

The Stories of the Miracles Approved for the Canonization of Saint Gianna Beretta Molla

By Thomas J. McKenna

Saint Gianna Beretta Molla was only thirty nine years old when she died in 1962, one week after giving birth to her daughter, Gianna Emanuela. She left behind a husband and four young children. Little did they, or any one else know that only 42 years later this wife, mother and physician would be canonized a saint of the Catholic Church. Present at her canonization on May 16, 2004, were her husband, her three living children, a brother and a sister and many other relatives and friends who knew her in life. It was the first time in history that a saint's spouse attended the canonization ceremony the other.

When St. Gianna died on April 28 1962 she was well known for her virtues. She was always kind and charitable and this was evident by the large crowd that attended her funeral. The acclaim did not cease when she was placed in her tomb. People continued to talk about her and reference the way she lived her life in virtue.

In December that same year the provincial administration of Milan presented St. Gianna's family with a gold medal in her memory and stated:

A diligent and generous collaborator of the ONMI Clinic of Magenta, inspired by a Christian spirit consistent with profound faith in eternal values, while a mother of three young children, she did not hesitate to sacrifice her own young life to bring her last child into the world. Her name gives witness to and exalts the sublime heroism of all mothers, and arouses deep sentiments in the hearts of all who recognize the unfailing principles of civilization.

Talk of her holiness continued to grow and in 1972, the Cardinal of Milan, Giovanni Colombo, having gained the favorable opinion of the Bishops Conference of Lombardy, promoted the cause for her beatification and requested the compilation of informative acts and documents. This was the beginning of a long and extensive investigation that is undertaken in every cause for sainthood.

On April 28, 1980 Cardinal Carlo Martini, Archbishop of Milan, with the approval of Pope John Paul II, officially introduced the cause for beatification of the Servant of God, Gianna Beretta Molla. There were just two major challenges left: a miracle would have to be approved for her beatification and another for her canonization.

It was not by chance that Providence had deigned that both miracles for St. Gianna's canonization would take place in Brazil. One of St. Gianna's brothers, Fr. Alberto, who was also a physician, was a Capuchin missionary in Brazil his entire life. He cared for the needy and frequently wrote to St. Gianna about the work in the mission helping the poor and the needy. She was enflamed with a desire to join him.

When she had finished her studies and contemplating going to Brazil, her spiritual director raised concerns for her health amid the grueling conditions of mission work. He counseled against the idea, as did the Bishop of Bergamo. In a conversation with Gianna's brother, Fr. Giuseppe, the Bishop said: "In what my experience as priest and bishop has taught me, I know that when the Lord calls a soul to the missionary ideal, besides a great faith and an exceptional spirituality, he also gives physical strength that

will help overcome difficulties and situations that here we are unable even to imagine. If Gianna does not have this gift, I think precisely that this is not the road the Lord calls her to follow." Gianna accepted this advice as a sign that God had another plan for her. She began her medical practice in Italy and soon after met her future husband Pietro.

Miracle for Beatification

October 22, 1977 in Grajau, Brazil a 27 year old Protestant woman, Lucia Sylvia Cirilo, gave birth to a still-born baby by caesarian section. It was her fourth child. After nine days she was discharged from the hospital in good health and resumed her duties as a housecleaner. A few days later she began having pain in her rectal and vaginal areas. When the pain increased she was rushed by her brother to St Francis of Assisi Hospital on November 9. This same hospital St. Gianna's brother, Father Alberto Beretta, OFM Capuchin, had helped establish. Upon examination the doctors found a very serious and unforeseen complication had caused a rectal-vaginal fistula that was inoperable in that hospital. The nearest hospital with facilities adequate to attempt to save her life was in Sao Luis, a city more than 600 kilometers away. An attempt to transport the young mother in this condition was extremely risky because her health was deteriorating by the hour.

A nurse at the hospital, Sister Bernardina, a Capuchin religious, became extremely worried upon hearing of the patient's painful condition. She turned in prayer to Gianna Beretta Molla asking through her intercession that the dying mother be healed of the illness and there-by avoid the dangerous trip to Sao Luis. Gazing at a small picture of the Servant of God, she prayed, "You who are Father Alberto's sister, make this fistula heal and keep this woman from having to travel to Sao Luis."

Sister Bernardina invited two other nurses to join her in this prayer. According to the sick woman's testimony, about this time the pain subsided immediately and disappeared completely. The surgeon was called to examine the woman. To his great surprise he found that the fistula had healed and it was no longer urgent or necessary to transfer the young lady to the hospital in Sao Luis.

It took years to compile the proofs of this miraculous event. Three processes had to be held in Grajau, Brazil between November 1981 and October 1987 before the depositions everyone knowledgeable in the matter were finally gathered. Then on May 22, 1992, following years of investigation and verification by medical experts and theologians, the cure was officially recognized by the Special Congress of the Congregation of the Causes of Saints, as a third degree miracle. That is, an instantaneous, complete and lasting cure unexplained by medical science. Lucia Sylvia Cirilo, attended St Gianna's beatification on April 24, 1994

Miracle for Canonization

In mid November 1999 a 35 year old Brazilian woman, Elizabeth Comparini Arcolino, was pregnant for the fourth time. Her children were 10, 7 and 4 respectively. Within the first month of pregnancy Elizabeth had a serious hemorrhage. In spite of the hemorrhage the pregnancy continued but an ultrasound on November 30 showed that the developing embryo was within a smaller than normal gestational sac. The doctor said that it was doubtful that that the pregnancy would come to term with

such a beginning. On December 9 an examination showed the embryo to be 1cm in length but also that a large blood clot measuring 5.2×3.5 cm had formed. On December 19 the doctors found that the baby's heart was still beating but that the placenta in the lower region of the uterus had greatly deteriorated. Elizabeth's physician, Dr. Nadia Bicego Vieitez de Almeida, said that the baby was barely alive due to the size of the blood clot in the uterus and that it was almost certain she would spontaneously abort the baby or it would have to be removed. Contrary to expectations, the child's heart kept beating and the pregnancy continued.

On February 11 Elizabeth felt something was seriously wrong and returned to the hospital. An ultrasound showed that the membranes had broken. She was 16 weeks pregnant and, although the fetus was alive, there was no amniotic fluid. The radiologist testified that there was no amniotic fluid present to protect the child from exposure to the bacteria of the birth canal and from the external pressure of the uterus itself. This meant that both the child and mother were in serious danger of infection. Dr. Bicego recommended terminating the pregnancy. In a desperate attempt to save the baby Elizabeth was put on a regimen of hydration of 4 liters of intravenous fluids per day with the intent of promoting the formation of amniotic fluid, without success.

Elizabeth remained in the hospital and on February 15 the prognosis was that the baby would die. At the time, doctors in Sao Paulo, Brazil and San Francisco, CA had studied the viability of pregnancies between 22-26 weeks with ruptured membranes, many more weeks along in their pregnancies than the case with Elizabeth. In every case examined in these studies, the pregnancy ended in spontaneous abortion within 60 days of when the membranes ruptured. So doctors involved in the case concluded that at 16 weeks the fetus would certainly also be spontaneously aborted.

Dr. Bicega and other doctors told Elizabeth that the pregnancy was going to be lost, and with the membranes ruptured, she was going to get an infection. They recommended an abortion to save her life and gave her some time to make the decision. Elizabeth was a practicing Catholic and later testified that she knew in her heart that she could not choose abortion as an option and that she must try to bring the child to term. She was distraught and crying when the doctor came back for the decision. Elizabeth's husband Carlos Cesar, who was faithfully at her side, said that his wife was requesting a priest. He called the local parish priest of San Sebastiano, Fr. Ovidio Jose Alves di Andrade. Dr. Bicega said she would return in 15 minutes with the documents for their signatures authorizing the abortive procedure.

One of Elizabeth's friends, Isabel, was in the room when Dr. Bicega stopped in and she overheard the recommendation about having an abortion. Isabel, inspired by her faith, hurried to the hospital chapel to pray to Mary to help bring some clarity to the situation befalling her friend. After spending some time in prayer she got up to leave and was surprised to see the bishop of the diocese, Bishop Diogenes Silva Matthes, pass by the door. He was at the hospital visiting another person and Isabel immediately stopped him to inform him of what was happening to Elizabeth. It turned out that he knew Elizabeth and Carlos. He had married them when they were working in San Sebastiano as catechists. The Bishop immediately went to Elizabeth's room. After hearing the whole story he said "Betinha, (Betsy) we will pray and God will help us." He then asked Dr. Bicega to give them more time and he left.

Shortly after the Bishop left, Fr. Ovidio arrived and began anointing Elizabeth with the sacrament for the sick. While he was anointing her Bishop Silva returned and brought with him a biography of Blessed Gianna Beretta Molla. The Bishop told Elizabeth "Do what Blessed Gianna did, and, if necessary, give your life for the child. I was praying at home and I said to the Blessed in prayer, 'Now has arrived the opportunity for you to be canonized. Intercede before the Lord for the grace of a miracle and save the life of this little child.'"

Elizabeth knew about Blessed Gianna and how she had died. She also knew that the first miracle, which allowed Gianna to be declared Blessed, had taken place in Brazil. It involved a woman who had life threatening complications from a caesarian section. This miracle had taken place in a hospital that had been founded by St. Gianna's brother, Fr. Alberto.

While Elizabeth has been pregnant with her third child, in spite of having delivered her two previous children by caesarian section, she had decided on a natural delivery. At the time, Bishop Silva had given her a holy card of Blessed Gianna and told Elizabeth to pray to her. She had been terribly afraid but asked Blessed Gianna for help and subsequently gave birth to a healthy child.

Reassured by her past experience and the inspiration of Blessed Gianna and the Bishop, Elizabeth told Dr. Bicega she would try to carry her child to term as long as the child's heart continued to beat. Several doctors at the hospital indicated that this was madness as the child was already dying. Dr. Bicega later testified about that crucial time: "I don't know if it was by intuition, through my own lack of courage, or if I was drawn by Elizabeth's faith which seemed to have no limit, but I decided to wait and see what happened." Elizabeth later testified that, for her, "Jesus' greatest miracle was to change the doctor's heart. She had been unmoved in her determination to perform the abortion, but one day she said to me, 'Your faith has made me think a great deal. Even I have faith now so let's wait for the death of the fetus.'"

Elizabeth left the hospital and went to the home of Carlos Cesar's aunt, Janete Arcolino, who was a nurse. Dr. Bicego lent them an ultrasound instrument so they could monitor the heart beat of the child. She told them to check Elizabeth's temperature and blood pressure every six hours. They continued the super hydration and eventually began a cortisone treatment to prevent problems with the child's lungs.

Fr. Ovidio later testified that the whole community continued to invoke Blessed Gianna asking for a miracle. The parish was very pro-life and every month held a special blessing for pregnant women. A community of Carmelite sisters in the area also joined in the prayers and requested convents throughout Brazil to pray for Elizabeth. For her part, Elizabeth had a very hard time. Despite her faith in God and her past experiences, there were times when she was terribly afraid she was going to die with her child. Sometimes she felt alone as if she had been abandoned by God. She worried about what would happen with her other three children if she died.

Dr. Bicega followed the pregnancy very closely and noted that during the whole time there was no accumulation of amniotic fluid. Whenever any fluid did accumulate it would leak out as soon as Elizabeth would get up to go to the bathroom.

Finally, when Elizabeth had reached her 32nd week of pregnancy and the baby weighed 1.80 kilograms, it was decided to deliver the baby by caesarian section. On May 31, 2000 Elizabeth gave birth to a daughter whom she named Gianna Maria after her celestial intercessor. The baby was healthy except for a twisted left foot which was later successfully corrected with an operation and physical therapy. The defect probably occurred due to compression within the uterus.

Elizabeth however, had serious complications. The placenta adhered to the uterine wall and as a consequence she developed a severe hemorrhage and shock, losing more than 75% of her blood. By late in the day her kidneys had shut down, her lungs collapsed, and she was lapsing into a coma. Finally, after multiple blood transfusions and three days in the intensive care unit, she recovered.

The newborn was sent home on June 17 weighing 1.960 kilograms. In July 2001, Dr. Maria Engracia Ribeiro, a pediatrician, examined the child and found her to be perfectly normal and healthy, intelligent and lively with a strong personality. A subsequent examination on January 17, 2002 found no problems of any sort with the child's development. She had no immune or respiratory problems and was in perfect health.

The case of the miracle was studied thoroughly by the "Consulta Medica" of the Congregation for Causes of Saints and on April 10, 2003 it was determined that, despite the grave prognosis for the fetus and the mother as the result of the total loss of amniotic fluid at the 16th week of gestation, and despite medical treatment that failed to alleviate and was inadequate for such a grave situation, the positive outcome of the pregnancy, both healthy mother and healthy child, was unexplainable in medical terms. The decree "super miraculo" was promulgated by the Congregation in the presence of Pope John Paul II on December 20, 2003. Gianna Beretta Molla had been beatified on April 24, 1994. Her canonization was celebrated on May 16, 2004, and her feast day is commemorated on April 28, the date of her death.

Elizabeth's obstetrician and gynecologist, Dr. Nadia Vieitez de Almeida, stated "Contradicting all logic and science, this pregnancy continued without infection, without premature labor and without any fetal anomalies. The destiny is that God sent us Gianna, who today is the pride of us all."

St. Gianna died as a result of sacrificing her life so that her unborn child in the womb could have the maximum chance at life. Divine Providence accepted her sacrifice and suffering and she was rewarded with Eternal Salvation. Thus it is very beautiful that her heroic virtue was acknowledged and confirmed by the Universal Church through two intercessory miracles involving two mothers and an innocent baby in the womb.