Historical highlights

Secular Institutes are one of the youngest institutions in the history of the Church, a gift of the Spirit, who never ceases to bring forth new charisms in order to respond to humankind's thirst for salvation.

In times past the only form of consecration acknowledged by the Church was "religious" consecration lived in a community setting. It therefore seemed impossible to couple the words "consecrated and secular" precisely because the religious life was understood as an experience of separation from the world.

Towards the end of the XIX and the beginning of the XX century the experience being lived by more than a few persons projected not only the need but also the possibility for these two words to be used together. Some of these pioneers, including Armida Barelli and Fr. Agostino Gemelli, were inspired by the Spirit with the intuition that possible were new forms of life where "full consecration" and full secularity" could together generate new life.

Many indeed were the difficulties at the outset because what was not contemplated in Canon Law just didn't exist for the Church.

Faith, consistency, suffering and obedience constituted the fertile soil in which the seed sown by the Spirit was able to bud and flower.

It proved necessary to wait until 1947 to obtain the long desired recognition of Secular Institutes by the Church, and this through the Apostolic Constitution "Provida Mater Ecclesia" of Pious XII. The Motu Proprio "Primo Feliciter" issued the following year further clarified the significance of secularity specific to such institutes.

The prayers, commitment, perseverance, arduous efforts and joy that accompanied the life experience of our Founders and our early sisters are narrated and testified to in the book by Armida Barelli, "La nostra storia" (Our History), a most precious instrument for a better understanding of our charism's originality and roots.

Vatican Council II went even deeper into the role of the laity in the Church and the world (Lumen Gentium, 31; Apostolicam Actuositatem, 7; Gaudium et Spes, 43), and Paul VI, the first 'post-conciliar' pope, so eloquently underscored the specificity of secular institutes within the stimulating vocation and mission of laypersons.

"Now what was the original inspiration of Secular Institutes? The soul giving birth, animation and development? It was a longing, a search, deep and preoccupying, for a synthesis, a way of life combining the two characteristic
features of your way of life: full consecration according to the evangelical counsels and freedom to take on the responsibility of a presence and transforming action in the world, from the inside, to shape it, to make it a better world, to sanctify it.” (Paul VI, Address delivered on the XXV Anniversary of Provida Mater, 2.02.72).

And in another occasion:

“You stand at the confluence of two powerful streams of Christian life and your own life is enriched by both. You are lay people, consecrated as lay people by baptism and confirmation, but you have chosen to underline your consecration to God with the profession of the evangelical counsels, accepted as binding, and the bond is firm and enduring and recognized by the Church. You are still lay people, committed to the secular values of the lay state of life, but with you it is a matter of “consecrated secularity” (20.09.72).

And again:

“Neither of these two aspects of your spiritual image can be overestimated without damaging the other. They are essential to each other”.

To the Presidents General of Secular Institutes he said:

“To be in the world, that is, to be committed to secular values, is your way of being Church, of making the Church present, of working out your own salvation and being heralds of redemption.

The condition in which you live, […] becomes your theological self and your way of bringing salvation into the realm of reality for all the world to see. In this way you are an advance guard of the Church in the world”. (20.09.72).

The stages of the journey traveled by our Institute towards an ever more conscientious secularity are set forth and outlined in “La nostra storia continua” (Our History Continues) written by Alda Miceli, our third President General.

On numerous occasions John Paul II also stressed the role and importance of secular institutes, exhorting them and their members to the task of evangelical witness in the face of the challenges of the new millennium.

"The [second] condition refers to the practical wisdom gained by experience, and the know-how, your competence in this your own field of work. Here too you need to be up to the mark if you are to carry out, from your vantage point of actual presence in the world, the apostolate of witness and commitment to every person, as required by your consecration and your Catholic life. Without this competence you will just not be able to put into effect the advice given by the Council to secular institutes: 'They should make a total dedication of themselves to God in perfect charity their chief aim, and the Institutes themselves should preserve their own
proper, i.e. secular character, so that they may be able to carry our effectively everywhere in and, as it were, from the world the apostolate for which they were founded’ (Perfectae Caritatis)” (John Paul II, 28 August 1980)

And again:

“You must be above all disciples of Christ. As members of Secular Institutes you want truly to be His disciples by means of a commitment which goes to the very roots, the following of the evangelical counsels. You do this in a way that does not change your condition - you are and remain lay people, and this is very important - but actually confirms and strengthens it. Your secular condition is now consecrated. It requires more of you. Your commitment in the world and for the world, which goes with your secular condition, is steady and permanent. (John Paul II. 28 August 1980).

The new Code of Canon Law (1983) gave legal status to Secular Institutes alongside the other forms of consecrated life. The Catechism of the Catholic Church also refers to them in order to bear witness to that fact that even though young in age compared to other institutions in the Church, they have already penetrated into the knowledge and awareness of the people of God.

On 3 September 2007 Benedict XVI had this to say when commemorating the 60th anniversary of the promulgation of “Provida Mater Ecclesia”:

“Your fervor is born from having discovered the beauty of Christ and of his unique way of loving, healing and meeting the needs of life and of enlivening and comforting it. And your lives aim to sing the praise of this beauty so that your being in the world may be a sign of your being in Christ”.

And again:

“The place of your apostolate is therefore the whole of human life, not only within the Christian community - where the relationship materializes in listening to the Word and in the sacramental life from which you draw in order to sustain your baptismal identity - and I say the place of your apostolate is the human world in its entirety, both within the Christian community and in the civil community, where relationships are formed in the search for the common good, in dialogue with all, called to witness to that Christian anthropology which constitutes a proposal of sense in a society bewildered and confused by its multicultural and multireligious profile”.

The Founders: Armida Barelli - Agostino Gemelli

Armida Barelli

She was born to a middle class family in Milan on 1 December 1882. Not educated to religious values, she did her studies in both Italy and Switzerland, was fluent in German and French and also knew English.
She collaborated with Fr. Gemelli on the review "Vita e Pensiero" (1910-1914), the consecration of soldiers to the Sacred Heart during World War I (1917), the foundation of the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart 1918-1921) and the Work of the Kingship of Our Lord Jesus Christ (1927-1929), whose aim was to spread liturgical prayer and Christocentric spirituality among the faithful.

Called by Benedict XV in 1918, she founded the Young Women’s Branch of the Catholic Action Movement in Italy and remained its president until 1948, expanding her horizons with a myriad of international relations.

During a period of great social transformation Armida was ever heedful of the voice of the Spirit, and to an ever greater extent did she feel the need for a new style of life that would characterize the presence of women in the world. For this reason, in 1919, together with Fr. Gemelli, she gave life to the Franciscan Spiritual Family, later named the Secular Institute of the Missionaries of the Kingship of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

She passed away at Marzio (Varese) on 15 August 1952 after two years of suffering lived with intense faith and offered for the good of the world and our spiritual family.

Armida Barelli, "la Sorella Maggiore" (Elder Sister) as she wanted to be called, was a woman of smiling sacrifice, an authentic Franciscan, lay apostle and woman of hope. The dominant characteristics of her life and person were: unlimited faith in the Lord, unlimited hope in the coming to be of the Kingdom, and a profound devotion to the Sacred Heart.

In the documents of the investigation phase of her process of beatification and canonization we read:

"Armida Barelli loved creatures with all the gifts God had given to her, with her vivid intelligence, her resolute will and her great heart. She loved them personally, not with the rigid love of the will that looks on one’s neighbors as a faceless crowd, but each person individually with his or her defects, difficulties and sorrows”.

She addressed her spiritual testament to the Missionaries of all places and all times, and hence to each one of us as well:

"I will ask the King of Love to enflame you one by one with the fire of His Charity so you may be His faithful, loving and fecund Missionaries [...]. I will ask His Mother and ours to purify you, adorn you, and form in each one of you her divine Child [...]. Of our Father St. Francis and his sweet sister Saint Clare I will ask the perpetuity of the authentic Franciscan spirit for our entire spiritual family, the Institute of the Missionaries of the Kingship of Christ
born in the stronghold of Franciscanism [...] My sisters, live in the world without surrendering anything to the world, work ceaselessly. Pray ceaselessly, but above all love, love, love.”

**Agostino Gemelli**

Edoardo Gemelli was born to a non believing family in Milan on 18 January 1878. He did his studies in Pavia, was a leader of the socialists in that city and took part in the anti-government protests in Milan in 1898.

A positivist physician, he sustained atheism, and then, quite unexpectedly, he was invested by the Spirit, converted, and made a radical choice of life by entering the novitiate of the Friars Minor in 1903, taking the name Agostino.

This Franciscan physician, who in his cell kept a microscope and the Crucifix, founded the “Review of Neo-scholastic Philosophy” and “Vita e Pensiero”, He was a pioneer in the realm of experimental psychology and the constructor of the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart, one of the most qualified centers of research and higher education for young people.

In addition to being a scientist and a man of letters, he was above all a priest and a master of spirituality.

In collaboration with Armida Barelli he founded the Work of the Regality for the divulgation of liturgical formation, the publication of tests of asceticism and the organization of retreats.

His is the merit of having intuited, welcomed and sustained in Armida Barelli the desire for a new form of consecrated life – a consecrated laywoman in the world – when it had yet to be understood and accepted by the Church. Thus born was the Institute of the Missionaries of the Regality of our Lord Jesus Christ, later followed by the Secular Institutes of Laymen Missionaries and Priest Missionaries.

He passed away in Milan on 15 July 1959 at the end of an intense life lived in an absolute authentic way in the footsteps of St. Francis.

To the Missionaries of the three Institutes he left a testament which is tantamount to a mandate:

“To them do I recommend these three things:
- that they love “secularity”: being laypersons in the world will enable them to extend their apostolate into every social state in order to make Jesus Christ known and loved;
- that they love “poverty”, the means for imitating Jesus Christ;
- that they attend with zeal to their perfection: this is the sole means for being effective and fecund apostles”.

And again:

“May they be faithful to the Franciscan vocation: St. Francis was the most faithful image of Jesus Christ; may they make St. Francis loved, and seek in all ways to spread his spirituality: this will be the means for saving the world from the ruin now threatening it; and may they be faithful to the Church and the Pope, serving with fidelity and without seeking either recognition or awards.

**Our Community: The Secular Institute of the Missionaries of the Kingship of Christ**

Our Founders’ intuition was certainly that of having grasped “the newness” and wanting an Institute that would remain open to the newness of the Gospel in the world.

Being faithful to the charism, therefore, undoubtedly means to live the dynamism of the Spirit. With their writings and above all with their lives Armida Barelli and Father Gemelli indicated for us the way to keep the charism ever alive; the way of the Incarnation, which is the ability to be radically present in one’s “space” and “time” in order to collaborate in the construction of the Kingdom of God with a life style that is transparency of the Franciscan spirituality.

"The charism of the Institute, from its very origins, expresses the gift of consecrated secularity given by God to the Church for a mission in the world in the spirit of St. Francis" (Const. art. 2).

The community of the Institute offers formation assistance for faithfully living the charism because it is founded on the spiritual bond uniting us wherever we may be, on the awareness of a common belonging, on the enhancement of the times when we do gather together (days of recollection, retreats, moments of discussion, study and fraternity), and on the quality of the human relationship we create when being with one another.

All this is entrusted to our personal responsibility, to the personal choices we assess and verify within the community itself.

“Fraternity is lived concretely in the Missionaries’ encounters and relations. In each and every life situation the Missionary considers herself a living member of the Institute and seeks opportunities to ensure her own collaboration in a spirit of co-responsibility” (Const. art. 26).

And furthermore:
“In order to grow in the ability to live as a sister, the Missionary, in an ongoing process of discernment, undertakes to:

- accept and enhance diversities as richness, considering the originality of each person to be a gift;
- overcome all forms of individualism and exclusion;
- rejoice in the good accomplished by others, convinced that “neither the planter nor the waterer matters, only God makes things grow”;
- participate constructively in the Institute’s formation encounters”. (Const. art. 25).

In addition, each Missionary:

“In an ongoing process of discernment assesses together with the leaders, in the light of the Word and the Magisterium of the Church, her own life style, choices, fidelity to the charism and adherence to the Institute’s formation programs. (Const. art. 19).

Another characteristic feature of our Institute is defined in article 3 of the Constitutions:

“The Institute has neither common life nor works of its own. The Missionaries, by virtue of the same charism, are united with one another by the bond of their belonging to the Institute, which is the place of specific formation and fraternal communion” (Const. art.3).

We do not have common life; ours is a “secular” vocation community, a community of persons “scattered” in various and sundry surroundings with different occupations, different political and social situations, different cultures. And yet we are one family!

The dynamism of the charism is entrusted to each one of us: our fraternity remains ever open to the voice of history if each one of us undertakes to remain attentive to the needs and expectations of the men and women of her time and place: our community grows if each one of us grows; we are responsible for one another; each one of us is important for everyone.

“The community at large undertakes to accompany and attend to each sister, especially those in difficulty” (Const., art. 26).

Therefore, altogether are we the Institute in the concreteness of our being, with our talents and our humanity, with our limits and our yearning to grow. We are on the march; we are the Institute on the march.
The Secular Institute of the Missionaries of the Kingship today, in the world

Founded in Italy in the places and the surroundings with which our Founders were so very familiar, the Institute has expanded and developed in many different countries.

Today there are Missionaries in Europe, North America, South America, Asia, Australia and Africa.

There are countries where the Institute is in the process of coming into being: the Aspirants themselves are “pioneers” in the development of the charism of the origins and its inculturation in their homeland and local Church.

You, in the Secular Institute of the Missionaries of the Kingship, “here and now”

You and only You can “write” the page of the Institute’s today,

You, enlightened by the Spirit,

You, assisted by the person placed by your side by the Institute to accompany you in the journey of formation and discernment,

You, sustained by the prayer and the presence of the Missionaries all over the world, a presence you can grasp also in the group closest to you,

You. . .

with your life can continue “our history”!

If you understand that “this” Institute can be of help to you in your life journey,

If you are fascinated by a style you feel suited “for you”,

If you understand you can grow in this charism according to the dream you have grasped as true for you,

If you believe this Institute can continue to be “God’s instrument’ for the good of the world today and in the future,

If you wish to learn how to be receptive to diversity as gift, convinced that it enriches the entire community,

If you are well-disposed to the formation the Institute asks of you and which is indispensable in order to incarnate the charism in the diverse social and cultural surroundings,

If you look upon others with an eye attentive to recognize their gifts and are prepared to live co-responsibility, receptivity and conflict,

If the vocation community constitutes a vital space in your life. . .
Then You are called to read together with the other Missionaries of your country the reality of your homeland in order to understand what it means today to be consecrated Franciscan laywomen.

In embracing God’s designs for you, you yourself must invent and create your journey, but you are not alone: the Father knows and loves you from the beginning of time; the Son became incarnate in order to be Life for you; the Spirit is present to guide you; Francis, Clare, Armida Barelli, Father Gemelli and so many sisters are there to sustain you in your journey.

Suggested food for thought for in-depth study and assessment:

- Make an effort to read your concrete life and journey in order to realize what space is dedicated to discussion and assessment with the person accompanying you (periodical nature of encounters, substance of the assessments...)
- What riches and which difficulties do you encounter in relations with the sisters of the Institute? Perhaps you feel this relationship as an opportunity of formation and progress. . perhaps you sense it as a weight and source of difficulty. . make an effort to think about concrete experiences and read what you have lived.
- What place do the formation proposals coming from the Institute have in your journey of vocation discernment? Do you devote time to reading and delving into what is offered to you?
- Together with the person accompanying you and the other Aspirants or Newly Professed you could take a close look in particular at the following articles of the Constitutions: 1-6; 24-26; 28-31.

Appendix:

The Holy Spirit, who accompanies the charisms of the various secular institutes, helps laypersons to live the radical choice of the evangelical ‘sequela’ in the today of history. Human history is a theological place, not with an absolute value in itself, but with a view to the Kingdom. We can see this also in the documents indicated below:

SECULAR INSTITUTES

The historical precedents of these Institutes date back to the end of the XVI century, even if their legal recognition and inclusion among the states of consecrated life was only approved by the Church on 2 February 1947 with the promulgation of the Apostolic Constitution Provida Mater Ecclesia.

The Holy Spirit, who wondrously fashions the variety of charisms, has given rise in our time to new expressions of consecrated life, which appear as a providential
response to the new needs encountered by the Church today as she carries out her mission in the world. (Vita Consecrata, n°10).

The faithful consecrated to God in Secular Institutes practice the "sequela Christi" through the assumption of the three evangelical counsels rendered binding by a sacred bond, and dedicate their lives to Christ and to the Church, endeavoring to contribute to the sanctification of the world, especially from within (CDC 710).

THE MEMBERS

Their members are men, women and priests who, living the ordinary life of all people in the world, undertake, in response to a call from Christ, to incarnate the Gospel in poverty, chastity and obedience in the spirit of the Beatitudes.

"Lay members participate in the evangelizing mission of the Church in the world and from within the world. They do this by their witness of Christian life and fidelity to their consecration, and by the assistance they give in directing temporal affairs to God and in animating the world by the power of the Gospel" (CDC 713 §2).

The laity "are called by God to contribute to the sanctification of the world as from within like leaven by fulfilling their own particular duties" (LG 31).

THE CHARISM

Secularity

Consecration as a member of a secular institute does not change the members’ canonical status among the people of God in the world, and they continue to live and work in the midst of the people of God in the ordinary conditions of their own social surroundings according to the secular life style proper to them. (CDC 711; 713 § 2)

Consecration

By virtue of their dedication lived in fullness and joy, consecrated women are called in a very special way to be signs of God’s tender love toward the human race and to be special witnesses to the mystery of the Church, Virgin, Bride and Mother. (Vita Consecrata, n. 57)

"Consecration", on the other hand, indicates the personal, unseen structure supporting your innermost self and all you do. Here is the deep, hidden human potential for which the people live with have no explanation, often no idea. (Paolo VI 20.09.72)
Mission

"... as far as experience and competence are concerned, be competent in your own field of work if you are to carry out, from your vantage point of actual presence in the world, the apostolate of witness and commitment to every person as required by your consecration and your Catholic life. Without this competence you will just not be able to put into effect the advice given by the Council to secular institutes: 'They should make a total dedication of themselves to God in perfect charity their chief aim, and the Institutes themselves should preserve their own proper, i.e. secular character, so that they may be able to carry our effectively everywhere in and, as it were, from the world the apostolate for which they were founded' (Perfectae Caritatis)" (John Paul II, 28 August 1980

THE EVANGELICAL COUNSELS: Chastity, Poverty, Obedience

The members of Secular Institutes are called to live the radicalism of the Gospel in the following of Christ, virgin, poor and obedient, in order to be in the world leaven and witness of God's love for it.

"Your poverty tells the world that it is possible to live with this life's good things and that we can make use of what makes for a more civilized life and progress without becoming slaves to any of it;

your chastity tells the world of a selfless love, fathomless as God's own heart from which you draw it, and that it is possible to dedicate oneself to all without binding oneself to anyone in particular, with special attention especially for those most abandoned;

your obedience tells the world that a man can be happy without digging in his heals over the things which just suit him, and can be always completely open to God's will as seen in daily life, in the signs of the times and in the needs of salvation of today's world" (Paul VI 22.09.72)

COMMUNION AND FRATERNITY

In the pluralism of their forms secular institutes feel committed to bear witness to true communion in the Church and in the world.

"... Secular Institutes, in fact, are alive to the extent to which they take part in man's history, and bear witness, among people today, to God's fatherly love, revealed by Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit" (Paul VI 25.08.1976)

"... The Church does not ask of your Institutes that life in common which is proper to religious institutes, because of the demands of living in the world which are postulated by your vocation. However, she asks for a “fraternal communion rooted
and founded in charity”, which makes all the members “one special family” (cf. CDC 602); she requires that the members of one and the same secular institute “preserve communion among themselves, solicitously guarding unity of spirit and genuine fraternity” (cf. CDC 716§2). (John Paul II 28.08.1984)

IDENTITY

The Church seeks with all means “to study how to bring the Christian message to modern man. For it is only in the Christian message that modern man can find the answer to his questions and the energy for his commitment of human solidarity” (Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Nuntiandi, n. 3).

"The special consecration which brings the consecration of your baptism and confirmation to the full height of potentiality must impregnate your whole life and all your daily activities. It must create in you a complete availability to the will of the Father who has placed you in the world for the world". (John Paul II 28.06.80)

"The constitutions of each Institute are to establish the sacred bonds by which the evangelical counsels are to be undertaken in the institute. They are to define the obligations which these bonds entail, while always preserving in the manner of life the secular character proper to the institute” (CDC 712).

"... A vast field of work opens before you. Here your twofold purpose is to be achieved, your own sanctification, your soul, and 'consecration of the world'. This commitment calls for perceptiveness and tact. The world which is your field is the world of human beings: restless, real, dazzling. It has its virtues and its passions, its opportunities for good, its gravitation to evil, its magnificent modern achievements, the inadequacies underneath it all, its inevitable sufferings. You are walking on an inclined plane. It would be easy to go down; it is hard to go up, but it is a challenge. You are spiritual mountaineers with a stiff climb before you". (Paul VI 26.09.1970)

Additional reference documents:
- Documents of Vatican Council II
- Evangelii Nuntiandi
- Christifideles Laici
- Vita Consecrata
- Catechism of the Catholic Church
- La nostra storia by Armida Barelli
- La nostra storia continua by Alda Miceli
- Website: www.ism-regalita.it