

Armida Barelli



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| 1 st December 1882 | Born in Milan into a numerous family. |
| 1895-1908 | Studies in a college in Switzerland where she learns to meet God, know Him and love Him. On her return in Milan she refuses marriage proposals and commits herself to voluntary work in favour of society's poor and marginalised. |
| 1917 | She works for the initiative of consecrating soldiers to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. |
| 17 th February 1918 | She starts the Gioventù Femminile di Azione Cattolica in Milan on the invitation of her Archbishop, Cardinal Ferrari. |
| 28 th September 1918 | She is nominated by Pope Benedict XV as National President of Gioventù Femminile which she promotes in all of Italy. |
| 15 th November 1919 | Together with Father Gemelli she founds the Secular Institute of the Missionaries of Kingship of Christ, a family of lay women consecrated to God. |
| 7 th December 1921 | The Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore in Milan is inaugurated. f'Milan. Armida forms part of the promoting committee of this University as treasurer. |
| 17 th September 1923 | Opening of the Benedict XV Institute in China from which a Congregation of Franciscan Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus emerges. Armida encourages members of GF to sustain this mission. |
| 1927-1929 | She organises the Work of the Regality of Our Lord Jesus Christ for the dissemination of liturgical and Christ-centred spirituality. |
| 1946 | She is nominated by Pope Pius XII as General Vice President of Italian Catholic Action. |
| 1949 | She is struck by illness, bulbar palsy, which she lives with faith and offers her suffering for the realisation of a dream: the Faculty of Medicine which is today the Policlinico Gemelli in Rome. |
| 15 th August 1952 | She dies in Marzio at the dawn of the feast of the Assumption. |
| 1 st June 2007 | She is declared as Venerable. |
| 30 th April 2022 | She is declared as Blessed in Milan. |

Born into a numerous middle-class family, she was sent to study in a Swiss boarding school as was the norm for families of her class. Her parents were indifferent to religion and so she did not receive from her family an education related to faith. From them she learnt the value of work and love for one's country. It is at her school run by a congregation of nuns that she met God. Here Armida deepened her religious life helped by various figures and examples such as Saint Elizabeth of Hungary. It is also in this school that Armida's devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus started when a friend of hers speaks about "a love that does not pass."



Back in Milan, like every young woman she was interested in fashion but refused marriage proposals and instead she dedicated herself to abandoned and poor children with the help of her friend Rita Tonoli, who later founded an institute dedicated to the assistance of these children. It was her friend who put her in contact with Fr Agostino Gemelli, a doctor who had just converted and joined the Franciscan order. Armida wanted to meet this Friar since she was worried for her brothers who did not live a life of faith. The meeting with Fr Agostino Gemelli marks the beginning of a collaboration which will last a lifetime. The fruit of this collaboration are: Catholic Action for Young girls (*Gioventù Femminile di Azione Cattolica*), the Secular Institute of the Missionaries of Kingship of Christ (*Istituto Secolare Missionarie della Regalità*), the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart (*Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore*), the Work of the Regality of Our Lord Jesus Christ (*Opera della Regalità di Nostro Signore Gesù Cristo*).

In 1918 she founded the *Gioventù Femminile di Azione Cattolica* (GF) in Milan – Catholic Action for young women. She was called to this post by Card. Ferrari, Archbishop of Milan, who in the face of Marxist propaganda, saw the urgent need for formation of young women too as that for young men was already organized. It was his wish that young women receive formation that helps them live their life as witnesses to the baptism received. Armida was already known for her organisational skills but at first refused the role as **she felt inadequate** for this task since it involved public speaking. However, in the face of the urgency of the situation due to events happening in her society, she ended up accepting. Together with a group of young women, women and spiritual directors, the association takes form. Members of groups in Milan's parishes began to strengthen their Christian formation and be trained on the social situation of their times.

The positive experience of Milan pushes Pope Benedict XV to entrust her with the same task for all the Italian dioceses. Once again, Armida would like not to accept the post, but to her resistance the Pope replied that her mission was Italy. He was sending her "not as a teacher among students, but as a sister among sisters", **so that young women become aware of their Christian identity and rediscover their dignity as women**. Armida finally accepted this mission and became "the elder sister" of many young women throughout Italy as the *Gioventù Femminile* would reach more than a million members.

This was 1918 and Armida began her first tour along the peninsula to rally the young women, who respond with **enthusiasm**. She proposed to them a demanding and difficult path: to go against the current, thanks to the personal commitment of formation and group life. This formation had as its foundation a trinomial: Eucharist, apostolate, heroism. These three words and principles marked the lives of many young women



In 1919, together with Father Gemelli, she founded the Secular Institute of the Missionaries of the Kingship of Christ of which she was a member as a person pertaining to the Secular Third Order of Saint Francis. With Fr Gemelli she also started the Work of the Kingship of Our Lord Jesus Christ for the diffusion of the liturgy. In 1921 she was part of the group of founders of the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart. It was she who had the firm conviction of dedicating this University to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and became its indispensable "cashier" as she organised fundraising events for the cause.



In these years, she continued with various initiatives by organising conferences, pilgrimages, purity weeks, social weeks and activities for the missions. Armida participated in the international congresses of the Gioventù Femminile and was always open to welcome new experiences from other countries which could be transferred to the Italian reality. In These are also the years marked by the growth of the fascist regime in Italy which stopped certain organised associations for various years. Armida was not afraid to speak up as she considered this regime incompatible with the formation given in GF. She warned that violence and hatred would not lead to

peace in society. She kept on working so that the Christian presence would remain active in civil society. When the regime collapsed, she did a valuable job of integrating women into the political life, since they would be voting for the first time in 1946. In the coming years, some women who took their formation in GF would also be elected as mayors and representatives.

Her openness to the world that surrounds her, today we would say to the signs of the times, was extraordinary, because it arose from her mystical life which made her grasp the great potential of the faith and mission within the Church. The support of the GF for the Benedict XV Institute in China was decisive and concrete and led to a Chinese female religious congregation that is still currently operating. Her spirituality, fundamentally Franciscan, was enriched by other types of spirituality present in Catholic Action which, as such, is nourished by the baptismal spirituality common to all faithful. This explains how religious vocations of different types were born in GF and how its members experienced marriage as an authentic vocation.

It is from the radicality of Baptism and the Gospel that many witnesses to the sanctity of the GF come (some already officially recognized as such by the Church): young women who heroically followed Christ on the roads of the world. In 1946, Armida was appointed General Vice President of Catholic Action by Pius XII. In 1949, she fell ill with bulbar palsy, which led to her death in 1952. In these years of illness she wrote: "I accept death, whatever the Lord wills, in full adherence to the divine will".

Armida died on the 15th of August 1952 in Marzio, Italy. She was then buried in the chapel of the Catholic University in Milan. She was declared venerable on the 1st of June 2017 by Pope Benedict XVI. On the 30th of April 2022 she will be Beatified after Pope Francis has authorised the Congregation for the Causes of Saints to promulgate the Decree that acknowledges a miracle attributed to her intercession. This miracle involves the medically unexplainable healing and full recovery of a woman who was hit by a car. The woman was in a very critical state when her family prayed to Armida Barelli for her intercession in the healing of this woman.



Armida was a woman who lived an era of great social changes and who took part in these changes by not shying away from the required commitment and action. The many initiatives she collaborated in did not only leave a momentary mark on her society but led to a renewal in Italian culture and opened new roads for women. In Armida one can notice **an intense spiritual life as well as a tireless organisational work** and due to these two the fruit of the seeds she sowed is still harvested to this day. She joined together the perspectives of Matha and Maria – work and contemplation. She had full trust in young people and encouraged them not only in formation and devotion but also in their commitment – to not be afraid to take on roles and responsibilities within the organisation and within society. Armida gave a valid contribution to the Church and to society, she anticipated the role of the laity which was confirmed with the Second Vatican Council and later on with the Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici*. Her beatification gives us the opportunity to get to know her testimony and let her encourage us so that we too can live our time that, as every other era does, asks us to be happy and courageous protagonists.



“To the mind that asks: <How will you start the *Gioventù femminile* in all of Italy?>, the heart would reply: <I don't know but I trust in the Sacred Heart of Jesus.>”

“O Jesus, all that I have, all that I am, I give You. Take all my activity as yours and make of it a work of your glory.”

“Forward together for Jesus. All together, teachers and illiterate, aristocrats and peasants, students and workers, teachers and employees, housewives and artisans, we are all one, beautiful, large Christian family.”

"I accept death, whatever the Lord wills, in full adherence to the divine will."

“Do not be satisfied with being the lukewarm members of Catholic Action, do not even be satisfied with being "good to good": I want you apostles, apostles who love and make the Lord loved!”

“May you tomorrow be Christian brides and mothers capable of forming families in which Jesus is the King and the Friend, the way and the life; be, if God calls you to the Convent or to the apostolate in the world, the spiritual mothers of the little ones, the poor, the weak, the ignorant, the suffering, the unhappy.“

“Life is so short, my little sisters! Spend it well, spend it on the One who alone is worthy of it and alone can give you eternal happiness.”

“Work ceaselessly, but above all, love, love, love!”

“For those of you who will read these pages, I would like to leave you the talisman of my life:
Trust in the Sacred Heart.

Yes always trust in Him,
In the happy hours in order not to prevaricate,
in the sad hours in order not to succumb,
in the difficulties to overcome them,
in the trials to valorise,
in work to carry it out supernaturally,
in the choice of the state to understand and do God's will,
in every contingency of life, in order to always live in a state of Grace and be in grace in the hour of death, when He wills, which will be sweet on His heart."