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Girolamo Savonarola: A Great Preacher of the Middle Ages

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Abstract: Savonarola's profound religious seriousness and unwavering determination demand both admiration and careful analysis of the messages and decisions he made in his fight against the moral slippages of his contemporary society. His actions in Florence underscore the urgent need for religious reform, even if Savonarola's efforts influenced Martin Luther's Protestant Reformation to a small extent. It is essential to recognize that Savonarola anticipated the spirit and objectives of the reformers, paving the way for their efforts and thus facilitating the emergence of the Reformation. This paper explores Savonarola's contributions, providing a deeper understanding of his role in this pivotal historical period.

Keywords: Savonarola, Preacher, Middle Ages, Sermon, Apocalyptic, Florence, Dominican

Introduction. Short biography

Girolamo Savonarola was born on September 21, 1452, in Ferrara. His father, Nicollo Savonarola, was part of the small nobility of this Italian city. His mother, Elena Bonnacorsi, also from Mantua, was an ambitious woman who spared nothing in perfecting the educational process of the little Girolamo. He attended the University of Ferrara, where he studied medicine, drawing, music, and philosophy. Choosing his grandfather's profession, he studied medicine, but in the end, he gave up medicine because of the increasingly strong impression that the corruption of society gave him. Also, due to the embarrassment caused by the family's refusal to give birth to their daughter Laodamia, at the age of 23, he secretly left his father's house and went to Bologna, where he took on the Dominican habit (Schaff, 1882, 466). When he decided to embrace the monastic life, his predilection for St. Thomas Aquinas (Rotaru, 2005, 316-322) led him to choose the Dominican order; but he joined this order with the clear intention of remaining all his life a simple brother at the base of the hierarchy, in order to avoid the mixture of the profane and the scholastic which his studies implied. Nevertheless, he took the vows made in the monastery of San Dominic in Bologna in 1475, and even overcame his aversion to teaching the philosophy of Aristotle when his superiors had imperiously asked him to teach it, taking care, however, to avoid speculation in his lectures and to emphasize, whenever the opportunity offered, the superiority of Holy Scripture over all philosophical authority. Although he had desired to "be engaged in the most humble and servile duties of the brotherhood," he soon showed a "special capacity which led to his appointment as instructor of the novices" (McGeown, 2010, 3).

Savonarola thus began his monastic life in the Dominican Order. An interesting choice for the young Savonarola, considering that the Dominicans, being militant preaching monks, their first and most important task was to preach the word of God. While the Franciscans, which emphasized poverty, would have been more suited to Savonarola's austere nature, according to his biographer Lauro Martines, his desire to join the Dominicans clearly demonstrates that this monk was a militant fighter for Christ from the very beginning. The Dominicans allowed him to "transform people by preaching the word of God. He found in the Dominican Order the same combative power that he was to find in the use of the printing press" (Martines, 2006, 91).

As a young Dominican monk, Savonarola quickly became disillusioned with the wealth and ostentation he saw around him. Partly, this was rooted in childhood memories of the ducal courts and partly in the prevalence of nepotism and indecent patronage so prevalent in

Rome and elsewhere. He often suggested that many wicked and deceitful men had entered holy orders and were thus, in some cases, by their mere presence, perverting the Catholic faith in favor of an "external, pompous and heartless" model of Christianity. Savonarola, therefore, wrote his first highly critical and accusatory work on the Vatican. "*De Ruina Ecclesiae*" in which he openly condemned the Church, accusing it of having lost its role as mediator between the faithful and God (Boston, 2008, 94).

At the monastery, Savonarola studied Augustine and Thomas Aquinas and absorbed the teachings of the Holy Scriptures, of which he knew entire sections by heart. In Florence, there are still two copies of the Bible that contain detailed annotations in the margins of the text, made by Savonarola himself, between the lines or on added pages (The Vulgate, printed in Basel, 1491). The abbot of the monastery sent him to preach in Florence, one of the largest and most sumptuous cities in Europe at that time. Here he consolidated a strong reputation based on his austerity, sometimes ostentatiously displayed, as well as due to his scholastic and oratory qualities. Here in Florence, Savonarola would soon become abbot of the monastery of St. Mark (Burlamachi, 1829, 39), (in the premises of which the rooms where he lived can still be visited today). Savonarola's first attempt as a preacher was so unfortunate that, towards the end of his Lenten sermons, his audience numbered no more than twenty-five. He then announced to them that instead of preaching, he would, from that time on, devote himself exclusively to the study of the Holy Scripture. He did not, however, give up preaching, becoming a furious preacher against human decadence, and convinced that the wrath of God was about to fall upon the Earth (Schaff, 1882, 467).

The influence of Savonarola's sermons

To understand Savonarola's rise in Florence, we must mention his apocalyptic visions. He reinforced the consistent theme in Florentine history that the Florentines were a people to whom God had destined a special destiny. He described the millennium as an era that would leave the Florentines purified and at the forefront of the new Kingdom. One of the many aspects that explain Savonarola's popularity was his erudition which, "although neither profound nor original, was sufficiently extensive to arouse the interest of both learned humanists, such as Giovanni Pico della Mirandolla (1463–1494)" (Rotaru, 2016, 29-43), and of many Florentine men of letters (Hale, 1991, 292).

The theme of his first sermons was the presentation of certain passages from the Apocalypse in a manner that inspired terror and anxiety; from these passages he made his conclusions heard, with the tone and authority of a prophet, concerning the great crisis which "could be expected" for the Church of God, and unheard-of misfortunes for it, a wrath from which there was no escape except through repentance (Burlamachi, 1829, 4).

Crowds waited for hours at the doors of the cathedral for the preacher's arrival, and Villari estimated that the crowds who listened to his sermons numbered 10,000 or 12,000 people. Eisenbichler appreciates that in his heyday Savonarola preached to crowds of about twenty thousand people. (McGeown, 2010, 3) The feelings of the listeners swayed to the preacher's voice like fields of grain blown by the wind, here burning with indignation, here softening with tears. "I was overcome with weeping and could not continue," wrote one listener in noting a sermon, and Savonarola himself felt the strain peculiarly and often sank into his chair completely exhausted (Schaff, 1882, 468). To the enthusiasm of the crowds for the preacher were added gratitude and reverence for the messenger of God, and the effect of all these feelings combined was so powerful and so contagious that it seemed as if the most beautiful age of the Church since its beginnings had been restored (Burlamachi, 1829, 39).

To enjoy their share of the miraculous manna, which was descending upon them in such abundance from heaven, the inhabitants of the neighboring towns and hamlets abandoned their homes, and the mountain people descended from the Apennines, setting their eyes on Florence. There, crowds of pilgrims hurried every morning, as soon as the gates were opened

at the first break of dawn, and were always received with brotherly hospitality. They were embraced in the street like brothers, even before their names were known, and there were some pious citizens who hosted in their homes as many as forty people at a time (Burlamachi, 1829, 4).

The climax of his sermons

Obviously, with such a sharp attitude in the most important city of the Renaissance, it did not take long at all for Savonarola to make implacable enemies. Among them were the members of the powerful and influential Medici family, the Palleschi (was the name adopted by the Medici partisans, from the three Palle or balls on the family coat of arms. They gave Savonarola's friends the nickname *piagnoni*, the whiners; and they responded by calling their opponents the lukewarm, the term actually used in the original, for which I have proposed replacing it with the name of the faction, easier to use and more historical) faction, who denounced him at the court in Rome every day and threatened him, loudly, with the gallows.

The death of Pope Innocent III, accurately predicted by Savonarola, coincided with two great events, namely the flight of the Medici family from the city and the invasion of foreign armies. His sermon, full of threats, is closely linked to national events. Italy, Rome and Florence are insistently mentioned. In a harsh and exuberant criticism, he accuses monks and church figures of being responsible for “this storm”, for “these evils”. He predicted that God would send punishments on His church to purify it: “The church will be reformed, but Italy will first be scourged, and her punishment is imminent.” The monk’s prophecies seemed to be nearing fulfillment when, in 1494, news reached Florence that the French king, Charles VIII, had invaded Italy. This happened while Savonarola was preaching on the text “Behold, I bring a flood of waters upon the earth” (Genesis 6:17). This coincidence only served to enhance his reputation (Rops, 1961, 229).

The occupation of Florence by the troops of King Charles VIII of France led to the temporary expulsion of the Medici family. Savonarola saw in Charles a new Cyrus whose coming could free Florence from its political bonds and initiate a new era of civic freedom. He also predicted Charles’s subsequent withdrawal. Philippe de Commines (a writer and diplomat at the court of the French king), who visited Savonarola in the monastery of St. Mark, after the trials that followed Charles's arrival in Italy began, left impressed by the piety and candor of the monk, and declared that he had predicted with certainty, to him and the king, "things that no one had believed at the time, but which have come true completely since then." The event was speculated to the maximum by Savonarola, who saw in this an unexpected chance to occupy and reorganize the sumptuous Florence according to his beliefs. Savonarola convinced the French king to appoint him head of the government council in Florence. Having reached the supreme position, for four years (1494-1498), Savonarola established the law of moral, Christian principles. Under the power of his new position, Savonarola also took a series of measures appreciated by the masses. Among these were the total prohibition of usury, the prohibition of wealth taxes, and the prohibition of luxury in any form. Towards the height of his life, through his sermons, he was particularly dedicated to the desire to see the lives of the Florentines freed from any pagan traces that led to the exacerbation of the humanist cult of that period. As a self-proclaimed prophet, as an instrument of God for Florence, Savonarola began a program to cleanse the city of its long-revered humanist vanities. Obsessed with the image of human wickedness that he saw, he wanted to rid Florence of all kinds of vices; the monk had a firm attitude of condemnation towards frivolity, poetry, sex, gambling, elegant clothes and jewelry. There were to be no more images of the nude and no artistic bowing to pagan deities (Cavendish, 1998, 34).

Once, under the spell of the monk's sermon, the whole of Florence seemed to have taken the path of religion. Wives left their husbands and went to the convent. Others married, vowing marital abstinence, and Savonarola even dreamed that the city might attain such a

state of perfection that marriages would cease altogether. The people attended services and received communion every day; Fra Bartolomeo threw his nude studies on the fire, and, for a time, continued to believe that it was a sin to use one's hands to paint, for they should be constantly joined together for prayer. There was enthusiasm but no regeneration. A reaction was certain to follow, and it is a wonder that Savonarola enjoyed such great confidence from the people almost to the end of his life (Schaff, 2002, 476).

Savonarola forbade the carnivals and country festivals celebrated by the Florentines. He established real secret police that sought out and identified the inhabitants who were fond of any form of worldly entertainment, art or luxury. He organized, on the occasion of the so-called "Bonfire of Vanities", in 1496 and 1497, which was a huge bonfire into which the inhabitants of Florence had to throw their chess sets, along with other "tools of sin" such as mirrors, playing cards, carnival masks, luxurious clothes, art objects, expensive things, statuettes and paintings that represented nudes, even some books and writings considered indecent or heretical. Even the Renaissance painter Botticelli was forced to throw his own paintings on mythological themes, but sprinkled with female nudes, into the flames. Savonarola believed that all ancient pagan culture should be eliminated, as well as art insufficiently imbued with Catholic Christianity.

The biblical element was also a prominent feature of his sermons. His most famous discourses were on the ark, the Exodus, the prophets Haggai, Hezekiah, Amos, Hosea, and the Apocalypse of John. He insisted on the authority of Scripture. “I preach the regeneration of the Church,” he said, “having Scripture as my only guide” (Rudelbach, 1835, 333-336). He presents an elaborate description of Savonarola's attitude towards the Bible and quotes from one of Savonarola's sermons on Exodus as follows: "The theologians of our time have defiled everything by their indecent and deafening disputes. They know nothing at all about the Bible, they do not even know the titles of its books."

Unlike many theologians of his time, he preached not much from the Holy Fathers but from Scripture and in the vernacular. Consequently, the people could understand him and profit by his sermons. Savonarola had an encyclopedic knowledge of the Bible. Crawford describes Savonarola as “an ardent reader of the Bible,” for he “knew it almost by heart, from Genesis to Revelation.” Old agrees: “His knowledge of Scripture was considered extraordinary by his contemporaries. In fact, it was said that he knew much of the Bible by heart” (Huges, 1999, 570). This knowledge was to be of great use to him when, in his last days before his execution, deprived of his Bible, he wrote his Prison Meditations on Psalms 31 and 50: “references to Scripture are found everywhere… slight omissions or departures from the Vulgate suggest that Savonarola did not have the Bible at hand when he wrote and that he quoted from memory” (Donnelly, 1994, 20).

The time had come to realize Savonarola’s vision of a theocratic government ruled by Christ in Florence. The expulsion of the Medici made possible a reorganization of the state, and the new constitution—largely created by Savonarola—involved him in the struggle between civic and political factions. In his grand sermons on Haggai, during the Lent of the Nativity of the Lord in 1494, and on the Psalms in 1495, Savonarola clearly embarked on the sea of politics. “The Lord has led my boat out into the open ocean!” he exclaimed from the pulpit. Rebuking God, for thrusting this daunting task upon him, he declared: “I will preach if I must, but why should I interfere in the government of Florence?” The Lord said to him: “If you want to make Florence a holy city, you must lay it on solid foundations and give it a government that glorifies piety.” The preacher undertook to do so (Eisenbichler, 1999, 489). Savonarola's sermons had a profound impact on the crowds. A contemporary chronicler noted, “The eyes of all stared in horror, tears flowed down their cheeks. People beat their fists on their chests and begged God for mercy, screaming.” At that time, the city’s churches were cramped, and men and women walked the streets in dirty, long robes.

The decline of Savonarola

Perhaps this would have been the moment when Savonarola could be content with what he had achieved and maintain a more withdrawn figure. But it was not to be, pride, the very sin against which Savonarola fought daily in public through sermons, was the one that gnawed at his soul imperceptibly. Enthused by the fact that the masses of people had accepted not only his own religious reform, but also his political opinions regarding the declaration of a possible theocratic democracy, Savonarola began to aim higher and higher.

He, therefore, wanted to enter politics, and sought support in the so-called party of the "*Weeping Men*" made up of tradesmen, artisans, knights and petty nobles, in open opposition to that of the Florentine nobles, entitled equally bizarrely, "*The Angry Ones*". Meanwhile, Savonarola continued to draft new and new laws, each more restrictive and sometimes absurd. Thus, in his opinion, anyone who even verbally opposed the leadership he had established was automatically considered a personal enemy of Jesus Christ, with all the consequences that then followed this. It did not take long, and the news of Savonarola's exploits reached the ears of the new Pope, who was none other than Alexander IV Borgia, from the feared Borgia family that was in open conflict with the governor of Florence. Unfortunately for Savonarola, his political and ideological enemies in Italy, plus the Florentine clergy who could no longer tolerate his dogmatic interpretations and measures, also joined forces against him. Their criticism, initially timid, would culminate in open attempts to silence him or banish him from the city altogether. At this point, fearing that the situation would degenerate, Pope Alexander IV summoned Savonarola to the Vatican for discussions and clarifications, including explaining his prophetic visions to the higher authorities. Feeling cornered on all sides, Savonarola refused, citing health reasons and the dangers that might await him on the road to Rome. His old rival in the pulpit, the monk Mariano di Gennazzano, and other enemies were in Rome plotting against him, and the Medici family was quickly gaining favor with the pope.

Alexander's first letter, dated September 9, 1495, forbidding the monk to preach, condemned Savonarola's foolishness in interfering in Italian political affairs and announcing that he was a special messenger sent by God. In reply, Savonarola answered the accusations and continued to preach. On October 16, 1495, the sovereign pontiff forbade him from preaching publicly or privately. Pastor remarks: "It was as clear as could be that Savonarola was guilty of disobedience to papal authority" (Pastor, 1898, 66).

For five months the monk remained in seclusion in the monastery, but on February 17, 1496, at the request of the lordship to preach the Lenten sermons, he again ascended the pulpit. Stating that the pope could err, he adopted a bold position. “The Pope,” he said, “may order me to do something that is contrary to the law of Christian love or the gospel. But if he really gives me such an order, I will tell him, you are not a shepherd. Not the Roman Church, but you are wrong.”

From then on, he raised his voice, as he had never done before, against the corruption of the papal city. Preaching on Amos (4:1) on February 28, 1496, he exclaimed: “Who are the fat cows of Bashan on the mountains of Samaria? They are the courtiers of Italy and Rome. Or, are they not? A thousand is too little for Rome, ten thousand, twelve thousand, fourteen thousand are too little for Rome. Prepare, alas, Rome, for terrible will be your punishments!” (Perrens, 2018, 471). Moreover, he resumed his sermons with increased violence and fervor. This time, the target of his public accusations was the Pope himself and the entire Vatican Curia. For Savonarola, the Pope had become an “atheist,” a “devil,” a “corrupt pagan,” and many other things. Thus, he was accused of heresy in 1495, after which the Pope forbade him from preaching. Instead, Savonarola continued to ignore the papal appeal.

On May 12, 1497, for “not having submitted to our Apostolic reprimands and orders” and being “suspected of heresy,” Alexander declared him excommunicated. Everyone was forbidden to listen to the condemned man or speak to him. Initially, Savonarola obeyed the excommunication order and stopped preaching. Between May 1497 and February 1498, he

remained silent. The longer he stayed away from his pulpit, the worse the morals of the people became. Therefore, Savonarola was asked by his friends to resume preaching in order to stem the tide of evil that was threatening the city once again.

On February 11, 1498, he defied the validity of his own excommunication and once again ascended the pulpit of the cathedral. Before a huge crowd, he described the priest as a humble instrument of the Almighty, saying that when God withdraws, "prelates and popes are nothing but a broken iron tool. […] And if a prelate orders what is contrary to his divine life in piety and charity, not only should you not obey him, but he is also worthy of damnation." Another time, he said that the pope could be misled not only by false reports but also by his own wickedness, as in the case of Pope Boniface VIII, who was a bad pope, beginning his pontificate like a fox and ending it like a dog (Schnitzer, 1904, 144).

The Pope still had one weapon to make Savonarola yield—the interdict of Florence. He threatened the city with this if the Signoria did not send "this son of the impure" to Rome or throw him into prison. If the former option was followed, Alexander promised to treat Savonarola as a father would his son, provided he repented, for he "did not wish the death of a sinner, but that he might turn from his way and live." But while some members continued to express confidence in the purity of the monk's motives, the majority came to adopt the position that it would have been more expedient to silence the preacher than to incur the papal interdict. At the public meeting called by the Signoria on March 9, 1498, to decide the course to be taken, considerations of efficiency prevailed. The Pope, as the Vicar of Christ, has authority directly from God and must be obeyed. A second consideration was the financial straits of the municipality. On March 17, 1498, the decision of the Signoria was communicated to Savonarola, namely that from that date he was to abstain from preaching, and the following day he preached for the last time.

In his last sermon, Savonarola acknowledged that it was his duty to obey the mandate. His mind had worked out a course to be taken: from the pulpit he had hinted at the convening of a general council as a last resort. But the course of events suddenly took an unexpected turn. Florence was astonished at the rumor that steps were to be taken to determine whether Savonarola's claims were true. The challenge (ordeal by fire) came from a Franciscan, Francesco da Puglia, in a sermon at the Holy Cross, in which he denounced the Dominican friar as a heretic and false prophet. If Savonarola had not been accused in this ordeal, it would have been a clear sign that Florence would follow him. The challenge was accepted by the Abbot Domenico da Pescia, a friar of St. Mark's and a close friend of Savonarola, a man whose pure life was recognized. He took his friend's place, stating that Savonarola should be reserved for higher works. Francesco da Puglia also withdrew, and Julian Rondinelli, a Franciscan friar, took his place against his will. Savonarola himself disapproved of the ordeal (Landucci, 1883, 165, 166).

The execution was authorized by the Signoria and set for April 7. The execution further inflamed Savonarola's friends. When he announced it in a sermon, many women exclaimed that they wished to be partakers together. Other monks from St. Mark's and hundreds of young men announced that they were ready to pass through the fire out of respect for their spiritual director.

The solemnity was set for eleven o'clock. When the hour came for the procession to begin, Savonarola was giving a sermon. He had again told the people that his work did not need miracles and that he had always sought to justify himself by signs of virtue and, he declared, just as on Mount Carmel, we could expect miraculous divine intervention, but only in response to prayer and humility. The storm that had descended on the city, the delay in preparations, and the fall of darkness caused the Signoria to cancel the execution (Schaff, 1882, 479-480).

Savonarola's power was over. The spell of his name was broken. There was a feeling that the spectacle was a farce. The popular threat was growing, and a guard barely managed to prevent a violent attack on Savonarola as the procession returned to St. Mark's.

The view that Savonarola's political enemies, the Arrabbiati, had fallen into collusion with the Franciscans, and that the delay in the square, caused by various objections, was actually a ruse to postpone the execution, enjoys much support. Florence was furious at having this situation imposed on it. The next day St. Mark's was stormed by the mob. The Signoria voted for Savonarola's immediate banishment. The Pope, upon receiving official news of the events in Florence, sent word to congratulate the lordship, fully pardoned the city, and granted it the right to tithe for three years. He ordered that Savonarola's trial be commenced, not neglecting, if necessary, the use of torture.

Arrest and death sentence

Excommunicated, Savonarola was arrested by the new Florentine authorities along with two of his most fanatical followers, the monks Domenico and Salvestro. All three were tried by an inquisitorial tribunal and cruelly tortured on charges of heresy (Rotaru, 2019, 304). On May 23, 1498, Savonarola and his faithful disciples were led, amid the shouts and boos of the crowd, to the place of execution. There, they were hanged, then burned at the stake. It is said that a priest asked Savonarola how he felt now in the face of his own execution. The monk answered briefly and calmly: "I feel very well. Christ suffered as much for me." These were to be his last words. His disciples were hanged first, then his turn. The bodies of the three were burned at the stake in Piazza della Signoria, and their ashes were then thrown into the Arno River, which runs through Florence (Landucci, 1883, 167, 168).

His figure would not be easily forgotten. In 1919, the Italian People's Party declared him a true champion of social justice, and after 1945, Savonarola was taken as a model for the reform of Catholicism. Moreover, the Roman Catholic Church decided in 1988 to canonize Girolamo Savonarola, but the complete process of canonization was blocked by the powerful and influential Jesuit Order, whose members still consider him a heretic.

Conclusion

The exalted tone of Savonarola's impassioned sermons, the invectives against the high church hierarchy, the call to the original purity of Christianity, the proclamation of Florence as the kingdom of Christ and interpreted Charles VIII's invasion as a punishment from Heaven—these ideas and attitudes were those of a preacher from the Middle Ages. The meaning of his activity, which far exceeded the sphere of religious life, along with his active involvement in the social and political life of Florence—which he dominated for four years—made the preacher Savonarola a major political figure who aimed for a reform of society in its entirety. His sermons were shocking and enthusiastic speeches, anchored in the word of Scripture, with a prophetic, penitential and apocalyptic opening, with numerous insertions of a political nature. His sermons shook Florentine society to its foundations, giving birth to love and hate alike, moving hearts, providing hope, and shattering ideals—a question mark of the mentality of the people of that time.

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