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Girolamo Savonarola

1452—1498

By W. G. POLACK

On May 23 this year, 450 years will have passed since the martyrdom at Florence, Italy, of Girolamo Savonarola, last of the great medieval friars and last of the so-called fore-runners of the Reformation. Columbus had discovered America six years before. Martin Luther, 15 years old, was attending the school of the Brethren of the Common Life at Magdeburg when Savonarola died. Thirty years later Luther published Savonarola's exposition of Psalm 51 — an exposition written while he was awaiting execution — as an example of evangelical doctrine and Christian piety. To understand the background of the martyrdom of the Monk of Florence means to understand why a reformation of the Church was necessary. In the Church-directed death of this man we see the culmination, as it were, of all the evils that had gradually developed and taken root in medieval Christendom.

The fifteenth century had produced many startling phenomena in what was supposed to be Christian Europe. Wars, treachery, murders, lasciviousness, rapine, and crimes of every hue fill up the annals of the period.

The dawn of that century brought the spectacle of two heads of Western Christendom, two popes, one at Rome, one at Avignon. The Council of Pisa, 1409, decided that a council was superior to the pope, deposed both popes, and elected a new one. As the two refused to be deposed, there now were three popes! It took the Council of Constance to end the

schism and to set up one pope who was eventually recognized by the entire Church of the West. The same council, however, condemned John Hus and Jerome of Prague as heretics and had them burned at the stake.

Italy and Rome, the heart of the Church, were in a state of more or less constant warfare. There was no cessation, except to take breath and to mend the battered arms. Then, to add to the demoralization, came the news that the Turks, under Mahomet II, had taken Constantinople and, flushed with victory, were ascending the Danube and moving toward the Adriatic, threatening all Europe with subjugation. The rivalry between the Italian princes and cities was so great that they could not even unite against this common foe. Venice, almost unaided by the rest of Italy, struggled against the Moslem, but after fifteen years had to sue for peace and had to pay an annual tribute. It was not until the sudden death of Mahomet II and the subsequent withdrawal of his armies that this danger to Italy was removed.

The Roman Papacy, in general, had become so thoroughly secularized that the popes were usually involved in the wars, and their private lives were as vicious as those of many secular princes. When Pope Sixtus IV died in 1484, he was succeeded by Innocent VIII, whose life belied his official name. He was the unmarried father of seven children whom he openly acknowledged. It was the marriage of a daughter of Lorenzo de Medici of Florence to one of the natural sons of Innocent VIII that paved the way for the elevation of this family to the highest position in the Church. For the pontiff made Giovanni, the thirteen-year-old second son of Lorenzo, cardinal. Subsequently Giovanni became Pope Leo X.

The immediate successor of Innocent VIII was the infamous Roderigo Borgia, who took the name of Alexander VI. He is the pope who condemned Savonarola to death.

One hesitates to set down on paper all that has been said about this "vicar of Christ on earth." Clark very charitably states: "It is difficult to write the simple truth respecting the man who occupied the papal throne under the name of Alexander VI without appearing to repeat the inventions of blinded prejudice and inveterate and reckless enmity. Yet the proved facts of his personal and official life are almost as bad as any hostile fabrications could be made; and the very

fables and legends which have gathered around his history are an evidence of the impression which he produced upon his own contemporaries." He adds: "It is agreed on all sides that there has hardly ever been a Pope who did more to disgrace the papal chair. He was impure, treacherous, and guilty of the most open and unblushing simony. A Latin couplet of the period is not too severe:

Vendit Alexander claves, altaria, Christum.
Emerat ille prius, vendere jure potest."

He quotes the Roman Catholic Abbé Christophe,* who would have liked to close the history of the popes of the fifteenth century with a finer character than this pope, as writing, sadly: "Say, if you please, that Alexander VI dishonored religion and humanity—we will not contradict you." Such was the character of the man who, according to Pasquale Villari, was chiefly responsible for Savonarola's death.

Girolamo Savonarola was born at Ferrara, Italy, the third son of Nicola and Elena Savonarola. His paternal grandfather was physician at the court of Borso d'Este, the duke of Ferrara. His father was a carefree courtier, his mother a deeply pious woman. His grandfather wanted his talented grandson to study medicine. The boy, however, preferred religion. From boyhood inclined to mystical self-introspection, he shunned worldliness and took to the study of Scripture. He visited the ducal court only once and then delved the more deeply into the Bible, Aristotle, and Thomas Aquinas. He had a "dark, melancholy looking face and brilliant eyes." He played the lute and wrote verse. He was barely twenty when he wrote a gloomy poem entitled "De ruina mundi."

He fell in love with a girl next door, and when she spurned him, he decided to enter a cloister. In a sermon which he heard at Faenza, one word—which he never revealed—influenced this decision. Anticipating parental opposition, he ran away from home, and being an ardent admirer of St. Dominic, he joined the Dominican house at Bologna. He wrote to his father then, giving his reasons for the step: the world's wickedness was intolerable; everywhere virtue was despised, and vice was triumphant.

His studies in the monastery included the Bible. His

* In *La Papauté pendant le quinzième Siècle*, ii. 580.

copy was crammed with many marginal notes. He wrote poetry on the Church, the Bride of Christ, in which he gave evidence of his deep grief over the fact that she had been debased by her enemies in the fold. Although he practiced humility, seeking out the most menial offices and welcoming the severest austerities, his great gifts soon brought about a promotion. He became the teacher of the novices, and his abilities as a preacher attracted the attention of his superiors.

Seven years after he had fled from his native city, in 1481, he was sent back to Ferrara to preach the Lenten sermons. This marked the beginning of his career as one of the two great preachers of his time, although the start was not auspicious. He was coldly received. His sermons made no stir, and when the series was finished, he left Ferrara, never to return. While there, he saw his mother for the last time, although he corresponded with her periodically during the following years.

Now his superior sent him to the monastery of San Marco at Florence, recently rebuilt and its walls illuminated by the brush of Fra Angelico. This was to be his city henceforth, his "beloved Florence," over whose corrupt state he frequently wept as did the Savior over Jerusalem. The city was governed by Lorenzo de Medici, "il Magnifico," at whose court, like that of Borso d'Este at Ferrara and practically all Italian courts—including that of the Roman bishop—there ruled luxury, sensuality, hypocrisy, false humanism, and cold indifference to every religious principle. "The philosophers extolled the doctrines of the Greeks and Romans; the poets revived the corrupting verses of Horace, Propertius, and Ovid; the artists in their paintings profaned religious scenes and went so far as to portray, in the pictures of the Virgin Mary and of the most venerated saints, the features of notorious courtesans and their own particular mistresses."

Savonarola was sent on other preaching missions, but his plain, earnest discourses attracted few hearers. The people preferred the popular preacher of the day, an Augustinian, Fra Marriano da Gennazzano.

Savonarola was discouraged and for a time devoted himself almost entirely to his task of teaching in his convent. He was sent to preach at Brescia in 1486 and there won his

first fame as preacher. He spoke on the Apocalypse and represented one of the 24 elders rising up and pronouncing judgment upon the city for its wickedness. The Florentine chronicler Cerretani described his preaching thus: "Savonarola introduced what might be called a new way of preaching the Word of God; an apostolic way; not dividing his sermons into parts or embellishing them with high-sounding words of elegance, but having as his sole aim the explaining of Scripture and the return to the simplicity of the primitive Church." It was in connection with his studies in the Book of Revelation and the resulting sermons, as at Brescia, that Savonarola began his famous prophetic utterances in which he proclaimed the dire destruction of those who were responsible for the corruption of the Church. Two years before his success at Brescia he had preached at Sangimignano, a lovely mountain village, where Dante two hundred years before had served as ambassador for the Guelph League. There he had said: "The Church will be scourged and then regenerated." This may be called the basic theme of all his subsequent prophecies.

His fame as preacher now spread rapidly. Dr. Schaff describes his method, saying: "Savonarola's sermons were like flashes of lightning and the reverberations of thunder. It was his mission to lay the axe at the root of dissipation and profligacy rather than to depict the consolations of pardon and communion with God. He drew more upon the threatenings of the divine wrath than upon the refreshing springs of divine compassion. Tender descriptions of the divine love and mercy were not wanting in his sermons, but the woes pronounced upon the sinfulness of his time exceeded the gentle appeals. He was describing his own method when he said: 'I am like the hail. Cover thyself lest it come down upon thee and strike thee. And remember that I said unto thee, Cover thy head with a helmet, that is, clothe thyself with virtue and no hailstone will touch thee.'"

In his masterpiece, *Il Trionfo della Croce*, Savonarola defended his purpose against his enemies and calumniators and endeavored to show that he was a true, loyal child of the Church, however bitter his criticism of the Church's weaknesses and degeneracy. The fact that this book later became one of the books of instruction adopted by the Congregation of the Propaganda is proof enough that the Roman Church

does not consider Savonarola a heretic even if he was executed at the orders of a pope.

His invitation to preach in the Duomo, the Church of Santa Maria del Fiore, in Florence was a recognition of his great popularity. The populace thronged to hear him. Villari estimates that audiences of 10,000 to 12,000 hung on his discourses. The effect of his fervor and eloquence on the people reminds one of the impressions made by the sermons of Whitefield on Lord Chesterfield and Benjamin Franklin and the impressions made by the oratory of Jonathan Edwards on the people of Northampton. Pico della Mirandola heard Savonarola on the text Gen. 6:17: "Behold, I, even I, do bring a flood of waters upon the earth." He said he felt a cold shudder course through him and his hair, as it were, stand on end.

Savonarola's sermons were Biblical, though his exegesis was often faulty. He insisted on the authority of Scripture: "I preach the regeneration of the Church, taking the Bible as my sole guide." He had extreme contempt for the clergy of his day who did not know the Holy Book. "The theologians of our time have soiled everything by their unseemly disputations as with pitch. They do not know a shred of the Bible, yea, they do not even know the names of its books."

The prophetic element in his sermons, which increased as the opposition to his reforms grew, has been much discussed. Rudelbach, for example, devotes a long chapter to a careful analysis of it. Since these utterances were more predictions than prophecies, it is perhaps safe to say, with Professor Bonet-Maury, whom Dr. Schaff quotes, that Savonarola's prophetic gift was nothing more than keen political and religious intuition. That some of his predictions came true, no one will deny. For instance, when he stated that the death of Lorenzo de Medici would come before his own.

His preaching against evil in high places had irritated the Magnifico. He sent five illustrious citizens of Florence to Savonarola to caution him to be more moderate in his speech. His answer was: "Go, tell Lorenzo de' Medici that although he is a Florentine and the first in the city, and I am only a stranger and a poor friar — yet he will depart, but I shall remain."

When Girolamo was elected prior of San Marco, he was

expected to present his homage to Lorenzo. He refused, stating that his election was due to God, to God alone would he promise submission. It is interesting to note that when Lorenzo lay on his deathbed a year or so later, he had the unyielding prior called to shrive his soul. "I know no honest friar save this one." No scene in Savonarola's career, as Dr. Schaff points out, excels in moral grandeur and dramatic interest his appearance at that bedside. The Magnifico wanted forgiveness of three great crimes that burdened him. Savonarola promised him absolution on three conditions: "First, you must repent and have faith in God's mercy." Lorenzo gave assent. "Secondly, you must restore your ill-gotten wealth or charge your sons to do so." Again the duke agreed. "Thirdly, you must restore the liberties of Florence." Lorenzo made no reply, but turned his face to the wall. The friar waited a bit and then walked sadly away. Shortly afterwards Lorenzo died unabsolved.

Not long thereafter, Pope Innocent VIII died and Roderigo Borgia by means of incredible simony became Pope Alexander VI. Pastor remarks: "The ancient Church would not have admitted him to the very lowest ranks of the clergy." The feasts and pageants that marked his coronation were as splendid as those of a Roman emperor. One poet, quoted by Misciatelli, composed these lines in his honor:

*Caesare magna fuit, nunc Roma est maxima.
Sextus regnat Alexander. Ille vir, iste — deus.*

One pious Roman notary lamented: "O Lord Jesus Christ, it is because of our sins that Thy vicar on earth has been chosen under such an unworthy form." Misciatelli simply says: "Unworthy was the election, and unworthy the man who held the high apostolic dignity." It is seldom that a church body elevates a man to a position of leadership whose theological and moral standards are higher than its own. It was inevitable, and required no special gift of prophecy to foretell, that this man in the See of St. Peter would have no sympathy for the reform efforts of the Prior of San Marco in Florence. A clash was bound to come sooner or later.

In the meantime we find the influence of Savonarola reaching its height. During this period Charles VIII of France invaded Italy, the Medici family, after a rule of seventy years, was banished from Florence, and a theocratic form of govern-

ment was established in the city. The preacher and prophet became virtual political dictator of the city. The new constitution set up two councils: a great council of 3,200 citizens of good reputation and twenty-five years of age, and an upper council of eighty, "which together with the signory decided all questions of too important and delicate a nature for discussion in the larger assembly." Behind these bodies, holding no office himself, Savonarola operated as real head of the republic.

His aim was to make Florence a truly Christian city which would set an example to Rome and the world. His sermons raised the enthusiasm of the populace to fever pitch. A new mode of life was adopted by the people. Hymns rang through the streets. Asceticism was practiced. Men and women clamored at monastery doors for admittance. The vain things of this world were cast aside as dross. The seasonal carnivals, which had been riots of pleasure, became religious festivals. For almost three years the city remained under the spell woven by the fiery eloquence of the Prior of San Marco. The last day of the carnival of 1497 saw the climax reached in the burning of the vanities. Trinkets, jewelry, obscene books, dice, games of chance, harps, mirrors, masks, cosmetics, pictures, etc., were gathered from the people by youthful enthusiasts and piled up in the public square in a pyramid 60 feet high and 240 feet in circumference at the base. A Venetian merchant offered 20,000 gold florins for the lot. The offer was rejected, and his own portrait was added to the top of the heap. After mass that morning the people gathered in the square, joined hands, danced around the pile, and then amid the singing of hymns set fire to it. The scene was repeated also the following year. Three months later Savonarola died on the scaffold which had been erected on the spot where the pyramids of vanities had stood.

It was impossible that such enthusiasm would last, and as it began to wane, the enemies of Savonarola grew in number both in and outside Florence. The Pope himself was among them. His spies kept him well informed on everything. At first the Pope resorted to bribery. A cardinal's hat was offered Savonarola as bait. "No hat will I have but that of a martyr, reddened with my own blood" was Girolamo's indignant rejoinder. Alexander VI bided his time. Savo-

narola continued his excoriating attacks on the immoral life of the clergy. "The priests no longer either fear or respect God, they spend their nights with harlots and their days chattering in the choirs. They make their altars into places of traffic. No reverence is shown to the Church." Nor did he shrink from bitter criticism of the Curia Romana. He was courteously summoned to Rome. He declined the invitation with equal courtesy. Then Florence was threatened with the interdict in the event of another refusal. His preaching for a reform of the Church continued. By this time the Arrabbiati in Florence, which had long opposed the Prior, gained the upper hand politically by merging with the Medicean faction. The result was the establishment of a signory hostile to Savonarola. It was now only a matter of time until he would be crushed. The papal excommunication fell. Savonarola defended himself with his *Epistle Against Surreptitious Excommunications*, addressed to "all Christians beloved of God." He openly declared his opposition to the Pope. Later he appealed from the Pope to a general council and to the heads of the Catholic nations. It was of no avail. When he was urged to make his peace with the Pope, Savonarola declared: "They ask me to write to Rome to say I have erred. But I would not do so. I have erred in other things, for I am a sinner, but not in this matter, for I have preached the doctrine of Christ."

There is no need to enter into the details of his arrest, trial, condemnation. He and two faithful disciples were tortured, hanged on three scaffolds, Savonarola in the center, and then their bodies were burned, while the mob which had once sung religious hymns around the burning pile of vanities now heaped contempt and ridicule upon their former leader.

When the bishop read the final formula of condemnation: "I separate them from the Church Militant and the Church Triumphant," Savonarola replied calmly: "Not from the Church Triumphant; that is beyond thy power." One of his last prayers was: "Lord, I know Thou art that perfect Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost; I know that Thou art the eternal Word; that Thou didst descend from heaven into the bosom of Mary; and that Thou didst ascend upon the Cross to shed Thy blood for our sins. I pray Thee that by that blood I may have remission of my sins."

Was the Prior of San Marco a precursor of the Reformation? There seems to be considerable disagreement on this question. Martin Luther said of him: "Though the feet of this holy man are still soiled by theological mud, he nevertheless upheld justification by faith only without works, and therefore he was burned by the Pope. But he lives in blessedness, and Christ canonizes him by our means, even though Pope and Papists burst with rage." Dr. Schaff says: "By the general consent of Protestants, Jerome Savonarola is numbered among the precursors of the Reformation — the view taken by Ranke." Then he goes on to say that Savonarola was not an advocate of the Reformation's distinguishing tenet of justification by faith. He adds, however, that Fra Girolamo's exaltation of divine grace accords with the teaching of the Reformation, and quotes one of many passages in Savonarola's *Meditations*: "Not by their own deservings, O Lord, or by their own works have they been saved, lest any man should be able to boast, but because it seemed good in His sight." One of his hymns, still a favorite in the Church, "Jesus, Refuge of the Weary," is a further testimony of this. The historian Hase states: "It makes no difference whether they counted Savonarola a heretic or a saint, he was in either case a precursor of the Reformation, and so Luther recognized him."

On the other hand, the Anglican Creighton maintains that Savonarola, though a great moral reformer, remained a faithful child of the Roman Church to the end:

"Savonarola's words are full of ardent faith in Christ, but Luther's position was far from his mind. He taught nothing which was opposed to the accepted doctrines of the Church; he never denied the papal headship, and he received submissively the plenary indulgence which Alexander VI granted him before his death. Savonarola was a great moral reformer, who was driven at the last to take up the position of an ecclesiastical reformer also; but he followed the lines of Gerson and Ailli, and wished to take up the work which the Council of Constance had failed to accomplish. His conception of moral reform led him into politics, and his political position brought him into collision with the Papacy. Rather than abandon his work he was prepared to face a conflict with the Papacy, but his enemies were too numerous and too watchful, and he fell before their combined force."

The Roman Catholics also claim him for themselves, even though he died as a condemned heretic. Misciattelli calls him

"the last apostle of medieval Christian faith," "the true precursor of the Catholic Counter-reform." Villari states: "His attacks were never directed in the slightest degree against the dogmas of the Roman Church, but solely against those who corrupted them."

These two views are vividly represented in these two scenes. In the famous Reformation monument at Worms, Savonarola is given a place at Luther's feet and at the side of Wycliffe and Huss.

In the Roman Vatican, Savonarola has a place among the doctors of the Church in Rafael's great fresco of the *Disputa*, ordered by the successor of Alexander VI, Pope Julius II.

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