An angel called Kiri

Giovanna Rita Di Maria · 30 November 1989 - 24 October 2002

Digital edition · English translation of the 2004 Italian booklet

This is a translation of the booklet «Un angelo chiamato Kiri», printed in Sassari on 24 October 2004, edited by Paolo Sanna with a contribution by Monsignor Antonio Loriga. The page numbering follows the original volume. Photographs are not reproduced in this text edition; the scanned pages of the Italian original remain available on this site.

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Introduction

«Two beautiful things the world has: love and death.» Giacomo Leopardi wrote it, and if that is how things stand, this book is a genuine hymn to beauty. It was born from the sudden, lacerating death of a splendid girl, Giovanna “Kiri” Di Maria, but also, if not above all, from the love she sowed with both hands in her brief existence. One might say, indeed, that this publication is the umpteenth, marvellous fruit of her unforgettable and never-forgotten earthly journey.

There is no cause for wonder, still less for those who had the great fortune (as happened to many) of knowing “Kiri”: cheerfulness, beauty, warmth, intelligence and virtue personified, always placed at the service of a love without boundaries. «Love is strong as death» we read in the Song of Songs. So we understand why the memory endures and appears destined to last through time, and with it the luminous example of an adorable and adored girl like Giovanna.

If we then consider that, as Sophocles maintained, «love frees us from all the weight and sorrow of life», it follows that where (as in our case) there is true, abundant and mutual love, even death, however painful and irreversible, ends up taking second place, leaving wide spaces, veritable meadows, in which to keep practising and cultivating good, positive feelings. The truly exemplary story of “Kiri”, presented here in its essence, proves it beyond any doubt.

Of course it is not easy, and often it becomes impossible, to accept death, especially when it strikes our dearest affections and perhaps (as it did for Giovanna Di Maria) prematurely, like lightning and without warning. One must be able to count on a great Faith and/or on the strength of a true, undoubted Love. “Kiri”, her family and their very many friends were given both. And this book, even when remembrance

becomes heart-breaking, is an eloquent “reflection” of it.

P. S.

Kiri for ever

Who knows how many people, passing through the shopping centre of Marina di Platamona, between Sorso and Sassari, have wondered about the meaning and origin of the name given to a welcoming bar on the square. And, if they were curious and determined enough, they certainly did not find the explanation of Kiri, for that is the name in question, either in dictionaries or by turning to books of any kind. Quite simply they had it, the answer to that question, from those who in that place or elsewhere crossed their path with Kiri's: an extraordinary child and then teenager, as beautiful as she was intelligent and lively. But with a rather short life, lived, moreover, with a truly special quality and intensity of intentions and actions.

Giovanna Rita Di Maria on her birth certificate, Kiri came into the world at 23.05 on 30 November 1989, the feast of Saint Andrew, in Alghero. But she was born in the Catalan town only by chance, because she always lived in Sassari, the city her family comes from. The second child of Giovanni, a doctor by true vocation, and of Ornella Loriga, a housewife by convinced choice of life, Kiri grew up in a family setting made of sound principles and permeated by a great, undoubted faith; able to count, among other things, on the boundless love, besides that of her parents and of her brother Ettore, of a large family on both her father's and her mother's side. For them and for her friends, who also adored her for the way she was and for her uncommon virtues, Kiri was by turns also Giovanna, Giovi or more simply Giò.

Great, too, was the love Kiri came to cultivate for animals; in particular for horses, a little tortoise and a small dog called Lucy. «I wanted to call my dog Lucy», one reads in a school essay of hers, «for the simple reason that when I grow up I want to be an archaeologist and Lucy was a skeleton, indeed the first skeleton of a woman». To be an

archaeologist: Kiri's great dream, perhaps her first passion, never abandoned, a true vocation stated and repeated many times over the years. But not the only one; there is, on close inspection, not even the strongest and deepest. «I hate smog, dust and I don't like the city. I would like to go and live in the countryside: it has always been my dream», Kiri also wrote, «but at the same time I don't like solitude, I always want to be in company». Her mother recalls, moreover: «She perceived and lived with particular intensity problems and feelings such as charity, justice, an irrepressible urge for practical volunteering, a marked sensitivity and attention towards the elderly, children, the humble, the defenceless and the needy in general. And, above all, an immense love for her neighbour and a rock-solid faith in God». «Kiri's favourite prayer was the prayer of forgiveness; towards everyone», her mother Ornella recalls again. «From childhood she kept it jealously under her pillow, urging on every occasion that it should always stay there, constantly within reach, like an inseparable companion even during sleep». Words of Kiri at the age of eight: «The great message of Jesus is: peace, love, joy. I would like to do something to improve the world. In my opinion, if everyone committed themselves to doing good deeds, the world would improve».

«Sunny, curious, lively, always smiling, able to find what is beautiful and positive even in the ugliest and most negative things. She was like a sunny day that cheers you up»: this is how her friend Stefania describes Kiri, adding that she was also very strong, never gave up and put her whole self into what she did. «Every minute of her life was special and she lived it with great commitment and great love for herself and for others». Federica, Kiri's friend and schoolmate since nursery school, adds: «Always cheerful, enthusiastic, sincere, she was simply wonderful, a truly unique and reliable friend, constantly generous with affection and every kind of attention. Even in sport, specifically in

volleyball, which she, a great and passionate player as she was, did no little to teach me and make me love». And it is precisely to volleyball that the last, dramatic stretch of Kiri's earthly life is linked: struck by a devastating and irreversible cerebral haemorrhage on 18 October 2002, she died six days later, at 11.45 on 24 October (the feast of Saint Anthony), in the intensive care unit of the civil hospital of Sassari. She was a little under thirteen and in the third year of middle school. Her death aroused grief, dismay, disbelief and regret, as great as they were widespread; but it also brought to the surface, through her and in her memory, a dense and wide interweaving of elevated thoughts and feelings.

In a letter written to Kiri's parents on 25 October, that is 24 hours after her death, one reads, among other things: «I am Elisabetta's mother, a volleyball teammate of Giovanna, and I want to tell the testimony of my daughter, who on the evening of Friday 18 October shared the last moments of your daughter's life. They trained together, they threw the ball to each other and, after every good shot or pass, Giovanna did cartwheels. Elisabetta told me that she will always remember her like that». The letter then stresses: «It is quite true that the Lord chooses "special children" early: he chose Giovanna so that, in all who knew her, the luminous memory of her youthful enthusiasm might remain. Thank you for the gift of this daughter whom you raised with such joy. Thank you for making her known to my daughter. Thank you because in these days we gathered as a family to pray the Rosary for Giovanna and for you, her parents. Now you have a "special guardian angel" for the whole family. May the teaching that the Lord wished to send us through "your wonderful creature" remain with us who shared your immense sorrow».

«I remember that Giovanna was not like the others or, perhaps, she was like all the others put together», says her friend and schoolmate

Maria. «She was a very strong girl and could pass on that kind of happiness that is hard to find. And at the same time she made you understand that, however badly life may treat you at times, there is always someone ready to help you and to let you know that you are not alone. She had something that made you wish to be like her... Giovì reminds me, and reminds me still, of Pollyanna, partly for her looks, but above all for the way, with her smile and her warmth, she could find unsuspected treasures in everyday things. There are many people in the world, but I believe only a few are (as Giovanna was) truly special, leaving the indelible trace of their endless memory».

«I met Giovanna in the first year of middle school, but we only began to see each other regularly at the end of the school year, during the summer, when we became great friends», adds Francesca. «We both loved dance: as children we had even attended the same gym. A shared plan for the future was to study to become archaeologists. Ancient Egypt held a particular fascination and great curiosity for her. I admired her for the spontaneity of her gestures», Maria continues, «for the sincerity she showed towards others. She was forthright. She had no secrets from anyone, she told everyone about her family relationships, her memories of journeys and much more. I admired her such an outgoing temperament. Giovanna fascinated me, her character reassured me and gave me great confidence. When she was not there I felt her absence deeply, I waited for her impatiently. She, for her part, proved to be a great friend in every situation and stayed close to me even in the most difficult moments. She kept repeating to me that in life one must be brave and have trust in oneself and in others. And that hope and that courage, which she handed out so generously, filled us all when the "terrible news" reached the school: however incredulous, we felt united, as she would have wanted. Of course, we did not accept the idea of never seeing her again, but we felt that Giovi was entering each of us

with all her great love for life. And that courage she passed on to us gave us serenity and strength to face those moments that we, so young, had never known, and to keep loving life, all the same. Just as, with great enthusiasm and simplicity, Giovanna did».

relationship of particular or deep friendship. What struck me most was the fact that she never missed an occasion to meet new people: always and at every moment. The list of her friends, or even just of her acquaintances, was (and remains) to say the least endless. And this mirrors the real Giovanna, her character and her way of being. Optimism, cheerfulness, expansiveness, a sense of humour, a love of fun, warmth (understood above all in the Greek sense of "being able to understand the sufferings of others"): these are only some of Giovanna's qualities of character. From her I learned many things. Thanks to her I understood, before anything else, that one must live every day that is given to us to the full, without wasting it. With her example and her way of living she then taught me never to stop dreaming, as if we were to live for ever... I understood how important she was to me, how much I cared for her and how much I loved her only when I lost her... What remains of her are memories and beautiful experiences: to be guarded jealously and for ever, despite that door of intensive care that stayed always closed and that terrible week of feverish waiting spent in a kind of nightmare, marked by recurring doubt, mental confusion and hopes that proved, alas, vain. It is that church packed with people in tears as a small coffin passed, adorned with many flowers, colourful but unable to cheer you, as the memory of one who (like Giovanna) has left us but has never abandoned us does».

«God does not abandon his children and not one of their tears is lost», recalls Pope John Paul II in a letter sent, through Monsignor Gabriele Caccia (of the Vatican Secretariat of State), to Kiri's family after her premature and painful death. The Holy Father also assures a special

remembrance at the Altar for the soul of Giovanna.

For her part, Sister Maria Arcangela, Mother Abbess of the Monastery of the Capuchin Poor Clares “Sacra Famiglia” in Sassari, wrote to Kiri’s parents: «As soon as we learned the gravity of the lethal illness that had struck her, we kept vigil and prayed insistently for the healing of their dear one, hoping for a miracle... Now we think of her immersed in the blinding Light of Paradise, where other countless souls chosen by the Lord live absorbed in the Enchantment of God... “The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord”, said Job. And the spontaneous question is always the same», Sister Maria Arcangela continues, «“Lord, why did you allow this immense sorrow?”. Well, God the Father answered a father who had lost three little children just born, almost gruffly: “What do we know of the Designs of God and of the Mysteries of this wonderful saving Plan for souls?”. For this purpose», asks the Mother Abbess of the Capuchin nuns of Sassari, writing to Giovanni and Ornella Di Maria, «how many souls will their daughter have saved? We shall see, God willing, one day up there, if we are worthy to reach Giovanna! Let us therefore thank the Most High, because in Heaven another little Star has been lit to praise the whole of Creation and, with Him, all creatures who on earth await the resurrection».

Of Sister Angela, her primary school teacher, as loved as she was feared, Kiri left written, among other things: «On the first day of school I was very happy because I knew the teacher... Over time I grew very fond of her... I even used to adjust her veil sometimes or put the cross of Jesus back in place. But afterwards things changed. If our hands were dirty she made us taste the blows of her cane. I was her target and when she scolded me I said that I would leave that school». Now Sister Angela is a missionary in Madagascar, and from there she sends word: «I received the remembrance of Giovanna, which I always carry in my

prayer book, so that every day, indeed several times a day, I can see her. Especially in difficult moments, which cannot be lacking, I often look at that photo and feel comforted and encouraged by Giovanna's smile: in some way she too is taking part in my mission».

Meanwhile Kiri's parents wrote to the teachers and schoolmates of Middle School No. 5 + No. 12 in Sassari, which Giovanna attended, thanking them for everything they gave to their beloved daughter and wishing them every possible serenity and satisfaction for life and future studies, «certain that in their heart and in their memory there will be a little place for one who (like Kiri) wished them well in enjoying their friendship». In the meantime, on the initiative of the head teacher, the teachers, the students and the parents, a sports club bearing her name was also born within the middle school Kiri attended, while in the gym a giant photograph of her in sportswear stands out. «The idea of founding the "Giovanna Di Maria" Sports Club», wrote Giuseppe Pagliaro in the diocesan weekly "Libertà", «springs from the wish to honour the memory of a girl already part of a women's volleyball team, and from the intention of offering young people the chance to make good use of their free time within an educational effort that should bear fruit also outside school hours and school buildings». Giovanna-Giovi-Giò-Kiri is surely happy about it.

«To Giovanna Di Maria, our Guardian Angel». With these words Kiri's schoolmates addressed an open letter to her at the end of their three years of middle school, two of which, or a little more, spent also with her.

school experience that projects us towards the future and marks the path of our life», the letter opens, «we think back on the days we spent, on you, Giovanna, who taught us the value of life, whatever it may be, and made the sense of solidarity grow strong in us. These gifts you left

us, so important and unexpected, sharpen the melancholy for your absence and this sadness that imprisons us, because everything happened so precipitously, leaving no room for reason or resignation. The days have passed and we have tried to recover a little serenity; you have always accompanied us and the memory of you has helped us through the difficult moments and to finish our work as students united. Thank you, Giovanna, for having been close to us, for living within us», Kiri's schoolmates conclude, «your gentle memory will never leave us, it will always give us courage. Thank you, Giovanna, for having been one of us».

A poem expressly dedicated to Kiri-Giovanna reads: «Golden cloud / splendid moon / doll of fine porcelain / so I left you in the hermitage of ancient silences. / Taken by the hand by time / you chased magic / and thousand-year dreams / riding innocent fancies / and kindly spirits. / Who knows how many horizons / on that journey never ended / and what wonders / in your world forever new. / I would like to know / but you are in the infinite / for ever cloud / doll and moon».

Lines as deeply felt as they are laden with meaning, and which in some measure even taste of fairy tale. But on reflection perhaps also "inadequate". Because, even if it may seem so and have its "flavour", the short and particularly intense life of Giovanna Di Maria was not only a fairy tale. It was a beautiful and luminous reality, which continues to shine even after her premature and painful death. Not even thirteen years spent in exemplary fashion, with mind, attention and works constantly turned above all to the benefit of her neighbour, and of the neediest in particular. On the part of a child and then a teenager, not only exceptionally sensitive and virtuous, but capable of being an example, besides to her peers, to very many adults, not to say to the whole world of the so-called "great and wise". This is proved beyond any doubt by the countless testimonies (which are not only the extremely significant

ones gathered here) about the life, the figure and the work (yes, the work too, because such it was) of Giovanna. It is confirmed by the widespread regret and by the deep, lasting “mark” that this small-great creature of God, as simple and “ordinary” as she was enlightened and “special”, knew how to leave in her brief earthly passage. To the point of being able to say with reasonable certainty, comforted also by Saint Augustine (“Our dead are not absent, but live among us”), that Kiri lives and will live for a long time. Indeed, for ever.

Among her thoughts

I am a lively girl: I play, I jump, I sing, I run and I do many other things...

Splendid and good, my parents are like two suns shining around me. I am proud of them and I love them very much. Together with my brother Ettore they make the most beautiful family in the world.

Black hair and black eyes, my brother is handsome, sturdy, strong and very tall. He is also affectionate, tidy and diligent: at home as at school. A champion! I am lucky to have a brother like that.

My dearest possession is “Donald Duck”: it was my first soft toy, they gave it to me when I was born, I have always slept with him and I do not know when, or whether, I will stop.

I want to be with my friends: when I see them I am happy, when I am with them I am not afraid, and if I have not seen them for a while I go looking for them. I ask my friends for help when I need it, I listen to them and I let them share my joys and my sorrows.

The most important thing in Christian prayer is to talk with God as with a friend, to stand before him with your heart, to give him gratitude and love for what he gives us, to ask for his help just as one does with a friend. For Christians, Jesus is the greatest friend.

My poem for Jesus: “You are joy and love / and you take away our pain / I love you more and more / and You love me more and more. / Hello, my good Jesus”.

The silence of Jesus before the high priests made me understand that he did not want to defend himself, accepting to be condemned to death for our salvation.

I feel generous when I give something of mine that I care about to someone who needs it. One day, when I was in the garage with my father, I saw a bag full of toys I was very fond of: thinking of other children who have nothing, I decided to give them away.

My ideal teacher, first of all, should get on well with the pupils, explain things in the right way and make us understand them. He should also be cheerful, likeable and patient, but also determined and never give up, just like me. He should not threaten to send us to the head teacher just because we are chewing gum, nor, as some teachers do, gossip about the pupils or make them feel guilty for something they did not do...

Ica is a very kind school caretaker, attentive and always ready to help others: I like her way of doing things very much.

Silvia Melis has been set free. Joy has returned to the faces of the Sardinians, a sister of ours has regained the freedom that had been taken from her by force. Now we are all happy.

On 11 September 2001 war broke out in America... Two planes were hijacked and crashed into the twin towers, the symbol of America... The debris fell straight down, some people threw themselves from the windows... The dead are more than five thousand... I felt crushed and very sad.

Dear Jesus, I am writing to you first of all because I love you and then because only you can grant this wish of mine. I would like, please, for you to give a little good sense to the men who have unleashed this war thinking only of their own interests. I would therefore like them to become bearers of values such as love, peace and brotherhood. After all, you have always taught us: love your neighbour as yourself.

I have understood that in life you cannot only laugh and celebrate, you can also go through sad days and disappointments because someone close to us can die: sorrows make us grow healthy and strong.

If in life there are so many differences between the rich, the well-off and the poor, it is not right that the same differences should reappear in death too, because before God we are all equal. I would therefore like the new cemetery of Sassari to be cared for with dignity but without too much luxury. The Mayor, moreover, should help the poor and those who cannot pay to rest in peace to have a dignified burial place, the same as everyone else's, bearing the costs himself.

I would never want to hear anyone crying, I would like to see a smile on every mouth, hope in every person, I would like every human being to be my friend, in joy and in sorrow. To love life with one and the same heart. I would like all people to be generous.

A mother’s flashes

Giovanna was always a very helpful child, ready to do everything I asked her to do. She was tidy, full of initiative and she helped me a great deal. She had a very lively, exuberant and cheerful character: I never saw her sad or in a bad mood, except when her beloved paternal grandfather died...

Every now and then, from the time she was little, she felt the need to sleep on the floor, even refusing the pillow. And often in the morning I would find her like that. She told me that sleeping that way made her feel good because other people did it, but out of necessity, for lack of alternatives.

One day she told me it was not right for me to buy her too many things because in the world there were children who had nothing. She was content with simple clothes and did not let fashions or brands influence her; she loved going barefoot.

When she learned about a little girl ill with a tumour, she wanted to send her books and videotapes of cartoons straight away. She would even have liked to meet her, but unfortunately there was not time... Another time she had some CDs made up by her brother Ettore and gave the whole proceeds of the sale to the soup kitchen of the Vincenziano social welfare centre.

She wanted to give blood to those who needed it. And when, still small, she needed to have blood tests, she cleverly asked the infirmary to take more than necessary from her, pretending she was already eighteen, so that it could go to the sick who were in need.

She often talked to me about life after death, she was not afraid, and one day she said to me: «Mum, if I should die don’t worry, you have

Ettore and you must be at peace... If the Lord wants me, I am ready». She told me she wanted to go to heaven and from there see the people who were in need so that she could help them.

One morning, as soon as she woke up, she told me that before falling asleep she had received a visit from an angel, all in white and with great wings. «He took me in his arms – she said – he carried me all round the house, going into every room, and then he put me back to bed». I remarked that perhaps she had dreamed it; she answered that it had not been a dream, but pure reality.

Two weeks before she fell ill, Giovanna wanted to pray for her aunt, who was seriously ill. She did so at home, reciting the Rosary before a statue of Our Lady. Two days after her death a little niece recounted that, at night, Our Lady (most beautiful and accompanied by angels) had entered her room telling her that aunt Giovanna “was in heaven and was working to rebuild the fallen Church”.

Others remember

One day at school, after we had finished praying, we heard a knock: it was Giovanna and she had a large envelope in her hand. Sister Angela, with trembling hands, opened the parcel: there was a picture in it, and when she saw it her tears almost fell, it was so beautiful. To keep it always before her eyes she hung it at once on the wall next to Father Manzella's picture. The picture showed Our Lady with the baby Jesus in her arms, holding an olive branch. It was so beautiful that we wondered how Giovanna could draw so well. (The pupils of the third year primary class "Father Manzella")

When she was nine years old Giovanna told me she had seen Our Lady at the foot of her bed and had spoken with her, as on other occasions. She described her to me as tall, slim, gentle, with a delicate face, covered by a sky-blue veil and with the baby Jesus in her arms... (Federica)

In June 2002 Giovanna told me that she would die young. I tried to convince her, without succeeding, that it was a thought that would pass with age... (Stefania)

She was certain she would die young, but she said she was not afraid of it and that she was ready... (Silvana)

I have her photograph before me: I did not know her, but that gaze, that expression mindful of the threshold of childhood just crossed, and at the same time curious about an unknown world opening ahead, give me a very great pang of regret... (Toti)

Dear Giovanna, what privilege the Lord granted you we will discover in the course of our life. One thing, however, is certain: the heart of those who hear others speak of you is at once filled with joy, to the point

of perceiving, and making others perceive, your living presence. Through prayer, Giovanna, you guide us and ask us to draw near to Jesus, because you have become his apostle and a consoling angel for those who pray before Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, rich in mercy... (Grazia)

You were more radiant than the sun, the brightest star of the sun. Whoever had the pleasure of knowing you could appreciate your intelligence, your vitality, your affection always accompanied by a splendid smile. For this you will always remain in our eyes, but above all in our heart. We will be able to count on having a very special angel close to us. (Annamaria)

Giovanna is the angel who will accompany us wherever we go... (Angela)

Acknowledgements

The Di Maria-Loriga family thanks all those who, in loving memory of Giovanna, contributed to the making of this publication, a tangible sign of a great and mutual love.

A particular thanks to the journalist and writer Paolo Sanna, a brotherly friend, an important point of reference and the generous editor of this work.

And thanks to the good God who makes it so that “Kiri” is always with us, and not only with us.