## First Canadian shrine to St. Gianna honours a woman who was a doctor, a mother and a wife

By: Brenda Suderman
Posted: 05/9/2015 3:00 AM | Comments: 0



Enlarge Image

supplied photo The story of St. Gianna, a devoted wife and mother, is compelling because her life focused on doing good.



Enlarge Image

Rev. Darren Gurr with portrait of St. Gianna and her child at St. Gianna's Roman Catholic Church, which will have the first Canadian shrine to the patron saint for mothers. (RUTH BONNEVILLE / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS)

Photo Store

On Sunday, an Italian woman plans to celebrate Mother's Day by unveiling a Winnipeg shrine to the mother she shares with the rest of the world.

Gianna Emanuela Molla of Milan will be on hand to open the first Canadian shrine to her mother, St. Gianna Beretta Molla, at the Roman Catholic parish of the same name (7 p.m., 15 Columbia Dr.).

"She told me, 'I know my mother extremely well because of the devotion of the community and people. They have been revealed to me," explains Rev. Darrin Gurr, referring to the daughter who was only a week old when her mother died in 1962 at the age of 39, having refused medical treatment that would have endangered her unborn child.

Molla, a geriatrician, was not available for comment owing to travel commitments.

Located in the new \$14-million church, the circular shrine illuminated by two large windows includes a 2.1-metre-high bronze statue by Texas artist John Collier, depicting the saint in mid-pregnancy, carrying a bag of groceries, with one shoe slipping off a swollen foot.

"The sculpture reinforces the point that saints are not sinless people without struggles, but can be regular people who face all the difficulties we have," says Gurr.

The people of the 11-year-old parish attempt to emulate the qualities of the courageous, humble and faithful pediatrician, mother and wife who demonstrated unconditional love and sacrifice, he says.

"We chose her (name) because we felt she best represented the parish community. She was a young woman, a professional, a wife, a mother. She could fit in this community," Gurr says of the growing congregation of 500 families in southwest Winnipeg.

The story of St. Gianna is compelling because her life was focused on doing good, helping the poor and taking care of her family, biographer Rev. Thomas Rosica says.

"For many people, it's the first time they can say 'It's someone like us," says Rosica, chief executive officer of the Toronto-based Salt and Light Catholic Media Foundation, and the producer of a documentary on the saint. "She was a mother of a family, she skied, she loved beautiful clothes and she had opera tickets."

He says the shrine is a wonderful way to reflect on St. Gianna's life of devotion and service, and not just the decision to save her unborn child. After being diagnosed with a uterine fibroma

early in her fourth pregnancy, she opted for treatment that put her baby's life above her own.

"She's really a saint for the full range of her life," Rosica says of Molla, who was canonized in 2004 in the presence of her husband and three surviving children.

"She was concerned with the moments of human life from the beginning to the end."

After Sunday's blessing and dedication ceremony, the shrine will be open during weekend masses, church office hours and some evenings.

Visitors can light a candle during their visit, purchase sterling silver medals of the saint and view a few locks of her hair, encased in a locket. (The hair is considered a first-class relic by Catholics because it was once part of her body.)

More than just a monument to the past, the shrine was designed to become an inspiration for everyone who visits, Gurr says.

"We're all called to be saints. We're all the process of becoming saints. The church declares some people worthy of attention."

And for those who don't understand the idea of sainthood and the importance of saints in the Roman Catholic Church, consider a sports analogy from Archbishop of Winnipeg Richard Gagnon.

"It's sort of like hockey heroes," he says.