

*“Guardians and Servants of Human Life”:
Formation and Mission in Catholic Health Care*



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My dear friends,

As you know, in his great pro-life encyclical, Blessed John Paul II said that we are all called to be “people *of life* and *for life*.”¹

As a bishop, my duty is to preach the Gospel of life to our society, and to ensure that the truth about human life and its sanctity is proclaimed in all our catechesis, education and formation.

But it falls to each one of you, as Catholic lay men and lay women, to make this Gospel of life shine in our world by your witness in your daily lives. It falls to you to defend the weakest members of our human family and to help our society see that every human life is sacred and must be respected, loved, and served.

Your witness is especially crucial in your work as health-care professionals.

Whether we build a new culture of life will depend a lot on the decisions made by men and women in your field, and by the attitudes and practices you adopt.

That’s why, as I said in my homily, I have such deep respect for the Catholic Medical Association and the important work of education and formation that you are doing.

For us to build the culture of life, we need Catholic health-care professionals who take their faith-identity seriously. And for that, we need formation — spiritual, moral and ethical formation — in addition to all the work you do to continue growing in your professional development.

I was thinking about this need for formation recently as I read about the daughter of St. Gianna Molla.

I'm know you all know St. Gianna's story. She is, of course, the great physician saint, who refused to have an abortion that would have saved her own life. Instead she carried her baby to term — knowing that the child would live, but she herself would die.

What a lot of people don't know is that the daughter that was born, the daughter that St. Gianna died for, grew up following in her mother's footsteps. She is also a physician, Dr. Gianna Emanuela Molla. And she was in our country this summer to give some talks about her mother's legacy.

Reading her daughter's recollections made me reflect on something. And that's this: St. Gianna's decision to lay down her life rather than have an abortion was not what made her a saint.

That one heroic decision did not make her holy. No. It was because she was holy that she was able to make that decision. And that's a big difference.

That's the reality of sanctity, of holiness. We die as we live. No one dies as a saint unless he or she is already living like one.

In St. Gianna Molla's case, she was a devoted wife, mother of a growing family, and a hardworking pediatrician. In her medical practice, she was known for her love for the poor.

What made her life different was her Catholic faith.

She believed that her faith called her to shape the world according to the Gospel's values. She once said she was trying to be "a living witness to the greatness and beauty of Christianity."

Her spiritual formation — her prayer, her daily meeting with Jesus Christ in the Scriptures and the Holy Eucharist — changed the way she approached her work as a doctor.

St. Gianna Molla once said: "There are far too many doctors who, for the sake of money, do everything possible. According to me, the medical profession is a mission."ⁱⁱ

That's how we need to see our work also, my friends. As a *mission*. As a part to Jesus Christ's mission. As a part of the mission that he gave to his Church — to proclaim his Gospel to the ends of the earth, to make disciples of all nations.

We need that same fire of love that St. Gianna Molla had, that the saints all have. That same sense of mission. That same desire to bear witness to the greatness and beauty of the Gospel.

We are called to be saints, my friends!

When our Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI was in Germany a couple weeks ago, he talked a lot about the saints and about our calling to be saints.

But he said we need to have the right idea about the saints. We have to keep in mind that the saints are human — just like we are. The saints sinned, just as we do. And just as we do, they picked themselves when they stumbled, and they sought God’s pardon and the grace to start anew.

And our Holy Father said something beautiful that I think applies to each one of our lives. He said this:

“Dear friends, Christ ... does not call you because you are good and perfect, but because he is good and he wants to make you his friends. ... You are Christians — not because you do special and extraordinary things, but because he, Christ, is your life, our life. You are holy, we are holy, if we allow his grace to work in us.”

That’s what it’s all about, my friends. It is a beautiful and great way to life. Trying to be good friends of Jesus Christ. Trying to work with his grace, to let him sanctify us. To let him use us, to work through us, to build his Kingdom, the culture of life.

Jesus said: “I came so that all might have life and have it to the full.”ⁱⁱⁱ And we are called to continue his mission.

The New Testament tells us that Jesus went about “preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom and healing *every disease and every infirmity* among the people.”^{iv}

That’s why the Church’s evangelization has always included this vital task of healing and caring for the sick. Not only in our Catholic hospitals and institutions — but everywhere that we see human need and suffering.

That’s why your work is so important to the new evangelization.

In your work you bring the light of life to people in the darkness of disease and suffering. In healing bodies and minds, you make possible the soul’s encounter with the living God and his promise of the resurrection.

In this beautiful work, you face many challenges, as you know. From ethical questions posed by new biomedical research, to new fiscal pressures to ration scarce resources for care and treatment.

But I think the greatest challenge we face as we try to build the culture of human life, is the hostile secularism that is growing in our society. This secularism, and the relativism it breeds, underlies many of the pressures you are already facing.

This secularism is driving the pressure groups that want to force Catholic hospitals and medical personnel to perform abortions and euthanasia. It is driving the government's push to make employers — including Catholic and other religious institutions — provide insurance coverage for sterilizations and contraception, including drugs that cause abortions.

This growing secularism threatens our religious freedoms. But I worry that it is also causing us to lose our sense of the truth and meaning of human life.

When we stop acknowledging our Creator, we lose our ability to understand who we are. Without God we have no foundation for our ethics and no basis for our belief in human rights.

Already we see this confusion in our science and medicine. The human person is more and more regarded as just another living organism. More and more ethics are reduced to a utilitarian calculation of consequences, or figuring out what “works” and what doesn't.

So this is a great challenge to all of us, but especially to you who work in this field of medicine and health care.

As Blessed John Paul said, in your work you are called to be “guardians and servants of human life.”^v

Jesus taught us to recognize his divine presence in those who are ill and suffering: “I was sick and you visited me ... as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.”^{vi}

Today, my friends, you have a special duty to guard and serve this great truth about the sanctity of the human person.

The Gospel of life is the good news that every human life is special, that each of us is born from the loving thought of God. That each of us is created for a reason.

You are called to bear witness to this truth — that our life is not simply *biological*. Our life is also *theological*.

Every human life is conceived and lived in dialogue, in a relationship with God. And this relationship begins before we are conceived in the womb. “Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you,” God tells us through the prophets. “Before the foundation of the world,” St. Paul says, God destined us to be his sons and daughters.^{vii}

This relationship with God is not interrupted by illness, disability, or disease. Suffering and sickness can never diminish the dignity of our lives, the great mystery of each one of our lives in the plan of God.

So my friends, thank you for your attention this evening.

I pray that you keep growing in your faith and your witness to the Gospel of life. Keep deepening your own relationship with Jesus Christ. And keep deepening your formation in the truths of his Gospel and the teachings of his Church.

I began this talk by mentioning St. Gianna Molla's daughter. And I would like to leave you with something inspiring that she said.

You know, St. Gianna's husband was also a saintly man. He fully consented in her decision to offer her life so many years ago. And he lived until just last year when he died at the age of 98.

His daughter, the child born of St. Gianna's sacrifice, was his caregiver at the end of his life. She is a geriatrics specialist, as it turns out.

And she said this about taking care of her dad: "I had the grace and privilege to assist him during the last seven years and three months of his long life. I was always at home with him. I felt like I was an instrument in God's hands, assisting him as a physician."^{viii}

I think that is a beautiful way for you to think about your work, my friends. You are instruments in God's hands, assisting him in everything you do to care for the sick and the suffering.

And I ask the blessings of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of the living and the health of the sick, be upon all of you and your families.

ⁱ *Evangelium Vitae*, 6, 78.

ⁱⁱ Ann Ball, *Faces of Holiness* (Our Sunday Visitor, 1998), 109–110.

ⁱⁱⁱ John 10:10.

^{iv} Acts 3:15; Matt. 4:23; 9:35; 10:1.

^v *Evangelium Vitae*, 89.

^{vi} Matt. 25:36, 40.

^{vii} Jer. 1:5; Eph. 1:4.

^{viii} *National Catholic Register* (September 12, 2011).