

Editorial

Honoring Gabriella Nucera, MD: A legacy of science, faith, and compassionate service

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"Remember me in love, not in sorrow."

These were among the final words written by Dr. Gabriella Nucera (hereinafter "Gabriella") in a heartfelt letter to her loved ones, penned just days before her passing, on 13th February 2025. Her farewell was not one of resignation, but of deep faith, serenity, and gratitude—a true reflection of the way she lived: with an open heart, a keen mind, and a life entirely dedicated to the service of others.

Gabriella was far more than an exceptional clinician. She was a devoted wife, the loving mother of two extraordinary children, a woman of unwavering faith, and a passionate advocate for a medicine that is both scientifically rigorous and profoundly humane. For her, medicine was never merely a profession, it was a calling. In every patient she treated, every diagnosis she delivered, every decision she made, Gabriella saw and served the person before the disease.

At a time when healthcare systems around the world are strained by structural challenges, staffing crises, and growing bureaucracy often at the cost of human connection- Gabriella stood as a

luminous example of what medicine can be at its best. Her values, her presence, and her unwavering sense of purpose remind us that healing is, above all, a moral and relational act.

Diagnosed with Familial Mediterranean Fever (FMF), a painful yet non-disabling genetic disease, Gabriella transformed her chronic condition into a wellspring of empathy and inner strength. Rather than limiting her, her experience of suffering deepened her resilience and compassion.

After earning her medical degree (in 1999) and completing a residency in Internal Medicine at the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore under the mentorship of Professor Giovanni Gasbarrini, Gabriella embarked on a clinical and scientific research journey focused on FMF. In collaboration with Professor Raffaele Manna and Dr. Micaela La Regina, she helped advance understanding of this rare disease, sharing insights in international conferences and promoting innovative diagnostic and therapeutic approaches.

Her personal experience gave her a singular voice—scientifically authoritative yet deeply humane, capable of merging expertise with lived testimony.

Gabriella was also a vital contributor to the international scientific community. She was one of the founders of the *Journal of Health and Social Sciences*, a peer-reviewed journal committed to integrating methodological rigor with a human-centered vision of healthcare. For her, medicine was not only to be evidence-based—it had to be grounded in humanism.

As an adjunct professor in the Nursing degree program at the Faculty of Medicine and Surgery of the University of Milan, Gabriella enthusiastically educated the next generation of healthcare professionals. Her mentorship extended beyond the classroom and into the hospital, where she offered medical students and residents not only clinical excellence but also a deep ethic of care. Many of her former students, now accomplished and skilled professionals, remember her as a rigorous, attentive, and profoundly inspiring teacher and guide.

Gabriella's commitment to healthcare management was equally exemplary. She earned two second level master's degrees with top honors: one in Healthcare Management from SDA Bocconi, and another sponsored by the Lombardy Region, where she developed an innovative telemedicine project.

Following her early career in emergency departments in Rome and Tivoli, Gabriella moved to Milan with her husband, a senior physician in the Italian State Police. At the *Fatebenefratelli* Hospital, she became head of the Emergency Medicine Unit and right hand of Dr. Pietro Marino, Director of the Department of Medicine and Rehabilitation.

When the COVID-19 crisis hit, Gabriella was appointed acting director of the department, coordinating emergency protocols and the multidisciplinary management of clinical teams. In this critical phase, she played a strategic role in developing the hospital's first clinical protocols for COVID-19, personally overseeing the implementation and optimization of helmet-based non-invasive ventilation systems for patients with severe respiratory distress caused by SARS-CoV-2.

Thanks to her clinical expertise, composure, and empathic leadership, the unit she led navigated successive pandemic waves with effectiveness and compassion, saving many lives under extremely difficult conditions.

Despite suffering repeated COVID-19 infections, anaphylactic reactions to vaccines and therapies, and long COVID syndrome, Gabriella never ceased working. Though classified as a

"fragile patient," she never used her condition as an excuse. She chose to remain on the front lines, fully aware of the risks to her own health—always with sobriety and determination.

Known affectionately as "the doctor of impossible diagnoses," Gabriella combined exceptional clinical skills with rare intuition. Above all, she never lost sight of the person behind the illness. Patients and colleagues alike recall, *"With Gabriella, you were never alone."*

Alongside her remarkable career, Gabriella built a family rooted in love and faith. She raised her children with tenderness and strength, sharing a deep spiritual bond with her husband. Her moral integrity was evident in extraordinary acts of kindness, such as her decision to adopt the daughter of a critically ill patient—a gesture that ultimately proved unnecessary but epitomized her boundless compassion.

At her funeral, nurses from the Emergency Medicine Department at Fatebenefratelli Hospital in Milan fondly remembered Gabriella: *"You brought us pastries and smiles, listened to us, defended us, guided us, and loved us until the very end. If it's true that those who leave live forever in the hearts of those who remain, then you will live forever in ours."*

In her hometown of Reggio Calabria, Bishop Emeritus Giuseppe Fiorini Morosini offered a moving homily: *"Gabriella lived her entire life open to the mystery of God. She was a gift. And now she asks us to continue living in love."*

Gabriella's Spiritual Testament

In her final message, Gabriella left a legacy of remarkable spiritual grace and clarity. The following is an excerpt from her letter to her husband, children, and friends:

"Dear Francesco, dear Luca, dear Francy, and my beloved friends,

If you are reading this, it means that my time on this earth has come to an end, and I hope to be in the arms of the Lord.

The very first thing I want to say is THANK YOU to all of you for being by my side and for giving me your love.

THANK you, my love. Thank you, Luca and Francesca.

You are wonderful, and you must promise me that you will continue to be.

Love with all your heart, without holding back,

And walk the path of life with joy and always with a smile.

Know that I will always be with you.

THANK you to my family, always present with a special embrace.

Please, do not cry-smile.

I am certain I have found peace, and you must continue your journey

With joy and a smile in your hearts.

THANK you to my precious friends who have accompanied me along this path.

Stay close to one another in my absence.

THANK you to my friends-doctors, nurses, and healthcare assistants-

Who comforted me and made my illness easier to bear.

THANK YOU to the dear priests who stood by me in these months

With their prayers, their presence, with a word or a message that filled my heart.

THANK you all for the prayers, the comfort, and the care.

I also wish to say I am SORRY to those I may have offended, and for my shortcomings.

I entrust everything to the hands of the merciful Lord.

I wish for this to be a celebration, lived in serenity and joy-

I know it's not easy, but it can be done, and I ask you to do it for me.

I will always be near you, like a great embrace.

Remember me in love, not in sorrow.

And pray for me."

A shining legacy

Dr. Gabriella Nucera remains a luminous and countercultural figure—especially in an era when medicine risks losing touch with its ethical and spiritual roots. Gabriella demonstrated that one can be both an exceptional scientist and profoundly human, that healing is a sacred calling, and that science and faith can walk hand in hand.

Her experience during the COVID-19 pandemic also invites us to reflect on the spiritual dimensions of care. As noted in the literature [1], the pandemic highlighted the critical need for physicians to possess pastoral competencies, especially in contexts where patients faced death in isolation. In some instances, physicians even assumed roles of spiritual comfort traditionally reserved for clergy, offering blessings to dying patients. Gabriella, through her unwavering faith and deep humanity, fully embodied this integrated vision. In moments of profound suffering, she went so far to bring Holy Communion to dying patients, in close collaboration with hospital chaplains [2].

Her love created good.

And it will continue to do so.

As long as we carry her example in our hearts, her legacy will never fade. She will live on, not just in memory, but in the actions of those who continue the work she began, with the same love, courage, and unwavering faith.

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