

Literary Club  
*Budget*  
April 25, 2016

Joseph P. Tomain

Five hundred and twenty-four years ago, almost to the day, a man lay dying at the family villa in Careggi, outside of Florence. Attending him at his request, was a Dominican monk with dark, penetrating, intent eyes nicknamed Il Frate, the little Friar. Although what passed between them is disputed, historians agree they spoke and a final blessing was given. The next day the man, Lorenzo the Magnificent, died. Renaissance Florence, too, died with him; in no small part because of the little Friar, because of Girolamo Savonarola.

Some back story may help explain the decline of Florence and the Black Monk's role in it. The principal players on the geopolitical chessboard of the Quattrocento included the city-states of Florence, Milan, Rome, Venice, and Naples. And, in that game of ever shifting alliances, maneuvers, and deceits, Spanish monarchs, King Charles of France and the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian added layers of international intrigue.

The Medici dynasty began in the 1300s, achieving prominence the following century through the efforts of Lorenzo's grandfather, Cosimo. Cosimo built a banking empire throughout Europe with help from Rome. Notably, Rome controlled lands containing alum, the necessary ingredient that held the colors in the dyes in the textiles that made Florence famous. In exchange for credit, the Pope's grant of an alum monopoly insured Medici success and stature.

To maintain the family name, Cosimo took two strategic steps. First, he sought no public office. Instead, this quintessential man-behind-the-scenes rigged the local elections.

Then, he invested heavily sponsoring civic building projects, culture activities, arts, and festivals thus giving Florentines some taste of the fruits that fell from the Medici table.

Cosimo's accumulation of power brought with it an accumulation of enemies. One Sunday in April 1478, during mass in the Duomo, the rival Pazzi family attempted a coup. At the moment of consecration, symbolic, to them, of the rising of a new order, two assassins, dressed as priests, attacked Lorenzo and his brother. Lorenzo was wounded but escaped; Giuliano was murdered and died on the cathedral floor.

Lorenzo took brutal revenge on the Pazzi's and their co-conspirators. While doing so, he learned that his enemies had the backing of Pope Sixtus and King Ferrante of Naples who employed a former Medici mercenary. Compounding that betrayal, their longtime Milan ally, Duke Sforza, had just been assassinated. Assistance from Milan was not forthcoming. Neither Medici rule in, nor Florence itself was secure.

It fell to Cosimo's 29-year-old heir to act, to protect Florence; to save the family patrimony. The impetuous Lorenzo secretly left the city to confront the King of Naples. Ferrante was a merciless tyrant who embalmed his enemies and displayed them to select guests in macabre warning. Surprisingly, young Lorenzo charmed Ferrante owing, in no small part, to the gifts and banquets bestowed on the King at an estimated 70,000 florins; enough to pay 5,000 workers for a year.

Lorenzo's diplomatic success was not matched by his business acumen. The family bank did not flourish during his time although Florentine culture did. Il Magnifico defined the Renaissance man. Sportsman, poet, humanist, and philosopher as well as jokester and womanizer, his legacy remains. His patronage nurtured artists like Leonardo, Michelangelo,

Perugino, Ghirlandaio, and Botticelli; poets like Poliziano; and philosophers like Marsilio Ficino and Pico de Mirandola. Lorenzo enjoyed the good life. Unfortunately, he enjoyed it too much. Like his father before him, Piero the Gouty, his flush lifestyle led to the liver and kidney diseases that killed him.

Lorenzo left two sons, Giovanni and Piero, and he had plans for both – one sacred; one profane. Piero would inherit the Medici court while Giovanni would be groomed for the Church. Dad’s ambition for Giovanni could not be called modest. Lorenzo wanted a cardinal’s hat for his 11-year-old son. That ecclesiastical honor, though, would have to wait a full 5 years when, at 16, Giovanni took the red hat from Pope Innocent who, in turn, took a 10,000 florin donation. That was a tidy sum; but it was money that Lorenzo did not have. Instead, he “borrowed” it from the City’s exchequer. For the family, it was a sum well spent as Giovanni was the first in the line of six Medici popes. It was not money well spent for Florence, however.

As the 15<sup>th</sup> c. ended, internecine conflicts, with Florence often in the crosshairs, did not cease. In 1494, two years after Lorenzo’s death, King Charles marched into Italy to reclaim Naples. To succeed, he needed support from some city states but most were unwilling. Son Piero, believing he possessed his father’s diplomatic skills, wanted to arrange a settlement with the interloper King. Mimicking Lorenzo’s mission to Naples, Piero rode out of Florence to negotiate an alliance and an alliance of sorts was forged through an exchange. Charles would help Florence regain Pisa. In return, Florence would allow the King and his soldiers safe passage through Tuscany. The deal was sweetened and sealed with a gift of 100,000 florins and the use of the family Palazzo in city center for the King and his entourage.

After Lorenzo's death, Savonarola had left Florence returning in 1494 just as Piero's capitulation to Charles insulted the City's citizens and leading families. At first, he went about his ordinary clerical duties at the Convent of San Marco, an architectural achievement by Michelozzo earlier financed by Cosimo and magnificently frescoed by Fra Angelico. Savonarola soon realized that Charles' incursion was a valuable gift; actually, a double gift.

Savonarola told the citizens that the King's threat to Florence was evidence of God's displeasure with the loose manners flaunted by the Medici and, not so coincidentally, enjoyed by the Florentines themselves. He used Charles as a lever to persuade the people to reject sin and embrace God. For a while, such a sermon sold well in Florence; it was not bought for a moment in Rome by the Spanish Pope Alexander VI, Rodrigo Borgia.

Alexander was every bit as brazen as he was decadent. His most notorious children, Cesare and Lucretia, lived with him in the papal apartments; that is when orgies and other bacchanals were on hold. The Pope's decadence gave Savonarola his second gift – he asked Charles to convene a Great Council to reform the Church by deposing the evil Pope and his sinful Curia.

Savonarola sought to win Florence by condemning Mediciean culture. He posed a simple question: What kind of world should we live in? His answer: We should live in God's world. The City should be run by a man of God, a Christian man, a man who can deliver the City from the failed Medici administration.

Savonarola railed against the world of government favoritism; the world of sexual license. He denigrated humanism in art, poetry, literature and philosophy because that is not the world of God; it is not the world of the Bible; it is a not a Christian world.

With his campaign rhetoric, Savonarola held in his thrall, the people of Florence, the King of France, the Holy Roman Emperor, the rest of Italy and even his sworn enemy, the Pope, as the little monk played the game of Renaissance realpolitik.

Savonarola traveled a tricky path though. At once, he proclaimed that he was a messenger of Christ, a prophet of the future, a Savior of the City. Yet, while the salvation of souls was his end, political power was his means. Savonarola preached the sacred; but he needed the secular, desperately. He needed the secular as foil; and, he needed the secular as popular base.

For over a century, Florence had been ruled by banker princes. In addition to the Medici; the Pitti, Strozzi, Tournabuoni and Pazzi families were the City's unofficial rulers; a city that would remain republican in name only. Those privileged families lobbied politicians, and, through dark money, exploited the City's politics and fixed its economy. Tax assessments, trade subsidies, tariffs, lending rates and the like could not be the law of the land without their design and acquiescence. Crony capitalism enabled these financial masters of the Renaissance universe, the 1%, to enjoy their rewards. Savonarola knew all of this.

He also knew that salvation prophecies alone could not capture and sustain popular support. To keep the people, fear was necessary and the apocalypse would do nicely. Savonarola played that card easily: "After years of the Medici, our country is slipping away." "Economic calamity . . . is befalling us." "There is a war against religion, and that war against Christianity must end." He preached.

Now, as long as trade was strong and Europe posed no competitive threat, then Florence and its merchant princes flourished. As European markets grew more competitive, as new technologies affected the cloth trade, and as the general economy softened, Italian banking declined and ordinary citizens struggled to satisfy daily needs.

The inequality between rich and poor was not preordained by God, Savonarola told them; rather, it was imposed by man. It was not the natural order of things that some should live lavishly while others barely made due. It was only through following God's commandments could the world become more just and the faithful reach Heaven. Savonarola swore to bring such justice by repealing Medicicare and by not filling government vacancies with activist liberal humanists.

Still, faith in God's word alone was not enough. After all, the Florentines were not completely innocent. The city's royalty may have lived lasciviously; yet, the people were complicit for they also enjoyed succumbing to the temptations of the flesh. "You too," Savonarola admonished them, "must change your ways; you too must follow God; you too must renounce the flesh." "If you do so," he swore to them and to God, "then Florence can become the New Jerusalem; it can become the city on the hill. Florence can become great again."

Savonarola damned licentious behavior in all of its forms but held sodomy in special scorn. He condemned the unnatural crime: Man must not lie with man as if under marriage vows between a man and a woman. Ribaldry, drunkenness, gluttony, gambling and other vices must be renounced and renounced publicly. Understandably, the citizens were not

anxious to give up their pleasures. To shake them out of their complacency, and force them to confess their sins and seek redemption, Savonarola used their children.

Traditionally, Mardi Gras was celebrated with a parade of drunken revelry and sexual display. Such exhibitionism disgusted Savonarola so he substituted a Children's Crusade to honor Lent through piety, not abandon. Children in white surpluses, carrying crucifixes and singing hymns, solemnly processed through the city. Going door-to-door, they implored their neighbors to surrender their luxuries in the name of Christ Jesus.

Jewelry, clothes, paintings, sculptures, fancy furnishings and such were collected and brought center stage to the City's main piazza where these vanities were stacked high before being burned in a sacramental fire. To Savonarola, these bonfires of the vanities were the outward symbol of the renunciation of the world in exchange for the salvation of souls. Today, though, one wonders why such sacraments had to include Donatello bronzes and Botticelli oils. Still, it appeared that Savonarola was winning hearts and minds. His ambition, though, went a step too far.

Recall that there were two planks in Savonarola's platform. First, he wanted to banish the Medici. Second, he wanted to dethrone the Borgia Pope. Both planks displeased Roderigo who most certainly needed to rid himself of that meddlesome priest. He tried by first issuing an interdict to Savonarola and to the city. By its terms, Il Frate was prohibited from preaching in Florence. If he violated the interdict, then both he and the city would be excommunicated and denied Eternal Happiness.

Not one to be intimidated, Savonarola took two countermeasures. Instead of "preaching" he gave "talks." Then, he dispatched fellow monks to preach in his stead. Three

faithful monks took up his message enthusiastically. Now, through the modern miracle of History TV, we have actual video footage and verbatim transcripts of his monks on the campaign trail. Let's listen in.

First, Fra Marco spread the word. "Our goal is eternity, the ability to live alongside our Creator for all time. The purpose of our life is to cooperate with God's plan." Fra Marco made clear that he was not a savior, he was only a messenger because "there's only one Savior and it's not me. It's Jesus Christ, who came down to earth and died for our sins." Fra Marco further said that the only way to save Florence was through God and by "asking God for the wisdom to solve and the strength to persevere incredible tests." Those challenges can be met by accepting the "free gift of salvation offered to us by Christ" and to "struggle on a daily basis as a Christian to remind ourselves of this. The purpose of our life is to cooperate with God's plan."

Following Marco, Fra Ted implored the crowd to "spend a minute a day saying 'Father, God, please, continue this awakening. Continue this spirit of revival. Awaken the body and mind to pull this country back from the abyss.'" If the righteous path is followed then, he promised, we "will turn this country around. We can turn [it] around, but only if the body of Christ rises up." That body, of course, being faithful voters. Fra Ted reminded the people that the city always "enjoyed God's providential blessing. Over and over again, when [faced with] impossible odds, [we] rose to the challenge" because we could realize that our constitutional "rights don't come from man. They come from Almighty God."

Wise Savonarola saved his best pit bull for last. At one campaign stop, Fra Donald, following an impassioned call by a fellow preacher to put sodomites to death, urged the

crowd to accept Jesus because any leader who “doesn’t begin every day on his knees is not fit to be commander-in-chief of this country.” For starters, he professed that women who sought abortions for any reason “should be punished.”

It was not enough for Fra Donald to call the faithful to God; he had to demonize his enemies; so he reminded his listeners that a few decades earlier, Muslims had invaded Italy to steal their land; to steal their faith; to steal their God. Accordingly, Donald said that Muslims living in Florence should be monitored and cordoned off while new Muslims should be banned and their families should be killed with bullets dipped in the blood of pigs. Tough talk, so tough that Savonarola and his deputies could be no longer be tolerated by Establishment families, nor tolerated by Rome and the Pope responded.

Alexander’s earlier interdict had no effect, so he ordered Savonarola to Rome. The wily monk knew what awaited him there so he stayed put in Tuscany. If Savonarola would not go to Rome, then Rome would come to him through an emissary armed with a papal brief.

The brief established a commission, an open convention if you will, and it ordered Savonarola and his fellow monks to appear and answer charges of heresy. No good could come from such an inquest. Everyone knew martyrdom was near. Still, Savonarola had one last gambit. He neither rejected the inquest nor did he rush to his martyrdom. Instead, while pledging allegiance to the party of Rome; he upped the ante and proposed a trial by fire: Whoever could walk the hot coals without being burned spoke the truth; otherwise, guilt was apparent and death was theologically proscribed and justified.

Civic and religious authorities agreed to the test and a football field length pit was prepared with seating on both sides. The accused and the accuser would start at each end of the arena and walk towards each other – a debate of sorts. The Florentines were thrilled; after all, they liked nothing more than a spectacle; they had gotten used to them under Il Magnifico; and this promised to be the spectacle of spectacles. Besides, they could not lose. One outcome would save their souls; the other would save their City.

Savonarola was not an anxious martyr; he would not walk the fire himself; rather his most loyal monk would serve as his proxy. On the appointed day, the stands filled early. To no avail, though, as both sides dithered for hours and the trial was eventually canceled. The inquest proceeded as Savonarola and company were interrogated and tortured for days. Finally, Savonarola confessed, recanted, confessed again, and then signed a document admitting guilt while explaining his changes of conscience. Today, we can read about the verdict on a large circular medallion embedded in the Piazza della Signoria that reads: Here on May 23, 1498 Savonarola and his monks were hanged and burned.

Thus, it seemed to be a good idea at the time for the Medici to bring Savonarola to Florence and for Il Magnifico to ask for his last blessing. With Lorenzo's death, though, Medici power in the City declined and with it the glory and grandeur of Renaissance Florence. Medici power waned because Lorenzo's son, Piero, could not lead; because Savonarola generated a populist revolt; and because more militant popes filled the power gap. To be sure, the Medici prospered in other parts of Europe. The Renaissance, too, prospered although it traveled to Rome where Medici artists continued their work and inspired the younger ones who heightened the Renaissance and created the Baroque. In the

end, Savonarola, shall we say, flamed out and Florence went south and was not as great again.

Now we must answer the question often posed by that great American philosopher Anthony Bourdain: “So, what have we learned tonight?” I think we have learned the following: Don’t nominate a false prophet. It may seem like a good idea at the time but . . . .

*Selected Readings*

Christopher Hibbert, *The House of Medici: Its Rise and Fall* (1974).

Paul Strathern, *Death in Florence: The Medici, Savonarola, and the Battle for the Soul of Renaissance City* (2015).

Donald Weinstein, *Savonarola: The Rise and Fall of a Renaissance Prophet* (2011).