

Talk 2 - Fr. Rolf Tollefson

We at Curatio are very happy to be here at St. Charles Borromeo Parish. Fr. James Adams, thank you for hosting us today, and Fr. Jim Livingston is with us as well. Many of us know him through his great retreat apostolate throughout the archdiocese. He is the chaplain of North Memorial Hospital in Robbinsdale. It is a privilege to have you with us, Fr. Livingston.

We are blessed to hear for the last several days Jesus' discourse on the Bread of Life, and it's very appropriate that we begin this Mass of St. Gianna Beretta Molla with this beautiful discourse. At the heart of Curatio is the Heart of Jesus Christ. That is our goal. Our goal is that we would be so transformed by the sacraments that we would be sources of healing grace to others, that our hearts would be transformed by the healing grace of Christ so that others may be transformed. First, we must have our own hearts be transformed by Christ; then we can be sources of healing to others, and what does that primarily is the Holy Mass. In this Holy Mass today, we celebrate this beautiful saint, St. Gianna Beretta Molla. Notably, she became a saint not just by exchanging her life for the life of her child, but also through her entire life, by working as a physician, as a wife and as a mother. By doing those things, she became heroically holy. So, truly St. Gianna should be an important saint, not just for members of Curatio but also for all members of St. Charles Borromeo Parish, especially for working moms. She can be a patron saint for working mothers. She became heroically holy by doing her duties as wife, as mother, and as physician.

So, how did her upbringing prepare her to be heroically holy to discharge these duties? She grew up in a strong Catholic family with eight people. Her parents stressed simplicity of life. They went to daily Mass, they prayed the daily rosary, they consecrated themselves to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and also in her upbringing her parents were on the same page when it came to discipline. Never was there a reproof of the mother not supported by the father, and vice versa. Necessary punishments and corrections were never neglected and, as a result of all of this love and of all of this parenting, there were three physicians who came out of that family, two priests, and one sister as well. Even though she grew up in a very normal family, she was also a very normal child. She was a very human child. Growing up, she liked to play and she even liked to pull pranks on others, and sometimes she even disobeyed her mother. Surprisingly, Gianna was not such a good student, at least straight off. She even needed to repeat a couple of courses. She was a bad speller. She preferred to be skiing in the Alps instead of studying. Even saints have a less than industrious past, but yet she was different somehow. A schoolmate recalled that she had a faith so touching that all those who met her felt closer and attracted to the Church, and an even deeper moment of conversion happened for her at the age of 15 when she was making a retreat, as it does for so many people - transformation happening through retreat, and as many of you know who have been on retreats and as the Curatio retreatants do today, holy resolutions are made on retreats. Here are some of St. Gianna's holy resolutions at the age of 15: "I prefer to die than to commit a mortal sin." "To say a Hail Mary daily, so that the Lord may give me a happy death."

And so, as a result of Christ touching her heart at this retreat, her life changed. Notably, her life became a life of outstanding commitment and achievement after this retreat, and even her grades improved because of this new spirit of self-sacrifice. Then, as she matured, she became active in Catholic Action as a young adult. It was a lay movement, like Curatio - a movement toward encouraging Catholic laity to live a more intensely spiritual life. Pope Pius XII called its lay members to reconstruct society on the Christian foundation, and that is the primary task of the laity, the transformation of the secular culture. Gianna became a leader with Catholic Action. She planned retreats and conferences, and she especially spent time visiting the poor in their homes. She even bathed a woman who was covered with fleas, and she dedicated herself to purity and dressing modestly at all times. She sanctified the lay state by living her life in this way.

Now, in 1949, after medical school in Milan, she began her mission as a physician. If someone was too poor to pay, she would pick up their services for free. She worked also as a very spiritually aware and awake physician, always looking for Christ in her patients. She writes this: "Just as the priest may touch Jesus, so too we doctors touch Jesus in the bodies of our patients - the poor, the young, the old ... children. She had a special love for mothers and for children as well, so she decided to dedicate herself to pediatrics. She did not leave the clinic until she saw the last patient who needed to have help and she would often come home late. She, like some of you retreatants or other St. Charles outcare workers, was also called at times and challenged at times to compromise her Catholic ethical beliefs. One time she was asked by the father of a child to get an abortifacient to be issued to his wife and she refused. One time she urged a girl to go to confession who had aborted her child and she asked her parish priest to preach on abortion. She was like a sister to many expectant mothers.

Then there was a new change in her life, in the life of this beautiful lay person - this beautiful lay woman. In 1955, at the age of 33, she became more and more heroically holy, not by becoming a nun, although that is a beautiful path as well, but by getting married. She wrote many beautiful and holy letters to Pietro, her loving spouse, and you can even buy a book which includes all of those love letters to him. This is what she says to her husband: "We need to do all we can, Pietro, to make our new family a little cenacle - a little upper room - where Jesus reigns over all our affections, desires and actions, and through the process of being married, through the process of her praying for her husband every day, she became holy. For her, her life was completely defined by and interwoven with the life of her husband. She wrote these beautiful lines in a letter to Pietro: "Will I be the kind of wife and mother you have always hoped for? I want to be, because you deserve it and because I love you so much. Every morning at Mass, I offer to the Lord my work and yours, my joys and sufferings and your joys and sufferings. She became also heroically holy in her family by valuing priestly vocations. She wrote this: "I want to make a chasuble out of my wedding dress for any of my sons who may become a priest." - a beautiful quote for this, which is vocation awareness weekend.

At one time then she was thinking about whether she should go to Brazil to be a missionary, but she became heroically holy not by becoming a missionary and going to Brazil, but by being married and by being a mother. Then, as she embraced more and more her Catholic family life, she told her husband that they must pray the rosary every day and she attended daily Mass whenever it was possible, because she realized that sometimes her children's timetable didn't quite correspond with that of the Church for daily Mass, so she realized that it wasn't always possible for her to attend. The same thing is true for mothers with young children. If you can't make the daily Mass schedule, then you can't make it. This is what St. Gianna Baretta Molla did, and she became a saint. Attend Mass as frequently as it is possible according to your vocation in life.

Finally, St. Gianna became heroically holy because she valued her children even more than her own life. Her pregnancies were always difficult and she experienced the sole pain of two miscarriages. Despite this, the couple redoubled their prayers because they so desired to have children. So, in the fall of 1961, she was found to be with child, but also with a painful ovarian cyst. Instead of having her uterus removed and having the child killed as a result, she decided to bring her child to term. She told her husband this: "If you have to make a decision between me and the child, do not hesitate; choose the child. I demand it." So, Gianna Immanuel ("God is with us") was born on Holy Saturday, 1962, and during that bright week, that Easter week, her suffering intensified - that is, St. Gianna's suffering intensified - and she knew that she was dying. As she said to her husband when she was dying, "Pietro, I was on the other side already, and if only you knew what I saw. Someday I will tell you." Then, a week after she gave birth to this child, she died with the words, "Jesus, I love you," on her lips. Beautifully, her child, little Gianna Immanuel, also grew up to be a doctor, and now she serves Alzheimer's patients in Italy. Her mother, St. Gianna Baretta Molla, was canonized in 2004.

St. Gianna Baretta Molla, pray for us!