

Saint Gianna Beretta Molla

by Susan Helen
Wallace, FSP with
Patricia Edward
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The Gift of Life



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Illustrated by Rick Powell



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*To my mother, Helen,
who loved being a mother
as did Saint Gianna*

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MEMORIES

Eleven-year-old Gianna sat at the dining room table surrounded by stacks of photo albums. "There are a lot of people in these pictures, and I don't even know who some of them are!" she exclaimed.

"Like who?" asked her older sister, Amalia, as she walked by carrying a pile of folded laundry.

"Like this cute little boy," Gianna responded, pointing to an old black and white photograph.

Amalia set down the clothes and stopped to have a look. "That's Papa, silly!" she chuckled. Slipping the picture out of the album, she turned it over. "See, it's written here on the back: 'Alberto Beretta at age four.' This photograph must have been taken not long after our grandmother died," Amalia continued. "See, his eyes look sad."

"Sad?" Gianna asked thoughtfully. "What else can you tell me about Papa and Mama?" Gianna prodded. "I don't think they have time to answer all the questions I'd like to ask, and you know so many things that I've never heard about before."

"It's just because I'm twice your age," Amalia answered with a grin.

Amalia pulled out a chair and sat down. "Well, several years after his mama died, Papa was sent away from his hometown of Magenta, to live at a Catholic boarding school in Milan. Papa was a good student and got along well with everyone, but he really missed his family at home. He was very lonely."

"Maybe that's why family is so important to Papa," Gianna observed.

"I'm sure it is," Amalia agreed. "Now to get back to what I was saying. When Papa was in his twenties, he met the young woman he knew he wanted to marry—Maria De Micheli."

"It was Mama, right?" Gianna interrupted.

"Right," nodded Amalia. "She was six years younger than Papa, but their friendship was a perfect fit, and soon they were planning their wedding!"

"Mama was the oldest in her family, wasn't she?"

"Yes, she was. And being the oldest of five girls, she had had plenty of opportunity to help her mother take care of her younger sisters. This experience prepared her to start her own family—our family."

The parlor clock suddenly chimed the hour. "I didn't realize it was so late!" Gianna exclaimed. "I'd better get all this put away. It's almost time for dinner. Thanks for filling me in on some of our family history, Amalia."

"It was fun," Amalia answered. "Let's look through old photos again some time. Who knows what treasures we'll find!"



Alberto and Maria had married on October 12, 1908. They certainly couldn't afford a honeymoon, but they were happy just the same. They began their married life in the city of Milan, not far from a large Capuchin Franciscan monastery. The newlyweds closed their apartment door behind them and smiled. "It's not much," Alberto apologized. "I wish I could give you more, Maria."

"What are you talking about?" his young wife countered. "It's beautiful, Alberto . . . and it's our very own. Here we'll begin a whole new life!"

"This is just what I've always dreamed of," Alberto confided, "a family of my own. And you are the only woman I have ever

wanted to be my wife.” Maria blushed and hugged her husband. Alberto noticed that her eyes were bright with tears.

The ordinary pace of life began right away. Alberto went daily to his job at the Cantoni Cotton Mill, while Maria busied herself with transforming their little apartment into a cozy home.

Twenty years and thirteen children later, Alberto and Maria Beretta had experienced joys and heartaches in their life together. Three of their children—David, Rosina, and Pierina—had died of the dreaded Spanish flu. The terrible epidemic broke out in 1918. It has been estimated that it claimed between fifty and one hundred million victims worldwide, far more than the fifteen million people who died in World War I.

Two more of the couple’s children, Guglielmina and Anna Maria, died as infants. The eight Beretta children who grew to adulthood were Amalia, Francesco, Ferdinando, Enrico, Zita, Giuseppe, Gianna, and Virginia.

Alberto and Maria never dreamed that someday one of their children would be canonized a saint. But, that’s exactly what happened. The story begins with Gianna’s birth.

GIFT NUMBER TEN

Alberto paced back and forth, anxiously awaiting news. In the 1920s, most children were born at home, and on the other side of the bedroom door Maria was now giving birth to their tenth child. It was the feast of St. Francis of Assisi, Wednesday, October 4, 1922. *Each child born into the world is a precious gift from God*, Alberto thought. *And it's an added gift from St. Francis to have our newest child born on his feast day!* Alberto and Maria were members of the Third Order of St. Francis and had a special love for their patron saint.

Soon, a newborn's cry echoed through the house. The bedroom door swung open. "Come in, Mr. Beretta," waved the midwife. "Come and see your beautiful little girl!"

One week later, on October 11, the infant, dressed in a delicate white baptismal gown and a ruffled, close-fitting cap, was brought to the Basilica of St. Martin in the city of Magenta. Wide-eyed, she looked up at the smiling faces surrounding her. "What's she thinking?" her brothers and sisters asked

each other as they vied for her attention. The priest carefully poured water over the little girl's head as he pronounced the sacramental words: "I baptize you Giovanna Francesca, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen."

Giovanna Francesca returned home that day a child of God and a new member of the Catholic Church. It wasn't long before her parents and family began calling her "Gianna."



The Beretta family lived in times of upheaval. World War I had deeply affected Italy and all of Europe in many ways. In the years immediately following the war, peace remained a very cautious hope.

Mr. and Mrs. Beretta often talked about the world situation. After having already lost three children, the safety and happiness of the rest of their family was their highest priority.

"Maria, I was thinking that it would be better if we could move further away from Milan to a place in the countryside," Alberto said one evening as his wife poured him a cup of coffee. "Perhaps Bergamo—the air is

cleaner because of the high altitude and the children will be healthier and safer there. That would be a plus for Amalia, with those weak lungs of hers. Maybe she wouldn't get sick so often."

Maria frowned. "Alberto," she quietly replied, "think of all the time you'll lose traveling every day. It's a distance of fifty-eight kilometers (thirty-six miles) each way . . ."

"I know Bergamo is farther from my job at the factory, but I could always take a train," Alberto broke in. "Don't forget, I'll still be home on Sundays."

Maria gave her husband a quick hug. "All right. I agree, if you think it's for the best."

"I do, Maria. I really do," he answered.

Mr. Beretta wasted no time in traveling to Bergamo to find a large enough home that they could afford. He was successful. Best of all, the house had a garden where the children could enjoy the outdoors. The family was even more excited, because Maria's parents lived nearby.

The Berettas soon settled into their new home, and Mr. Beretta began his new and unfamiliar daily routine. He started his day

in the parish church with 5:00 AM Mass, then took the train to his job at the factory in Milan.

At that time, the eucharistic fast in preparation for receiving Holy Communion began the previous midnight. That meant that Mr. Beretta and the other worshippers did not eat breakfast before attending the early morning Mass. Because he had had no food or water since midnight the night before, when Alberto boarded the train to go to work, he was hungry!

As the train rattled along, Mr. Beretta would open his lunch box and snack on some fresh fruit and a piece of his wife's homemade bread. And always he would offer a prayer of thanks for God's many blessings. Alberto had to admit that he was a happy man. "God has given me everything I have asked for," he whispered to himself, "and the greatest gift is my family."



Gianna was only three when her family moved to Bergamo. For her, it was a real adventure! How happy she was when the family gathered each evening after supper to listen to the beautiful music her sister

Amalia played on the piano. Then came family prayer time. Before a large picture of the Sacred Heart and a statue of the Blessed Mother, the Berettas would pray the Rosary. Gianna watched and listened from her safe perch on her mother's lap. Although she was too young to understand all that was going on, she knew that it was special. She felt loved—by her family, and by God.