

20th Sunday: Fire on Earth—St. Gianna Berretta Molla

"I have come to set the earth on fire, and how I wish it were already blazing."
Luke 12:49

The readings today present us with the challenges of our faith and the challenges to our faith. Jeremiah was thrown into a cistern because he refused to hedge on the faith. He refused to tell the king what the king wanted to hear. He proclaimed the truth that God told him to proclaim, even though it cost him severely. The people to whom the *Letters to the Hebrews* was addressed were tempted to give up the faith. It seemed too difficult to them, too demanding. Further on in the letter, the author of *Hebrews* would tell them to lift up their drooping hands, and firm up their shaking knees. In today's reading they are chided that for all their complaining. They had not yet resisted sin to the point of shedding blood. They should keep their eyes focused on Jesus, and not be so concerned about their present lives. In the Gospel for this Sunday, Jesus speaks about the cost of discipleship. Families may even be divided over the following of the Lord, but nothing is worth sacrificing the Life of Jesus within us.

St. Gianna Berretta Molla understood this so well, and all its implications. Hers was one of the last canonizations by St. John Paul II on May 16, 2004. She is a modern saint, who died on April 28, 1962. Her husband and children were present for her canonization. We haven't heard a whole lot about her in the United States, something which we priests are remiss.

Gianna Berretta was a doctor living outside of Milan, Italy. She had a double residency and practice in pediatrics and obstetrics gynecology. After she finished her residencies, her desire to reach out to the people influenced her to open a clinic in a small town in her native Italy. She was not a wealthy doctor. She never hesitated to give her services free to those who could not afford to pay. A good doctor works long hours and Gianna was no exception. Pregnant mothers felt so secure in her care because they knew no matter what time of night they needed her, she would be there for them.

After becoming a doctor, Gianna met and became engaged to the man of her dreams, Pietro Molla. She had found a man who agreed with her determination to live her faith. She told her future husband, "I really want a Christian family, where God is one of the family; a little cenacle where He can reign in our hearts, enlighten our decisions and guide our programs." They were married on September 24, 1955. In November 1956, to her great joy, she became the mother of Pierluigi, in December 1957 of Mariolina; in July 1959 of Laura. With simplicity and equilibrium she harmonized the demands of mother and wife, and continued practice as a doctor all with the passion that she had for life.

In 1961, Gianna became pregnant with the Molla's fourth child. In September,

towards the end of the second month of pregnancy, she was touched by suffering and the mystery of pain. She had developed a tumor in her uterus. She was given the choice of having the uterus removed and thus kill the child, or risk surgery that might save the child but kill her. She was an OB-GYN. She knew the risk that her continued pregnancy brought, but she pleaded with the surgeon to save the life of the child she was carrying, and entrusted herself to prayer and Providence. The baby's life was saved, for which she thanked the Lord. She spent the seven months remaining until the birth of the child in incomparable strength of spirit and unrelenting dedication to her tasks as mother and doctor. She worried that the baby in her womb might be born in pain, and she asked God to prevent that.

A few days before the child was due, although trusting as always in Providence, she was ready to give her life in order to save that of her child. She repeated to her husband: "If you must decide between me and the child, do not hesitate: choose the child - I insist on it. Save the child." On the morning of April 21, 1962, Gianna Emanuela was born. Despite all efforts and treatments to save both of them, on the morning of April 28, amid repeated exclamations of "Jesus, I love you. Jesus, I love you," Gianna Berretta Molla died. She was 39 years old.

Was Gianna foolish for making the decision to allow her death rather than the death of her child? Shouldn't she have considered staying alive for the sake of her other three children, her husband, and even her medical practice? These arguments were presented to her by those whom she had respected, doctors, family members, etc. But their thinking was the thinking of the world. Gianna knew that she would accomplish nothing in killing a child to keep her own life. The child that was saved, Gianna Emanuela, followed in her mother's footsteps and is now a medical doctor and consultant to the Saint Gianna Berretta Molla Society.

St. Gianna wrote this prayer: "O Jesus, I promise You to submit myself to all that You permit to befall me, make me only know Your Will. My most sweet Jesus, infinitely merciful God, most tender Father of souls, and in a particular way of the most weak, most miserable, most infirm which You carry with special tenderness between Your divine arms, I come to You to ask You, through the love and merits of Your Sacred Heart, the grace to comprehend and to do always Your holy Will, the grace to confide in You, the grace to rest securely through time and eternity in Your loving divine arms."

The cost of discipleship seldom makes the demand on us that it made on Gianna Molla, but we are all continually confronted with the choice of standing up for our faith or joining the world that rejects the Lord. One person is encouraged to tear down a co-worker with the hope of getting his or her position. Another is mocked for refusing to participate in an immoral gathering. Movies and the media glorify sin and belittle those who reject sin. The tempters themselves often claim to be modern day Christians, but in fact they are promoting the works of evil.

But nothing outside of us can quell the fire that Jesus lit in our hearts. Only we can put the fire out by giving in to the pagan world. We cannot do this. We cannot let anything, any situation put the fire out. We cannot drown it with our own selfishness. So, we keep our eyes focused on Jesus, and as we run the race of our lives we draw Him who leads us closer to ourselves. For the fire that he has set is worth infinitely more than all the so called reasonable demands of the world.

St. Paul wrote: "The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." 1 Corinthians 1:18.

St. Gianna Berretta Molla, pray for us.