Movie Reviews

Physicians who were canonized

How many doctors can you identify who were declared to be saints? Excluding doctors of the Church and patron saints of doctors like St. Luke and Saints Cosmas and Damien and restricting it to those who held medical degrees, the pool considerably narrows (there are at least three, all Italian). Knowing I had written a book on doctors in the movies (Dans 2000) and another on Christians in the movies (Dans 2009), Tom Bender approached me about writing reviews of movies portraying doctors of medicine who were later declared saints. I had to confess total ignorance not only about the existence of such individuals but also whether there were movies about them. He then sent me DVDs chronicling the stories of St. Giuseppe Moscati and St. Gianna Molla. You are unlikely to know about either film unless you are an avid listener of Eternal World Television Network (EWTN) or you get the Ignatius Press catalog which sells hagiographic films as well as Hollywood feature films about faith. Most were made pre-1970, a time when religious films were not only still made for the big screen but found wide distribution, which even the best made Christian films today have difficulty in doing.

Let us start with the story of St. Gianna Molla. This 48-minute documentary *Love Is a Choice* was produced by Father Thomas Rosica and Salt and Light Television for showing on Canadian television in 2004 in connection with her

canonization. More like a home movie, the film tells the story of a doctor who had uterine cancer discovered when she was 2 months pregnant with her fourth child. She would not agree to treatment that might injure the child that she was carrying. A healthy baby Gianna Emanuela was delivered on April 21, 1962. Saint Gianna suffered unbearable pain and died 1 week later after repeatedly exclaiming “Jesus, I love you.”

Reviewing the bare-bones details of her life, one is struck by how seemingly ordinary it was (Molla and Guerreiro 2004). Born in a town near Milan on October 4, 1920, the tenth of thirteen children, she grew up in warm and loving home. She was very devout, becoming a mentor for girls in the Catholic Action Movement that was very strong in the 30s and 40s when Catholicism was more militant. She pursued her studies through to a medical degree from the University of Pavia. She had hoped to join her brother, a missionary priest in Brazil, to set up a gynecology clinic but could not do so for health reasons, so she opened a medical clinic in a nearby town in 1949. After specializing in pediatrics at the University of Milan in 1952, her practice consisted of mothers, babies, the elderly, and the poor. A lover of fashion and beauty, she played the piano, painted, and enjoyed the opera, tennis, mountain climbing, and skiing.

She married her soulmate Pietro Molla in 1955 and they had three other children. Most of the film focuses on their love

consisting of love letters she traded with Pietro who was often away on business (Molla et al. 2002). As she was dying she told her husband that she had crossed over to the other world but would not tell him what she saw but only that she was very happy there and had been sent to earth to suffer before returning home.

What elevated her to the extraordinary was the decision she made about keeping her child and the impact that had on millions around the world. Her story spread far and wide and her cause was championed for sainthood. In November 2010, *Linacre Quarterly*, McKenna, and Ruppertsberger reported in depth the case studies of the two approved miracles ascribed to her (McKenna and Ruppertsberger 2010). Briefly, the first certified miracle was in 1978 involving a Brazilian woman who was dying of incurable complications of childbirth and was cured after praying to her. In August 1994, during the international year of the family, Pope John Paul II beatified her. The second miracle required for sainthood occurred in 2003 also in Brazil in which a woman who lost all her amniotic fluid after sustaining a placental tear at 12 weeks and was told fetal viability was impossible carried a healthy baby to term after prayers to St. Gianna. My daughter said that the third miracle, which was almost more impressive, was the conversion of her atheist doctor as a result.

Pope John Paul II, who elevated a record number of saints, canonized her in 2004, offering her to the Church as “a model of virtue, holiness, motherhood, professionalism, and devotion.” The wonderful thing is that her husband (then 92) and their children were present at the canonization. One woman friend is quoted

in the film as saying: her canonization showed that you did not have to be a friar, priest, or nun to be declared a saint, now we have a mother. Like St. Therese of Lisieux, who recommended that we practice the Little Way by doing little daily unheralded acts of kindness, St. Gianna provides a lesson for us ordinary people how to live and grow our faith.

One particular reflection of hers that has great salience for us as doctors is that we “are afforded a privilege not available even to priests. Doctors are called to bring God into situations where priests are not able to assist. They work with priests who are ministers of God. They work with human beings who are created in the image of God. Doctors are present during the most sacred moments of life. Never forget this!”

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