

Preface of fr. Agostino Gemelli ofm
cf. "**Armida Barelli**" by **Irma Corsaro**
(Società Editrice: Vita e pensiero)

This is not a preface to present the author or to praise the book; this is a testimony that I believe is my duty to render public to make Armida Barelli and her accomplishments known. Perhaps no one can make this testimony better than me, because I had the grace to collaborate with her in many works, that were all done to give glory to God and for the good of souls. This assiduous collaboration that lasted continuously for long years gave me the opportunity to know her thoughts and feelings and be able to evaluate the motivations of her actions.

After her death, many people spoke or wrote to me, inviting me to ask the ecclesiastical authority to begin the process of investigation on her virtues. I have not yet decided to take that step, notwithstanding authoritative invitations, numerous exhortations of illustrious and venerable prelates and testimonies received from everywhere (not only from Italy) in the aftermath of her death. It seemed appropriate to wait. I did so after seeking advice from trustworthy people. Time is a great judge. If this unanimous consent of testimonials lasts, we shall see the plan of God in it; we shall collect and present them to the ecclesiastical authority so it can decide on what is to be done in honor of God.

While waiting, here is my testimony.

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. Everyone could see her great love for the Pope, for Bishops, for the works of the Church. In a special way, they observed her zeal for souls fallen into sin or victims of temptation. Her great passions were the Catholic Action, in particular the Feminine Youth that she founded, promoted and supported. Then the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart, which she made known, loved and helped; she was a burning flame in its governance. She worked with zeal for the "*Opera Regalità*", which inherited the legacy of the work for the consecration of soldiers to the Sacred Heart and promoted liturgical and ascetic apostolate. I will not recall other works or initiatives, some of which must remain in the shadow of God's secret and others apparently of minor importance; however done for the glory of God and the service of the Church.

Armida Barelli urged everyone to love the Sacred Heart of Jesus, to be devoted to him and to propagate its worship. She taught full and filial trust in our Lady and the prayer "*Mater mea, fiducia mea*". 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. I could go on and on forever enumerating virtuous aspects of the life of Armida Barelli, but perhaps it is better to refer the readers to the good biography written with intelligent love by Irma Corsaro.

What I want to say (and as a testimony it is certainly of great significance) is that she was not born exceptionally virtuous, but she became so. She was not a woman of extraordinary

interior life since her early life, but little by little, with the gift of grace and her willpower, she developed the uncommon personality of an ever-smiling woman with untiring zeal, sacrifice, and the confident acceptance of the difficult trial with which God wanted to close her life. I mean the heroism in acting and suffering, that shined especially during her last years, was achieved through long uninterrupted hard interior work.

In the early years when I met her, she told me several times that at the Boarding School of Menzingen, a priest had taught her a popular German proverb, which says that anyone who does not progress does not stop, but rather falls back. This slogan strongly impressed her at that time and gave her an insight about the beauty of spiritual perfection, despite being far away from it. Now I seem to be able to testify that the intense inner life, the full dedication achieved in recent years was the result of a long work of asceticism in which she had the valuable help of some devote priests.

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I met Armida Barelli on February 11, 1910, thus on the Feast of Our Lady of Lourdes. She came to me to tell me about her brother, who later became a competent medical doctor. She was worried about him because she saw him very distant from Faith. She wanted to inform me of her brother so that the meetings I would have with him could be fruitful. When I met Armida Barelli she was young and beautiful. She belonged to a middle class family of Milan, with the most rigid moral norms. At the same time, there was much religious skepticism with no adhesion to Church life, but not to the point of falling into forms of contempt or anticlerical derision that were the stigma of the Milan middle class of the 19th century.

While the wealthy families of Lombardy were morally unimpeachable, they did not listen to the Church. This attitude was the result of the Italian political situation, of the relation between the Church and State after 1870 and the spread of prejudices that made them believe that the unification of Italy was achieved in spite of the opposition of «priests». However, some priests were excepted from this common negative judgment of that world, because, with their political conduct, they showed apparently that they did not adhere to the position of the “clericalists” protesting for the “Vatican prisoner”¹. A typical example is Stoppani, priest and geologist, who represents the ideal of liberal Catholics of Lombardy. He was known and admired at the Barelli household for his political attitudes, which made his great scientific merits more evident. I cherish a statuette of Stoppani, the head of the liberal priests of Lombardy, which was given to me by the Barelli family.

Nevertheless, young men and women from many Lombard families of this type, were among the first “soldiers” of the Catholic Action when it began to move out from the closed sacristies and started flourishing with its works. I knew many of these young men and women who became good professionals and at the same time “soldiers” of the Catholic Action. Pious and zealous priests and Religious, who were faithful to the teachings of the Church, came from those families. I believe they were the prize from God to many families with a custom of wholesome honesty, great respect and love for parents, and kind attitudes. Armida Barelli was one of these numerous “flowers” from such families. In fact, she did not see her father end his

¹ The ‘Vatican prisoner’ was the pope that, for protest, did not go out of the Vatican after the annexation of Rome to Italy in 1870

life in a Christian way, and for this, she suffered a great deal. She assisted her mother with extreme dedication, in the pains and trials that led her to a fervent Christian life. She was able to exert a beneficial influence on her siblings and relatives. She grew up in a moral family environment that was an essential condition to the development of her strong religious personality, which God formed in her through trials, sorrows, bitterness, but also joys and especially, through priests, bishops, cardinals, popes who loved her and helped her. They were urged to do so by the simplicity and spontaneity of her soul.

This was the most obvious natural feature of Armida Barelli. Her simplicity was a gift of God, but also a fruit of the education she had in her own family. Anyone who knew her was immediately impressed by the high quality of this gift, which made all her attitudes appear spontaneous and natural. She was of a simple heart so that at times, with her brothers and the complicity of her mother, I would joke making her believe improbable facts that she easily accepted as true because told by a Religious that would not tell lies. The jokes always ended with the story of the donkey that flies. A moment would pass and, fortunately, unconscious but consistent to herself, she would show her usual simplicity, which was not foolish credulity, but the result of full trust in the honesty of others. This remained her characteristic even in old age, even when bitterness and disillusion taught her later that, unfortunately, frankness and honesty are uncommon virtues of our time.

Another natural characteristic of Armida Barelli was her commitment and steadfastness in pursuing tasks entrusted to her. Since the beginning of our collaboration, I observed that she gave me valuable assistance. She took every assignment with commitment and decision, aiming to get to the goal quickly, well, and orderly. Many times I asked her for challenging and tiring collaboration. Once she accepted a task (first she wanted to be convinced that it was a good and just work; then she wanted to see a clear and precise program and she calculated whether the means were adequate) she would proceed with all her strength and went on, as if she never got tired, sacrificing long hours for work.

A third natural gift of Armida Barelli was positive practicality. Listening to a long generic speech bored her and she did not hide this. She immediately translated a speech based on facts into a clear diagram and in few formulas that, intuitively, she promptly used for herself and for others. Several times, we discussed projects and programs; I saw that she always picked immediately the core of the matter, and coordinated the means to attain the objective. She even discarded wonderful proposals (many turned to her with projects and programs that she showed me for advice!) when she sensed that the base was not concrete.

Another natural gift Armida Barelli had was her constant serenity and her trust in others. I saw her lead both unintelligent or stubborn and fantastic collaborators. She could have become impatient and angered and could have rebuked them. Instead, I saw her always serene, tolerant, forgiving, merciful and helpful. She improved work done by others without making them feel humiliated or ashamed. She did not show her contribution and spontaneously gave the credit for what had been obtained to those who had done little or badly.

These are the fundamental natural features of Armida Barelli, the expression of a truly remarkable personality, characterized by an enlightened and steadfast will. Accepting the opinion and influence of others was not easy for her, unless it were the case of poor, sick and suffering

people, or even souls fallen into sin and in need of help and light. In a word, Armida Barelli had the interior force of a strong personality, consistent with herself and with her own convictions and beliefs which she maintained faithfully, thanks to her constant fidelity to the guiding principles of her life. She maintained this fidelity even in the most arduous difficulties and most vivid conflicts. In Armida Barelli, that sentimentalism frequently observed in young people did not exist; but she was sensitive to the purest and noblest affections. Ordinarily, she did not reveal her pains to anyone; only in exceptional circumstances, she was moved to tears. That happened when the ideals of honesty, Christian faith, goodness and love for others, which were the foundation of her life, were at stake or contradicted.

Natural gifts come from God, but that is not enough to make a Christian a saint. When I met Armida Barelli I admired her natural talents and for these I thought she was much better and much more mature than other women of her age. It was impossible for me not to admire her consistent Christian conduct. Her religious practice was constant, without frills, with some note of naivety and was the fruit of a strong and positive education. I noticed how, with diligent and persistent work, she improved progressively and gradually achieved uncommon interior perfection. Thanks to her strong will, a continuous spiritual battle and exceptional gifts of grace, of which I will talk about later.

From what Armida Barelli told me about her childhood, adolescence and youth, I confirmed my opinion about the solidity of the educational formation given by the Sisters of the Holy Cross in Menzingen. I had the opportunity to see what great results the good sisters obtained with many young girls of families that I had advised to send to that Boarding School (before WWI). Armida Barelli, according to the Sisters, was one of their best students. Years later, when she received "Vergissmeinnicht" (meaning "Don't forget me"), the newsletter for former students, she showed it to me with evident satisfaction, pleased to praise her old teachers, sweet and firm at the same time.

If I compare the young lady that I met in 1910 to the mature woman in her last days, I must conclude that Armida Barelli journeyed a long way that led her to seek and gain the virtues that make a soul most acceptable to God. She lost her voice because of the disease. She was curled up in the armchair, unable to move on her own, yet with very bright intelligence. She was immersed in adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, detached from everything that surrounded her, including her loved ones. She was absorbed in prayer, in serene acceptance of the terrible consequences of the disease and with the vision of death. She considered that as the step to see face to face Jesus, to whom she had consecrated her entire life.

The personality of Armida Barelli had such natural characteristics that made her unique among other women. The characteristics of her natural personality were: her vibrant spirit, an intuitive and prompt mind capable to organize her own activities and those of others, a welcoming attitude for everyone especially the humblest. In relating with others, she had a constant smile on her lips even when she had inner pain. She was reserved in showing affection. She enjoyed peacefully even the smallest joys that God gave her. She was always ready to meet the needs of others. Her endurance to work was exceptional and she had a firm will in implementing plans studied and decided. These were the characteristics of her natural personality. In a word: a happy nature for the numerous gifts from God. Did these gifts facilitate the supernatural virtues? Perhaps. I would not dare to say so totally. Armida grew in a family of

absolute honesty where the children were given the freedom to realize their ideals and she was guided by wise, pious and zealous priests. She exploited her natural gifts to conquer supernatural virtues, which was the commitment of her life. This is evident in her notes of Retreats and days of Recollection and the decisions taken in them, properly stored with religious care by the Marquise Teresa Pallavicino, who was her faithful friend. What were these supernatural virtues? How did she progress in interior life?

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Her spirit of faith stands out particularly among the supernatural virtues that characterized the personality of Armida Barelli.

Armida Barelli was a woman of great and enlightened faith. When she was a young girl, she had a good solid religious instruction from the Sisters of the Holy Cross; later she attended religion courses that, in Milan, had been set up to teach “theology” to lay people and she received a diploma of which she was prouder than any of the other diplomas obtained for her studies.

For spiritual directors she had distinguished priests as Fr. Mattiussi s.j., Mons. Gorla, Penitentiary of the Cathedral, Fr. Archangelo Mazzotti, ofm who became Archbishop of Sassari. They asked her to study to complete her religious education. Throughout her life, she read, or better, she studied German and Italian books about religion. Thus, her faith had a solid foundation. I wish to repeat what I wrote when Armida Barelli died: the fundamental characteristic of her strong personality, considered from the supernatural point of view, was her great faith. If one wants to understand her manifold activity, her firmness in pursuing the ideals that she had chosen and the spirit of sacrifice with which she gave herself very generously to the works she loved, one needs to acknowledge that faith was her fundamental virtue.

It was conscious and enlightened faith. In some circumstances, it was heroic faith because she was able to endure pains, bitterness, disappointment, and misunderstanding, even from religious people or organizations. She was not critical; she only aimed at the supernatural end for which she worked and accepted everything in silence. I would say that her faith was also naive and childish (if these expressions were not misunderstood by some). I mean, her faith in God, in Jesus Christ, in the Church was so strong, that she never argued whatever was presented as God's will or as the desire of the ecclesiastical authority or even just as the word of a priest. She gave herself with great spontaneity to do what she thought was the will of God, and she did it with firmness that could be described as manly, as commonly said because people do not acknowledge that, many times, women are stronger than men in keeping to an ideal.

Proofs of her faith? Every day and every hour. I had the privilege to have her as a collaborator in various works since 1910. I can say that while we were studying a project, she always readily and immediately sought the will of God. Her faith was evident in her great love for the Pope, for bishops, for all priests. Her faith was shown, above all, through her love and devotion to the Heart of Jesus and Her Divine Mother. She said (and not only with words) that she “trusted the Sacred Heart”. She said this in the difficult moments of her life, which were neither few nor short. She also repeated “*Mater mea, fiducia mea*” with sweetness of expression

that was also evident in the accent of the word. Putting herself in God's hands was the reason of her optimism and her serenity.

In everything, people, things and events, she sought the glory of God. It must be said that this spirit of faith matured and developed through a life of Grace.

I wish to add, saying again, what I already wrote: the reason for the predilection that three Popes had for her was the spirit of faith revealed in her words, pursuits, projects, and questions. The same simplicity and naivety (in the highest sense of the term) with which she spoke to the Vicar of Christ awakened his preference. Pius XI told me that he listened to her with paternal goodness when she presented projects or programs.

Yes, her faith was heated by warm feelings, but had solid supernatural foundations. It was for this that she promoted the movement to intensify supernatural life which had its greatest implementation in the Feminine Youth of the Catholic Action. The spirit of faith led her to love the Vicar of Christ with a particular love. Since she was twenty years old, she had been faithful to daily communion. This love for the Eucharist was demonstrated by the fact that she promoted daily adoration of the Blessed Sacrament in the Catholic University. If the Catholic University is, in the words of Pius XI, a living miracle, it is because from morning until night, since 1921, there has been the adoration of the Blessed Sacrament in its chapel. How can we measure the good that this brought about to professors and students? How many people have prayed in the chapel? The merit goes to Armida Barelli.

Everyone knows what she did to propagate the devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. With what joy she listened to the news that I brought from the "front" during World War I, when, with me, she promoted the consecration of the soldiers to the Sacred Heart of Jesus! With whoever she had a conversation, after some time, she would move to talk of the Sacred Heart and urged him/her to honor Him.

I already told the story, but here I must recall what happened when our University was dedicated to the Sacred Heart. It was in the autumn of 1919 and the Organizing Committee of the University met for the first time in what was the second office of the "Società Editrice Vita e Pensiero": a bright room in Corso Venezia, Milan. First of all, in that meeting (I can't say the date because all documents were destroyed by the bombings), the name of the University that was about to start, came into question. For over some time, Barelli and I were already thinking of "Sacred Heart". It is easy to imagine that the name brought an outcry in that meeting. There were those (I do on purpose anonymous quotes) who said that this name could be good for a nursery school, but not for a University. There were those who said that the title 'Catholic' was so obvious that it was not necessary to specify. In order to reconcile the various ideas, there were those who proposed the name "University Ambrosiana" in honor of the great Saint Ambrose. Seeing that approach so distant from my point of view, I felt intimidated and I said to myself: what a bad start! If those that I called to collaborate do not agree about the name, what will happen when it comes to determining the character and structure of the new University? I was overcome by fear. I looked at Armida, as if to say: "Can you see where we are?". Her face was very calm and serious, as it happened every time when important decisions were at stake. She spoke last, with firmness and passion, defending our proposal. There was no doubt: the new University had to be called "Sacred Heart" and had to be entitled and consecrated to the Sacred

Heart. Everyone listened; but it was evident, from the facial expressions that those that had spoken first were not persuaded. "Sentimental reasons", one said, and he was a very respectable person; "it is not appropriate" said another who considered the difficulties among which the University was starting, and he was right; "it is not prudent", underlined a third one always in favor of mediations and added: "we must not offend".

It was my turn to speak. I confess that, before highly valuable men with official functions, I felt disarmed. I tried to tackle their reasons one by one; but some smiles on the edge of their lips made me understand that my defense was not accepted. I found myself without words, when one said, "but you who know the world of science and culture better than we do, should not support a similar proposal that would ruin an idea that is nice and great from the beginning." In fact, I felt in my heart, that those present, except two, were not convinced of the possibility to start a Catholic University. One of the two was in no condition to be able to understand what we meant to do and assess how arduous the implementation of the project was. The other, Mons. Olgiati, was too tied to me, by a communion of thoughts and affection, to ever doubt and argue. There was a moment of silence; the uneasiness was evident and obvious; I was afraid that we would leave without concluding anything.

Armida Barelli broke the silence and said: "The Sacred Heart wants it this way; He wants it entitled to Him; we have promised so; we have to do it; If we do so we will have his help; If we don't, we shall be abandoned to our poor forces and we will fail."

No one dared to replicate; even those who doubted that it was a feasible project, objected more on the form than the substance. The battle was won exclusively for the courage and faith of Armida Barelli.

Another episode testifies the same spirit of faith.

It was in 1924; we were trying to obtain the legal recognition from the State for the University as a free University. Lengthy were the negotiations with members of the High Council of Education, many of whom were contrary; there were serious difficulties with the officers of the Ministry; the only one favorable was Giovanni Gentile, who, however, was no longer the Minister of Education, as he was put aside by Mussolini, and was replaced by Senator Casati. Gentile was President of the High Council of Education though. One day, Gentile sent me a telegram calling me to Rome; the most serious opponents had given up; some members of the Board had agreed to give a favorable opinion; you have to face the vote. Gentile told me that the remaining objections were focused on the first article of the Statute that was and still is today: "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 and liberal professions with adequate high education and moral education inspired by the principles of Catholicism".

The rest of the Statute seemed good and worthy of approval. Gentile told me that he would accept the first article of the Statutes because it was good that a Catholic University would declare its status, not only in the name, but also in the Statutes. But some were hardheaded. It must be remembered that the Lateran Treaty² was not yet sealed then. We were in the regime of

² The Lateran treaty (1929) is an agreement between the Vatican and Italy regulating their reciprocal relations.

“Guarentigie”³; many counselors were old liberals and for their mindset, they were enemies of Catholicism, or rather, unable to understand its high ideals. After a conversation in which the pros and cons were weighed, Gentile said to me: “rather than have the High Council reject the Statutes and the erection of the University, it is better for us to give up on the first article. Let’s make it softer”. It is to note that Gentile, as Minister in 1923, had called me to Rome one day to collaborate in drafting the articles of the November 2, 1923 Law that reformed the state universities and established free universities. I revised the articles referring to the latter and I proposed pertinent modifications, working tirelessly a few days in the rooms of the Office of the Minister.

Having heard the proposal of Gentile, I flew back to Milan and gathered quickly the Organizing Committee. They were unanimous in accepting the proposal of Gentile in order to go ahead with the project. Only Barelli was contrary. I had an idea: Pius XI had been on the throne of Peter for two years; he had sustained us in every step. “Let’s go to him”, I said; “He will tell us the will of God”. Barelli, Necchi and I went to Rome and were immediately received by the Pope. It was a memorable audience. Unfortunately, the minutes that I had written was destroyed by the bombings. At the end of a long discussion, I saw on that noble face, the trace of calmness, sorrow, worries, hopes, black clouds. Then he said: “it is such a good thing to see our beloved University registered as a free university and break an old tradition that it is prudent to accept the advice of Gentile, especially as he has committed himself, as President, to lead the Council to approve the Statutes”.

He had just finished speaking, when Armida Barelli burst into sobs without saying a word; tears were streaming down her face. We were all moved and nobody dared to speak. After calming down the initial emotion, she alone, in tears and in a broken voice, said: “Holy Father, we will do what you decide; but please consider again: will this article save the Catholic character of the University in the future? Please! Tell us what we should do; with the courage given to us by your blessing, we shall face the battle and we will win.”

We all had tears in our eyes, including Pius XI. Another longer silence. Then: “It is true; *Signorina* Barelli is right; It is the voice of trust in the Sacred Heart that speaks in her. I accept her opinion; we must also think of the future; thus, let us face the battle. You, Fr. Gemelli, go and speak to Gentile and I will celebrate a Holy Mass tomorrow that God's will be done.”

Gentile too was moved, listening to my story of the Papal audience and said, “let us try the battle.” While the High Council of Public Education was meeting, I was praying in the nearby church of Santa Maria sopra Minerva. A trusted clerk, who was to inform me, came running to the church, and shook me a little brusquely while I was immersed in prayer, and said: “All approved; and well; come, Father, President Gentile wants to see you immediately to arrange what has to be done”.

The two events show what the Catholic University owes to the courageous and firm faith of Armida Barelli and to her trust in the Sacred Heart. Armida Barelli practiced uncommon charity; charity is love of God; charity is love of neighbor.

³ The Guarentigie Law (1871) is an Italian law that regulated the relations between Italy and the Vatican. It was abolished in 1929 when the Lateran treaty was concluded

Much could be said to testify her love for God, but I want to recall just one fact. In the many conversations I had with her, for the various projects that we promoted or supported together, every talk began or ended with a reference to God, and this is because in all she did, she was moved by her love of God and her desire to make Him loved.

Love of others is, first of all, practiced in working for the spiritual good of souls. Knowing that a soul lived in sin, she immediately did something, asked for help from everyone, for that soul to break the bond of sin and turn back in peace with God. Since she asked for my advice, I can say that, in many cases, she dedicated time without measure, leaving behind every other commitment, even the serious ones, making long trips, doing every good and holy thing just to lead a soul out of the condition of sin. She asked for the help of many priests to save souls.

What she did during the election period in 1948 was love for her country. She visited every city; she spoke to the women and girls of the Catholic Action everywhere, to push them to do their duty in the coming election. She travelled many nights! She gave many public speeches and private talks! Was it electoral propaganda? Someone from the outside could affirm this. Actually, what moved her was sincere love for her country, genuine love for people, zeal for the good of our country. Perhaps I could say that among the causes that determined the serious illness that led her to death we must not forget the huge inhuman hardships of this time. In vain, I begged her to have compassion for herself.

Love of others is also revealed by another fact. Before Christmas and Easter, she spent many nights, preparing gifts, images of Saints, tokens, special thoughts for an infinite number of people. And it was not sentimentalism. When I reproached her and advised her to always go to bed no later than midnight, she would say: a letter, an image, a thought brings a smile to people and I also suggest good religious thoughts. I know that my greeting and thoughts do them good. Shouldn't I send them?

And her charity for the poor? When she closed her eyes to mortal life, several people, whom she had helped secretly, came to greet her. In her yearly budget, I always found a significant sum reserved for the poor. The poor she helped were not only those without bread to eat. In certain cases, she did not hesitate to deprive herself of jewelries or a part of her assets to help those in need and unable to get out of a difficult situation by themselves. She was also generous with priests and religious. Her generosity to priests was admirable, since she was moved by their poverty. She would ask their sisters and mothers what they needed, and she did so without letting the "other hand know what the other hand did". She used to say: "it takes so little to make other people happy; a kind gesture, a nice word, a helping hand at the right moment; an act of charity makes them love our Lord, who is the reason for that gesture of love"

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Great was Armida Barelli's virtue of hope! At the bedside of young people affected by serious diseases, I myself heard her saying, over and over again, words of supernatural hope that gave the certainty of the Kingdom of heaven to those whose life was ending.

She herself had supernatural hope of the Kingdom of heaven. With what intensity she spoke of Paradise, life in the future, the light of glory! Never, even in the painful circumstances of her life, did I perceive doubts in God's help, the help of our Lady and the Saints.

I think I can conclude what I said briefly on Armida Barelli's faith, charity and hope saying that she helped many priests in their interior life. Not that she dared to preach or admonish them; no, I do not think she would do that. Yet she had the secret to make them practice these three virtues in a thousand ways. She used the holy wisdom of those who really love God; and she never showed off to anyone what she had done.

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Now I must bear witness to the Franciscan character of Armida Barelli's life.

In my opinion, based on experience, one is born a Franciscan. If I am asked to define Franciscanism, I would reply "I don't know!". You have to live it to know what it is. And to live it, it is necessary to observe the Holy Gospel "sine glossa, sine glossa", as St. Francis taught. I would say that Armida Barelli was faithful to a formula of Franciscan life that can be summarized as follows: no unnecessary desire; constant action according to one's vocation, leave no opportunity to reveries and sentimentality; journey in the main road, in the light; be pleased with little and enjoy everything; live day to day in liberating poverty; expect pain as a friend, love it jealously as a sign of predestination; trust God and always desire His will.

Love and poverty are the essential elements to give a Franciscan physiognomy to life. Concreteness and action are needed. It is important to put together the temporal and the eternal dimension embracing the universe in one unique line, simple and infinite as a circle, with God at its center. This is how young Dante conceived Franciscan love. This love leads souls to perfect joy, tends to spread the joy of living. For seven centuries, it has been carrying the historical task of supernaturally enhancing life in all its manifestations, from the smallest daily ones. It celebrates pain as a gift of God beyond pleasure, beyond suffering, beyond the "dionysian" forms in which people vainly seek happiness. It instils in life the supreme good of Faith and puts every good of life to the service of Faith.

So was the life of Armida Barelli. Such were her thoughts, her will, and her devotion. She was undoubtedly a genuinely and deeply Franciscan soul. And, I would add, that this was not just for herself, but also for others, whom she urged to follow St. Francis of Assisi to imitate Jesus Christ most faithfully.

Hers was an enlightened Franciscanism. She read and studied not only the texts on the life of St. Francis and the first Franciscans, but she also knew Franciscan theology and asceticism. Knowledge gained by studying valuable works, especially of St. Bonaventure. Among her favorite readings were the admonitions of St. Francis, the aphorisms of Bro. Giles, the preaching of St. Bernardine, the letters and proposals of St. Leonard of Porto Maurizio.

Her Franciscan mercy was active, aiming at liberating her soul from every imperfection and was without any scruples. The prayer and meditation of the Passion of Christ were her favorite.

She loved and practiced poverty sincerely. She was generous with others but sparing beyond words with herself. Above all, it was evident that the main Franciscan character of Armida Barelli was action. It is well known that St. Francis saw action in an aspect that was new for his time: he reminded men, who were consuming themselves in solitary ascetics, the religious value of active life, obeying the Gospel, imitating Jesus Christ who had an untiring heart and hand in His will to serve God. It is also well known that action, according to the teaching of the Franciscan scholars, starts from a deliberate and conscientious “I want”, and thus it is above all interior. When the Medieval Franciscan teachers talk of “doing”, they do not mean “doing” and “working” in which human energy is exerted and is pleased. Instead they mean the effort of the spirit to win over inferior movements and be united to God and therefore prayer itself is a fierce combat, while idleness is any solicitude or effort not aiming at eternity. Respond immediately to God’s divine inspiration, without missing a minute. Consider conversion as self-renewal hour after hour, and falling back as the opposite of progress. It is a sin to leave out any good work and the greatest gift is winning over pride and the senses; this is the plan of action of St. Francis. Since it is also the plan of action of every Christian, there is nothing original in it, but it is original for the spirit and the force with which the Saint does it. Originality starts there, where he directs this movement of his conscience to social life. Those that have known Armida Barelli saw that she lived generously this itinerary, her will was God’s will; apostolate understood as vocation, work loved and done joyfully.

Work did not interfere in Armida Barelli’s interior life. Everyone knows that active life is difficult because it has the danger of loving creatures more than God; it is full of thorns, because it accepts the struggle of the heart which - despite knowing that only the infinite can fill it up, and wanting to be faithful to God - feels the charm of fleeting things. To love and not to love; desire and not to desire, vibrate for the beauty of changing life without wanting to enjoy it; be crushed by the tide and go against the current, feel the fever of great conquests and remain quiet in a dark place of combat, is for those that have courage. The heroism of acting in conformity with the will of God was the characteristic and the action of Armida Barelli; therefore, hers was always and exclusively religious action.

I remember that Armida Barelli always inspired her conduct to the concept for which St. Francis bridged the gap between action and prayer, between active life and contemplative life. In her, action was converted into prayer and prayer into action; but this was not enough for her, so she devoted many hours of the day to prayer. She was faithful to the Franciscan concept of acting supernaturally at the core of reality be it tempting or disgusting. As the lay brother goes from house to house to bring the blessing of God for a loaf of bread, as the famous preacher collects pains, aspirations of peoples and social problems as living materials for his words of admonition, so Armida Barelli, as a faithful Tertiary, brought peace among people, urging them to do good for God's sake. She knew that the only “shield” of a Tertiary is her habit and her “weapon” is the cord; therefore, she presented herself to everyone with humble attitudes, with an optimistic view of the world, with simple but firm words. She spoke to everyone of God and his Grace; she made known to everyone openly that she was linked to S. Francis with the Tertiary's cord, but above all, she did so by living his doctrine and translating it into works. In her apostolate, Armida Barelli recalled the saying of Blessed Egidio: "If you want to work well, cut off your hands and work with your heart"; therefore, in her apostolate she was guided by the persuasion that the action to make God known and loved has no value without love that

eliminates that somewhat pretentious and pedantic attitude that sometimes moves people away instead of attracting them.

She often repeated a German saying she learned at Menzingen: that, to operate among people, a drop of honey is more valuable than a barrel of vinegar. She believed and taught her sisters that they should not expect mystical sweetness and that for those who work in the world using the means of the world, fidelity to God and the Church has more value than the sweetness of contemplation or the raptures of ecstasy.

If prayer and sacrifice are the springboard of Apostolic action for every Christian faithful to our Lord, Armida Barelli always remembered in her apostolic plans that the characteristics of apostolate were concreteness made of fondness, poverty, loyal, fast, tireless activity. She reminded the young recruits of the Women's Youth of Catholic Action that, in doing good, the heart had to be used more than the hands and they should not expect recognition, privileges, honor, or rest.

Armida Barelli was neither a mystic nor a contemplative; she had no ecstasy. She admired and loved the Saints who had these gifts, but she considered herself undeserving of all this. She felt little in the vast world; she was happy considering herself unequipped with special gifts. And she would thank anyone that reminded her with a rebuke that she was a small frail woman.

Armida Barelli suffered great pains caused especially by those who did not know her and interpreted her way of acting erroneously. Yet she never complained to anyone. I know this through several ways. And I know the pain she suffered for those she loved much and she led to Christian life through her sufferings. As a good and sincere Franciscan, instead of turning to her pain, which is supreme selfishness, she silently offered everything to God, in prayer.

As every Franciscan, Armida Barelli loved nature. At her home in Pegli, where she went for short periods of vacation for health reasons, she enjoyed the beauty of the sea that extended before her window, with a vision undisturbed by buildings. She would indulge for a while, in contemplation and she terminated the contemplation with prayer. Many times she recited the Canticle of St. Francis which she had memorized. She loved the mountains and the woods surrounding her villa in Marzio where she went to rest, as she said; but actually she worked even harder in silence. A flower, a tree, the crown of the mountains among which Mt. Generoso stands out, gave her great joy. And she would immediately say: this immensity of views speaks to me of God's goodness. Why do many people not appreciate nature as a gift?

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After a life spent in action, illness and the decline of strength came; sickness nailed her to bed or an armchair. But Armida Barelli recalled that physical pain did not prevent work and she worked to her last days, using her strength that was dying out. Remembering that pain is a gift from God, a sign of honor, she carried it with joy, as the only good that a person can boast about. And she told the caregiver. The more she felt nailed to her armchair or bed and could not move freely and naturally, the more she enjoyed, the more she thanked God; she recognized that this is the natural cross of life so she repeated the phrase: the good that I expect is so much that every pain delights me.

Thus she could close her eyes to life serenely, having before her the person of Jesus, whose love was the very reason of her life and whom, in the transition to true life, she certainly invoked with her heart since she was unable to do it with words. When she asked me in the last hours if she still had much to live, I told her that she still had to suffer especially as she was short of breath. For months she had not been able to speak and therefore she smiled, to thank me, with a very sweet smile. She looked at an image, carved in wood, of Our Lady with her Divine Son on her knees and pointed at me with a weary and limited gesture the image which shows the greatest pain on earth, that of the Virgin.

Then, after a few moments, she smiled again and pointed at the image of S. Francis. Of course she meant (her gesture made me understand this) that St. Francis helps us to find, understand, and love the Divine will through Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ crucified. Death loses its hideous face in creatures so prepared by the Divine Creator; Armida Barelli smiled, when she greeted me with a wave of her hand for the last time, a few hours before she died. Perhaps the Lord already made her realize that the joy of seeing Him face to face was near. And this was the reward of a lifetime spent exclusively for Him.

This is my testimonial of the life of Armida Barelli.

Fr. AGOSTINO GEMELLI, Franciscan

Feast of St. Ludovico King, Protector of the Franciscan Tertiaries
August 25, 1954.