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Motherhood and Personhood: The Canonization of Gianna Beretta Molla and the Figurativization of Catholic Norms

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Corresponding Author:	Jenny PONZO Universita degli Studi di Torino Dipartimento di Filosofia e Scienze dell'Educazione ITALY
Corresponding Author Secondary Information:	
Corresponding Author's Institution:	Universita degli Studi di Torino Dipartimento di Filosofia e Scienze dell'Educazione
Corresponding Author's Secondary Institution:	
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First Author Secondary Information:	
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Response to Reviewers:	Please find in attachment the manuscript I updated according to the indications of the Reviewers. In particular, in response to Reviewer 2, I tried to make more explicit (by adding a sentence) that the applied method is inspired by structural semiotics and I carefully checked the bibliography to correct typos.

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Jenny Ponzo

University of Turin

jenny.ponzo@unito.it

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Abstract: This paper considers the cause for canonization of Gianna Beretta Molla, a pediatrician who died in 1962 because during her pregnancy she refused medical treatment that would have caused her to abort. The acts of Gianna's cause contribute to the creation of a specific example mirroring and sustaining the position adopted by the Church in the 1960s and 1970s in matters of abortion, motherhood, family, and right to life. These issues were particularly delicate in those years, when the Catholic Church was facing the rise of liberal and radical positions that contrasted with its doctrine; in particular, law n. 194 of 22 May 1978 constituted the first act of abortion legalization in Italy. In this context, the sanctification of Gianna had strategic importance for the Church as a way of presenting the faithful with the Catholic ideal of motherhood through a concrete example to follow. In this paper, I argue that the way in which the figure of Gianna is represented in the acts of her cause for canonization can be read as the figurativization of the axiology laid out in more abstract terms in Church texts with a normative value, such as the constitutions it issued during the Second Vatican Council and other official documents expressing the pontifical magisterium.

Keywords: abortion, person, generative trajectory, Catholic magisterium, sainthood

1. Introduction[1]

In 1978, Italian law was changed to allow women to choose to have an abortion within the first ninety days of pregnancy, under certain circumstances. This law represented an unprecedented recognition of women's freedom of choice and the first instance of abortion legalisation in Italy. The announcement of this law was both preceded and followed by heated debates between supporters and opponents, with Catholics among those opposed [7]. Faced with a rapid shift in mentality and customs, in fact, the Catholic Church strongly reaffirmed its idea of family, maternity and the right to life between the 1960s and '70s. The Church's position was asserted not only through the work of theologians, public figures and various media outlets,[2] but also by issuing a series of documents that enjoyed normative status. The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* (1964) and the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the contemporary world *Gaudium et Spes* (1965), both issued in the context of the Second Vatican Council [21, 22], were particularly important in this sense, as were other documents referable to the

[1] This paper is part of the project NeMoSanctI, which has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No 757314).

[2] To cite only a few examples, see the document about abortion issued in 1975 by the CEI (Conferenza Episcopale Italiana) and signed by its president, cardinal Poma [28], the actions and writings of Carlo Casini, then magistrate and prominent exponent of the Christian Democracy party [2], and the works of the Jesuit moral theologian Giacomo Perico [25, 26]. In 1994, moreover, John Paul II founded the "Pontifical Academy for life" tasked specifically with implementing and promoting the Church's position in matters of life ethics, including abortion (see www.academyforlife.va, accessed 21 April 2020). Even though theological and doctrinal sources are undoubtedly important in shaping the Catholic ethics position, this paper focuses exclusively on pontifical and conciliar documents because they are characterized by a more direct normative character; indeed, the goal of this paper is not to contribute to the already-rich bibliography on the theological debates about abortion and sexual morals, but to explore the relationship between the norm and the judicial procedure of canonization in this respect.

pontifical magisterium, including the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* issued by Paul VI in 1968 [23] and, later, the encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* issued by John Paul II in 1993 [13].

The Church's idea of motherhood and the right to life was also expressed through concrete examples, and in particular the figure of Gianna Beretta Molla, who was officially made a candidate for canonization in 1980. If normative documents provide axiologies of values that are quite specific but yet abstract, saints concretize these axiologies in their lives: by applying the idea of generative trajectory [12: 132-134], it can be argued that the abstract values defined by norms are inserted in a process of figurativization through the process of canonization; that is, they are concretized and specified as part of a narrative scheme and, on an even more superficial level, a personal story that functions as an example. While this dynamic appears in many cultural and religious traditions,[3] the case of Catholicism is interesting because the ecclesiastical institution has fine-tuned a procedure for officially recognizing sainthood – "canonization" – that is invested with a judicial character. In other words, it functions as a post-mortem trial in which the life of the candidate for holiness is analysed in all its various aspects to determine whether he or she is worthy of being proclaimed a saint [31]. The acts of canonization causes thus play an important role in shaping the figure of the saint and in showing how it corresponds to the teachings and laws of the Catholic Church.[4]

In this article, after briefly introducing the figure of Gianna Beretta Molla and mapping the cultural, doctrinal and normative context surrounding her canonization, I examine the acts of her cause to show how it was strategic in that particular context. Indeed, the figure of Gianna is an excellent illustration of how (abstract) norms are translated into (concrete) examples embodied by a figure: in the story of Gianna as it was reconstructed in the cause, the values the ecclesiastical authority had outlined in its normative texts are figurativized in a coherent manner. In the discourse emerging from this canonization cause, both the unborn child and the mother are represented as persons; the former fully worthy of living, the latter of freely choosing to sacrifice her life in the name of values such as motherhood and Christian love. At the same time, however, the figure of Gianna is partly "depersonalized", that is, she is transformed into an icon, a character or "thematic role" [12: 343; 29: 57-58] that is abstracted from the more contingent and idiolectic aspects of her individuality to conform to a role defined upstream by a certain worldview and axiology, one that coincides with the ecclesiastical norm. Gianna's cause, analysed with a method inspired by structural semiotics, is thus a fruitful case study for observing the relationship between the Church's exercising of its legislative power and executive power in matters of sainthood and the ways in which canonization organizes the axiology promulgated by ecclesiastical authority into a narrative scheme and proposes "actors" who consistently embody this axiology.

2. Life and death of Gianna Beretta Molla

Gianna Beretta Molla was born in 1922 in Magenta, in the province of Milan, to a wealthy and deeply Catholic family. Both of her parents were Franciscan tertiary and they had thirteen children, five of whom died at a young age. Gianna was the tenth child, and like her siblings

[3] For example, the figures of sages and masters who function as models of the perfect realization of the values and ideals of life proposed by Eastern philosophies and religions, such as Buddhism, Hinduism and Confucianism, or certain historical figures who became symbols of a certain way of living (and dying) consistent with a certain way of thinking and a certain system of moral values, such as Socrates, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King.

[4] Regarding the regulation of canonization procedures, see [33, 5, 10].

she was taught to attend Mass and pray the rosary every day. Both her parents died in 1942, only a few months apart. Gianna earned a medical degree in 1950 and specialized in paediatrics in 1952. In addition to collaborating with her brother Ferdinando, also a doctor, she opened her own clinic in the village of Mesero in the Magenta area. From a very young age, she was active in Catholic Action;[5] she quickly took on positions of responsibility, guiding young people and giving lectures in the organization, and in many cases her written lecture notes have been preserved. For a certain period of time she thought her vocation was to become a lay missionary: she hoped to join her brother Enrico, who had become a Capuchin friar under the name Father Alberto and was in charge of building a hospital in Brazil. With time, however, and partly following the advice of her spiritual director, she became convinced that her true vocation was marriage. In 1955 she married the engineer Pietro Molla, director of an important industrial plant in Ponte Nuovo di Magenta. As evidenced by their correspondence while engaged, they looked to form a family in accordance with Catholic doctrine, and Gianna especially wanted to have many children. She gave birth to three children but, after her third daughter was born, Gianna suffered two miscarriages due to obscure reasons. Shortly afterwards, Gianna became pregnant a sixth time, but in the second month she was diagnosed with a uterine fibroma. Although as a doctor she was aware of the risks she was exposing herself to, Gianna clearly chose to prioritize the life of the unborn child. Consequently, instead of the total removal of the uterus recommended by doctors, Gianna decided to have only the fibroma removed so that she could continue gestation. On 20 April 1962 she gave birth to an entirely healthy baby girl, her fourth daughter, but a week later she died of septic peritonitis after intense suffering. She was forty years old.[6]

3. The context of the cause of canonization: regulatory framework

To fully understand the significance of Gianna Beretta Molla's canonization, it is necessary to consider some important elements of the context in which it occurred. These elements are key in that they rendered Gianna a representative figure for reiterating and exemplifying certain important points of the Church's discourse in that period.

3.1 The role of the laity and family, according to the Second Vatican Council

The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) heavily emphasized the importance of the laity's contribution to "the growth of the Church and its continuous sanctification" [21: no. 33], especially through the dogmatic constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*. This idea was tied to a fundamental concept asserted by the Council, namely the Church's universal call to sanctity [21: no. 40]. According to the conciliar Church, regardless of personal or social status, every person is to pursue sanctity in the various "classes and duties of life" [21: no. 41]. The role of spouse and parent is precisely one of the life choices the Church indicated as a path that can lead to sanctity:

[5] Founded in 1867, Catholic Action is a lay association focused on working together with the ecclesiastical hierarchy to educate young people and help the needy. The life of this association has brought together a large number of young people for social, spiritual and charitable activities [27].
[6] Regarding Gianna's life, see [17, 24].

> Furthermore, married couples and Christian parents should follow their own proper path (to holiness) by faithful love. They should sustain one another in grace throughout the entire length of their lives. They should imbue their offspring, lovingly welcomed as God's gift, with Christian doctrine and the evangelical virtues. In this manner, they offer all men the example of unwearying and generous love; in this way they build up the brotherhood of charity; in so doing, they stand as the witnesses and cooperators in the fruitfulness of Holy Mother Church; by such lives, they are a sign and a participation in that very love, with which Christ loved His Bride and for which He delivered Himself up for her. [21: no. 41].

In the context of the Council, the Decree on the apostolate of the laity *Apostolicam actuositatem* [20: no. 11] also focuses specifically on the family, stressing the key role it plays as the "first and vital cell of society" and therefore the importance of defending the model of the Christian family, especially against laws and institutions that appear to threaten it. It should be kept in mind that divorce was legalized in Italy through a 1970 law, that is, five years after the *Apostolicam actuositatem* decree was issued. This law (898/70) gave rise to fierce controversy and opposition, especially on the part of Catholic groups. An abrogative referendum was proposed in 1974, as a result of the debates, but 59.26% of Italians voted against repealing it, thus in favour of divorce, and the law remained in force.[7]

3.2 *The idea of "person" and the right to life in* Gaudium et spes

The pastoral constitution on the Church in the modern world, entitled *Gaudium et spes* [22], is dated 7 December 1965 and expresses the conciliar Church's position on the idea of the human "person" defined in a moral sense. Indeed, Chapter 1 is significantly titled "The dignity of the human person". *Gaudium et spes*' discussion of this subject is based on two biblical principles: first, the idea that man was created in God's image and, second, the intrinsically relational nature of human beings:

> But God did not create man as a solitary, for from the beginning "male and female he created them" (Gen. 1:27). Their companionship produces the primary form of interpersonal communion. For by his innermost nature man is a social being, and unless he relates himself to others he can neither live nor develop his potential. [22: no. 12]

According to the Church, a human person is a unit "made of body and soul" [22: no. 14]. Corporal life thus has full dignity and man "is obliged to regard his body as good and honorable since God has created it and will raise it up on the last day" [22: no. 14]. As a consequence, since "he bears in himself an eternal seed which cannot be reduced to sheer matter", the death of the human being does not coincide with "the utter ruin and total disappearance of his own

[7] For a discussion of the legalization of divorce in Italy, see [32, 15]. The results of the votes are available at this institutional webpage: https://elezionistorico.interno.gov.it/index.php?tpel=F&dtel=12/05/1974&tpa=I&tpe=A&lev0=0&levsut0=0&es0=S&ms=S (last accessed 22 April 2020).

person" [22: no. 18].[8] The moral conscience of man, consisting of a law that is not man's will but rather divine commandment, lies at the heart of his inner life:[9]

> In the depths of his conscience, man detects a law which he does not impose upon himself, but which holds him to obedience. Always summoning him to love good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience when necessary speaks to his heart: do this, shun that. For man has in his heart a law written by God; to obey it is the very dignity of man; according to it he will be judged. Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a man. There he is alone with God, Whose voice echoes in his depths. [22: no. 16]

The capacity to do good, however, must be exercised not by instinct or external coercion, but in the full expression of freedom: such freedom "is an exceptional sign of the divine image within man" [22: no. 17] and is therefore a prerogative of his dignity. Precisely in the name of this human dignity, the Council reasserted the importance of respecting human beings and the Gospel principle of 'loving your neighbour as yourself', even in the specific circumstances of contemporary life. The Council's discourse refers in particular to the values of life[10] and dignity:

> Furthermore, whatever is opposed to life itself, such as any type of murder, genocide, abortion, euthanasia or wilful self-destruction, whatever violates the integrity of the human person, such as mutilation, torments inflicted on body or mind, attempts to coerce the will itself; whatever insults human dignity, such as subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution, the selling of women and children; as well as disgraceful working conditions, where men are treated as mere tools for profit, rather than as free and responsible persons; all these things and others of their like are infamies indeed. They poison human society, but they do more harm to those who practice them than those who suffer from the injury. Moreover, they are supreme dishonour to the Creator. [22: no. 27]

Abortion is thus defined here as a form of negating the life of the human person. *Gaudium et spes* also considers the position of women in the light of the notion of the person, since the Council Fathers acknowledged that all human beings are equal and enjoy equal dignity: "For in truth it must still be regretted that fundamental personal rights are still not being universally honored. Such is the case of a woman who is denied the right to choose a husband freely, to embrace a state of life or to acquire an education or cultural benefits equal to those recognized for men" [22: no. 29].

The choice to embrace marriage as a life state must thus occur freely, and entails following a very clearly defined set of principles and narrative pattern: "Marriage and conjugal love are by their nature ordained toward the begetting and educating of children" [22: no. 50]. The text frequently reiterates the concept that parents fulfil their proper mission and collaborate in God's work of creation by generating and raising their children. Nevertheless, the Council did

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[8] Regarding the Christian idea of personhood, see [16] and the paper by Graziano Lingua in this issue.

[9] This is a theological idea that dates back to the first centuries, see for instance the idea of the interior master outlined by Augustine of Hippo [1].

[10] I use "value" here in the sense defined by Greimas, in relation to an actantial model [11]: the Church presents itself as the "addresser" proposing "values" to be put into practice by "addressees" and designating those who deny such values as defined by the Church as "opponents". The problematic node here lies precisely in the definition of values: as Perelman and Olbrechts-Tytecha have noted [19: 104-107], abstract and generic values such as "life" and "dignity" are universally shared, while the more detailed and concrete the definition of the value in question is, the less widely it is shared.

recognize that some social and economic circumstances might lead couples to need to regulate and curb procreation, and it did acknowledge the value of the conjugal union for the harmony of the couple and family; in light of these points, it allowed spouses to practice birth control, but only by acting according to the biological rhythms of the human body and not by resorting to artificial methods of contraception, much less abortion. This last is defined as a crime against the human person:

> For God, the Lord of life, has conferred on men the surpassing ministry of safeguarding life in a manner which is worthy of man. Therefore from the moment of its conception life must be guarded with the greatest care while abortion and infanticide are unspeakable crimes. The sexual characteristics of man and the human faculty of reproduction wonderfully exceed the dispositions of lower forms of life. Hence the acts themselves which are proper to conjugal love and which are exercised in accord with genuine human dignity must be honoured with great reverence. Hence when there is question of harmonizing conjugal love with the responsible transmission of life, the moral aspects of any procedure does not depend solely on sincere intentions or on an evaluation of motives, but must be determined by objective standards. These, based on the nature of the human person and his acts, preserve the full sense of mutual self-giving and human procreation in the context of true love. Such a goal cannot be achieved unless the virtue of conjugal chastity is sincerely practiced. Relying on these principles, sons of the Church may not undertake methods of birth control which are found blameworthy by the teaching authority of the Church in its unfolding of the divine law. [22: no. 51]

Despite the conciliar Church's call to protect the Christian model of family and marriage, as mentioned above these social institutions were destined for rapid and radical change, including at the legislative level.

3.3 **Humanae Vitae** ***and the abortion law***

In 1968, Pope Paul VI issued his last encyclical *Humanae vitae* [23], focused on the issue of procreation. The pontiff was driven to take a stand on this subject by the changes that were taking place in his era, changes such as "the rapid increase in population which has made many fear that world population is going to grow faster than available resources, with the consequence that many families and developing countries would be faced with greater hardships. This can easily induce public authorities to be tempted to take even harsher measures to avert this danger" [23: no. 2]. The use of contraceptives and innovations in designing new methods (such as the pill, for example) were indeed on the rise, and in the course of only a few years several countries (including Italy, as I will show in a moment) went on to legalize abortion. The Pontiff noted that these changes were linked to "a new understanding of the dignity of woman and her place in society, of the value of conjugal love in marriage and the relationship of conjugal acts to this love" [23: no. 2].

This document also stresses the concept that married people "collaborate freely and responsibly with God the Creator" [23: no. 1] in perpetuating human life. In this case as well, the doctrine the Pope proposed is based on a global vision of mankind, considered in "both its natural, earthly aspects and its supernatural, eternal aspects" [23: no. 7]. In opposition to arguments justifying artificial methods of birth control, Paul VI referred in particular to the principles developed during the Second Vatican Council and expressed in the *Gaudium et spes* constitution. According to these principles, responsible parenthood involves reason and will

prevailing over passions and instincts, a knowledge of and respect for the biological rhythms of the body, and a desire to create a large family which is, however, tempered by reflection: "responsible parenthood is exercised by those who prudently and generously decide to have more children, and by those who, for serious reasons and with due respect to moral precepts, decide not to have additional children for either a certain or an indefinite period of time" [23: no. 10]. Once again, a precise axiology underlies this ideal of behaviour: "In a word, the exercise of responsible parenthood requires that husband and wife, keeping a right order of priorities, recognize their own duties toward God, themselves, their families and human society" [23: no. 10]. Consequently, the Pontiff prohibited both direct abortion and direct methods of sterilization:

> We are obliged once more to declare that the direct interruption of the generative process already begun and, above all, all direct abortion, even for therapeutic reasons, are to be absolutely excluded as lawful means of regulating the number of children. Equally to be condemned, as the magisterium of the Church has affirmed on many occasions, is direct sterilization, whether of the man or of the woman, whether permanent or temporary. Similarly excluded is any action which either before, at the moment of, or after sexual intercourse, is specifically intended to prevent procreation—whether as an end or as a means. Neither is it valid to argue, as a justification for sexual intercourse which is deliberately contraceptive, that a lesser evil is to be preferred to a greater one, or that such intercourse would merge with procreative acts of past and future to form a single entity, and so be qualified by exactly the same moral goodness as these. […] Consequently, it is a serious error to think that a whole married life of otherwise normal relations can justify sexual intercourse which is deliberately contraceptive and so intrinsically wrong. [23: no. 14]

The Church allowed infertility, on the other hand, when it was not directly sought out but rather the result of the use of "therapeutic means necessary to cure bodily diseases" [23: no. 15]. In fact, many theologians also upheld the lawfulness of indirect abortion, that is, the interruption of pregnancy that is not directly pursued but indirectly caused by treatments aimed at curing a serious illness on the part of the mother.[11] Similarly, birth control based on calculating the woman's periods of infertility was deemed licit. Paul VI took precautions against accusations of inconsistency in ecclesiastical doctrine in this area:

> The Church is the first to praise and commend the application of human intelligence to an activity in which a rational creature such as man is so closely associated with his Creator. But she affirms that this must be done within the limits of the order of reality established by God. If therefore there are well-grounded reasons for spacing births, arising from the physical or psychological condition of husband or wife, or from external circumstances, the Church teaches that married people may then take advantage of the natural cycles immanent in the reproductive system and engage in marital intercourse only during those times that are infertile, thus controlling birth in a way which does not in the least offend the moral principles which We have just explained. Neither the Church nor her doctrine is inconsistent when she considers it lawful for married people to take advantage of the infertile period but condemns as always unlawful the use of means which

[11] Regarding the theological distinction between direct and indirect action, see [6], and for a discussion of the idea of indirect abortion, see [14: 108-139].

directly prevent conception, even when the reasons given for the later practice may appear to be upright and serious. In reality, these two cases are completely different. In the former the married couple rightly use a faculty provided them by nature. In the later they obstruct the natural development of the generative process. [23: no. 16]

Finally, the Pontiff addressed men of science and medicine, encouraging scientists to focus their research on birth control methods based on following "the natural rhythms" [23: no. 24] and doctors and medical professionals to instead "support those lines of action which accord with faith and with right reason" [23: no. 27].

In Italy, abortion was legalized through Law no. 194 of 22 May 1978[12] following acrimonious debates between radical, communist and socialist-inspired parties on the one hand, and the Christian Democracy and right-wing parties on the other. Before 1978, any form of voluntary pregnancy termination was considered a criminal offence. Law no. 194 tempered the penalization of abortion and regulated its practice, stressing both a woman's freedom and right to choose to end a pregnancy and the need to protect "human life from its beginning". Article 1 clearly states that the "interruption of pregnancy, as referred to in this law, is not a means of birth control".

Given this focus, it was considered important to provide assistance and information to women: women's clinics, as well as doctors, were called on to educate women to prevent abortion from being used to limit births, and support pregnant women by making them aware of their rights as workers and mothers. Article 4 states that women may turn to a public women's clinic for abortion within the first ninety days of pregnancy provided that there are "circumstances in which carrying forward their pregnancy, childbirth or motherhood would constitute a serious danger to their physical or mental health, in relation to either their state of health, or to their economic, social or family circumstances, or to the circumstances in which conception occurred, or to forecasts of anomalies or malformations of the conceptus". The health facility must carry out the necessary medical examinations and also explore "with the woman and the father of the embryo, whenever the woman permits, fully respecting the dignity and confidentiality of the woman and the person indicated as the father of the conceptus, the possible solutions to the problems presented, to help her remove the causes that would lead to interrupt the pregnancy, to enable her to assert her rights as a worker and mother, to promote any appropriate action aimed at supporting the woman, offering her all the necessary aid both during pregnancy and after birth" (Art. 5). On the other hand, voluntary termination of pregnancy after the ninetieth day is only permitted "if the pregnancy or childbirth poses a serious danger to the woman's life" and "if pathological processes, including those relating to significant anomalies or malformations of the unborn child, are found to pose a serious danger to the woman's physical or mental health" (Art. 6). Finally, Article 9 states that health professionals "shall not be required to take part in procedures [directly related to the voluntary termination of pregnancy] if they make a conscientious objection". According to the 2012-2013 "Report of the Minister of Health on the implementation of the law containing rules for the social protection of maternity and for the voluntary interruption of pregnancy (Law 194/78)", the percentage of conscientious objectors in Italian women's clinics varies among regions from a low of 2% (Umbria) to a high of 67% (Sicily), while the percentage increases significantly in hospitals.[13]

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[12] The text of the law is available at: https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=2ahUKEwiWvaOJpP7oAhWFwuYKHZGRBt4QFjAAegQIARAB&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.salute.gov.it%2Fimgs%2FC_17_normativa_845_allegato.pdf&usg=AOvVaw3Tb7B11OWyKMcNyH7T5LY6 (last accessed 23 April 2020).

[13] http://www.salute.gov.it/imgs/C_17_pubblicazioni_2226_allegato.pdf (last accessed 20 April 2020).

3.4 **Veritatis Splendor** *and abortion as an "intrinsically evil" act*

In 1993, just one year before the beatification of Gianna Beretta Molla, in the encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, John Paul II recalled the fundamental principles of the Church's moral teaching in order to respond to the crisis of values he detected in modern society [13]. The pontiff brought to its extreme consequences the Church's condemnation of abortion by defining it as one of the "intrinsically evil acts", for which there cannot be justification:

> If acts are intrinsically evil, a good intention or particular circumstances can diminish their evil, but they cannot remove it. They remain "irremediably" evil acts; *per se* and in themselves they are not capable of being ordered to God and to the good of the person. "As for acts which are themselves sins (*cum iam opera ipsa peccata sunt*), Saint Augustine writes, like theft, fornication, blasphemy, who would dare affirm that, by doing them for good motives (*causis bonis*), they would no longer be sins, or, what is even more absurd, that they would be sins that are justified?" Consequently, circumstances or intentions can never transform an act intrinsically evil by virtue of its object into an act "subjectively" good or defensible as a choice. [13: no. 81]

Clearly, Gianna Beretta Molla, who was proclaimed blessed by the same John Paul II in 1994, represented a good example to illustrate the correct application of the Catholic moral teaching in matter of abortion proposed in *Veritatis splendor* and in the previous ecclesiastic documents.

4. **Gianna Beretta Molla's cause for canonization**

In 1972 (four years after the encyclical *Humanae Vitae*), Cardinal Giovanni Colombo, Archbishop of Milan, called for the beatification of Gianna Beretta Molla and requested that documents concerning her cause be collected. The cause, with the authorization of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, was introduced in 1980 (two years after the legalization of abortion in Italy). In the same year, the Cognitional process was launched in Milan (1980-1986) and the Rogatorial process in Bergamo (1980-1983). The former heard 48 witnesses in 144 sessions and the latter 7 witnesses in 18 sessions. Of the total 55 witnesses, 7 were priests, 11 religious, 4 doctors and 33 lay people. Many of the witnesses were relatives and friends of the Servant of God.[14] In 1986, the Congregation for the Causes of Saints issued a Decree of validity for the processes, after which the cause curator, Mons. Michele di Ruberto, began to examine all the documents that had been collected together with the Postulator, Capuchin Father Bernardino da Siena. This examination served as the basis for the drafting of the *Positio super Virtutibus*[15] edited by the curator [4]. Gianna was beatified in 1994 and canonized on 16 May 2004, with the official proclamation by John Paul II in St. Peter's Square.

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[14] In the technical language of causes for saints, "Servant of God" indicates a candidate for sainthood who is the subject of an ongoing cause for canonization.

[15] The *Positio super Virtutibus* [4] is a large volume organized as follows: it opens with a brief Presentation by the Curator, followed by a lengthy *Informatio* (193 pages) which summarizes the content of the witness statements and documents relating to the cause, tracing the most salient features of Gianna Beretta Molla's life and virtues and outlining the process of the canonization cause. The Decree of validity of the trial, dated 1986, and a table of contents of the witness statements follow. The *Summarium* is next, reporting the testimony collected during the cognitional process (which I will refer to here as *Summarium I*), then the *Summarium* presenting the testimony related to the Rogational process (*Summarium II*). This is followed by a collection of procedural documents (*Documenta*), preceded by a brief description and followed by "written statements presented during the interrogation and sworn statements" (including some by the Servant of God's husband), personal documents of the Servant of God (e.g. baptism certificate and diploma), extra-procedural documents defined as "statements for

4.1 Gianna as a strategic figure

Given the contemporary debate on abortion and the growing consensus that it should be legalized, the Church viewed Gianna Beretta Molla as a strategic figure for promoting its position on this delicate issue. In fact, the Presentation of the *Positio*, dated 1988, opens with these words:

> The Cause [of Gianna] has great ecclesial importance, being a contemporary lay woman, wife and mother, a paediatrician, who died on 28 April 1962, at the age of 40, sacrificing, with freely-chosen and deliberated immolation, her own life for the life of her fourth child. In fact, being a doctor, fully aware, she had not wanted to terminate her pregnancy. (*Presentation*: 1)

Further on, Gianna is described as a "model" in direct opposition to the legalization of abortion[16] and in accordance with the teachings of the Second Vatican Council.[17]

The procedural acts reiterate several times that Gianna Beretta Molla's cause was promoted by Paul VI in particular:

> The first and fundamental inspirer of the Cause was His Holiness Paul VI, because Mrs. Beretta […] died while Cardinal Montini was still Archbishop of Milan and shortly before he had travelled on a pastoral visit to Ponte Nuovo di Magenta [...]. The case of Mrs. Molla struck him because she was a mother ready to sacrifice her life to avoid interrupting an ongoing pregnancy, and this had happened in a person who was fully aware thanks to her medical knowledge: it was a case that deserved particular consideration in that it united professional expertise with a Christian spirit. Later, in the harsh times of *Humanae vitae*, he repeatedly expressed to me his desire to recall this case as an example". [...] This is additionally confirmed by the Archbishop's Delegate of Magenta [...]: "once he became Pope, [Paul VI] told me that he repeatedly urged Cardinal Giovanni Colombo to introduce the cause of Beatification of the Servant of God. That was the period in which the problem of abortion was on the table. [...] Paul VI himself remembered Gianna's act on 23 September 1972, during the Sunday Angelus, with these words: "A mother of the diocese of Milan, who, in order to give life to her child, sacrificed her own with considered immolation." (*Informatio*: 74-75)

The emphasis on the fact that the pope himself promoted this cause is due to the need to not only emphasize the significance of Gianna's case and grant authority to her elevation to the

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future reference not presented during the interrogations" (including a clinical report written by Ferdinando Beretta, doctor and brother of the Servant of God), "extracts from the writings of the Servant of God", the judgments of the two theological censors regarding Gianna's writings, and finally a long list of bibliographical references presented as a "general list of publications in Italy and abroad on the Servant of God Gianna Beretta Molla". There are also some postulatory letters with which the bishops and community ask the Holy See to canonize Gianna.

[16] "a great model of lay holiness [...] a family mother who lived in our time [...] sacrificing her own life to save that of her fourth creature, who was still throbbing in her bosom. Today, this heroic gesture of hers has a very special meaning in the face of the impressive massacre perpetrated in the maternal womb, at the first blossoming of a new life, a massacre widely legalized even in those countries that believe themselves to be at the forefront of Christianity!" (*Informatio*: 9).

[17] "A true model, precisely as the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council proposes, in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church [...] (*Lumen Gentium*, 41)" (*Informatio*: 10).

status of model through the canonization cause, but also to respond to a latent accusation that is reported in some of the statements collected in the acts of the canonization cause, namely that Gianna's family strongly desired and promoted her cause.[18] Another controversial aspect, also reported in various testimonies, is the fact that Gianna's canonization cause did not meet with particular enthusiasm in the Magenta area because Gianna belonged to a wealthy family; as such, many viewed her sanctification as a class privilege that did not do justice to the many other mothers who had made the same choice.[19]

Despite these issues, however, the figure of Gianna still had great strategic impact in the Church's public discourse because of three fundamental characteristics of her character. In the first place, Gianna embodied the model of sanctity promoted by the Second Vatican Council, based on an ideal of perfection that may be pursued even in a secular life, one manifested in everyday and ordinary life without the need for dramatic or miraculous acts.[20] These characteristics are clearly expressed in the acts of the cause of canonization. For example, the Curator comments:

> We stand before a true and great saint, not by virtue of having done extraordinary deeds, but by virtue of having done the ordinary deeds of life with an extraordinary soul. [...] The fact that many witnesses testified that while still alive she did not enjoy a true reputation for holiness may depend on a religious culture formed in turn on [the basis of] hagiographies which, up to our days, have emphasized above all the spectacular factor, especially when equipped with a miraculous flavour. The explosion of our Servant of God's reputation for holiness occurred when the way in which she immolated herself was known. This brought to mind the virtuous and holy life of Gianna, a model for all truly Christian mothers. (*Informatio*: 85)

Furthermore, her husband testified that "I do not know whether during her life she enjoyed a reputation for holiness" and, when the Postulator asked him about this, he replied that it was due to the fact that Gianna did everything very naturally, without ostentation, and that it is difficult to notice consistent behaviour. He ended by explaining that "up to the second V. C., Mr. Molla had the idea that holiness, in general, was reserved for those who perform significantly exceptional and very unusual acts and works and, in this specific case, was reserved for brides and mothers who had done exceptional things as well as fully fulfilling all their duties as deeply Christian excellent brides and mothers" (*Informatio*: 86).

Indeed, Gianna is one of those figures that bring about an evolution in canonization jurisprudence and law: until 2017, the types of behaviour identified as bases for canonization were martyrdom (the sacrifice of life when facing a persecutor who acts out of hatred of the faith) and the heroic practice of virtues (heroicity) over a long period of time (generally considered to be at least 10 years). Various new models of twentieth-century holiness, such as Gianna's model but also the new figures of saints persecuted by totalitarian regimes rather than a well-distinguishable persecutor acting specifically against the Christian faith, were not easy to catalogue and fit into these two traditional categories [3]. Over time, therefore, the

[18] See for example *Informatio*: 75.
[19] See for example *Informatio*: 93.
[20] Regarding this topic, see [30].

Congregation for the Causes of Saints formulated a new pathway to canonization known as the "offering of life", approved by Pope Francis in 2017 with the motu proprio *Maiorem hac dilectionem* [9]. Cases such as Gianna's played a key role in driving this update of the canonization rules: today, Gianna would certainly be canonized under this new category.[21] It is no coincidence that the acts of Gianna's cause repeatedly cite John's verse (15, 13), which reads "greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends".[22] The same verse is also mentioned in the title and beginning of the 2017 motu proprio.

The uncertainty in classifying the figure of Gianna can also be seen in the terminology applied to her. Gianna was canonized for the heroic nature of her virtues and yet, in the acts of her cause, she is repeatedly referred to as a "martyr", especially by high prelates speaking in favour of her canonization. For instance, she is called a "martyr of motherhood", "martyr mother", "martyr of motherly love", and "martyr of duty and love" (*Informatio* 187).

The other two strategic elements related to the figure of Gianna have to do more specifically with the way she conceptualized and practiced the medical profession and her idea of motherhood and family, including her refusal of abortion: the fact that the impulse for her canonization came from the Church's authorities more than from the local community shows that the ecclesiastic institutions were aware of the strategic value of her figure, which embodied the moral principles enunciated by the Second Vatican Council and by the subsequent magisterium.

4.2 Gianna as a doctor

What clearly emerges from the *Positio* [4] is that Gianna viewed the medical profession as a mission to be carried in keeping with the Christian spirit. The *Informatio* mentions a specific passage from Gianna's writings:

> Everyone in the world works to some extent in the service of men. We work directly on man. The object of our science and work is the man before us who tells us about himself, and says 'help me' and expects the fullness of his existence from us. Jesus would say: what is man. He is not just a body – in that body there is a thought – a will, which is capable of facing suffering, others are not. There is a spirit in the body and as such immortal. There is an abyss between body and soul, they are two such different entities but they are united. What would Jesus tell you? You have to place every care on this body. God has thus grafted the divine into the human to such an extent that everything we do takes on greater value. (*Informatio*: 44)

Consistent with her moral and religious principles, Gianna was "uncompromising in defending the Church's teaching on abortion" (*Informatio*: 112), as various witnesses report:

> The Servant of God told me about a girl who wanted to have an abortion and turned to her. Of course, the Servant of God was horrified at this statement and warned the parish priest, although she never disclosed her name. [... Another female witness] learned

[21] Concerning this category, see [31].
[22] See for example *Informatio*: 132; *Documenta*: 548, 565.

> directly from the Servant of God "that a man consulted her to find out how he could make his wife abort. The Servant of God replied: 'And you came to me to ask this?' And dismissed him." [...] the parish priest of Ponte Nuovo made an important deposition [...]: "The Servant of God was completely opposed with those who turned to her for possible abortions, to the point that she turned to me in two or maybe three cases, to seek my help to dissuade girls who refused motherhood. She would not reveal the people's names to me, but she asked me to talk about it in the Sunday conferences I held for young women." [...] Her husband testified that: "she told me more than once: 'the extent to which girls who resort to my care and who refuse motherhood or turn it into the object of guilt exhort and evoke the principles of faith'" [... A sister of hers testified]: "When a girl who had an abortion was introduced to her, the first thing she said was: 'Don't you know that you offended the Lord? Did you confess?'"

And again:

> When judging mothers, she always assessed all medical and family reasons. However, she refused any compromise with Catholic principles: for her, abortion was never a possibility, even in cases where there were therapeutic reasons for performing it. (*Summarium* I: 195)

Gianna's personal choice to prioritize her foetus' life over her own was therefore in continuity with the principles she displayed in carrying out her profession. In reality, the account outlined in the *Positio* shows that Gianna's consistency encompassed all areas of her life, including her intense involvement in the Conference of St. Vincent and Catholic Action. Many witnesses testified to her role in these organizations as a counsellor to young girls and a benefactress, especially to elderly and solitary women.[23]

Gianna was thus proposed as a model not only for mothers, but also for health care practitioners. Two postulatory letters contained in the *Positio* highlight this aspect in particular: the letter from the representatives of the hospital chaplains (*Documenta* 567-8) and, above all, the one from the Italian Catholic Medical Association, dated 1978, stating that:

> The National Council and the members of the Italian Catholic Medical Association, while renewing to Your Holiness their commitment to devote their profession, always and firmly, to defending life – thus resisting laws and proposals that, [being] true crimes against the rights of the human person, more or less override the commandment to not kill and the consequent doctrine of the Catholic Church regarding abortion – join with particular joy and pride the great chorus of praise and admiration for the heroic behaviour of our colleague ...

Moreover, the fact that Gianna was a doctor was considered irrefutable proof of the full awareness with which she faced the choice of proceeding with her pregnancy despite the risk to her own life. A witness who was a friend of the Beretta family clearly states this position:

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[23] See for example *Informatio*: 70, 17.

> It is right that they declare her a saint, because which saint can mothers in that condition invoke? There isn't one, so far; they really need one. My grandmother also died in that condition, but she wasn't a doctor, she didn't know what she was getting into; Gianna did. (*Documenta*: 538)

Indeed, Gianna is part of a group of saints that represents a new category, that of medical saints. During the twentieth century, in fact, the Catholic Church canonized or beatified a number of doctors and scientists. Some examples are Giuseppe Moscati (1880-1927), a Neapolitan doctor canonized in 1987, and Riccardo Pampuri (1897-1930), a doctor who entered the Hospitaller Order of St. John of God, canonized in 1989. Although the Christian tradition has included figures of saints devoted to caring for their neighbours since ancient times, what the new medical saints have in common is that their approach to practicing medicine had considerable weight in determining the reason for their canonization: these saints, such as Gianna, are presented as an example of how to exercise the modern profession of doctor according to the principles promoted by the Catholic Church.[24]

4.3 Gianna as a bride and mother

Numerous statements show that Gianna in her youth intended to become a lay missionary but later understood that her true vocation was marriage, this latter also experienced as a mission.[25] From the moment she decided to marry, Gianna set herself the goal of creating a family and, to this end, of having many children. Her aim was to swell the ranks of Christians in the hope that some of them would feel called to serve God. For example, as early as the period of her engagement, she wrote to her future husband:

> So with God's help and blessing we will do everything so that our new family may be a small cenacle in which Jesus reigns over all our affections, desires and actions. My dear Pietro, there are only a few days left and I feel so moved to draw closer to receiving the Sacrament of Love. Let us become God's co-workers in creation, so we can give Him children who love Him and serve Him. (*Informatio*: 49)

The family created by Gianna is therefore described as so exemplary in every respect that it brings to mind the Holy Family: "The family of Pietro and Gianna is truly an authentic copy of the Holy Family of Nazareth: it is a small church" (*Informatio*: 65). It should be noted that the terminology used by Gianna with regard to her family is perfectly in line with that used in official ecclesiastical speech and, later, in Council and post-Council doctrinal and magisterial documents as well.

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[24] The Catholic tradition is actually rich in "medical" saints, beginning with the evangelist Luke. While previously this expertise was merely one of the pertinent features in constructing traditional hagiographic figures that were first and foremost figures of religious people or mystics or benefactors, however, recently canonized saints are characterized by the emphasis that the Church places specifically on their scientific knowledge and the way they implemented it. The way they practiced their medical profession therefore becomes a fundamental constitutive trait in defining these figures, and as such they thus provide a concrete example of the way the ethical principles championed by ecclesiastical authority should be applied and serve to promote an ideal that harmoniously brings together faith and modern science.

[25] See for example *Informatio*: 135.

A priest who knew her affirmed that "... she declared to me that her first aspiration was not married life, but religious life. She had come to marriage with a certain perspective, in the desire to be an instrument of sanctification, both for her spouse and children, and with the hope of having some vocation among her children" (*Informatio*: 53). Thus, holiness is presented as a global goal of Gianna's life that she pursued especially through marriage and family life: "Even on her honeymoon, the Servant of God sent a note to the witness talking about God and the duty to become a saint" (*Summarium* I: 340).

Having children, and many of them, seems to be an essential requirement for achieving this ideal: many witness statements underline the impatience that Gianna displayed from the very first months of marriage to begin giving birth as soon as possible.[26] Gianna's perseverance in wanting to have children quickly pushed her to try to become pregnant even though she always had difficult pregnancies and extremely painful births.[27]

Gianna had miscarried twice before her last pregnancy for reasons which were never determined. One of the questions the Promoter of the Faith posed to many witnesses[28] in the part of the questioning aimed at verifying the Servant of God's exercise of the virtue of prudence stands out in the procedural acts: the Promoter asked whether she was prudent in seeking a new pregnancy immediately after the two miscarriages or whether running such a risk violated the principle of "Responsible Procreation"[29] defined during the Second Vatican Council (see above). The various witnesses offered different answers to this question. Her family members replied that Gianna was not imprudent for various reasons, especially that her haste was prompted by the fact that both she and her husband were of an age considered rather old for reproducing and therefore wanted to build their family as soon as possible, given that the risk of foetal malformations increased with the passage of time;[30] they also testified that, despite the problems she encountered during the previous pregnancies and her two miscarriages, Gianna had great confidence in Providence: the divine will had already given her three healthy children and would therefore help her during the fourth pregnancy as well. Other witnesses appeared less certain, and one witness in particular, a mother of eight children, answered "resolutely not. She says that, having already had three children, she could have been satisfied with that or waited a little longer" (*Summarium* I: 175).

Gianna is repeatedly described as a mother who *sacrifices herself*. It is striking that this "label" was already attributed to Gianna on the occasion of her funeral: one witness reported that "the funeral flyer read that the mother had sacrificed her own life in order to save her daughter's" (*Summarium* I: 256). The characteristics of her sacrifice were defined in detail during the cause of canonization. First of all, it was an absolutely voluntary and unconditional sacrifice, as repeatedly noted:[31]

> ... placed by divine provisions in the position to necessarily respond to renouncing her own life so that the fourth newborn might live and love God in turn, she stated *I do* in the

[26] For instance, one of her sisters testified that: "During the honeymoon she wrote to me complaining that she did not feel symptoms of pregnancy" (*Summarium* I: 110).
[27] See for example *Summarium* I: 44-45.
[28] Those who knew Gianna best, or who were more aware of her medical history, or who were in any case knowledgeable about pregnancy in general.
[29] *Summarium* I: 89.
[30] *Summarium* I: 57.
[31] See also *Informatio*: 15.

> most decisive and convinced manner, which led to earthly death, but to life in the Eternal. (*Informati*o: 17)

The parish priest of the hospital where Gianna was brought testified that:

> In the pastoral ministry that I have carried out for almost thirty years among the sick I have been able, repeatedly, to engage with women in relation to motherhood. I approached women who challenged motherhood, who selfishly escaped it; who reluctantly endured it; who trampled on it criminally; who cried and prayed wishing for it. Of all these women, and I served thousands and thousands of them, the one who left me the most beautiful and indelible memory is Dr. Gianna Beretta. As soon as she arrived at the hospital, she immediately and insistently manifested her strong will to offer her life to give healthy birth to her creature. (*Informatio*: 187-188)

The sentence that Gianna supposedly spoke to her husband after she was diagnosed with fibroma is repeatedly quoted in the proceedings, with Gianna urging him to make sure that the doctors prioritize the foetus' life over her own, if it comes to choose:

> God asked the Servant of God, who so loved her "*popi*", as she called them, to make a choice: either to live and be close to her three children by sacrificing the fourth one that was throbbing in her womb, or to die to save the fourth one and leave the other three orphans. She chose without hesitation to save her child. She said to her husband: "If you have to choose between me and the child, no hesitation, choose – I demand it – the child, save her". (*Informatio*: 55)

This passage introduces a second theme that imbues the significance of Gianna's sacrifice with complexity and depth. There are two factors that, if taken into account, frame it a particularly profound and difficult offer or renunciation that comes at a very high "price". The first is Gianna's immense pain at leaving her four children, all young. Various texts report a statement Gianna made from her hospital bed: "If you only knew what it means to leave four young children!" (*Informatio*: 171). The second factor is that Gianna does not represent a model of ascetic holiness, according to which detachment from the world constitutes a positive value. On the contrary, Gianna is described as a joyful woman[32] with profound love for the beautiful things of the world, such as "theatre, skiing, climbing mountains, [and] the charm of creation" (*Informatio*: 73):[33] it is clear that someone who loves life finds it much more painful to give it up. Perhaps the most effective assertion of Gianna's love for life was provided by Cardinal Martini, whose speech to the young people of Milan is reported in the proceedings:

> [...] Gianna Beretta Molla a wonderful woman […], a lover of life because she was a bride, family mother, doctor, and exemplary professional, who then gave her life so that the mystery of the dignity of life would not be violated. [...] She was a very ordinary

[32] Informatio: 74.

[33] There are actually a number of photos of Gianna in the mountains, or portrayed in dynamic moments of life, in the outdoors, see e.g. the book edited by her daughter [18].

> woman who practiced her profession as a doctor rather well, she was an excellent mother, she enjoyed being in the world, she reflected joy and enthusiasm all around her. Yet her faith in Providence was very strong. What struck me the most was her firmness in continuing to insist on saving her pregnancy at the expense of her life with determination and simplicity, as she looked to the Crucified Lord. (*Documenta*: 550)

Another feature of Gianna's sacrifice is its temporality: her choice was not impulsive or immediate, but rather an act for which she laid the groundwork first through an entire life lived according to Christian principles[34] and then especially in the months of her last pregnancy. One of her brothers testified about the period following the surgery to remove the fibroma: "Six months of heroic martyrdom, of daily, continuous self-donation for the life of the creature she bore in her womb. Six months offered in silence so as not to burden anyone" (*Informatio*: 181). Even "While doctors were hoping for a miscarriage, she was taking medication to prevent it" (*Informatio*: 182).

Yet another feature is Gianna's full awareness, due in part to her professional expertise. A priest testified that, having tried to encourage her, he received from Gianna a serene and calm answer: "With faith and hope I entrusted myself to the Lord despite the dreadful words that medical science told me: either the life of the mother, or the life of her creature. I trust in God, yes, but now it is up to me to do my duty as a mother. I renew to the Lord the offering of my life. I am ready to do anything to save my creature" (*Informatio*: 182-183). Similarly, a nurse-nun who was present when Gianna was admitted to the hospital for her last childbirth testified: "I met her as she came up the stairs to be admitted to the ward. She said to me, 'Sister, here I am, I am here to die,' but she had a good and serene look. And she added: 'As long as the baby is all right. It doesn't matter to me'. When I administered the pre-anaesthesia, she shook my hand and said, "Sister, pray, pray. That the baby will be all right. As for me, it doesn't matter'" (*Informatio*: 183).

The last feature attesting to the exceptionality of Gianna's figure and sacrifice is the fact that it went beyond what the Church ordinarily required of the faithful: as Pope Albino Luciani (John Paul I) observed, Gianna was well aware both of what awaited her and of the fact that "since it is indirect abortion, authoritative theologians do not forbid it" [*Informatio*: 189]. Such exceptionality is a typical characteristic of saints in that they are paradoxically represented as examples for the faithful to imitate and, at the same time, as cases which are exceptional by virtue of the degree of perfection they achieve.

5. Conclusion: two persons and one "case"

The story that emerges from the acts of Gianna Beretta Molla's canonization cause is narrated by several voices, though coordinated by a specific narrator (the Curator). He represents the authority of the Church and, in the *Informatio*, selects the events and comments he considers most pertinent to delineating the profile of the saint. What stands out in this portrait is the remarkable consistency of Gianna's character, in all areas and at all stages of her life. In

[34] "Many considered even the sacrifice of her own life to save that of her creature to be an ordinary act, similar to that of many other mothers, and this was because they ignored the Christian spirit with which she accepted it and prepared herself for it. It was not a fact she merely endured or even accepted with resignation, but a free and generous holocaust chosen and sought out to conform to divine will" (*Informatio*: 95).

particular, Gianna's entire vision is based on a certain idea of maternity, as is evident from a passage she wrote in her personal notebook between 1944 and 1948 (thus well before she married) on the occasion of a cycle of spiritual exercises. This passage is quoted in the *Positio*:

> All things have a special purpose. They all obey a law – the stars follow their orbit, the seasons follow each other perfectly – everything is developed for a predetermined purpose – all animals follow a natural instinct. God has also marked the way for each of us, a vocation – beyond physical life, the life of grace. [...] *Every vocation* is a vocation to material, spiritual, and moral motherhood. Because God placed the instinct for life in us. The priest is a *father*, the Sisters are *mothers*, mothers of souls. Woe to those girls who do not accept the vocation of motherhood. [...] *We should prepare for our vocation*, prepare to be donors of life.... [...] There are many difficulties but with God's help we must always walk without fear, and if in the struggle for our vocation we should die, that would be the most beautiful day of our life. (*Documenta*: 597-598)

Motherhood implies a relationship between two persons: mother and child. As I have shown, in the discourse of the cause the mother figure is represented as an individual who exercises free choice yet whose full and perfect fulfilment lies only in conforming to a certain thematic role involving self-abnegation or sacrifice in favour of her child.

The child – here, specifically the foetus – is seen in turn as an unborn "person" who enjoys the right to life. For this reason, abortion is interpreted as murder and a violation of the Sixth Commandment. This perspective, which emerges several times in the acts,[35] frames the foetus as having rights equal to children who are already born. This is why the accusation against Gianna for having chosen to leave three children orphaned was contested. The already-born children do have a right to be cared for, but this right is secondary when compared to the right to life, as one of Gianna's sisters clearly stated:

> The Servant of God loved her husband and children very much and undoubtedly regretted leaving them. But the creature she was carrying had a right to life, and between the right to life and the right to receive care, the former prevailed. As for the latter, she trusted Providence, certain that it would intervene. (*Summarium* I: 121)

This passage illustrates how, in the vast majority of cases, the unborn child is referred to as a "creature" rather than a "foetus" or "person". The term "creature" appears consistent with the idea, expressed repeatedly in the normative documents above, that parents are "creators" in the sense that they participate in God's work of creation.

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[35] For example: "Finally, let us say that she was heroically obedient to the divine commandment not to kill, preferring to sacrifice her own life" (*Informatio*: 171); "Such a martyred mother, out of love for God and in obedience to his commandment that forbids killing, testifies and exalts the sublime heroism of a Christian bride and mother who, in respecting every life, which is always God's gift to mankind, sacrifices her young life to say 'yes' to the Christian duty of love" (*Informatio*: 171): 187); "There is a great need for this [Gianna's] message or teaching especially today because, while all the doors have been opened to allow the entrance of principles that desecrate the family, they instead are closed to God in the name of false hedonistic and liberal principles. So, based on the same principles the gift of life is denied, or, worse still, a newly conceived life is killed. To value the sacrifice of our Servant of God, therefore, is to value life itself" (*Informatio* 191); however, see also *Document*a: 565, 567-568.

However, despite the leading role Gianna plays in the narrative developed over the course of her cause, she is somehow depersonalized in the Church's official discourse. In fact, what matters is not Gianna as a specific person but rather her "form of life",[36] that is, the behavioural pattern based on a well-defined axiology that Gianna embodies. This concept is evident in the words of Cardinal Colombo, promoter of the cause of canonization, who declared:

> [Paul VI] seeking to present to the faithful examples of heroic lay people, one Sunday in September 1973, during the Angelus, presented [...] "a mother from the Diocese of Milan, who sacrificed her own life, with meditated immolation, to grant life to her child". The formula the pope used on that occasion, "a mother of the Diocese of Milan", due to the fact that he was not able to track down her name immediately before speaking, clearly indicates that Paul VI was more interested in the "case" than in the person. (*Documenta*: 553)

The statement was made in answer to a Postulator's request that the Cardinal provide more information about the origin of the case, so as to assess certain "insinuations" in witness statements suggesting that the case had been introduced at the behest of Gianna's family. The Cardinal's reply thus intended to deny this fact and underline that Gianna's wealth and surname had no influence in the assessment of her. It also made clear, however, that in Church discourse Gianna served primarily as a figurative representation of a system of values and narrative pattern. Gianna's story thus became an *exemplum* and her character an icon, a very effective means of communication that offers a concrete example to convey abstract principles in a way that is comprehensible and persuasive to a wide audience. On another occasion, in fact, Cardinal Colombo himself declared that "The true inspirer of the cause [...] was Paul VI: there are, he said, mothers with heroic virtue who deserve to be presented to the Christian people as an example; the Pastors must be encouraged to do so, providing some concrete example" (*Documenta*: 554).

It might thus be argued that, in the process of developing the canonization cause, representations were stratified in a way that moved away from the particular, individual, contingent "person" of Gianna (i.e. the "referent") and towards a progressive iconization of her, the transformation of Gianna into a figurativization of a more general form of life. In other words, the direct testimony as well as the Curator's re-elaboration and all the statements through which Gianna is remembered and celebrated created a series of *débrayages*, a process of separation between the concrete, real figure of Gianna and her sanctified and public figure. The latter comes to enjoy increasing autonomy as an enunciated instance and ends up functioning as a character: a system of values and precise thematic role is associated with Gianna's face and name. Indeed, there are numerous pro-life centres, associations and sites that are dedicated to Gianna or generally reference her figure in this specific sense[37].

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[36] Intended as "a semiosis between the syntagmatic form of a course of existence (on the expression level) and the set of congruent selections operated on the axiological, modal, passion and figurative configurations (on the content level)" [8: 260].

[37] On this subject, see Federica Turco's essay in this issue.

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