



SAINT PETER MARTYR IN THE LIKENESS OF SAVONAROLA
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THE FIFTH CENTENARY OF THE BIRTH OF JEROME SAVONAROLA



FIVE HUNDRED YEARS AGO, on the twenty-first of September, 1452, Jerome Savonarola was born in the ancient Italian city of Ferrara. A stronghold of Renaissance pomp and grandeur, Ferrara was the capital of the House of d'Este, generous sponsors of Italian culture and pagan learning, and gracious hosts who entertained at their lavish court an elegant succession of prelates and emperors, princes, and popes. It is interesting to note in passing, that the two most illustrious personages whom Ferrara has given to history were both contemporaries and both Dominicans: Jerome Savonarola, and the eminent theologian, who himself bears the name of the city, Francis Silvester Ferrariensis, one of the greatest commentators of St. Thomas Aquinas, and the fortieth Master General of the Order of Preachers.

Although Savonarola passed his youth in Ferrara, and his early Dominican years at Bologna, his name is inseparably associated with the majestic Tuscan city of Florence. Beautiful Florence, bestriding the Arno in the shadow of the Apennines, was the scene of his preaching triumphs, and of his zealous struggle for moral reform and spiritual revival; it was the dismal setting for his tragic fall and inevitable destruction, for his venomous persecution and brutal end. His memory still lingers among Florentine treasures of art and sculpture which bear the titles of such immortals as Giotto, Ghiberti, Della Robbia, Fra Angelico, Michelangelo; his dynamic spirit still hovers above the pulpits and altars of San Marco, Santa Maria Novella, and the Duomo. His specter seems to haunt the graceful tombs of Giuliano and Lorenzo de' Medici, and his long shadow is cast across the polished pages of Pico della Mirandola and the unprincipled invocations of Machiavelli. In the annals of Florentine sanctity, his name is still mentioned with such holy people as St. Antoninus, St. Philip Neri,

and St. Catherine de Ricci. After five centuries, Savonarola is still the first citizen of the Florentine Republic; in stature he towers above all the other artists and statesmen, saints and sages, who graced the rich piazzas of fairest Florence. Savonarola's sublime and indomitable spirit is the dominant pulse in the rhythm of Florentine culture which has enchanted the ages.

After four and a half centuries, Florence has not forgotten the holy Dominican whom she burned and whose ashes she cast as refuse upon the flowing waters of the Arno. On May 23, the anniversary of Savonarola's death, Florence commemorated the fifth centenary of his birth with extraordinary solemnity. The entire ceremony bore the aspect of reparation to the memory of Savonarola on behalf of the Florentines who betrayed his beneficence. Florence recalled with shame how bereft she is even of the tomb of her Fifteenth Century Republican; Scipio Africanus' wrathful reprobation falls fittingly from Savonarola's lips: "Ungrateful country, thou shalt not even possess my bones!"

The festivities began in the ancient Palazzo Vecchio, the town hall of Florence, where the Provincial of the Dominicans celebrated Mass in the *Capella dei Priori*, the scene of Savonarola's last Mass and Communion on the morning he was led to execution. Present in the chapel, which had been specially rededicated for the occasion, were the *Priori* or Communal Council, the successors of the city officials who condemned Savonarola, along with many ecclesiastical and civic dignitaries. Following the ceremonies at the Palazzo Vecchio, a great procession made its way to Savonarola's own Convent of St. Mark, where the mayor of the city addressed the assembled throng. All walked in the procession: no automobiles were used, nor were there any refreshments, out of respect for the austerity of Savonarola, and in keeping with the sober character of the occasion. At St. Mark's, the Dominicans arranged a great display of documents and relics of Savonarola.

In the afternoon, the Dominican Friars and children formed another procession which left St. Mark's and passed through the center of the decorated city, bearing one of Fra Angelico's famous paintings of the Crucifixion, which Savonarola took with him on preaching tours. Five hundred children marched in the pageant, dressed, as in the days of Savonarola, in white tunics and carrying little crosses and olive branches, the symbols of faith and peace. The children sang ancient hymns which St. Philip Neri had put to music. The Assessor of Fine Arts of the city of Florence spoke to the children, and the mayor received the Dominicans in the *Salone del Cinque-*

cento, constructed at Savonarola's wish to accommodate the Great Council, one of the first types of authentic democracy to appear anywhere in the world.

The day closed with a great popular demonstration in the Piazza della Signoria. The venerable Palazzo Vecchio was magnificently illuminated. From the four corners of the city, men came with torches to pay homage to Savonarola; accompanied by the sombre cadence of a band of drummers, they gathered about a stone in the middle of the square which marks the spot where the immortal preacher was burned. After an oration by the mayor, the great bell of the D'Arnolfo Tower tolled for five minutes in a tribute of reverence and affection for Savonarola and the two Dominicans who perished with him. Thus do the Florentines who killed him remember him.

Fra Jerome Savonarola, born at Ferrara five hundred years ago, would live to sway the foundations of Christendom with the thunder of his speech, and thrill the Florentine multitudes with the splendor of his sanctity; he would be known to posterity as a fascinating character of the Renaissance, and one of the most confusingly controversial figures in all history. For five hundred years Savonarola's name has been the pawn of historians; his biographers are far from agreement as to the shade of light in which history should portray him. The variations of his virtue and villainy which discordant historians trace are almost incredible; practically every book ever published about the Florentine Dominican has proposed some new theory alleging the essential goodness or evil of his life and works. Many non-Catholics, despite the mass of evidence indubitably to the contrary, hail him as the first of the Protestant reformers, an heroic precursor of Luther, a righteous rebel who prepared the way for the cataclysmic dismemberment of the Church which came twenty years after his death. Some Protestant writers blithely dismiss him as a religious psychopath, suffering divergent stages of egomania, hallucination, and fanaticism; others regard him quite gravely as the embodiment of a most dangerous sort of intolerance which Catholicism is apt to breed, a vicious type of Catholic puritan, an enemy of culture and freedom, the personification of the sinister spirit of the Inquisition. Catholic biographers are normally better focused in their disagreement, but the cleavage between the two extremes is sharp, and both contrary viewpoints have energetic champions. Catholic opinion is clearly divided between those who judge him a contemptuous scoundrel deserving utter repudiation, and those who esteem him a saint, misguided perhaps in his latter days, but nonetheless worthy of confident veneration. There is hardly a middle position to be found.

Faced with such a maze of authoritative arguments on all sides, it is difficult to come to a definite conclusion. Savonarola emerges from the controversy as an ever-expanding enigma. About certain facts, however, there can be no question. Even his most bitter critics affirm that Jerome Savonarola was a truly great man: he was a sincere preacher of incomparable power, an exemplary Dominican devoted to the highest ideals of his Order, a holy priest whose sanctity, apart from his tragic relations with Alexander VI, cannot be honestly disputed. His works speak in authentic testimony to his character: Savonarola was the moral and political regenerator of Florence. His enemies were far from virtuous; they were degraded and disreputable conspirators who hated him because he was such a powerful influence for good. It was he who achieved the unprecedented spiritual renovation of the city, and it was his potent leadership which prompted the Florentines to cry out in one accord, "Live Jesus Christ, our King!"

Chesterton, in his inimitable way, has crystallized the spirit of Savonarola. "Savonarola is a man whom we shall probably never understand until we know what horror may lie at the heart of civilization. This we shall not know until we are civilized. It may be hoped, in one sense, that we may never understand Savonarola." He sees the Florentine Friar as a great deliverer from the curse of human satisfaction. "Savonarola did not save men from anarchy, but from order; not from pestilence, but from paralysis; not from starvation, but from luxury. . . . He was making war against no trivial human sins, but against godless and thankless quiescence, against getting used to happiness, the mystic sin by which all creation fell. He was preaching that severity which is the sign-manual of youth and hope. . . . Savonarola addressed himself to the hardest of all earthly tasks, that of making men turn back and wonder at the simplicities they had learnt to ignore."

Five centuries ago Savonarola came as a prophet of doom for an evil generation. The twentieth century is peculiarly like the fifteenth with its crest of human achievement, its satisfaction with sin, its reverence for the material and ignorance of the spiritual, its frenzy for pleasure and paroxysm of despair. Over the vast expanse of years our world in its wickedness hears the Friar's dread warning, "Lo, the sword of the Lord swift over the earth and sudden." Had he come among us, would we heed his word? Or, like the Florentines, would we burn him?