

## Armida Barelli: Channel of Education and Consecration

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*In this article, Susan Larkin—member of the Secular Institute of Missionaries of the Kingship of Christ and president of the United States Conference of Secular Institutes— examines the life of Armida Barelli (1882-1952) and her role in the religious and social development of Italian women in the early 20th century, as well as the changes she brought about which impacted Church and state.*



**O**n April 30, 2022, Armida Barelli, the modern founder of secular institutes, and founder of the Secular Institute of the Missionaries of the Kingship of Christ, was beatified in the Cathedral of Milan in the presence of 100 vestment-robed priests, 25 bishops and 2 cardinals. Who was this person and why was she so honored by the Church?

Barelli was a Milanese woman whose life and work in the early 20th century had great impact in three areas: the religious and civil education of the women of her country in the Young Women's Catholic Action movement; the co-founding, with Fr. Agostino Gemelli, OFM, of the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart in Milan; and thirdly, her ceaseless work to promote formal Church recognition of the vocation of consecrated secularity. Known for her determination and indefatigability as well as for her great personal sanctity, Barelli was elevated to Blessed by Pope Francis.

### **The Early Years and the Feminine Youth Movement**

Barelli was born in Milan on December 1, 1882 to an upper middle-class family. Educated in Switzerland, she completed her studies between 1895 and 1900 at the Institute of the Sisters of the Holy Cross in Menzingen. She acknowledged that it was here she learned self-discipline and full commitment to a task. And it was here that she felt the call to religious life. Her family wanted her to marry, but her only desire was to consecrate herself perpetually to God.

In 1910, Barelli met the Franciscan friar Agostino Gemelli. His love of Jesus Christ combined with his example as a Franciscan inspired Barelli greatly. Gemelli, a priest, a physician, and a psychologist recognized her gift for organization and leadership, and steered her to positions where this gift best served the special objectives within the Church of the time. In 1917, she met with Cardinal Andrea Ferrari, Archbishop of Milan, and he proposed that she travel to the parishes of Milan and develop courses of religious education and social studies for young women. Initially refusing, telling the cardinal that she was shy and was called to pray, she later agreed and began to travel around Milan as the Cardinal had asked. This effort eventually became the Young Women's Catholic Action movement (also known as the Feminine Youth movement) which in 1918, at the request of Pope Benedict XV, was extended to all of Italy.

In addition to their studies, Barelli taught these young women the importance of an intense spiritual life and the necessity to bear witness to their faith in their environment and in their parishes. The Feminine Youth movement flourished in Milan and throughout Italy. Barelli would serve as president of this organization for twenty-eight years. Over the course of this time, over 1 million young women became members and received education in religious studies and civil matters at a time when their needs were poorly served.

### **Origins of the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart (1921)**

The idea for a Catholic university emerged from Barelli's devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. This began during World War I when, fearing for the life of her brother in the army, an agnostic, led her to campaign to have all Italian soldiers receive and wear badges with the Sacred Heart of Jesus on their sleeves. This was her first foray into public life.

Following the Feast of the Sacred Heart in 1917, Barelli wrote to Fr. Gemelli, declaring that their focus on the Sacred Heart should shift to one with a "cultured element": the University of the Sacred Heart. Fr. Gemelli was hesitant but Barelli—as well as those who she worked with in the Catholic Action—insisted that he was the only one who could bring this vision to fruition because of his work and reputation. After a retreat, Fr. Gemelli wrote to Barelli: "I have the impression that God wants the Catholic University."<sup>1</sup>

In March 1919, Fr. Gemelli attended an audience with Pope Benedict XV to submit the idea of the University. When the organizing committee met for the first time, Armida insisted that "it must be called the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart." The committee said the time was not right for such a title; Armida would not agree, even when she was pressured by the cardinals. The committee eventually relented. On February 9, 1921, Pope Benedict XV, in *Cum Semper Romani*, approved the creation of the University in Milan which was entitled and dedicated to the Sacred Heart as Barelli desired.<sup>2</sup>

"The Catholic University of the Sacred Heart of Milan...aims to contribute to the development of study and prepare the youth for scientific research, public administration

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<sup>1</sup> Armida Barelli, *La Nostra Storia: Secular Institute of Missionaries of the Kingship of Christ* (Milan: SIM, 1952), p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> Armida Barelli, Agostino Gemelli, *To Know the Founders: Armida Barelli, Agostino Gemelli, OFM* (United States: SIM, 2019), p. 26.

and liberal professions with adequate high education and moral education inspired by the principles of Catholicism.”<sup>3</sup> The University has since educated thousands of young men and women in the arts and sciences, all in the context of faith in and love of the Sacred Heart.

### **Working for a State of Lay Consecration in the Church**

While consecrated laity have been present since the early Church (those who devoted themselves to spreading the Gospel and personal prayer in an intense way while not living in community) the more familiar state for consecration was the state of the religious who took public vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, lived in community, and had a hierarchical structure.<sup>4</sup> However, Barelli did not feel called to religious life. She imagined the idea of a life consecrated totally and perpetually to God while working for the apostolate in the world as a layperson. Others around her felt the same way. In the early years of the 20th century, such a vocation was unknown and was met with opposition even in the Church itself.

In 1919, determined to proceed and with the help of Fr. Gemelli and the advice of the other Franciscans, Barelli wrote the first “Rule” of what would later become the Missionaries of the

Kingship of Christ, drawing on Franciscan spirituality. The first group of twelve made their profession at San Damiano in Assisi in 1920.

Over the next twenty-seven years, Barelli continued to press her case with the Italian bishops and three popes—Benedict XV, Pius XI and Pius XII—who had great familiarity with Armida’s work, both with the Feminine Youth movement and the Catholic University. Finally, persistence paid off and on February 2, 1947 Pope Pius XII issued [\*Provida Mater Ecclesia\*](#).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Irma Corsaro, *Armida Barelli* (Milan: Società Editrice: Vita e pensiero).

<sup>4</sup> There are also societies of apostolic life, which are not identical to religious institutes or institutes for consecrated life but, for the sake of simplicity I will refer to all as “religious.”

<sup>5</sup> This was followed by the *motu proprio* of Pius XII [\*Primo Feliciter\*](#) and the instruction from the then-Sacred Congregation for Religious [\*Cum Sanctissimus\*](#) in 1948, further clarifying and confirming the legitimacy of secular institutes within the Catholic Church.

This Apostolic Constitution recognized secular consecration; that is, it recognized that lay men and lay women could, while remaining "in the world", live consecrated lives—which hitherto had been held to be possible only as a religious. The specific [charism](#) of secular institutes unites the elements of a consecrated life lived according to the [evangelical counsels](#) and living as a lay person not in a religious community. Pius XII described them as "societies, clerical or lay, whose members make profession of the evangelical counsels, living in a secular condition for the purpose of Christian perfection and full apostolate."

The formalization of this way of life led rise in the ensuing years to groups of lay persons and clergy who felt called to a particular charism, seeking approval either in the diocese in which they were located (institutes of diocesan rites) or from the Holy See in Rome (institutes of pontifical rites). This has grown to approximately 184 secular institutes with over 32,000 members on 5 continents.<sup>6</sup>

## **Personal Sanctity**

In addition to the works which brought her recognition and gratitude among lay and clergy alike, Barelli lived a life of deep personal piety. She was given a cross beginning in 1949 and lasting until her death in 1952 with a condition that rendered her unable to speak. At the end, she wrote: "In the forced silence I pray more, think more, write more, and prepare myself better for the meeting, no longer distant, with Him 'Whom I saw, Whom I love, Whom I believe, Whom I have cherished'." Despite these limitations, Barelli continued her work with the University until her death on August 15, 1952.

On March 8, 1960, the cause for Beatification of the Servant of God, Armida Barelli, was introduced at the Curia by the Archbishop of Milan.<sup>7</sup> Sixty-two years later, Barelli was beatified on April 30, 2022.

In a book published soon after her death, Fr. Gemelli was asked to write the preface inasmuch as he was her closest collaborator over many years:

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.cmis-int.org/en/>.

<sup>7</sup> Armida Barelli, Agostino Gemelli, *To Know the Founders: Armida Barelli, Agostino Gemelli, OFM* (United States: SIM, 2019), p. 30.

Those who knew Armida Barelli during the last years of her life had the chance to see that she had given herself a rule of life to which she held faithfully. They could have observed that every thought, every action, every word, every gesture revealed her firm intention to serve the Church, to make Jesus Christ loved, to minister and help others, with discretion and modesty, at the service of anyone who asked for something... In a special way, they observed her zeal for souls fallen into sin or victims of temptation... Many who turned to her were always helped, even the impolite or irritating, but mostly the poor and lowly. She greeted everyone with an inviting smile or at least a good word...<sup>8</sup>

In April of 2023, on the occasion of the late Pope Francis's greeting of twelve thousand faithful gathered at Saint Peter's to celebrate the anniversary of the beatification of Blessed Armida Barelli, a journalist noted that he remarked:

Armida was able to read the signs of her times and the most urgent needs: think of the need for a renewed care of spirituality; think of the training and the call to commitment for young women; think of the educational challenge and the dream of a Catholic university in Italy; think of the passion for the world, starting from the certainty of the universality of Christ's message. These needs were for Armida Barelli, ground for commitment and mission.<sup>9</sup>

Barelli's work reached another milestone twenty-one years after her death, when secular institutes became enshrined in the 1983 Code of Canon Law, promulgated by Pope Saint John Paul II<sup>10</sup> (Articles 710-730). This vocation has spread throughout the world—another means of bringing Christ into daily life in the persons of members of secular institutes.

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<sup>8</sup> Irma Corsaro, *Armida Barelli* (Milan: Società Editrice: Vita e pensiero)

<sup>9</sup> Linda Bordoni, "Pope upholds prophetic witness of Blessed Armida Barelli," Vatican News, 22 April 2023, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2023-04/pope-blessed-armida-barelli-women-education.html>.

<sup>10</sup> The 1983 *Code of Canon Law* was promulgated on 25 January 1983 by John Paul II and took legal effect on the First Sunday of Advent (27 November) 1983.

You may find the original posting of this essay, as well as the author's biographical and contact information, at <https://www.reviewforreligious.com/essays/armida-barelli-channel-of-education-and-consecration>