

SAVONAROLA'S "SWEET MARY"

Translated by
EUGENE BONDI, O.P.



IN THE DAYS WHEN ST. MARK'S in Florence was really a convent and not partly a museum as it is today, Dominicans at every step encountered the tender face of the Mother of God in images which enkindled love and devotion to her in the friars' hearts. For Fra Angelico has painted our Lady in many parts of the Convent of St. Mark: in the chapter room, the Virgin is depicted as crushed with grief among the pious women at the foot of the Cross; at the head of the stairway she kneels in ecstasy before the Angel Gabriel; in one of the corridors she is enthroned with her divine Son surrounded by saints. Throughout the sixteenth century the Blessed Mother smiled gently from another of Angelico's panels above the high altar of the church and from the walls frescoed by Cavallini.

Very fittingly, then, has Bacci Venuti painted Fra Jerome Savonarola in prayer beside one of these images of Mary. Nowhere else does Fra Jerome seem more natural than at her feet. What other sixteenth century preacher spoke of Mary more than he? Who loved and diffused that love for her with such zeal as he?

Whenever Fra Jerome speaks or writes of "*Maria dolce*" it is as honey in the mouth of the lion; an odor of piety, simplicity, and sweetness arises from his lips. For him, our Lady was the Mother of God: "O Mary, Mother of God, thou art the Mother of the Creator!" Mother inviolate and immaculate, Mother and Virgin, fruitful Virgin! Virgin before, during, and after child-birth!" For him, Mary was Mediatrix of Graces: "Christ pours forth His graces into the Virgin, and she diffuses them to us." Again in a hymn he sings—

*Tu sei nostra speranza
Di tutti gli om' mundani;
Ch' in Te non ha fidanzza
Si vol volar senza ali.
O carità
Somma pietà
chi non ricorre a Te, niente fa.*

A translation of the article "*Maria Dolce*" del Savonarola by Ambrogio Paganucci, O.P., in *L'Osservatore Romano*, May 12-13, 1952.

You are our hope
 Of all human creatures;
 He who trusts not in thee
 Wishes to fly without wings.
 Oh Charity!
 Highest mercy!
 Who goes not to thee, accomplishes nought.

It was Savonarola's burning desire that his beloved city of Florence return to the sound ways of Christian living, to true love for Jesus. He was convinced that the most efficacious way was to foster devotion to Mary among the people. Hence the many writings, sermons, out-door festivals—all for the purpose of making "*la beatissima e gloriosissima Maria*" better loved in the hearts of the Florentines.

Even today, when we read the Friar's Christmas sermons, we feel the effect of the ardor with which the Prior of San Marco invokes the Mother of God and tenderly tells of her happiness at the crib of the Child Jesus. He calls her "Happy Virgin, blessed Maid, most sweet Virgin." He beseeches her to manifest herself to him: "Show me your face, then, my Lady; sound your sweet voice in my ears, because your voice is gentle and your face comely. I knock: open to me. I am scattered: gather me. I stand in tatters; heal me. . . ." In another Christmas sermon he cried: "We pray thee, glorious Virgin, Mother of pity and mercy, turn toward us thy merciful eyes. Behold our desolation how weak we are in the ways of God, how mighty perils beset us! . . . if you leave us without help, we will surely lose our way. You are our advocate, our mother; you are all our hope . . . when you stretch forth your hand, all things are filled with goodness; turn your face away and the whole world grows troubled. . . . There is nothing so great that you cannot ask it of God. . . ."

High in the pulpit of Santa Maria del Fiore, the famed *Duomo* of Florence, Savonarola was transformed whenever he spoke of Mary. He smiled, he cried; he raised his eyes and his arms to heaven; the same voice which thundered when speaking of the evils of the times now became gentle, and a wave of emotion swept through the congregation.

In Mary's name he spoke to men, women, and children. "O men! Mary speaks to you, 'I am your mother, you are my sons. My children, strive to be like your mother . . . cultivate humility in imitation of me; my works were chastity and humility. I am displeased with

the existence in your city of so many addicts of that cursed vice; I cannot suffer the filth; I cannot enter a city which harbors such abomination'."

He taught the women how to be Mary's true daughters in this life. In Florence vanity was rife, and styles anything but modest. Our Lady, speaking through Savonarola's lips, made herself the exemplar of modesty and purity. "My daughters, if you wish to have me for your mother, do as I did: dress modestly, be reserved. You know that the Virgin dressed simply; her wardrobe consisted of one poor dress. The Virgin is mother of fair love, that is, not of worldly but of divine love; so my daughters, do not have so many frills, so many baubles, if you wish to be the daughters of the Virgin Mary."

He instructed the children as well in devotion to Mary. He urged them to recite the Virgin's Little Office, and to call upon her constantly as their mother. "Recommend yourselves to the Virgin, call her *Mamma mia*, because she is your mother."

Savonarola composed hymns in honor of this heavenly Mother; he organized processions, and arranged to have the feasts of the Virgin together with the entire Christmas season celebrated with great pomp. He never grew weary of preaching about her. His sermons for the feast of the Assumption are famous; each year he invited the faithful to rejoice in the great honor given to Mary, our Mother. "Rejoice, all of you, and make merry; do you not know she is our mother? We can always have recourse to her, and she never fails to hear us." In impressive silence while the people lay prostrate on the earth, he fervently prayed for the Church and his country. "Remember us in the sight of thy divine Son. Turn your merciful eyes to look upon us in our trials. If ever pity has overcome thee, if compassion has ever induced thee to pray for sinners, may our misery move you now, may the plight of the Church now win thy intercession, may the blood being spilled in Italy now constrain thee to our help."

Most of the Florentines followed Fra Jerome in his reform of life; he was loved and revered by many. Yet in Florence, and in Rome and Milan, too, he had many implacable enemies who maneuvered for his downfall by calumniating him. Savonarola heard reports of the hatred launched at him by the sordid elements pitted against him, and in his hours of greatest trial, he took refuge at the feet of our Lady. At night, while his brethren slept, Savonarola prayed, contemplating with tear-filled eyes the dimly visible Madonnas of Angelico. Here, as if in ecstasy, he lost sight of the ungodly corruption in the world about him and gained new strength for the

arduous battles ahead. After these nights spent in sweet conversation with Mary, there can be little wonder that he preached her love with such power; that with such fervor he prayed to her for help. One of his sermons for the festival of Christmas ends with this impassioned plea: "My Mother, obtain for me the remission of my sins, and the grace to be able to resist temptations, to have always a firm and good intention of amendment, and to persevere until death. O Virgin and Mother Inviolable, deign to win for me unswerving obedience and a profound humility that I may truly acknowledge myself a fragile sinner, powerless to do the least good, or even to think to resist temptations without the grace of your divine Son and your prayers. Obtain for me, O most chaste Virgin, stainless chastity of heart and body, so that in purity I may be able to serve your beloved Son and you, O Queen of Heaven. O Mother Sublime, gain for me voluntary poverty . . . and the grace not to despise anyone, nor judge any evil of others, so that in my heart I may prefer myself to no one—neither in merit nor virtue. . . ."

When Fra Jerome Savonarola came to Florence, sacred art had little of sacredness in it. Beautiful Madonnas were painted, but how scant the devotion they expressed: worldly, and modelling the latest Florentine fashions! In the churches one could easily recognize in the altar paintings the ladies whom the artists used as models. Botticelli, for example, depicted that celebrated type of young lady: a melancholic, languid, slender woman, a light veil over her delicate hair, a handsome child in her lap—all framed about with groups of admiring angels. The other artists, too, had their types.

Savonarola did everything he could to prevent the profanation of this lofty medium. The distinguished biographer of Fra Jerome, Burlamacchi, writes: "He sought after unique images of such beauty as would truly seem alive and yet would never completely satisfy the beholder." In his sermons he urged artists to picture our Lady "as Mary walked, dressed humbly and simply, and so modestly that scarcely her face was seen." In another passage he said, "You have read of the Blessed Virgin, and you must concede that in her divine grace so abounded that no one could look upon her with an evil desire; indeed, since she possessed something divine, all who gazed upon her were compelled to revere her."

The foremost artists of the age sat rapt in the spell of Savonarola's eloquence: Botticelli, Lorenzo di Credi, Fra Bartolomeo della Porta, Perugino, Pollaiuolo, Fra Filippo Lippi, Andrea and Giovanni della Robbia, and Benedetto da Maiano, to mention only the most renowned. Savonarola's influence is clearly seen in the later paintings of

some of them. Their favorite subjects became the sacred mysteries; devout Madonnas of an exquisite and chaste bearing, serene, noble, and expressing a supernatural peace.

It has been written that Savonarola's last hours "seemed colored with azure, he seems to dilate, giving a sense of wondrous serenity, in sublime meditations. . . ." We need not marvel at the peaceful death of the Friar from San Marco. He whose whole life's hope was to crown Mary Queen of the Florentines, had always looked forward to meeting her in heaven.