

6-2013

# Lessons From Florence: The Savonarolan Movement

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Lessons From Florence:  
The Savonarolan Movement

By

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Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for  
Honors in the Department of History

Union College  
June, 2013

## **Abstract**

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### **Lessons From Florence: The Savonarolan Movement**

This thesis examines the life of Girolamo Savonarola (1452-1498), a Renaissance preacher from Ferrara, Italy. From his early beginnings as a student of theology, to his years spent preaching from the pulpit in the Santa Maria del Fiore Cathedral in Florence, this paper shows how his life transformed into one driven by the Will of God. The thesis is divided into three sections. The first section covers the early life of Savonarola and how hatred for the materialistic and sinful world, along with the teachings of his grandfather, drove him towards religion. The second section focuses on Savonarola executing the Will of God in Florence through the use of sermons. By applying a combination of the Holy Scriptures and divine inspiration to his cause, Savonarola attempted to implement religious and moral reforms in Florence during the 1490s. Using the sermons as his key tool, Savonarola hoped to enlighten the Florentine populace to adopt a life devoted to simplicity and prayer. In this way, equality would resonate throughout the city and no man would think to place himself above another. His popularity grew at an exponential rate and Savonarola experienced success in his desire to reform Florence, until his pride got the best of him.

In his plight to rid Florence of sin, Savonarola publicly denounced anybody who disagreed with his reforms—including Pope Alexander VI and members of the Medici family—because in doing so they were questioning the Will of God. The second section culminates with Savonarola being found guilty of heresy and schism, and ultimately it concludes with his public execution in 1498. The third section of this thesis is a text written in the same format as one of Savonarola's sermons. In this part I created a

scenario in which Savonarola had one final opportunity to reflect upon his life and deliver his last thoughts to the Florentine populace the day before his execution. I performed the piece at the Steinmetz symposium. The sermon was written as a way to show the depth of Savonarola's devotion to his cause; how a man can become so blinded by his own ambition that all logic gets lost to the original aspiration. Savonarola was willing to suffer the ultimate price for his mission, an undertaking that began with devotion to prayer, which in turn led to a false prophet.

## Introduction

Girolamo Maria Francesco Matteo Savonarola was born on September 21, 1452 in Ferrara, Italy. His grandfather, Michele Savonarola, was a famous doctor at the University of Padua Hospital in Ferrara. Coming from a family of means, "Girolamo was to see the opulence and raw power of the sort that he would come to detest and denounce."<sup>1</sup> Girolamo displayed his potential to do great things beginning at a very young age. In 1474, at the age of twenty-two, Savonarola made the decision to forfeit a life of worldly pleasures in order to become a "Militant Knight of Christ," and he joined the Dominican Order.<sup>2</sup> By militant, Savonarola meant that his actions would be driven by aggressive social and moral motives. He believed that his cause for ecclesiastical reform had already been written down in the Holy Scriptures. Savonarola's early teachings would infuse people to always strive to do good and act morally towards one another, all in God's grace. Savonarola went to Florence for the first time in 1482, where

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<sup>1</sup> Lauro Martines, *Fire in the City: Savonarola and the Struggle for Renaissance Florence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pg. 8.

<sup>2</sup> Alison Brown, "Ideology and Faction in Savonarolan Florence," 2000, pg. 27, accessed January 28, 2013, International Medieval Bibliography.

he was called to be the Post of Lector, or instructor in theology, at the Convent of San Marco.<sup>3</sup> His first experience in Florence was not successful in that the Florentine populace did not listen nor did they seem to care for him or his ideas on Church reform. After “failing” his first attempt to reform Florence, Savonarola departed for San Gimignano in 1485. The people of Florence did not even acknowledge his withdrawal.

During a Lenten sermon in 1485, Savonarola began preaching his prophetic truths. From that moment forward, Savonarola was no longer just another Friar preaching the Holy Scripture, he became the voice of the Heavenly Father on earth. When Lorenzo Medici called for Savonarola’s return to the Convent of San Marco Florence in 1490, the floodgates were open for the Friar to transform Florence into the “New Jerusalem” that God had planned it to be. Through his interpretations of the Holy Scriptures and his prophetic truths, Savonarola quickly became the most influential person in all of Florence. The people cried when they heard him speak, and they refined their lifestyle’s to concentrate on the common good. Savonarola spoke of the scourge from God that was destined to destroy Florence and her people for their sins. In Rome, the papacy was at first intrigued by the methods of the new friar from Ferrara. However, Savonarola was able to burn his bridges with all of Rome when he prophesized that “Rome would be punished, perhaps even abandoned in favor of a new center, a New Jerusalem, Florence will be the center of a Christianity renewed and triumphant.”<sup>4</sup> Savonarola’s continued

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<sup>3</sup> Girolamo Savonarola, Donald Weinstein, and Valerie R. Hotchkiss, *Girolamo Savonarola: Piety, Prophecy, and Politics in Renaissance Florence : The Elizabeth Perkins Prothro Galleries, 20 March-30 July 1994*. (Dallas, 1994), pg. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Donald Weinstein, *Savonarola and Florence; Prophecy and Patriotism in the Renaissance*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970), pg. 230-31.

attacks on Rome, and the papacy in particular, would eventually lead to his excommunication in the summer of 1497, closely followed by his execution in 1498.

The papal excommunication Bull did not have the effect on Savonarola that Pope Alexander VI had hoped. The Pope even threatened to excommunicate any Florentine that continued harboring the friar. The charismatic preacher would not let the Pope's threats or actions head him from his divine mission. He continued preaching on the morality of man and the reform of the Church.<sup>5</sup> The actions that ultimately led to his public execution were those that Savonarola made in regards to Florence's political structure. It is one thing to be a captivating preacher who hopes to instill change by opening a city's eyes to conform to God's will; it is another thing entirely to attempt to force said reforms on a city by manipulating its political infrastructure. By the late 1490s Savonarola had thousands of followers in Florence, but he also had a number of enemies, many of whom held the power in the city and were not going to permit some "prophet" to take it away from them through political reform. Savonarola refused to discontinue his mission because of criticisms; he even addressed his critics in some of his later sermons. It was this zeal that led to his death in Piazza della Signoria on May 23, 1498. In this paper I show how Girolamo Savonarola, a man who claimed himself to be a prophet of God, failed in his attempt to execute God's plan to establish the rebirth of Christianity by implementing moral and religious reforms in Renaissance Florence. Savonarola proved to be equally vulnerable to sin as any other human being; he was blinded by his own ambition and placed personal glory over the truth. Savonarola's pride is what led him to his execution.

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<sup>5</sup> Weinstein, *Savonarola and Florence*, pg. 281.

## **Part One: Early Life and the Road to Religious and Political Reform in**

### **Florence**

Girolamo Savonarola was the third of seven children. Girolamo had two older brothers: Ognibene and Bartolomeao, along with four younger siblings: Marco, Alberto, Beatrice, and Chiara. His parents were Niccolò di Michele dalla Savonarola and Elena Bonacossi. The Savonarolas originally came from Padua, Italy, where one of the city gates was named after them. Girolamo's mother came from Bonacossi, a branch of the old and powerful Bonacolsi clan, once the lords of Mantua. The linking of the Savonarola and Bonacossi families was a reflection of the marriage practice of the day.<sup>6</sup> As a child, Girolamo's mentor was his grandfather. Michele Savonarola was a highly distinguished professor and physician, who became renown for his medical writings and was known for his eminence as a teacher of science. Michele's success in his respective fields had earned him a fortune. Michele's son, Niccolò went into business and money changing; he failed in both of those fields. He had fathered seven children and left his daughters with no dowries to think of.<sup>7</sup>

While Girolamo's father strived to attain fantastic wealth, his grandfather had already acquired wealth and still, he was "a man of profound religious sentiments who was repelled by the cult of pleasure and sensuality, the materialistic worldliness, of the Este court."<sup>8</sup> Given the personality of Girolamo, it does not come as a surprise that he found himself drawn to his grandfather more so than anybody else in his family. Michele

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<sup>6</sup> Roberto Ridolfi, *The Life of Girolamo Savonarola*. (New York: Knopf, 1959), pg. 2.

<sup>7</sup> Martines, *Fire in the City*, pg. 7.

<sup>8</sup> Martines, *Fire in the City*, pg. 9.

Savonarola saw Girolamo's potential at a very young age, something that they rest of Italy would soon see as well. Michele appointed himself to be the first tutor of Girolamo; he began by teaching him Latin. After reading Cicero, Quintilian, and even Ovid, Girolamo turned against fashion and began to cherish the early Church fathers. His favorite amongst the early fathers was St. Thomas Aquinas, who he would continue to love and base his ideas off of in his future career as a Friar.<sup>9</sup> During his earlier years of education, Savonarola fell in love with a woman who lived just across the street from him in Ferrara. Her name was Laudomia, and she was an illegitimate child of the rich and powerful Strozzi family. Savonarola supposedly asked her to marry him while hanging out of his window when Laudomia was across the street. She arrogantly rejected his proposal on the grounds that "the great house of the Strozzi would hardly think of allying themselves with the Savonarolas."<sup>10</sup> Later in his career, Savonarola claimed to never have loved a woman in this world. Perhaps he chose to erase the event from his memory entirely. However, the traumatic lustful event may have also played a role in his hatred toward wealth and power. And, as will be noted later, it is conceivable that the rejection he faced by a woman aided him in his decision to ban women from some of his sermons, as well as exclude them from all of his political movements.

Michele Savonarola died in 1468. The loss of his grandfather was incredibly difficult for Girolamo; but he had learned a great deal from him and was easily able to manage his studies at the University of Ferrara, where he received an advanced arts degree. Niccolò Savonarola saw his son's intellectual capabilities as the family's ticket to re-acquire the wealth that he had lost in his failed business ventures. Niccolò pushed

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<sup>9</sup> George M'Hardy, *Savonarola* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1901), pg. 12.

<sup>10</sup> Ridolfi, *Life of Savonarola*, pg. 4.



Girolamo to study medicine and attain fame and riches the same way that his grandfather had done.<sup>11</sup> Savonarola had already developed a hatred for the materialistic world, and could not stand that fact that his father was so intently pushing him into it. At the age of twenty, Savonarola wrote a poem, which he entitled, “The Destruction of the World:”

Ah, look at that catamite and the pimp,  
Dressed in purple, frauds looked up to  
By the common people and adored by the blind world.

Earth is so pulled down by every vice  
That it will never stand again.  
And Rome, the capital, slips into the muck,  
Never more to rise again.

Avoid all those who put on purple.  
Flee from palaces and ostentatious loggias,  
Speaking to the few alone,  
For you will be the enemy of all the world.

When I saw the proud woman go into Rome,  
She goes about poor, with her parts exposed,  
Her hair in strands and her garlands torn;  
She is blasphemed by dogs,  
The swindlers of our holy days.<sup>12</sup>

At the age of twenty, Savonarola was already taking shots at Rome, he said essentially saying that those in the papal court were pirates, men stealing proper religion away from the rest of the world. He had found his moral voice for love and for more rumination about love. Savonarola was finding it increasingly difficult to ignore the blind wickedness inside the people living in Italy. In May of 1474, Savonarola took what he called a “pleasure” driven trip to Faenza. To him, the idea of taking any sort of trip that involved pleasure was a trip that should not be taken at all. During his visit,

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<sup>11</sup> Ridolfi, *Life of Savonarola*, pg. 2.

<sup>12</sup> Martines, *Fire in the City*, pg. 10-12.

Savonarola went to the Church of Santo Agostino, where he was suddenly struck by a word from God. The words came from Genesis, “Get thee out of thy country, and from they kindred, and from thy father’s house.”<sup>13</sup> Those words would serve as the first of many that Savonarola was going to hear directly from God. On January 13, 1495, Savonarola delivered a sermon in Florence in the defense of his prophecies, which he entitled the “Renovation Sermon.” In this sermon Savonarola said, “I say to you Florence, that this light has been given to me for your sake, not mine, for this light does not make a man pleasing to God. I also want you to know that I began to see these things more than fifteen, maybe twenty years ago, but I began to speak of them only in the last ten years.”<sup>14</sup> I imagine that after hearing the voice of God for the first time that it would not prove to be difficult to remember the exact date and location of its occurrence. The fact that Savonarola did not remember the exact day is even more surprising given that when he first realized that theology was the most important form of science, he memorized the Bible in its entirety.<sup>15</sup> Regardless, Savonarola knew that the voice he heard that day in Faenza was in fact the voice of God, and he would be damned if he was not going to listen to Him.

Upon his return to Ferrara, Savonarola felt prompted to become a member of the Dominican Order. He made this binding decision without informing his family, largely because Savonarola knew that the chances of them being able to talk him out of it would be greater if he faced them before making the decision. When he joined the Order, Savonarola did so knowing the clean distinction between the true Church and the harlot

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<sup>13</sup> Ridolfi, *Life of Savonarola*, pg. 7.

<sup>14</sup> Girolamo Savonarola et al., *Selected Writings of Girolamo Savonarola: Religion and Politics, 1490-1498* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), pg. 61.

<sup>15</sup> Ridolfi, *Life of Savonarola*, pg. 3.

in Rome. He knew that to truly make a difference in the Church he would soon have to speak openly about how he felt, however, Savonarola ended his poem saying essentially that, “Not being heard or understood is perhaps better.”<sup>16</sup> At this point in Savonarola’s “career”, the fight at hand was with his nuclear family. Savonarola was still a young man when he made his decision to join the Dominicans; he left his home on a night when his family was out enjoying the religious festivities that took place in Ferrara in April. The internal battle that Savonarola was having with himself is evident in the letter he wrote to his father on April 25, 1475:

First of all I want you, as a manly spirit and disdainer of fleeting things, to be swayed by truth, rather than –as women are– by passion, and judge in accordance with the empire of reason whether or not I was right to flee from the world and pursue my own calling. The reason the moves me to enter the religious order is this: first, the great misery of the world, the iniquity of men, the carnal crimes, adulteries, theft, pride, idolatry, and cruel blasphemies... I prayed daily to my lord Jesus Christ that he pull me up out of this slime, Now God has shown me the way, and I have accepted it... don’t you think it a true gift of grace to have a son who is one of the knights of Jesus Christ? You should surely rejoice and celebrate over this triumph... I beg you to comfort my mother, pray you both to give me your blessing, and I shall always pray fervently for your souls.<sup>17</sup>

In these excerpts from the letter, it becomes clear that Savonarola knew his father would have strongly rejected his decision to leave the family. In the few discussions that Savonarola had with his father there had been much gentle, but firm disagreement on the matter. Given the fact that his father had lost everything he had ever earned for his family, it becomes possible to believe that Niccolò wanted Girolamo for selfish reasons that did not have to do solely with the love of his son. Also, the fact that Girolamo had proven to possess a higher level of intellect than any living member of his family made it

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<sup>16</sup> Martines, *Fire in the City*, pg. 12.

<sup>17</sup> Martines, *Fire in the City*, pg. 12-14.

more difficult for his father to watch as he threw away all opportunity to regain the family's lost fortune. Two months after sending the letter to his father, Savonarola received news that his every member of his family was still wailing over his decision to leave. Savonarola, against his better judgment, wrote a second letter to his family; this one did not carry anywhere near the same tone as the first:

What are you crying about, you blind ones? The Prince of princes, He Who is infinite power, calls me with a loud voice – more, he begs me (oh vast love) with a thousand tears [as on the Cross] to gird on a sword of the finest gold and precious stones, because he wants me in the ranks of his militant knights... you complain when you should rejoice, if such are your ways, I say nothing else to you but this: Away from me all you who work at doing injustice.<sup>18</sup>

In the second letter, it became clear that Savonarola no longer even felt sympathy for his family. Even if he did, his only regret was that they too were sinners and were too blinded by the materialistic world to see God's light shining to the fullest as he did. He ended his letter with a generous flourish in Latin, he said, "Since the soul is more precious than the body, rejoice and exult that the glorious God is making me a doctor of souls [not of the body]."<sup>19</sup> Savonarola chose this line from Psalms VI, its meaning fit perfectly with the context of the letter, especially because his family had hoped that he would become a successful doctor of the body, just like his grandfather had done.

By the time Savonarola was twenty-three, he had found comfort in his decision to leave his family behind in order to pursue the life of light and morality; the life that God had chosen for him. Savonarola's first stop after his departure from Ferrara in 1476 was the convent of St. Dominic in Bologna. It was there that Savonarola took his first monastic vows. His decision to join refuge with the Dominican friars was very likely

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<sup>18</sup> Martines, *Fire in the City*, pg. 16.

<sup>19</sup> Donald Weinstein, *Savonarola and Florence; Prophecy and Patriotism in the Renaissance*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970), pg. 81.

made on the grounds that his grandfather had taught him to understand and love to works written by St. Thomas Aquinas; he too was a member of the Dominican Order. Thomas Aquinas is considered to be one of the thirty-five “doctors of the Church,” a title only granted to those priests who demonstrate exceptional knowledge and practice of theological studies. Nevertheless, Thomas Aquinas had been a hero of Savonarola since his boyhood.<sup>20</sup> He began his work as a friar doing medial tasks in Bologna. While he certainly already possessed the knowledge necessary to preach, and had a strong understanding of theology, Savonarola pushed to do things like work in the garden, make clothing for the monks, or even take care of cleaning the waste deposits produced by the other friars. His reasoning behind doing these tasks was to escape from the distractions and iniquities of the world, do penance for his sins, and devote himself to quiet communion with God.<sup>21</sup>

Savonarola was very strict with himself about maintaining obedience to his superiors and to the rules of the Order in Bologna. He ate only enough to sustain life, his clothes were worn down and coarse to the touch, and his bed consisted of a stack of straw laying on roughly crossed pieces of wood. After spending a good deal of time in his training process, Savonarola made some discoveries about the real inner workings and corruption that festered in ecclesiastical life. Savonarola found that the monks within the Convent were not able to escape from the negative spirit of the secular world in the same way that he had. Perhaps it was because they had not heard directly from God like he had. Savonarola noticed that many of monks at the Convent were driven by ambition and

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<sup>20</sup> M’Hardy, *Savonarola*, pg. 21.

<sup>21</sup> M’Hardy, *Savonarola*, pg. 22.

selfishness, rather than by the love of God's everlasting light.<sup>22</sup> The Cardinals were regularly offering and accepting bribes, he even witnessed the planning of immoral acts in Rome. Savonarola was, unfortunately, receiving an education from a Church that was riddled with gross scandals and abuses. Within a year of his entrance to the convent, Savonarola wrote a poem in which he described the Church in the guise of a chaste and venerable virgin. The imagery that Savonarola used in his poem would have angered all members of the convent to the point where he likely would have been removed. But he chose to keep silent, (temporarily) restraining himself from delivering his protests that he felt burning so strongly within his soul.<sup>23</sup>

Savonarola had first entered the monastery in Bologna with the hopes of merely becoming a lay brother (a position that he knew was beneath his qualifications). His superiors in the Convent quickly discovered that Savonarola was a scholar and they noticed his exceptional knowledge of theology. They asked that he use his gifts to account in a higher form of usefulness than that in which he had initially requested to be employed. Savonarola was called upon to teach the novices in the convent and aid them with their studies in philosophy and theology. The offer was one that his superiors hoped Savonarola would happily accept, which to them he appeared to do. However, in reality Savonarola loathed his new position in the Convent.

After revisiting some of the studies that he had been distanced from for a number of years, Savonarola came to realize that humans could not truly gain anything other than vanity from studying the minds of ancient philosophers. However, "It was in the Holy Scriptures that Savonarola found the most satisfying nourishment for the needs of his

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<sup>22</sup> M'Hardy, *Savonarola*, pg. 24.

<sup>23</sup> Ridolfi, *Life of Savonarola*, pg. 20.

heart.”<sup>24</sup> His time spent at the Convent in Bologna was where Savonarola supposedly committed the whole of the Bible to memory. He felt that the Old Testament was the most appealing because of its stern denunciations of sin and its awful warnings of judgment in the name of Righteous God. It was also at this time that Savonarola began writing notes in the margins of his favorite passages in the Bible; some of these notes would later be transformed into the themes of his sermons.<sup>25</sup>

The Dominican Order was distinctively known as a preaching order. One of its functions was to rear a succession of men trained to stand in the pulpit and administer a sermon in front of a crowd of worshippers.<sup>26</sup> Savonarola had displayed great potential to become a friar one day, however, part of the young friar’s training was to watch as his superiors indulged their own congregation. This part of the training proved to be difficult for Savonarola, because while he spent a great deal of time listening and learning, he found himself learning what not to say rather than what he should say to his listeners. He had lost the respect he once had for superiors in the Church. He could not help but feel that their very standing at the pulpit was a sin in-of-itself. Regardless, as part of his steps toward becoming a friar, Savonarola was sent to preach at several of the Dominican Convents all throughout Northern Italy. As it would turn out, in 1481 Savonarola was appointed to preach in his native city, Ferrara. Upon his return, it was noted that he kept his family at a distance and cut off all previous connections he once had with ordinary acquaintances.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> M’Hardy, *Savonarola*, pg. 25.

<sup>25</sup> Martines, *Fire in the City*, pg. 18.

<sup>26</sup> M’Hardy, *Savonarola*, pg. 28.

<sup>27</sup> M’Hardy, *Savonarola*, pg. 26.

During his time as a friar in Ferrara, Savonarola did not touch his audiences the way he would in the future at the main Cathedral in Florence, the Santa Maria del Fiore. He spoke the words of the Holy Scriptures. Apparently, Savonarola was able to touch the conscious' of men and women in when speaking to them individually, however he had not yet grasped the technique of delivering a sermon such that the words are felt by the worshippers as strongly as the preacher who delivered them. The individual city-states within Italy were constantly fighting wars amongst each other, either to gain territory or force the other cities to open their gates to foreign merchants looking to expand their business and thus, increase the overall power of their particular city-state. While Savonarola was in Ferrara, the Venetians were quickly approaching the city walls, while Pope Sixtus IV was also pressing down on the hand of Ferrara. The Dominican Order, looking to defend their friar's, elected Savonarola to the office of lecturer in the Convent of San Marco in Florence.<sup>28</sup> The choice to save Savonarola was an easy decision for the superior monks in the Order; he had demonstrated knowledge and abilities that stretched well beyond his years. And so in 1480, Savonarola, as he had been commanded, set out barefoot on the road to Florence, carrying with him his two most valuable possessions: a Bible and a breviary (a book containing the service for each day).

Savonarola arrived in Florence in May, the month when the city of flowers is at her most beautiful. His first order of business was to win over the affection of his fellow-monks at the Convent. The chronicler of the Convent tells us today that, "With Savonarola there came into San Marco a new spirit of true poverty, and a new feeling of

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<sup>28</sup> Ridolfi, *Life of Savonarola*, pg. 11-12.



brotherly love.”<sup>29</sup> In San Marco, similarly to in Bologna, Savonarola thoroughly impressed his peers and superiors with his vigorous spiritual life and unequivocal understanding of the Scriptures. One of his peers even noted that upon hearing one of Savonarola’s lessons on the Scripture, particularly those in the Old Testament, it was as though the teaching was divinely inspired.<sup>30</sup> It could be argued that Savonarola took his lecturers chair and turned it into a pulpit. His first attempt at a sermon in Florence was in the church of Benedictine, during Advent of 1482. This sermon was a small beginning, which is way it was conducted at a small church. Because of this, the success of a sermon, or lack there of, was of little significance. Savonarola had been preaching simultaneously at the Church of Orsanmichele. Orsanmichele was also a small church. Savonarola was most likely preaching at two small congregations as a training method, a way to strengthen and provide more stamina for his voice. He would need this practice because after just two years of preaching in small settings, Savonarola was called to deliver Lenten sermons at the Cathedral of San Lorenzo (the Patron Cathedral of the Medici family) in 1484.<sup>31</sup>

“The sermons were a disaster, and the memory of this would nag him, as he admitted a decade later.”<sup>32</sup> Savonarola had never preached in such grand surroundings or to such a large congregation. His voice, still hoarse and uncertain, his foreign pronunciation, and his rough gestures displeased the congregation. Savonarola gained little favor with the public, and by the end of his 1484 Lenten sermons, his audience consisted of roughly twenty-five men, women, and children. Today we know little about

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<sup>29</sup> Ridolfi, *Life of Savonarola*, pg. 15.

<sup>30</sup> Ridolfi, *Life of Savonarola*, pg. 16.

<sup>31</sup> Martines, *Fire in the City*, pg. 20.

<sup>32</sup> Martines, *Fire in the City*, pg. 17.

the sermons he delivered during his first preaching assignment; there exists no written evidence revealing what Scriptures he read from or what his main ideas were.<sup>33</sup> The year of 1484 was one that could be characterized as a time of deep internal discouragement for Savonarola. However, Savonarola was able to find himself once again through his “dream of the water of repentance.” For the second time now, God had come to his aid when he most needed it, and told him that the Church had to be scourged, and soon. God left Savonarola with eight reasons why the scourge was not only necessary, but also inevitable.<sup>34</sup>

After his failures in Florence, Savonarola was reminded by God of his mission to not only inform Italy of the coming scourge, but also prepare the people for what was to follow. Thus, when he was sent to San Gimignano in Lent of 1485, his prophetic sermons began. Savonarola learned of the death of his father, Niccolò in March of 1485. Savonarola did feel remorse, however he felt preoccupied with his mission to inform the people that, “The Church must be castigated and reformed with the greatest speed.”<sup>35</sup> After experiencing some successes with his sermons during Lent of 1485, the Church of San Gimignano anticipated his 1486 Lenten sermons to be of great importance. During these 1486 sermons, Savonarola explained the eight reasons why the Church needed to be scourged, these reasons were the same as the ones he heard from God in his dream of water repentance two years earlier. Following his introduction to the congregation, Savonarola stood at the pulpit and listed the eight reasons for the scourge: First, the wickedness of man had become so great that the measure was now full. Second, God

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<sup>33</sup> Weinstein, *Savonarola and Florence*, pg. 84.

<sup>34</sup> Weinstein, *Savonarola and Florence*, pg. 86.

<sup>35</sup> Ridolfi, *Life of Savonarola*, pg. 22.

gave the Church to wicked shepherds who do not deserve to flock His worshippers. Third, because He sent prophecy among men. Fourth, The good within men had lost strength and needed to be returned. Fifth, There had been a massive decline of faith in human spirits. Sixth, God hated the extreme rottenness of the Church. Seventh, God had contempt for the Saints. And Eighth, God had seen the voluminous decay of religious observance.<sup>36</sup>

After his 1486 Lenten sermons at the Church of San Gimignano, Savonarola had established himself as a preacher of talent; a man who could captivate an audience using his words, and according to him, the words of God. He returned to Bologna in 1487 to be the General of studies at the University of San Domenico. After spending a year teaching young scholars the art of preaching and understanding theology, his superiors in the Order sent Savonarola back to Ferrara before Lent in 1488. At last, he saw his mother and his birthplace once again. Savonarola remained in Ferrara for some two years in the Convent of Santa Maria delgi Angeli; however, he also preached in a number of other churches throughout Northern Italy.<sup>37</sup> His prophetic words were continuing to sear to the surface, and word of this new “prophet” was quickly spreading throughout the clergy. During Advent of 1489, Savonarola was preaching in Brescia, and it was there that he warned the people of his prophecy for their city. Savonarola apprised that a great scourge was to descend upon them, that fathers would see their children slain and shamefully mangled in the streets. The citizens of Brescia remembered these words when, in 1512, the French sacked the city and put it to the sword with the utmost cruelty.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Ridolfi, *Life of Savonarola*, pg. 24-5.

<sup>37</sup> Ridolfi, *Life of Savonarola*, pg. 27.

<sup>38</sup> Weinstein, *Savonarola and Florence*, pg. 75.

In May of 1490, a most unexpected person, Lorenzo Medici, or as he was better known, Lorenzo il Magnifico, vociferated for the return of the friar called Savonarola to Florence. Savonarola returned to the Convent of San Marco and took on his former post as lecturer. He continued with his teachings that he had begun in Brescia within the walls of the Convent. Other members of the Order were so impressed with his spiritual attraction and wonderful gift as a speaker that they, on the 1<sup>st</sup> of August, sent him to preach at the Church of San Marco.<sup>39</sup> The sermons that Savonarola delivered at the Church of San Marco in 1491 would serve as his “new” introduction to the city of Florence. He began these sermons by telling the people of Florence that they all were sinners; and because of their refusal to seek proper repentance God had to scourge them. Savonarola said that three things were destined to happen: the renovation of the Church would come about in these times, all of Italy will be scourged by God before He brought about this renovation, and lastly that these things were all going to happen very soon.<sup>40</sup> This “new” Savonarola who arrived in the city was able to immediately instill both fear and curiosity within those congregated at the Church of San Marco. Word of the prophet from Ferrara spread through the city like a plague; and before the end of 1491, Savonarola had transformed himself into the most listened to preacher in the entire city of Florence.

Savonarola’s return carried with it a sense of irony in that Lorenzo Medici, the man who demanded that he return, would end up hating the friar more than any other man in the city in less than a year. Today it is argued that Lorenzo called for Savonarola’s return because illness had fallen upon him, and he hoped to be delivered from evil in his

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<sup>39</sup> Ridolfi, *Life of Savonarola*, pg. 32.

<sup>40</sup> Weinstein, *Savonarola and Florence*, pg. 69.

life after death.<sup>41</sup> Savonarola's early successes upon his return earned him an invitation to preach in the city's largest and most important Church, the Santa Maria del Fiore. His Lenten sermons in 1491 were focused on denouncing the standard Church practices. Savonarola always began his sermons with a quotation from the Bible as his springboard for a blistering commentary on the present scene. He had no fear in showing the clergy that he was the mark of a new beginning; he said, "I shall start a new manner of preaching."<sup>42</sup> He made it his mission to single out targets: the wealthy who searched for luxury in the pockets of the poor, the vanities of women, and time and again he attacked the corruption of the Church. He always reminded his congregation of the need to both cleanse and renew the Church.<sup>43</sup>

In April of 1492, as Lorenzo Medici was fading away on his death bed; he asked to be seen by the friar, whom he came to hate, to be absolved from his sins. Savonarola willingly saw Lorenzo, however, he refused to provide him absolution and a blessing until Lorenzo was willing to accept Savonarola's conditions for the Church. To this day it is not known what the conditions were, but it is assumed that the only agreement that the two men forged was that Savonarola would give Lorenzo his blessing and permit the usurer man to face death in peace.<sup>44</sup> Towards the end of 1492, Savonarola's view of the Church and the impact of social life on morals were bearing him toward a position in which he would have a voice in politics. However, he could not see how politics could ever be put before God and His will. Savonarola, choosing to ignore the inevitable clash

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<sup>41</sup> Martines, *Fire in the City*, pg. 20.

<sup>42</sup> Martines, *Fire in the City*, pg. 25.

<sup>43</sup> Ridolfi, *Life of Savonarola*, pg. 30.

<sup>44</sup> Martines, *Fire in the City*, pg. 28.

of God and politics, focused on the clergy. The friars began to prefer his stricter regimen; which included more fasting, more praying, less aimless talk, and simpler clothing.<sup>45</sup>

Over the course of the following year, Savonarola and his close followers were able to bring the Dominican Convents in Fiesole and Pisa under their unified leadership. Savonarola wanted first to unite all of Tuscany before branching his ideals beyond to the whole of the Italian Peninsula. When the Dominican Convent at Pisa was brought under Savonarola's wing, over forty of their Friars abandoned it because they refused to accept the new austerities.<sup>46</sup> Savonarola did not mind losing members of the clergy who were not in it for the sole purpose of serving God in the best possible manner. Towards the end of 1493, Savonarola spent several months in the familiar city of Bologna. He delivered all of the city's principle Lenten sermons for that year. Meanwhile, as the year 1494 approached, so did King Charles VIII of France and his army towards Italy to seize and conquer the divided city-states. In Florence, the political scene was swerving toward a crisis that would bleed the city, and Piero Medici, son of Lorenzo, most certainly did not have any solutions. While the Medici were on the verge of abruptly toppling to the ground, Savonarola would return from Naples and be catapulted to the forefront of the Florentine crisis.

## **Part Two: Using the Pulpit to Mediate the Transformation of Florence into The City of God**

On November 17, 1494, the Florentine populace went from enjoying the view of an arresting sunset reflecting on the Arno River, to being swathed with terror when the

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<sup>45</sup> Martines, *Fire in the City*, pg. 31.

<sup>46</sup> Martines, *Fire in the City*, pg. 33.

city's warning bells began to boom through the streets. King Charles VIII of France was mounted on his horse less than a mile outside the city gates, with the entire French army at his back. The current government was the Signory, a select group that consisted of nine officials, all of whom had acquired their positions through wealth and prestige, rather than from popular votes. Together they assembled a council of 500 men to discuss the city's defense strategy against the flood waiting to burst through their walls. The decision was made to send Florence's newest and most renowned friar, Girolamo Savonarola, to speak in private with King Charles.<sup>47</sup> Savonarola revealed to King Charles that he had been sent to Florence by God, and that his coming lightened the hearts and exhilarated the minds of everyone in the city. After a "Godly" conversation, Savonarola was able to convince the King that, while Florence deserved a scourge from God, the reformation process had begun and the Lord would urge the King to head south to conquer Naples instead. King Charles left the exchange feeling flattered and even more powerful than before he breached the Italian border. Savonarola's words did in fact persuade him turn with his army and ride south.<sup>48</sup>

Less than two weeks after the intense drama with the King of France, on November 28 1494, Savonarola delivered his *First Sunday of Advent* sermon. In this sermon he wanted to emphasize the fact that God had just saved them from utter annihilation, with nothing but Hell to follow. In his plight to push the city toward seeking penance, Savonarola said:

O Florence, remember the danger in which you stood so recently, the danger of death, I say, from which God, in His mercy, wanted to free you. O Florence, if

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<sup>47</sup> Lauro Martines, *Fire in the City: Savonarola and the Struggle for Renaissance Florence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pg. 50.

<sup>48</sup> Martines, *Fire in the City*, pg. 53.

things had ended badly, as they could have done, many, very likely, who had no confessed nor had a good intention to confess, would today be in Hell; therefore, thank God and give praise to Him, Florence, and continue to say that tribulation is good, in that it makes one turn to God, and He hears you. The words were not spoken in vain when I said to you, “Do penance, turn to God.”<sup>49</sup>

It is important to acknowledge here that Savonarola did not look receive personal thanks from any member of the congregation, even though it was in fact he who spoke to King Charles of France and enthralled him to move past Florence with his army. Savonarola truly believed that all credit belonged to God, for it was He who saved them all; Savonarola was merely His tool in the middle of it. Savonarola was God’s voice on earth, and in his mind he had no choice but to abide by the words of God and instill His intended reforms within the souls of the people of Florence.

Throughout the sermon, Savonarola kept reminding his congregation that they must take care not to incur the vice of ingratitude. Savonarola claimed that ingratitude had three gradations: “The first stage is not to know the favor one has received; the second is not to give thanks to the One Who has given it to us; the third, which is the worst, is to consider the favor an evil.”<sup>50</sup> Savonarola emphasized the fact that “man” did not stop the flood, which was the French army, from entering and ravaging the city. It was He who came, and He did not come because Florence necessarily deserved to be saved, but rather He wanted Florence to become the new center of the Christian world. This sermon also served as a great opportunity to prove that his prophetic voice spoke the truth. Between 1492 and the arrival of the French King, Savonarola spoke of nothing other than the great flood that was inevitably coming to Florence, and that tribulations

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<sup>49</sup> Girolamo Savonarola et al., *Selected Writings of Girolamo Savonarola: Religion and Politics, 1490-1498* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), pg. 145.

<sup>50</sup> Savonarola, *Aggeus, Sermon VII, The First Sunday of Advent*, pg. 140.



were on the horizon. King Charles was the flood; now Savonarola had his irrefutable evidence:

Anyone with half a brain, even if he has no faith, understands that what I say to you is true, but those who do not believe it, if you look carefully, either they are utterly lacking in reason, or they are obstinate and blinded by evil-doing. These are the lukewarm, who do not believe and impede others from believing; but let them wait a while, for God has come to punish them *ut qui non vident videant, et qui vident caeci fiant* [Ioh. 9:39].<sup>51 52</sup>

At no point in his career as a friar did Savonarola hide his negative feelings toward material possessions. He believed that a materialistic world was one in which the devil's presence is overwhelming. External goods lead to temptation, which in turn lead you into the clasps of demons. In the hopes of ridding people of the craving for the devil's temptation, Savonarola said:

Know, children, that living uprightly, which is pleasing to God, does not consist in external things, but in the knowledge of God and loving Him with one's whole heart and inclining toward Him with all one's affection. This cannot be done except through continuous prayer, and it cannot be done well unless you devote yourself to simplicity, which today seems to be lost and extinguished among men, for everyone tries to be richer and more important, shunning simplicity. Give yourselves to simplicity and let go of superfluous things, which I tell you are snares of the devil.<sup>53</sup>

Given the amount of wealth and prosperity that encapsulated the overall theme of the Renaissance in Florence, the movement towards simplicity would prove to be a difficult step in Savonarola's reform plan. The class distinctions within the city were clearly defined, so it was no surprise to see that those who already lived lives defined by simplicity had little trouble making the adjustments that God deemed necessary for

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<sup>51</sup> "So that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may be made blind."

<sup>52</sup> Savonarola, *Aggeus Sermon VII*, pg. 142.

<sup>53</sup> Savonarola, *Aggeus Sermon VII*, pg. 147.

reform. However, the “haves” in the city were experiencing more growth secularly than ever before, even members of the clergy who had sworn against secularism on their knees before God. Savonarola believed that the clergy was full of more sinners than good men of The Lord. He also felt that if he could first reform them, then perhaps the rest of the city, including usurers like the Medici family, would follow their path to righteousness. Savonarola also was not afraid to place blame on the clergy for the city’s sins, and he expressed his disappointment during that *First Sunday of Advent* sermon when he said:

O clergy, clergy, on account of you this tempest has arisen. Know that it was for the purpose of avoiding these tribulations, which today are seen coursing throughout Italy, that these prayers were made to which I have exhorted you for so long, and let us pray that the turn into plague rather than war.<sup>54</sup>

Savonarola wanted use God’s force as his strength to push the people to be charitable, the clergy in particular. “The first Sunday coming up there will be two collections: one will be for the poor who are inside the city, the other for those who are outside. Let the priests be urged to be foremost in this matter, if you want to avoid tribulations and plague.”<sup>55</sup> And with that, Savonarola stepped down from the pulpit to go and observe three straight days of fasting and prayer; for he was already so immersed by the life of simplicity that the only thing he could sacrifice for The Lord was his cravings for excess nutrients. In this sermon he wanted to both instill fear and love of God; for it became clear that only He has the ability to scourge a city or save it based entirely on His will.

Two weeks later, on December 12, 1494, Savonarola delivered his *Third Sunday of Advent* sermon. In this particular sermon Savonarola spoke of how to form the mental

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<sup>54</sup> Savonarola, *Aggeus, Sermon VII*, pg. 147.

<sup>55</sup> Savonarola, pg. 149.

and spiritual shape within man that he felt was necessary in order to have a strong and just form of government. He claimed that, “Regulation and governance by a single leader, when that leader is good, is better than any other government.”<sup>56</sup> His reasoning behind this statement was that wherever power is more united, the more easily concentrated and unified the governed would become. However, Savonarola also said that, “When that one leader is wicked, there is no worse government and form of rule, since the worst is the opposite of the best.”<sup>57</sup> He then said that Florence, unfortunately, fell under the category of “the opposite of the best,” for there could not be a single leader (on earth) of their city who would rule with perfection. He said explicitly that:

People under a tyrant are like water restrained and held by force, which, when it finds a small outlet through which to escape, bursts forth impetuously, wreaking utter ruin. Therefore, when God wants to show mercy, He expels the tyrant. Take care then that such people do not rear their heads in your city, and attend to the common good.<sup>58</sup>

The idea of tending to the common good of the city became the primary theme of this sermon in Advent. Savonarola said that if everyone would go to confession and attend to the common good of the city, “Your city will be glorious because in this way she will be reformed spiritually as well as temporally, that is, with regard to her people, and from you will issue the reform of all Italy.”<sup>59</sup> Savonarola truly believed that if these changes were made, Florence would become richer and more powerful than ever before. Their city would become a vast Empire that stretched across Europe; it would become a new and improved Rome.

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<sup>56</sup> Savonarola, *Aggeus, Sermon XIII, Third Sunday of Advent*, pg. 151.

<sup>57</sup> Savonarola, *Aggeus, Sermon XIII*, pg. 152.

<sup>58</sup> Savonarola, *Aggeus, Sermon XIII*, pg. 160.

<sup>59</sup> Savonarola, *Aggeus, Sermon XIII*, pg. 153.

Savonarola continued through his psalm and reached the thesis of his sermon when he stated that, “A kingdom, the more spiritual it is, the stronger and better it will be, for, being nearer to God, its spirit participating more fully in the divine, it must of necessity be better, more stable, and more perfect.”<sup>60</sup> In this statement it becomes clear that he sincerely believed that there did exist the one universal leader whom he spoke of, and that person does not and cannot exist on earth, for it is the Lord Jesus Christ. The government must be created through the act of living within God’s grace. In Florence, living in God’s grace consists of communal unity, universal obedience to God’s Will, simplicity on all economic fronts, richness of both fear and love of God, soldiers who fight out of loyal respect rather than for plunder, and belief in the one truth, the truth that living in God’s grace is the only way to be strong and maintain morality to the highest degree. Savonarola later said that, “By contrast, you can now understand how that kingdom fares which is without grace and is carnal and voluptuous; it will always be weaker and more passive in its power, also where there is no charity, the citizens do not love each other.”<sup>61</sup>

In this sermon, Savonarola also made his first specific claims on what shape the government of Florence should take, along with how its powers must be implemented within the city. When speaking of governmental framework, he said, “I believe none could be better than that of the Venetians; you should take example from them, cutting out, however, some things which are neither to our purpose nor necessary to us.”<sup>62</sup> He felt that the Signory was obligated obtain all things that were contrary to Godly religion

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<sup>60</sup> Savonarola, *Aggeus, Sermon XIII*, pg. 155.

<sup>61</sup> Savonarola, *Aggeus, Sermon XIII*, pg. 157.

<sup>62</sup> Savonarola, *Aggeus, Sermon XIII*, pg. 161.

and expel them from the city; all members of the clergy must be good and mirror to the people what it means to behold the highest form of righteous living. The Signory must also pass laws that condemn the vice of sodomy; it is necessary that those people who sin so blatantly be stoned and burned. “We must throw out everything that is noxious to the health and soul. Let everyone live for God and not for the world, all in simplicity and charity.”<sup>63</sup> Savonarola encouraged the members of the city to search for men attempting to elevate themselves above the rest and to then deprive him of all his goods. He also felt it necessary to remedy the current taxation system in the city. All taxes must be distributed evenly amongst the populace, so that men can exert themselves for the universal good. Savonarola even commented on marital dowries, saying that they be appropriated with some measure, to ensure that no family will ever find themselves impoverished again because of how outrageously high dowries tended to get. A native Florentine man in the congregation, Luca Landucci, kept a diary with him at all times when he listened to Savonarola speak. On the day of the *Third Sunday in Advent* sermon, he noted that, “Fra Girolamo did his utmost in the pulpit to persuade the people to adopt a good form of government; and he preached much about State matters, and that we ought to love and fear God, and love the common weal; and no one must set himself up proudly above the rest.”<sup>64</sup> Landucci serves as proof that Savonarola clearly pushed for these things in a way that no Florentine had ever seen before, and every time he did, more people began to believe in what he stood for:

I encourage you to do what you can as soon as possible, for thus God inspired me directly. His Most Illustrious Lordship will take care that your crown will not be

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<sup>63</sup> Savonarola, *Aggeus, Sermon XIII*, pg. 158.

<sup>64</sup> Luca Landucci, *A Florentine Diary from 1450 to 1516*. (New York: Arno Press, 1969), pg. 76.

taken away from you. If you do with a good will all this which I have said to you, I promise you *on God's behalf* remission of all your sins and great glory in Paradise.<sup>65</sup>

When the season of Advent came to an end in 1494, just three days after the celebration of the birth of Christ, Savonarola called for the congregation to gather in order to reiterate the reform ideas that he had been thrusting upon them for so long. He began the sermon by speaking about faith and belief in the natural light, which is Christ our Lord. Savonarola quoted from the book of Hebrews 11:1 and said, “Fides est substantia rerum sperandarum argumento non apparentium, that is, faith is the substance of things to be hoped for, of things not to be made obvious by proof.”<sup>66</sup> In saying this I believe that Savonarola hoped to make the people put their trust into his reforms. Moreover, he wanted them to have faith in his prophetic claim. He went on to say that truth holds more naked power than any other existing contemplative force. He claimed to be speaking from direct communication with the Heavenly Father, and God is truth, which yields the need to ever have question. Savonarola reminded the crowd that, “Truth with conquer, and, in the end, will prove stronger; truth does not seek to attach itself to another power; rather, on its own, alone and naked, it wins always.”<sup>67</sup> Since, in his own mind, Savonarola knew the truth, and heard it from the one person Who knew. He posed the question to those who did not believe His truth, “Is this reform good or evil? You cannot say that it is not good; why, then, do you attack it?”<sup>68</sup> He aspired to have Florence

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<sup>65</sup> Savonarola, *Aggeus, Sermon XIII*, pg. 161.

<sup>66</sup> Girolamo Savonarola et al., *Selected Writings of Girolamo Savonarola: Religion and Politics, 1490-1498* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), pg. 164.

<sup>67</sup> Savonarola, *Aggeus, Sermon XXIII*, December 28, 1494, pg. 169.

<sup>68</sup> Savonarola, *Aggeus, Sermon XXIII*, pg. 165.

be governed as though it were a mirror image of the hierarchy of Heaven, where God is united with His angels and peace and prosperity build off of each other.

After revealing to the congregation his dream to see Florence behave in an equivalent manner to that of the Heavenly Kingdom, Savonarola went into a deeper breakdown of what the Heavenly hierarchy is composed of. He discussed the interrelation of the holy Trinity and how it lives within God; it sees with Divine Essence all the things that ought to be done in the world. Working through the Holy Trinity, “God and His angels govern all this universe; the Heavenly city is ruled and governed with the utmost order and quiet and peace; so I would like your city to be.”<sup>69</sup> He then reverted back to his initial principle, which stated the importance of fearing God and observing His law so that Florence might gain from Him the light of grace. Savonarola then reminded the people of the universal peace and love for the common good that was essential for God’s reform; in a community that is united in charity no one should wish to make himself head of the city or to be “above” others. He reiterated these crucial principles to the congregation because he had just described exactly how peace is maintained in the Heavenly Kingdom. And what better way to ensure peace and tranquility than to mirror the form government used in Heaven?

When Savonarola spoke about the Heavenly hierarchy, he in no way described it as a tyranny. Rather he illustrated it with God the Father at the top working in perfect collaboration with His Heavenly cohorts to control all of the happenings in the world. As a way to push the Florentine populace away from a tyranny in their city, he reminded them that, “Tyrannies do not want to be governed with prayers nor with doing good, but

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<sup>69</sup> Savonarola, *Aggeus, Sermon XXIII*, pg. 167.

the state of the people of God has always been governed with prayers and living a good life.”<sup>70</sup> This idea would lead to Savonarola’s discussion in regards to ensuring equality for everyone under the law:

You must punish anyone who has gone astray. You must elect magistrates who are like the Virtues and the celestial Powers, that is, they know how to expel evil and reward good, that is, punish the bad and protect the good so that they may not be attacked; these magistrates will be in the place of the Angels and Archangels, whom you will elect for the city as your domain.<sup>71</sup>

Savonarola wanted to ensure that the people knew to only elect those who were possessed of good morals. He wished for those who would hold public offices to do so with love and charity, and not take gifts from the people, and provide justice for every Florentine in the name of The Lord. Savonarola told the congregation that any man, woman, or child who contradicted His good plans was proud, viscous, or foolish; and he reminded them that The Lord, “Who dwells in Heaven, will make a mockery of them, of their cunning and malice, and He will punish them.”<sup>72</sup>

Once more in this sermon, Savonarola reverted back to the idea that having one “perfect” universal ruler over a city is the best form of government. He also raised the point that no living man is moral enough to fulfill the honor of being the unified leader. Savonarola landed on his main point when he said, “Now, Florence, God wants to make you happy and wants to give you a leader and a King to govern you, and this is Christ. The Lord wants to rule over you, if you would have it so, Florence. But let yourself be ruled by Him.”<sup>73</sup> By taking Christ as their King, the Florentines would voluntarily place

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<sup>70</sup> Savonarola, *Aggeus, Sermon XXIII*, pg. 168.

<sup>71</sup> Savonarola, *Aggeus, Sermon XXIII*, pg. 168.

<sup>72</sup> Savonarola, *Aggeus, Sermon XXIII*, pg. 170.

<sup>73</sup> Savonarola, *Aggeus, Sermon XXIII*, pg. 171.



themselves under His law. In doing that, their city would become perfectly unified with light of God's grace. After noticing the sea of astonished faces in the congregation, Savonarola reminded the people how much their sins had been afflicting him, because he had been surrounded by their sins every day since arriving. Savonarola claimed to feel their sins just as The Lord did. He impelled them to remember that, "If failure were to come from you wither through negligence or some other thing, the Lord would be enraged against you and would make you lose your good fame, and He would give you punishment."<sup>74</sup> The congregation could feel the anger in his voice, and he went on to say, "I am still at sea, and I see the harbor very far away. I could, if I wanted to, turn back, but God does not want it. For this reason, I must stay, I must obey God." He told the people that even he intermittently felt the desire to quit the reformation, but God both lovingly and forcefully probed him forward. Because of his God-given strength to press on, Savonarola could in turn project his vigor into the people of Florence; with the hopes that they too might understand that failure simply was not an option.<sup>75</sup>

The year was 1495, and on a frigid January 13, Savonarola held what he entitled the *Renovation Sermon*. He called for the congregation in order to repeat all that "We" had said and preached in Florence about the renewal of the Church, and how it was all pre-destined to happen, and soon. The primary focus of this sermon for Savonarola was to prove to Florence, and the whole of Italy, that he was in fact a divine prophet. The consequence of this sermon was that he upped the stakes of the game to a completely different level, particularly because he labeled Rome as one of the key reasons why

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<sup>74</sup> Savonarola, *Aggeus, Sermon XXIII*, pg. 174.

<sup>75</sup> Girolamo Savonarola et al., *Selected Writings of Girolamo Savonarola: Religion and Politics, 1490-1498* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), pg. 175.

reform was necessary. His power and influence was growing, however, whether he was conscious of it or not, Savonarola promoted himself to be disliked and not trusted by a large number of clergymen, the Pope included. In regards to his prophesizing he said:

I say to you, Florence, that this light has been given to me for your sake, not mine, for this light does not make a man pleasing to God. I also want you to know that I began to see these things more than fifteen, maybe twenty years ago, but I began to speak of them only in the last ten years; but you, Florence, have heard with your ears not me, but God.<sup>76</sup>

Savonarola spoke these words at the beginning of this *Renovation Sermon* as a way to ease his congregation into all that was to follow. He continued on to say, “I have predicted this, that all Italy will be turned upside down, and Rome, and afterward the Church, must be renewed; you should believe, because God has told you so, rather than I.”<sup>77</sup> This moment would serve as the first time that Savonarola openly stated that Rome would have to be renewed along with the rest of Italy. While the words may not have been his, they did come out of his mouth, which, to the non-believers, meant that it was in fact Savonarola who was making these claims on his own behalf.

Savonarola believed that there existed two types of knowledge: the first is when we know by some external sign that shows what something means intrinsically, and the second type comes through mental images. It was these forms of knowledge that permitted Savonarola to predict the death of Pope Innocent II in July of 1492. “I saw, through the power of imagination, a black cross above Babylonian Rome, on which was written: *Ira Domini*,<sup>78</sup> and upon it there rained swords, knives, lances, and every other

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<sup>76</sup> Savonarola, *Psalms, Sermon III, Renovation Sermon*, January 13, 1495, pg. 61.

<sup>77</sup> Savonarola, *Renovation Sermon*, pg. 62.

<sup>78</sup> “The Wrath of the Lord.”

sort of weapon.”<sup>79</sup> Savonarola said that he had seen these images in the middle of July. And just two weeks later, on July 25, Pope Innocent II was pronounced dead. Savonarola also claimed to have seen an image of a sword hanging over the peninsula of Italy; and this overhanging sword serves as a representation of the King of France entering the country to perform God’s work for Him. King Charles was the scourge that Italy deserved according to Savonarola and God, because of their sins, and it was a necessary first step before the renewal of the Church could properly take place. After revealing his prophetic truths to the congregation in regards to Pope Innocent and the King of France, Savonarola unveiled exactly what God said to him concerning the Florentine populace:

Rejoice and exult, you just, yet prepare your hearts against temptation with reading, meditation, and prayer, and you will be freed from the second death. You, you vile slaves, who dwell in filth, wallow as you will: let your bellies be full of wine, your loins loose in lechery, and your hands stained with the blood of the poor, for this is your portion. But know that your bodies and your souls are in My hand, and after a short time, your bodies will be scourged to a pulp, and your souls I will hand over to the everlasting fire.<sup>80</sup>

Savonarola continued with his disclosure by saying that the Almighty Father also said, “I, the Lord, speak in My zeal; behold, the days are coming, and My sword will wave over you. Therefore, be converted to me before My fury reaches full strength. For when distress overcomes you, you will search for peace and not find it.”<sup>81</sup>

This sermon indubitable served as Savonarola’s “prophetic coming out” ceremony. He spoke of things that he had kept to himself since his first prophetic vision. Later in the sermon he said, “I know that this morning I am crazy and that everything I say is foolishness, but I have spoken to you in this way because God wanted me to speak

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<sup>79</sup> Savonarola, *Renovation Sermon*, pg. 68.

<sup>80</sup> God, through Savonarola, *Renovation Sermon*, pg. 70.

<sup>81</sup> God, through Savonarola, *Renovation Sermon*, pg. 71.

to you so.”<sup>82</sup> With that he proceeded to the close of the sermon, explaining that Florence must flee from itself, it must flee from sin through penance and flee from the wicked who refuse penance, and in this way reform is destined to follow. “I have begged you; I cannot command you, for I am not your Lord, but your father.”<sup>83</sup>

When Savonarola delivered his *Renovation Sermon*, he either intentionally or inadvertently acquired the attention of the entire Peninsula of Italy. Evidence of this came in the fall of 1495, when Pope Alexander VI wrote Savonarola a letter. This letter was not the first of their direct communications, however, it proved to be of particular importance because of its content. Rome had already expressed in previous letters their disappointment in Savonarola’s behavior in Florence, but he refused to venture and Rome explain his actions. Savonarola’s reasoning for this was that his duty rested solely in Florence and he was not to depart until his divine mission was complete. Needless to say, ignoring a Papal brief was not in Savonarola’s best personal interest. In response to Savonarola’s impertinence and ignorance of the rules of the Catholic Church, Pope Alexander VI spoke for the entire Christian clergy when he said:

We command you, by virtue of holy obedience, to abstain entirely from any preaching, whether public or private, so that in ceasing from public sermons, you might not be charged with resorting to conventicles. Fully maintain the manner we desire until you are able safely, properly, and with that seemliness which becomes a religious to convey yourself in our presence.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Savonarola, *Renovation Sermon*, pg. 74.

<sup>83</sup> Savonarola, *Renovation Sermon*, pg. 76.

<sup>84</sup> Letter from Pope Alexander VI to Savonarola, October 16, 1495, in Girolamo Savonarola et al., *Selected Writings of Girolamo Savonarola: Religion and Politics, 1490-1498* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), pg. 278.

Rather unsurprisingly, Savonarola displayed his ability to ignore his required obedience to the “Most Blessed Father,” whom he had already referred to as obstinate in regards to the renewal of the Church, in his *Renovation Sermon*. While the Pope’s public letters caused many to call Savonarola’s movements acts of heresy, he still maintained a stronger voice than any other religious figure in Florence at the time.

On March 27, 1496, Savonarola held a Palm Sunday procession. He decided to make this particular sermon shorter and less explicit than his congregation had become accustomed to. Savonarola said that, “This sermon is for the children, and we do it for them, but it will also be for those adults who want to become like children in purity, as the Lord says: “Unless you are converted and become like children, you will not enter into the kingdom of heaven.””<sup>85</sup> Building off of this idea, Savonarola encouraged the people to think about what it truly means to be pure. One of the key points he raised was that a lack of purity was evident because boys and girls had been raised according to the world, not by God. He said that all men are born with original sin, and by living purely in the eyes of God, specifically; avoiding sin and doing good, the original sin can be eradicated. However, Savonarola went on to say that the adults in Florence were not the birthplace of sins in the city. That is, the adults “bear the weight of a bad government, under which liberty has perished, and citizens carry all of the load.”<sup>86</sup> Therefore, remedying the government would act as the key to establishing purity throughout the whole of the city.

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<sup>85</sup> Savonarola, *Amos and Zacharias, Sermon XL, Palm Sunday Procession*, March 27, 1496, pg. 223.

<sup>86</sup> Savonarola, *Palm Sunday Procession*, pg. 225.

Looking into the eyes of the adults in the congregation, Savonarola could see that they believed in Him; they knew that their form of praise was flawed. This idea carried more weight when Savonarola explained that their children were “better” worshippers than they, because those “philosophers”, that is, the clergymen and members of governmental factions who preached the wrong form of praise, had not yet corrupted them. “Wise men have not known how to praise Him, the philosophers have not known how to praise Him, but children have praised You, our Lord.”<sup>87</sup> Savonarola preached that simplicity served as the basis behind purity. Children observe simplistic thought subconsciously, thus, they have an unprecedented ability to connect with God. It is that very capacity for closeness with God that gets lost in all who conform to the complex impurities of the world. Savonarola continued, saying that those who merely praise God with their words are praising Him with their own natural light, not the light of The Lord. Children praise the Lord with their works and through the supernatural light, which is God; they praise Him by carrying His cross through the streets and singing His hymns. “Lord, I commend to You Your city; I commend to You these children; I pray You that this work may be commended to You and that Your hand may be upon them today in this holy procession.”<sup>88</sup> This particular sermon enraged a large number of Savonarola’s enemies; they saw his use of children as a tactic against the clergy that even God would find grotesque. It would not take long for Rome to close in on the friar from Ferrara.

The year 1497 can be characterized as a period of the clashing between two religious powerhouses in Tuscany. Pope Alexander VI had already demanded that Savonarola cease his preaching altogether until further notice in 1495. As we saw, the

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<sup>87</sup> Savonarola, *Palm Sunday Procession*, pg. 228.

<sup>88</sup> Savonarola, *Palm Sunday Procession*, pg. 230.

Pope's demands were a distant second to the plan that God had for Savonarola and Florence. The Pope began sending open letters throughout all of Italy expressing the charges that Savonarola faced. Some of these charges were: high treason, theft, sexual perversion, and of course, heresy.<sup>89</sup> Finally, after threats through public letters were no longer considered to be a viable course of action, the Pope began drawing up a brief of excommunication for the useless friar known as Savonarola. And so, on May 13, 1497, the papal brief was signed and the Pope's courier departed from Rome to Florence where he would publicly proclaim the contents of Girolamo Savonarola's excommunication. Upon his arrival in Florence, members of the Signory who still remained loyal to Savonarola refused to let the courier inside the city gates. This act of loyalty delayed the excommunication process by a little over a month, and on June 18 the courier walked through the city gates and revealed the contents of the papal brief. The brief stated that Savonarola had been put outside the Church, "Because he has not obeyed our apostolic admonitions and commands. Moreover, on pain of suffering the same penalty, all Christians, male and female, laity and clergy, are ordered to avoid the friar Girolamo altogether, as one excommunicated and suspected of heresy."<sup>90</sup> Savonarola had been anticipating this day for over a year in Florence, and he remarked to one of his brothers in San Marco that, "Any man who issues an order against God is not our superior."<sup>91</sup> Savonarola later commented that the accusation calling him a heretic held no weight either because he sincerely believed to be preaching the doctrine of Christ, something that Pope Alexander VI would know nothing about. In a letter to the Pope regarding his

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<sup>89</sup> Lauro Martines, *Fire in the City: Savonarola and the Struggle for Renaissance Florence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pg. 166.

<sup>90</sup> Martines, *Fire in the City*, pg. 170.

<sup>91</sup> Martines, *Fire in the City*, pg. 173.

excommunication, Savonarola asked, “What except the penitence of sinners and the improvement of morals, drawn from the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, do I declare to all men, as long as I strive to recall to the hearts of men that nearly extinct faith?”<sup>92</sup> With that, Savonarola made the decision to ignore the false hierarchy that existed on earth, and he began to preach his *Exodus Sermons*. One could find it difficult to believe that he did not know that severe consequences would soon follow this decision.

On February 27, 1498, Savonarola approached the pulpit in the Church of Santa Maria del Fiore for the final time. He began the sermon by showing that his excommunication carried with it no truth or validity for many reasons. His first assault against the charges was concerned with the letters coming from Rome, he said, “You saw that they contained such variation that it could be demonstrated that they were executed by a pea-brain.”<sup>93</sup> The second reason was that, “This excommunication was enacted in order to undermine the public good of this city, and this is manifest not only all over Italy but even outside of Italy.”<sup>94</sup> And third, he claimed that everything he had said or presented could be justified to the fullest extent. There could not be any question in regards to the truth of what Savonarola and Florence had been collaboratively striving to achieve; for He Who determines the truth is on their side. His next goal in this sermon was to show that the lukewarm (wicked) clergy and laity members within the city had nothing good within them, and they were merely a painted image. But first Savonarola

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<sup>92</sup> Letter from Savonarola to Pope Alexander VI, May 20, 1497, in Girolamo Savonarola et al., *Selected Writings of Girolamo Savonarola: Religion and Politics, 1490-1498* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), pg. 295.

<sup>93</sup> Savonarola, *Exodus, Sermon III*, February 27, 1498, pg. 315.

<sup>94</sup> Savonarola, *Exodus Sermon III*, pg. 315.



exclaimed that, “God is greatly enraged against you Florence! Today I speak about the wicked.”<sup>95</sup>

Savonarola, speaking to those who had turned away from the cause, rhetorically asked:

Sinner, what is it that has made you turn back? What has been promised to you? Not gold, not silver, but rather, tribulations.... We have already been at war for seven years, we have always conquered; whence has this power come? We have not had money or soldiers, but enemies nearly everywhere, and always we have won; our arms have been prayers, faith and patience.<sup>96</sup>

Never once did Savonarola question the success of his reforms when he had the support of God and the people at his back. He placed the blame on those who instilled fear into those who once believed, but then lost faith because fear of God led them to the arms of the devil. He spoke to the lukewarm clergymen, exclaiming that their good exterior works carried no weight in the eyes of God. “If you do not have charity and the law of Christ in your heart, you accomplish nothing, and will end up in the house of the devil.”<sup>97</sup> He explained to the congregation that so long as Christ and His law are in the world, there is also His contrary, which is the devil and his law. Those who turned against Savonarola’s law, which is His Law, are in fact His contrary; the devil. Savonarola turned again to the wicked clergy in the congregation and labeled them as idols, idols that are nailed and fixed to earthly things, and are thus hindered from doing good. He said to them that, “You are ready to absolve the wicked such as the usurers who demonize this earth. This, then, is perfectly clear: that you are as wicked as they.”<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Savonarola, *Exodus Sermon III*, pg. 316.

<sup>96</sup> Savonarola, *Exodus Sermon III*, pg. 323.

<sup>97</sup> Savonarola, *Exodus Sermon III*, pg. 325.

<sup>98</sup> Savonarola, *Exodus Sermon III*, pg. 326.

In an effort to absolve those who maintained their loyalty to Savonarola and God despite his excommunication, he told his supporters that, “You do not have to fear it, nor are you obligated to observe the excommunication, because the scandal has been removed; in that case, come to me, and I will give you Communion.” He continued on to say, “These excommunications today are cheap commodities; for four lire anyone can have anyone he likes excommunicated; I do not believe such excommunications carry any weight with God.”<sup>99</sup> And finally, in an attempt to put his followers at ease, Savonarola revealed, for the first time, that his end was on the horizon; but he calmed the congregation and taunted the non-believers by saying:

I fear nothing; make war as much as you want; it is enough for me that the Lord is with me. But many of you do not believe that the Lord is with us; believe that I am not crazy, that I know where I am, and that I know how to get out of here, if I wanted, by human means. But because I know the Lord is with me, I fear nothing.<sup>100</sup>

He later went on to plead the congregation, “Believe that I am not crazy, and I know what I am doing, and I would not set myself up as a target if I did not know that God is with me, fear nothing, for it is the Lord who has given his blessing to both the great and the small.”<sup>101</sup> As his sermon came to a close, his congregation remained silent. Savonarola then left his communicants with a closing word for the last time, “May You be praised, then, and blessed by us, Lord our God, and Your sweetest Son, Christ Jesus, our Redeemer, *cui est honor Gloria et imperium per infinita saecula saeculorum. Amen.*”<sup>102</sup>

At this point, Savonarola had opened the floodgates for Rome to come in and drown him. On March 9, 1498, Pope Alexander VI signed and sent a papal brief to the

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<sup>99</sup> Savonarola, *Exodus Sermon III*, pg. 332.

<sup>100</sup> Savonarola, *Exodus Sermon III*, pg. 327.

<sup>101</sup> Savonarola, *Exodus Sermon III*, pg. 334.

<sup>102</sup> “To Whom is honor, glory, and power forever and ever. Amen.”

Signory in Florence. The brief was designed to be an all-out assault against Savonarola; aimed at his arrogance, presumption, illegal preaching, scandalous behavior, and his impertinence in arguing that he had not been excommunicated.<sup>103</sup> The Pope referred to Savonarola as nothing more than a poison, and a spreader of poison at that. Knowledge of the papal brief spurred Savonarola to write the Pope one final letter. In the letter, which he wrote with his own hand, Savonarola began by explaining his innocence in the entire situation. Through divine inspiration he was able to drive people towards penance and nourish peace within the city. Savonarola also remarked in haste that, “You, I say, Most Blessed Father, have given ear to my detractors, and withdrawing from me all assistance, which you ought to offer not only as a Christian but by reason of the office you hold, you have given authority and power to wolves.”<sup>104</sup> Savonarola then signed the letter, “The useless servant of Jesus Christ.”<sup>105</sup> His signature would serve as his last written slight to the Pope, who, in one of his letters to the Florentine populace, referred to Savonarola as a useless servant of Jesus Christ.

On March 25, 1498, the Franciscan friar for the Church of Santa Croce, Francesco di Puglia, challenged Savonarola to prove his doctrine by undergoing with him an ordeal by fire.<sup>106</sup> The challenge would consist of Savonarola entering a path cut through the middle of a raging bonfire, in the belief that he will emerge safely on the other side. His shield was to be God’s grace, and death would prove that God’s grace has been denied to

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<sup>103</sup> Martines, *Fire in the City*, pg. 206.

<sup>104</sup> Letter from Savonarola to Pope Alexander VI, March 13, 1498, in Girolamo Savonarola et al., *Selected Writings of Girolamo Savonarola: Religion and Politics, 1490-1498* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), pg. 309.

<sup>105</sup> Letter from Savonarola to Pope Alexander VI, March 13, 1498, pg. 309.

<sup>106</sup> Donald Weinstein, *Savonarola and Florence; Prophecy and Patriotism in the Renaissance*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970), pg. 286.

him. The Franciscan friar threw out the challenge knowing that he would die, but the reward of disproving Savonarola's claims would serve as a prize worthy of death.<sup>107</sup>

The city erupted with excitement over the ordeal. The anti-Savonarolans were thrilled because this would prove him to be a false prophet and heretic, and his supporters were so intoxicated by the idea that many of them volunteered to enter the flames by Savonarola's side; they believed that a miracle would occur and they would all be spared from any harm. The Signory refused to permit civilians to walk into the flames; this was a trial for the friars alone.<sup>108</sup> Savonarola did not feel that it was right to tempt God; nor was it up to man to say when and where the next miracle would occur. Regardless, once trapped, Savonarola had no choice but to agree to the ordeal and give himself to prayer.

The ordeal was originally set to be on April 6, but was moved to April 7, the Saturday before Palm Sunday. It had been decided that two of Savonarola's closest Brothers in the Dominican Convent at San Marco, Domenico da Pescia and Mariano Ughi, were to sustain the ordeal on behalf of Savonarola. If they burned, it would prove Savonarola's falsehoods and he would have three days to flee the city. The Franciscan challengers from Santa Croce were Francesco di Puglia and Giuliano Rondinelli.<sup>109</sup> Every Florentine man, woman, and child gathered in Piazza della Signoria anticipating to see either death or a miracle. Once the fire was lit, there arose much controversy between the friars as to what each man could carry with him into the flames. Savonarola, while appearing to be confident for his representatives, persisted in arguing with the Franciscans as though he was buying time for the flames to burn out. After many hours

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<sup>107</sup> Martines, *Fire in the City*, pg. 221.

<sup>108</sup> Martines, *Fire in the City*, pg. 222.

<sup>109</sup> Weinstein, *Savonarola and Florence*, pg. 287.

of delay, April showers began to pour on the city, putting out the flames and ruining any possibility of a fire ordeal. Savonarola's supporters claimed that God sent the rain, but the overwhelming majority of the population was thrust into a rage of hatred and contempt for Savonarola and his lieutenants. Savonarola managed to evade the mob with his supporters and safely made it back to his quarters in San Marco; by now it was clear, his reign in Florence had come to an end.<sup>110</sup>

The next morning was Palm Sunday, and the city's cobblestone streets were still slick from the downpour that had transpired the previous night. A few agitators who had been howling over the friar all through the night were able to quickly rouse together a mob to storm the gates of San Marco when daylight broke. The laymen who were surrounding Savonarola inside the Convent fled, while Girolamo moved into the Convent library and prayed quietly. As the screams grew louder, Savonarola moved into the choir in the Convent so his prayers would remain undisturbed.<sup>111</sup> Without any army to defend its gates, the mob easily broke through and slaughtered a number of friars within San Marco's. Within minutes the mob found Savonarola in prayer; they bound him by the hands, and dragged him out of the Convent, all the while beating him to a pulp. Friar Domenico da Pescia was also bound and pulled out, and together the friars were taken to a communal tower where they were thrown into separate dungeons to await their fates.<sup>112</sup>

The Signory was so eager to begin "questioning" Savonarola that its members did not even wait for approval from Rome to commence. The first round of interrogations began on April 9 and ran until April 18, however, Rome officially gave them the legal

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<sup>110</sup> Martines, *Fire in the City*, pg. 230.

<sup>111</sup> Weinstein, *Savonarola and Florence*, pg. 287.

<sup>112</sup> Weinstein, *Savonarola and Florence*, pg. 288.

right to commence on April 12.<sup>113</sup> Savonarola's fiercest enemies conducted the interrogations; the first of which touched on religious matters but focused primarily in the realm of politics. Torture was used every single day during the first series of questioning. The favorite method of torture was known as strappado or, the drop-and-jerk procedure. In this practice the prisoner has his hands bound behind his back and is suspended in the air by means of a rope attached to the wrists. The process was designed to dislocate both elbows and shoulders, causing excruciating pain.<sup>114</sup> After several days of enduring the pain without giving in to his interrogators, Savonarola began to tell them fragments of what they wanted to hear. Savonarola confessed, in his delirium:

Regarding my aim or ultimate purpose, I say, truly, that my purpose lay in the glory of the world, in having credit and reputation; and to attain this end, I sought to keep myself in credit and good standing in the city of Florence, for the said city seemed to me a good instrument for increasing this glory, and also for giving me name and reputation abroad.<sup>115</sup>

By the end of the first trial, Savonarola was so physically and emotionally defeated that his captors gave him a three-day break before proceeding with the second trial. The second round of interrogation stretched from April 21 to April 25, and was conducted by the same interrogators, again using torture as their key tool for obtaining answers. Savonarola admitted that he had never gone to confession, "Despite the fact that I consecrated the bread every day and took communion, and my reason for not confessing was so as not to disclose my secrets to anyone and because I would not have been absolved, not wishing to give up my undertaking."<sup>116</sup> Savonarola signed his second confession on April 25, 1498; however, there existed some question as to whether or not

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<sup>113</sup> Martines, *Fire in the City*, pg. 249.

<sup>114</sup> Martines, *Fire in the City*, pg. 251.

<sup>115</sup> Girolamo Savonarola, *Fire in the City*, pg. 250.

<sup>116</sup> Girolamo Savonarola, *Fire in the City*, pg. 254-55.

his confessions were sincere or the result of fear of pain. The Pope's Florentine ambassador in Rome received word of these suspicions from the Signory, and thus the Pope asked that Savonarola be sent to Rome. The Florentine plea to keep the friar in their possession was so strong that the Pope had no choice but to send out his own agent to conduct religious part of the trial in Florence.<sup>117</sup>

The third trial was delayed three weeks on direct orders from Pope Alexander VI so that his envoy, Francisco Remolins, could travel to Florence and conduct the trial on the Pope's behalf. On May 20, 1498, the trials commenced. Remolins carried within himself the anger that the Pope felt toward Savonarola, and before he asked a single question, he ordered the guardsmen to pass him the rope. Upon hearing this, Savonarola fell to his knees and said:

Now listen to me. God, you have caught me. I confess that I have denied God. I have told lies. Florentine Lords, be my witnesses. I have denied Him from fear of torture. If I have to suffer, I want to suffer for the truth. I did get from God what I have said. God, you are giving me penance for having denied you from fear of torture. I deserve it...<sup>118</sup>

This counter-confession probed the papal envoy to raise the friar high off the ground from his wrists with his hands bound. When Remolin asked why Savonarola denied all that he had confessed over the last several weeks, his response was, "Because I'm a madman. I denied it thinking that you might then be afraid to lay hands on me. This is why I spoke those words."<sup>119</sup> As Remolin slowly lowered Savonarola back to his knees, he continued asking questions about Savonarola's fellow friars at the Convent of San Marco, but Savonarola interrupted him and said:

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<sup>117</sup> Martines, *Fire in the City*, pg. 258.

<sup>118</sup> Girolamo Savonarola, *Fire in the City*, pg. 259.

<sup>119</sup> Girolamo Savonarola, *Fire in the City*, pg. 259.

I was the worst of them. Because of my subtle pride and vainglory, I wanted to be considered a prophet and a holy man, and I did not confess this sin so as not to expose myself. Nevertheless, I knew I was erring and doing wrong. I did wrong and I beg your Lordship's pardon. I have been a bad man; I want to save my soul and unburden my conscience.<sup>120</sup>

And with that, the proceedings came to a close. Savonarola along with two other friars from the Convent of San Marco, Silvestro Maruffi and Domenico Buonvicini da Pescia, was found guilty of heresy and schism, and sentenced to public execution by hanging followed by burning. The three executions took place simultaneously in Piazza della Signoria on May 23, 1498. Once again, the entire city gathered to watch a fire in Piazza della Signoria, only on this occasion, the death of Girolamo Savonarola was imminent, and there would be no hope for a miraculous emergence from the flames.

## Epilogue

*As the executioner placed first the rope around my neck, followed by a hood over my head, I looked high to the Heavens and said, Father, forgive me, for I am guilty of sin. The sin of pride. In manus tuas commendo spiritum meum (Into thy hands I commend my spirit) Luke 23:46*  
*CONSUMMATUM EST*

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<sup>120</sup> Girolamo Savonarola, *Fire in the City*, pg. 261.



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### **Part Three: The Final Sermon By Girolamo Savonarola**

*(Church Bells Ringing... Enter SAVONAROLA)*

*Fides est substantia rerum sperandarum argumento non apparentium* [Heb.

11:1], that is, “Faith is the substance of things to be hoped for, of things not made obvious by proof.” I ask, once more, that you have faith in me. O, Florence, do not let the apparent external pain and suffering that I have received in captivity draw you away from the truth; the truth that this pain is nothing when compared to the internal agony I have endured in my plight to conform this city to become the New Jerusalem, as the Lord commanded me to. The mere fact that I am composed enough to force words out of this hole in my face may serve as my final verification that God truly is within me. The powers that be have given me this final opportunity to speak to you today, O Florence, for on the morrow I shall be speaking with our Heavenly Father face-to-face. So, let it be known that I, Girolamo Maria Francesco Matteo Savonarola, born on the twenty-first day of September in the Fourteen-hundredth and fifty-second year since the coming of our Lord Savior, am to meet my premature demise tomorrow on the twenty-third day of May in the Fourteen-hundredth and ninety-eighth year since the coming of Christ.

Today, I wish to remind this congregation, for the final time, all that I have sacrificed to make God’s will a reality in this sacred city. I would like to depart twenty-four years into the past, when I was still learning the art of preaching at the Church of Santo Agostino in Faenza. I remind you of this time because it was in that Church where God spoke to me for the first time; this was when He assigned me to you, O Florence. I spent the next fifteen years in preparation, learning and teaching theological thought throughout Northern Italy, until God felt it was time for His plan in Florence to take action. This was when He revealed to me that the renovation of the Church was upon us,

and that He was to scourge all of Italy before the renovation took place, and finally, He said this was all going to happen very soon. Do you recall when I revealed this truth to you, O Florence? He reminded me that everyone must throw out everything that is noxious to the health and soul. Let all Florentines live for God and not for the world; all in simplicity and charity. A city that cares most for the common good is one that will rule over all others, not because of power or wealth, but because of strength in morality.

When I arrived to Florence I was astounded to see how much the people cared about worldly pleasures. Nobody seemed to care for or love one another, worse yet; you people appeared to thrive off of others' failures. You all came to believe in a materialistic world; a world that God believes to be the house of an overwhelming amount of temptation, all of which leads you into the arms of the devil. How many times did I remind you that to live uprightly in the eyes of God? You must love Him wholeheartedly, and you must do so through continuous prayer and devotion to simplicity. Even you, yes you, members of the clergy, you are idols, idols that are nailed and fixed to earthly things, and thus, you all have proven to be hindered from doing good. You want to disagree with me? Ask yourselves this: How can you sit there and absolve the wicked, such as usurers and others who demonize this earth from sin, and call yourself a man of the Lord? It is perfectly clear then, you are just as wicked as they. My detractors will tell you that it is in fact I who am wicked; and my response to them is that anyone who depreciates my words, is in fact attempting to minimize the influence of the Heavenly Father Himself.

Do you not recall, O Florence, when I spoke to you about the purity of children? I wish to remind you that all boys and girls who are raised according to the world and not

by God, lose the natural purity and simplicity that all children are born with. It is because of the world that you have created, O Florence, that this so. Even the wisest of men do not know how to properly praise the lord, the pope included. While you, Florence, established yourself into a city run by countless governmental factions, all of which claimed to be the one true power in the city, Rome stood by and ensured that their monthly supply of silk linens was arriving in a timely and orderly fashion. I ask you now, do you believe that Pope Alexander VI cared more about you, O worthy Florentines, or about his secular life, orchestrated primarily by worldly pleasures such as jewels and fine wine sent by the devil as bribes? In what way is the devil involved in this, you ask? The devil signifies all that is contrary to God's grace; and let me remind you that a world where the secular lifestyle rules over all, is a world that is fully encapsulated by the devil.

I wish also to remind you of this, O Florence, that a city, when regulated and governed by a single leader, when that leader is good, is better than any other form of government. However, I prompt you now to remember my second clause in regards to government, and that is that there is no such man on this planet who possesses the moral value to universally rule a city in a just and Godly fashion. Not once did I propose to you or anyone, a person on earth whom I felt was endowed with the qualities necessary to be the ruler of this blessed city. I did however describe to you, in explicit detail, the hierarchy of the Heavenly Kingdom. Let me remind you that the Heavenly government consists of the Holy Trinity at the top, and, working in unity with Them are the archangels and angels; together they work in perfect peace and tranquility to govern all of this universe. Listen not to your Pope, who claims that it was in fact my goal to become

the universal leader of this Godly city. Believe in me when I tell you that my aim was to make the government of your city mirror that of God's, with power distributed equally amongst everyone, where love for the common good was what drove all decisions made in the government. I wanted the Lord to be your universal leader; for only He contains the ample morality required to rule over a city as blessed and ordained as you, O Florence.

Today it is widely believed that I am a heretic, and this falsehood carries such a mirage of truth that I am to be executed under said beliefs. I have always reminded you to fear God's wrath in the same way that you embrace His love. Now I tell you that my heretic charges are the birth of Pope Alexander's fear of God. Do you not recall, O Florence, when I predicted to you the death of Pope Innocent II in July of 1492? I dare you to question my prophetic truth regarding God's scourge striking down upon Florence in 1494. God sent me an image of a great flood slamming through the gates of this city, and I warned you all of this tribulation that was presented to me. Now let me remind you of what happened the very next day. King Charles VIII marched East from Pisa with the entire French army at his back, destined to destroy Florence and crush all hope of reform. Ask yourselves this: whom did you choose to send to the city gates to converse with the blood-driven king? I went to King Charles, I kissed his feet, and I explained that his arrival was unified with the will of God; and it was my words that enthralled his Kingship to spare Florence from the scourge of God. I induced King Charles to ride South to Napoli, and you, O unworthy Florence, lived to see another day. I have done all of these glorified things for you Florence, and never once have I asked for thanks or praise. Yet here I stand, excommunicated, tortured, and condemned to death. I ask you, O Florence,

how dare you excommunicate me? I forbid you to think me a defeated man in my death, and know that fear does not exist within my soul. I am able to reproduce the voice of God, I am the one He chose to communicate with; He trusted me to conduct the rebirth of Christianity, I am the one who truly believes and understands His will, I am one with God, My will be done!

*Cui est honor gloria et imperium per infinita saecula saeculorum. Amen*

To Whom is honor, glory, and power forever and ever. Amen.