

## THE TRUE SAVONAROLA.

In the history of the world and its illustrious personages, the penalty of greatness, and a sure proof of influence over men, is to have one's motives questioned, one's words distorted and one's actions misjudged. So it is with Savonarola. The spotlight of controversy has been played with only too brilliant a glare on the negative side of his life; the positive, the inspiring and fascinating side has been cast into the shadow by malicious rancor and dispute. Truly the Friar's was an extraordinary career; praised by scholars, Popes and Saints; yet accused of ambition, pride, disobedience and selfishness by many who do not know him.

Jerome Savonarola was born September 21, 1452, of one of the oldest and most illustrious families of Ferrara. He entered the Dominican Order at a time when the Church was in the throes of one of the darkest periods of her existence, when the Renaissance and Humanism, with their return to pagan ideals, were gradually ascending toward the zenith they were to attain in the Golden Age of art and literature under the pontificate of Leo the Magnificent; when Plato and the other ancient classical authors were preferred before Jesus Christ, and when even

the spiritual life of Monasticism was at its very lowest ebb. After many years of silent study and meditation he appeared in the role of a missionary. The Florence which he entered was a city thoroughly corrupted by its tyrannical ruler Lorenzo de' Medici, a city reeking with iniquity; "a nest of beathen philosophers, voluptuaries, money-lenders and traitors, intriguing politicians and sharp-witted critics"; the Florence which learned to love and venerate him as its king was a city of sack-cloth and ashes; a city worthy of its name, "The City of Flowers." As a reward of his labors Savonarola was elected prior of the Convent of San Marco. In this position for six years he prosecuted his apostolate with extraordinary zeal and indefatigable labor, although surrounded by unscrupulous maligners, carrying their deception even to the Pope's palace, persuading Alexander VI. that he was preaching pernicious doctrine, that his discourses disturbed the peace of the state, and that he was insulting the Holy See. It was for heresy alleged to have been uttered in the sermons, which had wrought a change in the spiritual life of Florence that was almost miraculous, and for "pernicious crimes," that he was sentenced to

death. With his two faithful disciples, Dominic and Sylvester, he was hanged, May 23, 1497. Their bodies were burned and the ashes sacrilegiously scattered on the waters of the Arno.

"Alleged" is the word, for no one has ever insinuated that Savonarola was a heretic. Preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ was the pernicious crime of which he was guilty. He was the victim of Italy's intriguing politicians and tyrannical despots. As of old, Caiphas had announced to the Jews, "That it was expedient that one man should die for the people", so the condition of Italy at this period demanded a like sacrifice. And as the True Friend of the Jews had been nailed to Calvary's Gibbet, so the unfortunate lot fell to the innocent Friar, who like his Master before him, "had gone about doing good." Alexander VI., Peter de' Medici and the petty princes of Italy, in conflict with Charles VIII., the King of France, brought about the death of Savonarola. The Pope was attempting to link the Italian States in a confederacy for protection against the French Monarch, who was then threatening them. To this Italian League, as it was called, the eloquent Dominican was the insurmountable barrier that stood in the way of its consummation. Wielding the political influence which he had ac-

quired over its people, he prevented Florence from becoming a member in the compact. Nor can his motive for so doing be misunderstood. Florence under his leadership had become the one bright spot of true Christian civilization, flourishing in the midst of the basest pagan immorality. And, having, as he did, the instinct as well as the experience of the religious reformer, and dreading the lapse of the Florentines into their former manner of life, which would be a consequence of a union with the other Italian States, he preferred the Florence of which Jesus Christ was King, to the Florence, such as the Italian League, only at its best, could offer. For this reason he incurred the implacable enmity of the Pontiff and the conspiring princes.

Let it be well understood and remembered that Savonarola was never excommunicated. The letter commonly known as the "Brief of Excommunication" was simply a command by the Pope to the Florentine communities to proclaim the Friar excommunicate. On the day of his death he received the Sacrament of Penance, said Mass and accepted a plenary Indulgence which Pope Alexander sent him. Such in brief is the life of Jerome Savonarola, the maligned Friar of the City of Flowers, a religious victim immolated on the altar of politics.

"The evil that men do lives after them; the good is oft interred with their bones." Shall it be so with the great Dominican? His evil, if such it can be called, consists only in the haze of misunderstanding and calumny with which his heroic figure has been enshrouded. His brethren, penetrating the veil of vilification and querulous imputation behold in him an illustrious son of the gentle father Saint Dominic, a true imitator of the angelical Saint Thomas, and a worthy successor of the zealous missionary Saint Vincent Ferrer. He was a man of heroic virtues in the true and full significance of that term. His likeness proclaims a homely man; but nobility of character, gentleness united with firmness and a certain melancholy sweetness are clearly outlined. Benignant and pleasant with all; humble, gentle and of great affability, his agreeable manner was a source of joy and gladness to many; his personality attracted all with whom he came into contact. A man of learning, constant prayer and profound meditation, he made the Holy Scriptures the well-spring of all his spiritual instruction, the foundation of the political system he inaugurated and the standard of his own life. His writings, far from betraying a haughty, ambitious and rebellious spirit, are gems of Catholic ascetical literature, ad-

hering strictly to orthodox principles and, contrary to the custom of his day, written in a style, so simple, yet attractive, that they appealed to all, learned and unlettered alike. As a true Dominican he professed, practised and inculcated in others a most tender devotion to our Blessed Lady, the Mother and Protectress of his Order. For the immoral and enticing pageants to which the Florentines had been accustomed he substituted devotional processions in her honor. To the end of his life he was ever her faithful son and servant. His love for our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament was a marked characteristic of his spiritual life. In the chapel he was often known to spend hours, rapt at times as if in ecstasy; a radiant flood of light was often visible to those who witnessed his fervor. While celebrating Mass his face was illuminated, as with the fire of his love, and in consequence of this prodigy he was accustomed to seek the privacy of such altars as hid him from the observance of all.

Bound by solemn vows he was loyal in the observance of both rules and Constitutions. The tender solicitude for the welfare, spiritual, and temporal of his subjects, both as master of novices and prior of San Marco, mark him as a God-given superior. Bur-  
lamacchi, one of the Friar's biog-

raphers, has left us a touching picture of the family life of the community of San Marco under the direction of Savonarola. "After the siesta," he says, "the brethren would gather around the Father, in cheerfulness and eagerness, to hear some passage of Holy Writ explained. While they walked in the garden he would comment on the sacred text, thus mingling innocent recreation with pious meditation. Sometimes he would take the life of a saint for the subject of his discourse; again they would sing joyous hymns. At other times he would bid them (the novices) dance, accompanying them by the humming of an appropriate air. A practice often followed was that of robing a young novice to represent the Divine Child. Then they would sit around him, giving, as to the beloved Jesus, their hearts, and asking for graces for themselves and others."

Highly talented and cultured Savonarola was endowed by nature with the oratorical power of a Cicero. When he began his career as a missionary, he cared little for the flowery ornate manner of speech proper to this enlightened literary age, preferring to preach the "Word," as his Master had done, in all simplicity. But perceiving the disgust that his style created among the erudite and polished Florentines, he "be-

came all things to all men, that he might save all," and adopted a tone in his sermons that gained for him congregations so large that there was no church in Florence spacious enough to accommodate his auditors. He preached not himself, "but Jesus Christ and Him crucified." "Not only did his sermons attract multitudes to the foot of his pulpit; they sent them away changed in heart and their purpose of life. The whole city assumed an altered aspect; the houses became as convents, the streets as religious cloisters, the public squares as monastic quadrangles. His words, as divine seeds bore the fruits of sanctity in the lives of the Florentine people. The churches were filled with devout worshippers; the confessionals were thronged with penitents, the very streets resounded to the music of hymns and psalms. The scenes of primitive Christianity, where all were of "One mind and one soul in the Lord," seemed again to be enacted. Men sold their goods and gave the proceeds to the poor and needy; they formed themselves into a truly Christian commonwealth, of which, it has been well said, "Savonarola was the uncrowned king."

As a statesman he possessed the Nepeoleanic instinct as a leader of men. The lapse of Florence into its former manner of life after his

death is sufficient proof of his personality, and the influence that he exercised over the ungrateful inhabitants of the Italian City. We have a faithful portrayal of his ardent charity from the scenes that accompanied the famine and plague, which wrought such havoc among the citizens of Florence. As a true reformer he is one of the beacon lights of the history of the Church; while his firm stand against Alexander was but a reflection of the constancy he displayed during his entire career. And if we behold him during his last days; sacrilegiously arrested, held in solitary confinement, insulted and outraged, subjected to rack and torture, ignominiously and unjustly condemned to death; yet not uttering so much as a word of complaint, we cannot but see in him the ardent disciple of

the Cross, the true imitator of the "Man of Sorrows."

His purity of life is unimpeachable, while his apostolate, beset with almost insurmountable difficulties and filled with glorious achievements that are recorded only in heaven, is an eternal monument to his burning zeal. The story of his down-fall is a long and sad one. Much has been written about it, but the last word, as we hope, yet remains to be said. No one can doubt his zeal, no one can call into question the holiness of his life and the singleness of his purpose. If he had a fault—who is the second man who has not? it was excess of zeal. And how terribly did he pay the penalty of his imperfection; it was burnt away in fire and cleansed in blood.

*Bonaventure Neitzey, O. P.*

### IS THERE A MAN?

Who hears the thunder's fearful might,  
Or sees the lightning flashing bright,  
Or hears the tempest's roar at night,  
And is not awed?  
Who, feeling conflagration's breath,  
And tossed in earthquake's lap of death,  
Or braving storm-tossed ocean, saith:  
"There is no God!"

*Bartholomew Reilly, O. P.*