere of great faith and love for the Lord, Gianna received her First Holy Communion at the age of 5 ½ years at Prepositurale di Santa Grata parish in Bergamo Alta. From that day on, she went to Holy Mass daily with her mother. **Receiving Communion daily became her “food she could not do without”**, the “support and light” of her childhood days, during her teens and her youth. At the age of eight years, she was confirmed at the Cathedral in Bergamo.

She grew up joyfully and happily, helped her brothers and sisters, especially me: since I am 3 years younger than she was, there was a special relationship between us. She was never idle: she loved all beautiful things: music, art and trips to the mountains.

During her teens, she also suffered trials and problems, but because of her deep faith life no traumas remained, on the contrary, they refined her sensibility and her virtuousness.

In January **1937 our beloved sister Amalia died** at the age of 26 years. Our family moved to **Genoa Quinto al Mare**, a university city. That made it possible for us to stay together, as our Dad Alberto had always wished. Here, Gianna attended the 5<sup>th</sup> grade at the secondary school run by the Sisters of St. Dorothy.

During our stay in Genoa, Gianna deepened her spiritual life. At a **retreat** with the **Jesuit Fr. Michele Avedano in March 1938** she learned **fundamental things which were to determine her whole life**. There is a notebook with 30 pages containing **Gianna's memories and prayers** from this retreat. There you can read the following sentence: *“I will avoid mortal sin as if it were a poisonous snake; and again I repeat: better to die a 1000 times than to insult the Lord”*. And the following prayer: *“Oh Jesus, I promise You that I will accept everything that happens to me, help me to know Your will...”*

**Monsignor Righetti**, the parish priest in Quinto al Mare, who was very much concerned about the liturgy, also contributed much to Gianna's spiritual maturity. He became her spiritual guide and won her as a co-worker for the little ones in the **Catholic Action**. He wakened her enthusiasm for the liturgy, which was a source of spiritual life for her.

After finishing the 5<sup>th</sup> grade at secondary school, her parents suspended her from school for a

year because of her weak constitution. She willingly submitted to her parent's decision and spent one whole year together with them, satisfied that she was able to get to know them better and also to be able to imitate their virtues. In October 1939 she went back to school in Genoa, attending the classical secondary school.

In **1941**, in the middle of the war, the family returned to the maternal grandparents' house at **Bergamo**, because our Mom, who had a weak heart, could not stand the bombings in Genoa.

After her matriculation, Gianna and **we all lost both of our parents** within only 4 months. First, Mama died on April 29<sup>th</sup> 1942. She was only 55 years old. Then Papa died on the 10<sup>th</sup> of September at the age of 60 years.

### **Her Adult Life**

We all decided to return to the house of our paternal grandparents at **Magenta**, where Gianna had been born.

In November of the same year, Gianna registered and studied at the **Faculty for Medicine and Surgery** in **Milan**; later she studied at **Pavia**, where she finished her doctorate on **November 30<sup>th</sup> 1949**.

I still have some very lively memories of our time at university, where we studied together. She was a dear young girl, strong-willed and reserved. Her spiritual life was very intensive: she went to Holy Mass and Communion daily, she went for adoration of the Blessed Sacrament and meditation and also prayed the rosary.

During our student years, Gianna, my sister Zita and I worked in the **Parish** and for the education of young people at the **Oratorio of the Madri Canossiane**, which was in Magenta. This place for youth work became like a second home to us.

Gianna studied diligently and lived her faith among the young people of the **Catholic Action**. Realizing that "God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Cor 9,7), she also applied her faith through generous service in charitable work among the elderly people and needy as a member of the **St. Vincent de Paul Society**. She loved God and wanted to lead many people to also accept this attitude.

A friend gave the following testimony: "*Gianna gave her open smile, she was full of joy and inner peace, which reflected the peace in her soul.*"

In **July 1950** Gianna opened a **medical surgery** in **Mesero** and when necessary, she helped her brother Ferdinando, who was a doctor in Magenta.

In **1952** she specialized in **pediatrics** in **Milan**. She gave special attention to the poor, the elderly and mothers with children.

She loved her **medical profession** as her **mission** and continued to study. She tried to help people physically and spiritually. In the Catholic Action she increasingly helped very young girls. She found relaxation in music, painting, skiing and hiking, an **expression of her great joy in life and in creation**.

She tried to find her **vocation**, which she considered to be **God's gift**, by praying for it and asking others to pray for her. She was convinced that earthly and eternal happiness depend on

our faithfulness to our vocation.

My **brother Alberto**, who was capuchin, doctor and missionary in **Brazil**, was in writing contact with her. He reported about the great work load which had to be accomplished daily and because of her brother's situation she felt she was called to go to **Grajaù** to help him. But her physical constitution was not very strong and her spiritual guide was able to convince her that this was not her vocation. Gianna accepted this and waited for a sign from God.

On **December 8<sup>th</sup> 1954**, she met the man of her life for the first time, the **engineer Pietro Molla**, director of the well-known match factory S.A.F.F.A. in Magenta, who was also active as a layman in the Catholic Action and the parish of Mesero. They were both invited by Fr. Lino Garavaglia from Mesero to attend the celebration of his First Holy Mass.

### **The Engagement and Marriage**

The **official engagement** was celebrated on **April 11<sup>th</sup>, 1955**, on Easter Monday. On this occasion, our brother Giuseppe celebrated a Holy Mass at the Chapel of the Madri Canossiane.

Gianna and Pietro **lived their love fully in the faith**. "*Dearest Pietro,...* Gianna wrote in her first letter, *I already love you now and I would like to build a true Christian family with you.*" "*I love you so much, Pietro, -- she wrote on June 10<sup>th</sup> 1955 -- and you are always with me, beginning in the morning with Holy Mass until the offertory, during which I offer my work and yours, your joys and sufferings to the Lord, and then all day long until evening.*"

Gianna had a very joyful and happy engagement time. **She thanked the Lord and prayed. She had a very clear idea about the formation of the new family** and at the same time her great joy of life was contagious for Pietro; she asked how she could make him happy and what she should do to achieve this.

She invited him to prepare for the sacrament of marriage with a **Triduum**. They both were thankful for the gift of life and for all beautiful things. Pietro attended the Mass-Triduum at the *Our Lady of Good Counsel Church in Ponte Nuovo*; she attended *at the Sanctuary of the Assumption in Magenta*. Pietro was thankful for Gianna's suggestion and went along with it enthusiastically.

They **married** on **September 24<sup>th</sup> 1955** in the *San Martino Basilica in Magenta*.

They lived in **Ponte Nuovo of Magenta** at the pretty house which the S.A.F.F.A. Factory placed at the disposal of the director's family and which was situated a few meters from Our Lady of Good Counsel Church, where Gianna now went for Holy Mass.

She was **happy as a wife** and the Lord soon answered her great wish to become a **happy mother**: on **November 19<sup>th</sup> 1956** Pierluigi was born, on **December 11<sup>th</sup> 1957** Maria Zita (Mariolina) was born, and on **July 15<sup>th</sup> 1959** Laura was born.

Gianna lived her great joy of life simply and in equilibrium. She was **capable of combining her duties as a mother, wife and doctor harmoniously**.

In this state of mind **she consequently and joyfully lived her great faith, which molded and formed all her decisions and actions**.

She felt very much satisfied with the family fellowship of life and love, which brought with it

even more duties with the birth of the children. The wish for a big family like ours was always alive in her. Unfortunately, to her great distress she was not able to carry two pregnancies to the end.

### **The Mystery of Suffering and Her Trust in Providence**

In **September 1961** towards the end of the second month of a new pregnancy, suffering and the mystery of pain touched Gianna: a big **fibroma**, a **non-malignant growth**, was found on the uterus. Before the operation at St. Gerardo di Monza Hospital, she pleaded with the surgeons **to save the child in her womb**. As a doctor, she knew exactly what she was risking in continuing the pregnancy. She trusted in prayer and divine providence. The child in her womb was able to be saved. Gianna thanked the Lord and spent the remaining seven months up to the birth, with incomparable inner strength and unchanged commitment as a mother and doctor. She was afraid her child might be born somehow impaired; she prayed to God, that He should prevent that from happening.

A few days before the birth, she was prepared to offer up her life for the life of her child. **She placed her life completely in God's hands**. Her husband Pietro remembers: *“She explicitly told me in a determined tone, which was also joyful and with a serious look, which I will never forget: “In case you have to choose between the child and me, do not hesitate, choose, that is what I want, the child's life. Save it.”*

Pietro, who knew the generosity of his Gianna very well, her spirit of sacrifice, her mature deliberation and the validity of her decisions, felt compelled to respect her decision, although it was extremely painful for him and the children.

For Gianna, the child she was still carrying in her womb, had the same right to life as Pierluigi, Mariolina and Laura and she felt **she alone was at that moment the instrument of divine providence for the little human being, that was to be born**. For her other children, their bringing up and their future lives she trusted in the divine providence through her relatives.

Gianna's choice was determined by her conscience as mother and doctor and may be well understood on the basis of her fundamental principles: her **deep faith**, her firm convictions on the **sacred right of life**, the **heroism of maternal love** and the **total trust in the Divine Providence**.

### **The Sacrifice and the Gift of Life**

On the afternoon of **April 20<sup>th</sup> 1962, a Good Friday**, Gianna was taken to St. Gerardo di Monza Hospital once again, where the birth was induced to eliminate eventual risks, however without success.

On the morning of **April 21<sup>st</sup>, Holy Saturday**, her daughter **Gianna Emanuela** was born by Cesarean Section and for Gianna the passion, which was to be conformed with the passion of Jesus, began.

Only a few hours after the birth, her condition deteriorated: the fever increased, in the course of **septic peritonitis**, most severe abdominal pain set in.

At that time I was a missionary in India. Through divine providence and completely

unexpectedly, I was granted leave to go home. I arrived in Italy exactly four days before she died. The first words she said as I entered her room, were: ***“If only you knew what it means to die, when you have to leave four little children behind!”*** Although she so ardently believed in providence, she was inconsolable at the thought of not being able to look after her children personally.

During the last hours I was with Gianna the whole time; I noticed how **she combined her sufferings with those of Jesus**. I will never forget her confidential disclosures at that time.

In Gianna’s medical report, it says that she didn’t want to take a sedative, in order to be able to offer her sufferings to the Lord in complete waking consciousness. So, once she said: ***“If you knew how differently one judges the things of the world on one’s deathbed...”***, then she kissed the cross with great love, I saw how she changed, and she said: ***“How much consolation I have received from the Lord; if he hadn’t been here at certain moments!”*** She kept calling to Jesus, in order to receive the strength for her sufferings from Him. Short prayers of love and surrender crossed her lips: ***“Jesus, I love you” - “Jesus, I adore you.”- “Jesus, help me” - “Mama, help me”- “Mary..., - these were followed by short reflections.***

In spite of the doctors’ efforts, her condition visibly worsened.

She wanted to receive Jesus in the Eucharist also on Wednesday and Friday, but she had an irrepressible nausea and vomit, So, in order not to be disrespectful towards the Lord, she only received a tiny piece of the Host.

Our brother Ferdinando had been asked by Gianna to prepare her for the moment of her death with a predefined sentence. He couldn’t find the courage to do so, however. He passed this difficult duty on to me, and at a suitable moment, I said: ***“Don’t lose heart, Gianna, Papa and Mama are in heaven waiting for you: are you contented to go there?”*** As her lashes moved, I could see her complete, loving surrender to the divine will, even though she was grieved at the thought of having to abandon her beloved children, who were still so little.

In the early morning of **April 28<sup>th</sup> 1962, Samedy after Easter**, at her own request, which she had told her husband Pietro, she was taken **to her home at Ponte Nuovo**, where **she died at 8 a.m.** She was 39 years old.

She had once told her girls at the Catholic Action: ***“There are so many problems, but with God’s help we should always walk without fear and in case we should have to die in the battle for our vocation, that will be the most beautiful day of our lives.”*** Prophetic words!

On **May 16<sup>th</sup> 2004 Pope John Paul II** canonized her in **Rome**, he declared her a **saint as “Mother of a Family”**: she is the first mother to become a saint exactly because she was a mother, she became a saint in her motherhood-vocation. For the **Diocese of Milan**, it is the first canonization since St. Charles Borromeous was canonized in 1610.