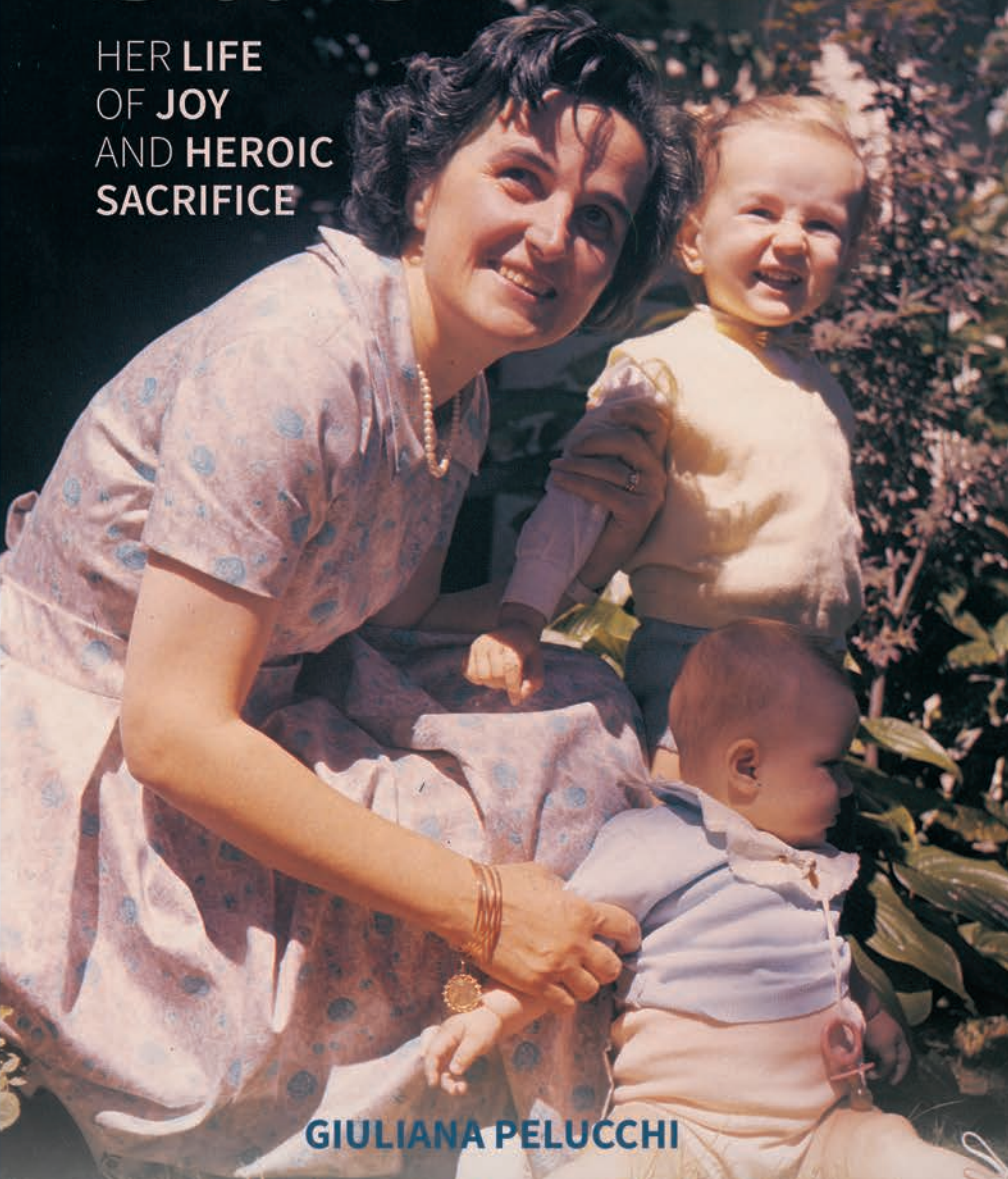


St. Gianna

HER LIFE
OF JOY
AND HEROIC
SACRIFICE



GIULIANA PELUCCHI

*“Among the many biographies of my Mom,
this one is my favorite.”*

— FROM THE FOREWORD BY GIANNA EMANUELA MOLLA

Saint Gianna

Her Life of Joy and Heroic Sacrifice

Giuliana Pelucchi

Translated by Michael J. Miller



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Translated by Michael J. Miller

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To Pietro Molla and his children.
To Sr. Virginia and Msgr. Giuseppe Beretta.
To the other relatives of Gianna and Pietro.
To those who keep Gianna in their heart.

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Foreword

I AM DEEPLY GRATEFUL to Giuliana Pelucchi for her beautiful biography of my “Saint Mom,” and to Pauline Books & Media for publishing this English edition for the fifteenth anniversary of my Mom’s canonization.

The author wrote this book as a revised and enlarged edition of her first biography, in view of my Mom’s canonization. That event was celebrated on May 16, 2004, in Saint Peter’s Square in Rome by Saint John Paul II. Through God’s grace, my Dad, who was then ninety-two, was also present with me and my siblings. It was the first time in the history of the Church that a husband attended his wife’s canonization!

For me and my entire family, Giuliana Pelucchi is much more than simply one biographer of my Mom among many; she has been a dear friend. Because she has been close to me and my relatives for a long time, and is a mother of a family herself, she has been able to get to know my Saint Mom better and in a deeper way, and to feel even closer to her. Giuliana poured not only her learning and writing skills into this biography, but also all of her heart and all of

her affection for my Mom. That is why this book is so dear to me.

While Giuliana was writing, she often came from her home in Milan to Mesero, to visit my Dad and me in our home, because she wished to share her book with us. She wanted the biography to reflect my Mom's magnificent figure, testimony, spirituality, and example as faithfully as possible. She also wanted to portray my Mom's life of joy until the moment of her extreme and heroic sacrifice, the moment which enabled me to come into the world. I think that she has achieved her goal.

This book is written in a simple but enthralling style. From the first chapter it inspires readers, drawing them more deeply into the vicissitudes of my Saint Mom's life. Hers was the "normal" life of a young woman, spouse, mother, and doctor. But with the help of God's grace, she lived it in an extraordinary, exemplary way, day by day from her early youth. She founded her entire life on our Lord, always fulfilling and accepting his holy will, always trusting in his Divine Providence until her last breath.

Giuliana Pelucchi has presented my Mom's entire journey of holiness in its true light, beginning from its roots. This journey confirms that we certainly can't turn ourselves into "saints"! My Mom was proclaimed "Blessed" and then "Saint," first and foremost because of her exemplary Christian life. Her death, as noble as her life, was its crown.

Among the many biographies of my Mom that have been published over the years, this one is my favorite since

the author enriched it with quotations from my parents' writings. Because this biography allows me to still feel them living and present, it touches my heart in a particular way. Their magnificent letters, some of which appear in these pages, are, in their simplicity and authenticity, a little treasure of conjugal and family spirituality. They can do so much spiritual good, can give so much courage and hope, in particular to people and families who suffer and are in difficulty.

I heartily hope that besides doing good to many persons, this book will help to make my most beloved Saint Mom even better known in the United States of America, where she is already much loved and prayed to. In my travels there I meet many little girls named "Gianna"! I also hope it will make better known my most beloved and holy Dad, her most worthy spouse.

An American priest who is very devoted to my Mom, after having read, around the years 2010–2011, the magazine entitled *Gianna, Smile of God*, which I have completely dedicated to my Dad's memory, wrote this to me: "You said it all when you wrote on page 5, 'And knowing my Papa helps us to know still better my Mom.' In our Christian anthropology man and woman—husband and wife—are complementary. They need each other to reach their complementarity and to become a more complete man and a more complete woman. Without your father, your mother would not have become the woman, the saint, she became. She would have lacked something really precious

and unique. In Saint Gianna Beretta Molla we can feel the influence of her ‘dear Pedrin.’ Your father was truly a holy man.”

May this biography be for you, as it is for me, a source of inspiration and a concrete help in your daily journey toward holiness and Heaven.

I assure you of my daily prayers to my Saint Mom and my holy Dad. I recommend to them all the intentions you hold in your heart, and I humbly ask you to pray for me and my mission.

GIANNA EMANUELA MOLLA

Youngest daughter of Saint Gianna

An Everyday Saint

ON THE EVENING OF April 29, 2002, Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini, the archbishop of Milan, was expected in nearby Mesero to commemorate Gianna Beretta Molla. The region's inhabitants, who have never forgotten their *dottoressa* (female doctor), had gathered in the little square facing the house where the saint once had her medical office and where her husband, Pietro Molla, had lived with their daughter, Gianna Emanuela.

The small piazza with its old, low buildings, cheerfully adorned by a few trees peeking over a wall, is dedicated to this woman, who was so generous and is still so beloved.

She is memorialized in a stone plaque set over the entrance to the doctor's office:

Here, while holding medical consultations (1950–1962),
Gianna Beretta Molla treated the body and comforted the
spirit of her patients.

In her—a woman who loved life, a wife and mother
of a family, a physician and exemplary professional—we

recognize the faith, the dedication, and the generosity of many other people, parents, and mothers.

Well accustomed to self-giving in the service of others, she knowingly offered and sacrificed herself to save the life of the child that she carried in her womb.¹

The cardinal was scheduled to stop in this place, still so full of her presence, to bless it before celebrating a solemn Mass in her memory at the parish church.

The previous day, April 28, had been the fortieth anniversary of Gianna's death. Pietro had wanted to go alone to the town cemetery to pray in the chapel where his wife is buried. He planned to thank her for all the love she had lavished on him and on their family in the seven very brief years of their marriage. He wanted to express his gratitude for all the good that she so generously had done and continues to do for the growing numbers of people who call on her with hope.

But on the evening of April 29, the citizens of Mesero—including simple folk, civil and religious authorities, young and old, mothers and children—wanted to draw close to him, in silence, to let him know that they shared his feelings for the loss of his wife.

After the cardinal blessed Gianna's consulting room, a long procession formed, accompanied by a band, and made its way to the parish church through the narrow streets that had once seen her young and happy.

The illuminated church welcomed everyone, and Cardinal Martini concelebrated with forty priests. Among

them were Msgr. Giuseppe Beretta, Gianna's brother;² Serafino Spreafico, bishop emeritus of Grajaù in Brazil; and Fr. Giuseppe Colombo, the parish priest who had organized the celebration.

The whole ceremony was conducted very simply—but also with much heartfelt faith, in keeping with the personality of this very courageous mother.

During his homily, Cardinal Martini recalled Gianna's sacrifice and her total dedication to her loved ones and others, particularly those struggling through difficult situations. Everyone's faces showed their agreement with the portrait he painted in his remarks filled with devotion for that young mother, someone who lived in our own time, who knew how to walk, humbly and with conviction, along the arduous paths of God's will.

When I wrote the first edition of her biography, no one yet knew—although many hoped—that one day Gianna Beretta Molla, beatified by John Paul II in a solemn ceremony in Saint Peter's Basilica on April 24, 1994, would be raised to the honor of sainthood.

But this hope was fulfilled. And I feel it is my duty to note—along with my personal recollections from that evening of April 29, 2002, at the beginning of this new book—that devotion to Gianna has always been and continues to be very strong.

With emotion I once again discovered how much those who knew her, either in person or through stories of her patients and friends, cherish her memory in their hearts.

They are proud to have been her neighbors and are happy to be able to pray to her. They are proud of having witnessed her precious example, which they have since tried to imitate in their lives. Indeed everyone is convinced that Gianna found the courage to give herself totally not only because she was impelled by sudden, generous love for her unborn child, but above all because her whole life had been characterized by continual, sincere spiritual striving. Her fellow townspeople knew this about her.

“Gianna was beatified not just because she died while giving her life to save the life of her child”—many tried to tell me at the solemn Liturgy on April 29—“but because year after year, day after day in her daily routine, just as Cardinal Martini explained [in his homily], she was committed to abandoning herself to God’s will. And she succeeded in doing so. She loved and served him in every one of his creatures, but also in the little things, sustained by her complete trust in Divine Providence. She loved and served God even in the simplest, humblest gestures of everyday family and professional life. And this is her greatness: the example that she left for us.” They agreed: “Without this continual experience of abandonment to God, to his will, maybe she would not have found the courage to make such a painful . . . choice.”

These words, following the more authoritative words of the archbishop of Milan, confirm that the pursuit of holiness is possible. These words oblige each of us to do the same.

Based on this principle I set out to recount the earthly life of Gianna: to write what happened after her death, before and after the official proclamation about her beatification. To do this, I start again from my first meeting with her husband, Pietro Molla.

We met in a room of the Molla family's ancestral house. Here Pietro had rebuilt his family and life after Gianna died and left him with four very small children: Pierluigi, Mariolina, Laura (or Lauretta), and Gianna Emanuela, the last and much awaited daughter for whom Gianna sacrificed her life.

While Gianna was alive, the family had lived in Ponte Nuovo, a village in Magenta. Their villa was located in the neighborhood where Pietro, an engineer, managed the La Saffa factory.

During our interview, Pietro and I sat across from one another. Pietro was embarrassed. It's not easy to delve into one's intimate past and talk about private things with a stranger. We were surrounded by objects that Gianna herself picked out many years before. On the mantel, silver frames displayed several photographs of her and her children. On the walls hung several little pictures painted by her. She had always loved painting.

A piano stood in a corner of the room as a testimony to her passion for music. "My wife played very well," Pietro said. "Her mother taught her when she was a child."

Much has been said and written about this young woman, who died at age thirty-nine while giving birth to her last

child—about her courage, her faith, her love for life. Many have analyzed her sacrifice in risking her own life to protect that of her unborn child. Some admire her choice. Others struggle to accept it. But most agree that it was certainly an exceptional act of love, one that has become even more unusual in light of our own restless, indifferent age.

But what was Gianna Beretta Molla really like? Who was this wife and mother who chose life without hesitation, with enormous generosity, and with an awareness made all the more acute because she, a doctor, knew the consequences perfectly well? I asked Pietro this question, trying to break through his great reserve.

Before answering, he stood up and invited me to accompany him into his study. The walls were completely covered by a large bookcase filled with well-ordered books and folders that contained the records of a life.

As Pietro spoke to me, his voice cracked, as often happens when someone must relate something extremely personal while still suffering deeply—someone who must recall a long story that now lives in the distant past but is still imprinted indelibly on his memory, on his heart.

“Gianna,” he began to say, weighing his words, “was a splendid but absolutely normal woman. She was beautiful. Intelligent. Kind. She liked to smile. She was also a modern, elegant woman. She drove a car. She loved the mountains and skied very well. She liked flowers and music. For years we had season tickets to the concerts of the Conservatorio di Milano. Given that we had to travel

there from Ponte Nuovo,” he continued, starting to smile, “we regularly skipped dinner, so we wouldn’t miss the concerts—something that happened when we went to the theater too. She liked to go on trips. I often went abroad for my employer, and whenever possible I brought her with me. We went to Holland, Germany, Switzerland, a bit all over Europe.”

“Your wife was a serene, fulfilled woman,” I said.

“No doubt about it,” Pietro replied. “But she was also a pious woman with an unquestionable trust in Providence. It never abandoned her, not even in the final months of her life.”

Pietro unexpectedly fell silent, entering memories that revealed the very heart of his wife. He then continued in a surer voice: “Gianna never lost hope that God would save them both, her and the baby. To confirm this, I will tell you a little incident that may seem trivial but that I consider significant. In the month of March, not long before the birth of our baby, I went to work in Paris. Gianna asked me to bring back a few fashion magazines, something that she had never done. ‘If God keeps me here,’ she told me, ‘I want to splurge [*sfogarmi*].’”

Pietro opened a compartment in the shelves and took out an elegant fashion magazine. “Look,” he said, slowly leafing through the pages, stopping at some places where little *Xes* mark very beautiful models. “These are the marks that she put next to the items that she particularly liked.” Without looking at me, he closed the glossy magazine and put it back on the shelf.

“I am sure that her sacrifice, accepted with so much love, must have cost her infinitely,” he said, resuming his remarks as he accompanied me back to the room where he had welcomed me. He invited me once more to sit facing him.

“Gianna loved life,” he told me again. “She was not one of those mystical types who are always thinking only about Paradise, who live on earth believing that this life is mostly a valley of tears. On the contrary, Gianna was a woman who knew how to enjoy, in the good sense of the word, the small and the great joys that God grants us even in this world.

“Despite this, she had no doubt whatsoever. When she realized the terrible coincidence of her pregnancy and the growth of a large fibroma that compromised its healthy development, her first, well-reasoned reaction was to ask that the baby that she had in her womb be saved. She had three possibilities. [The first,] the surgical removal of both the fibroma and the uterus, surely would have saved her life. [The second,] ending the pregnancy by means of a “therapeutic abortion” and surgically removing the fibroma, might have allowed her to have other children afterward. [The third option was] the surgical removal of the fibroma alone, without interrupting the pregnancy.

“Gianna chose the last solution, the one that involved the most risk for her. In those days it was indeed foreseeable that childbirth after such an intervention would be extremely dangerous for the mother. And Gianna, as a physician, knew it very well.”

Pietro then continued in a low voice, “Gianna, as I told you, trusted in Providence. My wife’s decision was the consistent result of a whole lifetime. The roots of it must be sought in the years of her childhood, in the family that raised her, in the profoundly religious atmosphere, with a Franciscan spirituality, that her parents had always let her and her siblings breathe in. [The roots must be sought] in the example of love that they had given her as a constant impetus, as security even in life’s difficult moments. [The roots of her decision lay] in her years of involvement in Catholic Action and in the Saint Vincent de Paul Society—experiences that enabled her to refine her spirituality: to become a woman, a mother who was generous to everyone. Her whole life, until the final action that she took, was a development along these lines of self-giving. Gianna never expected anything in return. Trying to explain something he believed, he insisted that “she didn’t do what she did to get to heaven. She did it above all because she felt that she was a mother.”

I listened to him, touched.

“To understand her decision,” he concluded, “we cannot forget Gianna’s profound conviction, as a mother and as a physician, that the child she bore within her was a complete child with the same rights as the other children, even though she had been conceived scarcely two months before. The child was a gift from God, deserving sacred respect. We also cannot forget the great love that she had for her babies: she loved them more than she loved herself. And we cannot forget her trust in Providence. Indeed she was

convinced that, yes, she was very helpful to me and to our three children, as a wife and as a mother. But above all, she was convinced that she was, at that precise moment, indispensable for the little child who was growing within her. She was certain that God would choose what was best for his mysterious plan of love.”

“While you were speaking to me, sir, I was reminded of that ‘something more’ that you told me about,” I said.

“I repeat,” Pietro replied: “In everyday life, Gianna was a very normal woman. I also had the opportunity to say it during the interviews that I had at the Curia of Milan, during the archdiocese’s documentation process for beatification: I never noticed that I was living with a saint.

“I must explain that the concept of holiness that was taught to us before the Second Vatican Council was always connected only with exceptional behaviors or deeds or works. Today the Church teaches that holiness can be achieved even in normal life, and all Christians are called to sanctity. Holiness is everyday life lived in the light of God and doing his will.

“Gianna was poised, direct, straightforward, serene. . . . There was no drama after she made her decision. She had surgery for the uterine fibroma, a benign tumor. She recovered. She spent the six months remaining until childbirth with incomparable fortitude and without any change to her duties as a mother and a physician.

“Again and again her request to ‘save her pregnancy’ came to mind, insistently, but I did not dare go further



A formal portrait of Gianna and Pierluigi, on his first birthday

with the thought. I did not dare raise the subject with her. She prayed and meditated. Several times she asked me to forgive her if she was worrying me. She told me she had never before needed tenderness and understanding like she did then. I continued to see that she was calm. She took care of our children and her patients with her usual affection. [But] it worried me when she started to reorganize all her things, with special attention, and to put the whole house in order, drawers and closets . . . , as though she had to leave for a long voyage.”

Sunbeams shone through the windows of the study, causing light to play strangely on Pietro’s face.

He started to speak again. “Several days before the delivery, I remember that I had to go to the factory and had already put on my overcoat. Gianna—it seems to me that I can still see her—was leaning on a small piece of furniture in the entrance hall of our house. She came close to me. She did not say, ‘Let’s sit down,’ or ‘Wait a moment,’ or ‘Let’s talk.’ Nothing. She came close to me and—just as it happens, when you have to say difficult and burdensome things, but you have thought about them a lot and don’t intend to turn back—she said: ‘Pietro, if you have to decide between me and the child, don’t hesitate at all. Choose the baby, I insist. Save the baby.’

“Just like that. Nothing else. I was unable to say anything at all to her. I knew my wife very well, her generosity, her spirit of sacrifice. I left the house, deeply upset, without saying a word. There was nothing dramatic in her action,”

he concluded. “Only the intimate, Christian awareness of a choice that she had decided was of the utmost importance. Necessary. With the assurance of God’s love, in an attempt to respond to Providence with self-abandonment—as she had always tried to do.”

Indeed the whole life of Gianna Beretta Molla was free of tumultuous episodes or extraordinary deeds. Instead a whole series of little, everyday moments, bit by bit, prepared her with the courage to sacrifice herself totally, to give life to a child whom she loved so much even before coming into the world.

In her story we meet a happy girl Gianna, from a lovely family, living in lovely houses in Magenta, Milan, Vigiona, Bergamo, and Genoa. We meet a secondary-school student and a medical student Gianna. We meet a Gianna who worked among the young people of Catholic Action and among the poor with the Saint Vincent de Paul Society. We meet a loving wife Gianna and a happy mom among her beautiful children.

I attempt therefore to reconstruct her story, step by step, following the memories of many who knew her and have not forgotten her, supported with documents that substantiate the fundamental stages of her life.