

VOTIVE MASS OF SAINT GIANNA BERETTA MOLLA
SHRINE OF OUR LADY OF GUADALUPE
LA CROSSE
AUGUST 2, 2009

First Reading: *Dt* 6:3-9

Responsorial Psalm: *Ps* 112:1-2, 3-4, 5-7a, 7b-8

Second Reading: *1 Jn* 3:14-18

Alleluia Verse: *Jn* 13:34

Gospel: *Mt* 16:24-27

HOMILY

Praised be Jesus Christ, now and for ever. Amen.

1. How fitting to celebrate the memory of Saint Gianna Beretta Molla in this church of the Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe! Today's celebration deepens our appreciation of the mystery of God's love at work in the life of a saint of our own time, who, through her devotion to the Mother of God, under the title of Mother of Good Counsel, and through her daily praying of the Rosary, came to know Our Lord deeply and to live more ardently the Divine Love which she received from His Most Sacred Heart. From the Blessed Virgin Mary, she learned obedience to the first and most fundamental law of God, the law which Moses proclaimed with these words:

Therefore, you shall love the Lord, your God,

with all your heart,

with all your soul,

and with all your strength (Reading I).

Indeed, as Moses urged, she united these words to her very being, and she carefully and insistently taught them to her children. Through obedience to the law of love of God, she discovered her true freedom. Discovering her freedom, she loved God ever more, so that she was prepared to offer her very life, in order to bring to birth the last child with whom God blessed her marriage. Our commemoration of the holiness of life of Saint Gianna has been greatly enriched, today, by the presence of her eldest child, Pierluigi, who has generously given us testimony regarding the holiness of life of his mother.

2. Truly, Saint Gianna lived the divine wisdom taught by Our Lord in the Gospel. She found her life by losing it; she discovered freedom by purifying herself of sin and becoming the servant of Divine Love in every fiber of her being. From the Mother of God and through her Eucharistic devotion, extended throughout the day by devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, she readily took up the Cross with Christ, in order to love others as Christ loves, purely and selflessly. She understood sacrifice and suffering, not as something negative and diminishing, but as the opening to the way of ever greater love. Regarding sacrifice, she declared:

[T]he final end of prayer and action is not to receive praise or self-advantage but to busy oneself, as did Jesus, in the total giving of oneself for others at the cost of renunciation and suffering, in the impassionate competition of love which arrives at the sacrificing of one's own life.¹

She came to know the mystery of God's love in Jesus Christ, God the Son Incarnate, in the offering of His life for the salvation of man and of the world. In coming to know the great Mystery of Faith, she also learned the pattern of the Mystery as the key to understanding her own life. In the words of Saint John the Evangelist:

The way we came to know love
was that he laid down his life for us;
so we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers (Reading II).

3. In reflecting upon the life of Saint Gianna, we quite naturally tend to concentrate on her last and greatest act of love, the offering of her life to save her tiny daughter in the womb, Gianna Emanuela. Her heroic act is only fully understood, however, in the context of an entire life given in devoted love of God and in sacrifice of self for the good of one's neighbor, first, in the family and, then, in the wider community of the Church. One thinks, for example, of her teaching and example given to the young girls of Catholic Action. She was a model for them. At the same time, she did not fear to enunciate for them the virtues needed to lead a good and holy life. Her instructions on purity are most striking and are so apt for our time, in which so many find themselves enslaved to habits of impurity, frequently connected with viewing of pornography on

the Internet. She reminded the young women that, through the reception of Holy Communion, we become living monstrances from which the beauty of a holy life in Christ is to shine forth in the world. She declared:

Our body is a cenacle, a monstrance: through its crystal the world should see God. Purity must control the proper use of the pleasures of the senses. Our body is sacred. It is in conjunction with the soul in doing good. Purity is a resultant virtue, that is, a unity of other virtues that bring it into custody. How does one keep custody of purity? By surrounding our body with the hedge of sacrifice, purity becomes beauty. Purity becomes freedom.²

4. Closely connected with her teaching of purity and the other virtues to the young women of Catholic Action is her profound understanding of the meaning of vocation in life and of the specific vocations to the married life, the dedicated single life, the priesthood and the consecrated life. Her teaching of the youth was, in fact, directed to helping them know God's call and to respond to it with an undivided heart. Mastering the virtue of purity, therefore, was fundamental to the response to one's vocation. Regarding our vocation in life, Saint Gianna wrote:

Everything has a particular end and obeys a law. Everything develops toward a predestined end. God has traced a way for each one of us... Both our earthly and eternal happiness depends on following our vocation very carefully.³

In her own life, she struggled to know God's plan for her, first thinking to give her life as a dedicated single person in the missions, following in the footsteps of her saintly brother Father Alberto in the missions of Brazil. Having sought the counsel of her Bishop, she understood that God had not given her the health necessary for the missionary vocation but rather had destined her to achieve heroic love in the married life.⁴ Her love letters to her husband Pietro provide a most inspiring meditation on the meaning of vocation and on the vocation to the married life.

¹Pietro Molla and Elio Guerrero, *Saint Gianna Molla: Wife Mother Doctor*, tr. James G. Colbert, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004, p.151.

²Pietro Molla and Elio Guerrero, *Saint Gianna Molla*, p. 150.

³Pietro Molla and Elio Guerrero, *Saint Gianna Molla*, p. 152.

⁴cf. Pietro Molla and Elio Guerrero, *Saint Gianna Molla*, p. 31.

She was filled with gratitude to God for the gift of her vocation. Shortly before their marriage, she wrote these words to Pietro:

With God's help and blessing, we will do all we can to make our new family a little cenacle, where Jesus will reign over all our affections, desires and actions.

My Pietro, our wedding is just a few days away now, and I feel very moved to be so near receiving the sacrament of love. We will be working with God in his creation; in this way we can give him children who will love and serve him.⁵

Saint Gianna's ultimate sacrifice of life for the sake of the infant in her womb is understood as the highest expression of her response to God's call to be wife and mother.

5. Saint Gianna knew deeply the total engagement required by her vocation and the fatigue of fulfilling the obligations of her call to marriage. In a particular way, she knew profound suffering in bringing new human life into the world, the crown of her vocation as wife and mother. Her husband Pietro and she knew the intense sorrow of losing two of their children before they were born. Fittingly, so many couples who are having difficulty in conceiving and bringing a new life into the world have turned to Saint Gianna for her saintly example and also for her powerful intercession. In the painting of Saint Gianna in this church, we see wonderfully depicted the fruit of her loving intercession in the conception and birth of many children who, at their birth, are rightly called "Saint Gianna babies." In these days, I have blessed the statue of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Mother of the Unborn, in the Memorial to the Unborn of the Shrine. May Saint Gianna inspire us to understand more deeply the mystery of God's love which embraces us, through the arms of the Mother of God, from the moment of our conception until the moment of natural death.

6. Saint Gianna is also a model of the sanctification of daily work for the glory of God and the salvation of souls. She understood the exercise of the medical art as a participation in Christ's healing of the sick. She referred to the service of the physician as a priestly service, because it

⁵Blessed Gianna Beretta Molla, *Love Letters to My Husband*, ed. Elio Guerrero, Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2002, pp. 40-41.

gave glory to God and, exercised properly, not only was directed to healing the body, but also to leading the soul closer to God. Regarding the medical art, she wrote:

We have opportunities that a priest does not. Our mission is not ended when medicines are of no more use. There is the soul to take to God, and your word will have authority. Every physician should deliver a patient to the priest. These Catholic doctors, how necessary they are!

The great mystery of man – he has a body but also is supernatural soul – is Jesus: “Whoever visits the sick, helps me.” Priestly mission: as the priest can touch Jesus, so we touch Jesus in the bodies of our patients – poor, young, old, children.⁶

At a time in our nation, when physicians and other healthcare workers may be required by law to violate their consciences through cooperation in actions which diminish or even take a human life, Saint Gianna is a powerful example and intercessor.

7. There are so many other aspects of the life of Saint Gianna, upon which we wish to reflect in the context of the celebration of the Eucharistic Sacrifice, but time does not permit us to do so. May our reflection continue as we grow in spiritual friendship with Saint Gianna, wife, mother and physician.

8. Finally, we see ever more clearly how Saint Gianna, in imitation of and through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, gave her heart totally to Our Lord Jesus Christ. In Our Lord Jesus Christ alone she found her freedom, the beauty of a life given totally to God, in her vocation and her service of man, both in her exercise of the apostolate and through her medical art. Saint Gianna declared:

Love must be total, full, complete, governed by God’s law and it must carry over into eternity.⁷

The oblation of Saint Gianna’s life in love of God and neighbor indeed carried over into eternity. Her daily living was an anticipation of the consummation of her gift of life in love through death

⁶Pietro Molla and Elio Guerrero, *Saint Gianna Molla*, p. 75.

⁷Pietro Molla and Elio Guerrero, *Saint Gianna Molla*, p. 153.

which brings us Christians to the final destiny of our earthly pilgrimage. Through the passage from this life to the life which is to come, we reach the fullness of joy and peace in the company of the angels and all the saints in the Kingdom of God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The beautiful painting of Saint Gianna in this church gives expression to the union of heaven with earth in the life and death of Saint Gianna Beretta Molla.

9. Let us now, with Our Lady of Guadalupe and Saint Gianna Beretta Molla, sacramentally place our hearts into the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Let us find our rest in the Heart of Jesus and bring from the heart of Jesus pure and selfless love to our neighbor.

Heart of Jesus, burning furnace of charity, have mercy on us!

Our Lady of Guadalupe, pray for us!

Saint Juan Diego, pray for us!

Saint Gianna Beretta Molla, pray for us!