an element in religious life which cannot be otherwise expressed. For example, the philosophic analysis of coming-to-be resolves a concrete given into abstract principles of explanation . . . the *mythological statement* presents the same situation in dramatic terms and thus invokes what might be called an analogy of personal relations.

This is not just to speak irrationally: it is to say something in basic and primitive terms, something which cannot be said in conceptual terms, which move away progressively from the existent phenomena, but can be suggested by imaginative ones. The problem today is how to revive this mode of speaking for a world for whom traditional imagery is meaningless or dead, and whose mythology is synthetic.

GIROLAMO SAVONAROLA

KENELM FOSTER, O.P.

HE was a little below medium height and lightly built, but his erect carriage and fine head made him stand out in company. His complexion was fresh, his hair dark chestnut, his eyes greyish-blue, probably, and very brilliant. The long curved nose, strong jaw and full lips are familiar to us from portraits; not so the charm of expression, the noble grace of bearing and gesture that impressed and attracted his contemporaries. We imagine Savonarola grim; as fierce as his terrible sermons; but his nature, all the evidence shows, was warmly affectionate and even gentle. He won the Florentines, especially the young and the poor, by so evidently loving them. An early writer says that he had about him 'una certa humanità humile et urbana', and dilates on the beauty of his hands, so clear-skinned and spare that the light seemed to show through them. We are told that his rough habit was always neat and—a remarkable thing in that climate—never soiled with sweat. His handwriting, of which a number of specimens remain, is exquisite.

Spiritually what strikes one most in Savonarola is a driving simplicity of purpose. His life shows a clear design. He is all of a piece: his first steps in adult life are already

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steps to the death that awaited him; with his first utterance, in poems written when barely out of his teens, he seems to have a foreboding of it; he names, already, his enemy. That enemy was not simply the 'paganism' of the Italian Renaissance. We miss the whole point and pathos of Savonarola unless we see that right from the start his struggle was with corruption in the Church, and in the Church's headquarters, Rome. The youth who wrote those sad poems, *de ruina Mundi* and *de ruina Ecclesiae*, was too ingenuous and too ardent not to localise the evil with that name of majesty. He pictures the Church, the 'ancient Mother', driven out of Rome by a 'proud harlot, Babylon'. Seeing her weeping in a cave he wants to fly to arms at once on her behalf; but she restrains him. 'No tongue of mortal man', she says, 'can avail anything. Weep and be silent', *tu piangi e taci*.

And this, in the event, was just what he could not do. It was his mission to speak out; why else, he must have thought, was he a Dominican? He had become one in his twenty-third year, leaving Ferrara suddenly one April day in 1475, and walking to Bologna to enter the novitiate at S. Domenico. He asked to be made a lay-brother—with excessive ingenuousness, since it was precisely his familiarity with the writings of St Thomas (to whom he was already, and was to remain, devoted) which had made him choose the Order of Preachers. He became a model religious, a lector in philosophy, and then a hard-working preacher tramping from city to city of north Italy. Early in his thirties the first 'prophecies' began to sound in his sermons: the Church, he declared, was to be terribly chastised and then renewed; and this would happen soon. Down at Rome the Papacy sank from the mediocrity of Innocent VIII to the depravity of Alexander VI. Lorenzo de Medici, sending his younger son (the future Leo X) to Rome to become a Cardinal, warned the boy of the vices of the Roman Court. In August 1489 Savonarola came to Florence, 'the navel of Italy', to the Medicean Priory of S. Marco, lectured on the Apocalypse, then began to preach in the Duomo. His conquest of Florence had begun.

He was a stranger. He was single-handed. He had none but spiritual weapons and the power of his unaffected elo-

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quence and his wonderful courage. Within three years he dominated the most intellectual city of Italy. The French King came, the 'new Cyrus', with his army, seeming to fulfil the Friar's prophecy of a Sword of God that was to punish the sins of Italy and purify the Church. Florence threw out the Medici and set up a new 'popular' government under Savonarola's inspiration. The city was swept by waves of energy radiating from that frail figure in the pulpit. S. Marco swarmed with young recruits to the Order. The Duomo could not contain the crowds that came to hear the prophet calling all Italy to penance. The great church was crammed to the doors, long before the preacher arrived, with poor and rich, the unlettered and the learned; while the children, massed on the tiers of raised seats which had had to be built for them, sang hymns to Christ 'the King of Florence', and to his Mother the city's 'Queen'.

It did not last. The enthusiasm which had flamed up in the autumn of 1494 was wavering through 1496 and visibly declining in 1497. The political isolation of Florence—largely due to Savonarola—economic depression, the moral strain caused by the growing hostility of the Roman Curia, the reaction of a volatile people deprived of their customary amusements—all these factors told steadily against the Friar. Yet the impression he had made was profound enough to survive triumphantly his downfall and to continue down to our own day in a loyalty and a legend which has scarcely a parallel in Christian history. For it was not only that he impressed people as a man of God: holy people like Bd Sebastian Maggi who had heard Savonarola's confession many times and declared (with surely some exaggeration) that he had *not* committed even a venial sin; and critical people like the historian Guicciardini who grew up in the Florence that had watched Savonarola day after day for eight years, and who, reflecting many years later on that extraordinary career, wrote that the man's life was irreproachable; to say nothing of the veneration in which he was held by SS. Philip Neri and Catherine de' Ricci. What is particularly remarkable about Savonarola is that he impressed and still impresses people as a man *sent* by God—as a prophet.

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Whether Savonarola was a true prophet or no—and the question is too complex to be examined here—certainly the people of Florence would not have taken him for one if he had not first impressed them as holy; and this impression they received, along with his preaching, chiefly from his spirit of poverty. His reform of S. Marco was principally a drastic return to poverty. St Antoninus, forty years earlier, had secured a fixed income from rents for the community, to tide it over a shortage of donations and vocations. This income Savonarola abolished, compelling the Friars to live on what people chose to give them from day to day, together with earnings from the crafts which he established in the priory under the care of lay-brothers. And of course gifts came in abundance when the Florentines noticed the new situation. The plain living of the friars, with their patched habits cut economically short, was a real factor in Savonarola's influence on the city.

It is not easy however to assess his relations with the vast community whose number had grown, under his influence, from about sixty to over two hundred. Inevitably his fame as a preacher has overshadowed his work as a prior. The community was curiously unfaithful to him when the crisis came. There is evidence that as time went on the majority felt, rightly or wrongly, that their prior gave too much favour to an inner ring of devotees—especially to poor Silvester Maruffi who eventually died with him. Yet there are touching stories of Savonarola's humility and patience with the brethren: we are told of his allotting to himself—he so sensitive and fastidious—the task of cleaning the privies.

But the reform of S. Marco was only part of a wider design. From those cloisters the light was to shine out on Florence, 'the watchtower of Italy', as he called it, and so through Italy and over the Christian world. 'This work', 'this fire' it was to be the mission and privilege of Florence to propagate. No one was ever so 'Florentine' as this Ferrarese; and it is here perhaps that we touch a weakness in him, the source perhaps of that strain of obstinacy and unreason which many who admire Savonarola have felt in his dealings with the Pope. The fact was that Savonarola

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so identified his dream of reform with the regime which he strove to maintain in Florence as to make its success contingent on circumstances which he could only secure at the price of rebellion. He came to think it necessary that either he remain in Florence, or at least that his work—the new political regime in the city, the reformed Congregation of S. Marco—remain in the forms which he had given it. He tied his designs to matters which he could not legitimately withdraw from the control of superiors (principally the Pope himself) whom he increasingly distrusted and was in the end prepared to defy.

Had he stopped short at denouncing corruption in the Church without involving himself in politics (supposing that were possible) he would still have run a great personal risk, but he would have avoided the particular and extreme peril into which his political engagement in fact drew him: the peril of finding himself politically as well as morally at odds with a very politically-minded Pope. This was to double the risk of disobedience.

Whoever ventures to pronounce on Savonarola must of course take account of the enormous provocation he underwent: the dead weight of spiritual inertia infecting the higher clergy of the time and the Papacy in particular. Who dare blame him if, in challenging this inertia, his matchless courage overreached itself? So far, in any case, as his audacity served the proper ends of Christian preaching, it may shock us but it should not scandalise. And shocking it certainly is. Reading Savonarola's sermons today one is amazed that such things were really said about the clergy from one of the chief pulpits of Christendom: 'You spend the night with concubines and receive the Sacrament next morning. . . . Look at the Court of Rome! . . . benefices and the very Blood of Christ are sold for cash there . . . and all the talk is of evil things and women and boys.' There are pages of this kind of thing. True, Savonarola always refrained from attacking the Pope himself directly. He shows, habitually, a notable regard for Alexander's feelings. Indeed, the two men always maintained a certain regard for one another; the Pope, through all the vacillations and half-concealed rancours which mark his dealing with Savon-

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arola, never ceased in a way to admire him. Until the final desperate sermons of 1498 Savonarola does not as a rule confront the Pope as such at all in the pulpit, and when he finally does so it is in order to clarify his own attitude to papal authority, not to denounce Alexander as a man. Considering the awful strain he was subjected to and the vulnerability of his adversary, Savonarola kept the debate on a remarkably high level. He fought like the Christian gentleman he was.

It is clearly important to distinguish between moral criticism of those in authority and rebellion against them—granting as we must, of course, that criticism itself has its dangers for the critic, and not the less if he speak from a pulpit. 'Rebellion' too must be distinguished; one may rebel against an authority or against a particular action regarded as a misuse of authority. This last is what Savonarola did—he was no Luther—in the matter of the Pope's suppression of the independent Congregation of S. Marco (7 November, 1496) and in that of his own excommunication six months later. 'Whenever', he stated from the pulpit on the 8th March, 1496, 'whenever it is clear that a superior's orders are against the commandments of God, and more especially the precept of charity, then one is obliged not to obey . . . *oportet magis obedire Deo quam hominibus*'. And a month later he distinguishes still more explicitly: 'I am always ready to obey the Roman Church, . . . I say that whoever refuses obedience to the holy Roman Church will be damned. . . . I am prepared to obey in everything, except when the command is against God or charity. I do not think such a command has been given, but if it were to be given then I would say, "You are not the Roman Church, but a mere man. You are not the Shepherd (*pastore*), for the Shepherd never gives commands against God or charity".' And finally, ten months after the excommunication, by now convinced that 'such a command' *had* been given, in the last sermon he ever preached: 'I submit myself and all I have ever said to the correction of the Roman Church and ecclesiastical authority, nor do I in the least disparage this but rather exalt it. . . . Ecclesiastical authority and the Roman Church stand for good morals. How can you think I am against

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authority? I only want you to understand it rightly. "O Father" (you will say) "*Papa omnia potest*". But what does that *omnia* mean? The Pope (for instance) cannot abolish Baptism. . . . If he were to order you not to confess your sins or be baptised, I would answer, "Pope, you are a heretic; I will not obey you". So he cannot do *everything*; that *omnia* means everything that agrees with Christ and His will (*intenzione*); it means all good things. . . .'

Thus the campaign against corruption in the Church has narrowed down to a revolt against a particular course of action taken by the Pope. For Savonarola the revolt was continuous with the wider campaign. Was there a flaw in his logic or his intentions? It is, I have suggested, only by examining the actual historical situation that one can bring one's misgivings to a focus. The chief aim of Alexander VI all through, from July 1495 to the end, with regard to Savonarola, was to separate him, somehow, from Florence. Alexander was a politician and he had strong political reasons for wishing to destroy the Friar's influence in Florence. Tolerant by nature, he would not, probably, have much resented, to start with anyhow, the denunciations of clerical and in particular of Roman vice which rang out from the pulpit at Florence, had not these hampered his political manoeuvres. Savonarola's motives, on the contrary, were severely spiritual; but he had become persuaded that his work in Florence (and the reform of S. Marco) was divinely intended to be the beginning of a general renewal of the Church. And now he saw that work, in the form which he had given it, threatened by the worldly manoeuvres of men who had a vested interest in corruption. As he watched the Pope harden against him the prospect for Savonarola must have been heart-breaking indeed. But would a saint have preached those last defiant sermons? The question is not merely rhetorical.

Heroic in their defiance those sermons certainly were. The courage of Savonarola comes to a climax here; that courage which always went hand-in-hand with his peculiar clarity of aim and foresight. He knew well what awaited him. In a way perhaps he had always known it, ever since those dim forebodings of his youth. A shadow had ever

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accompanied his vocation, that haunting sense of an ordeal to come which lends such pathos to so much of his preaching. And now the shadow was right over him; he could read his fate now, in the hostile faces closing in.

THE MODERN VICE

MICHAEL DE LA BEDOYERE

CORRUPTIO OPTIMI PESSIMA—yes, but few of us can rise to the best, and consequently few of us descend to the depths. *Corruptio melioris pejor* would be a maxim more suited to us, and we could translate it: The corruption of the rather better produces the rather worse. That is the habitual danger which most Christians and especially most Catholics run. It is that 'rather worse' which interests me, and another way of putting it would be that Catholics run their own particular danger of being vulgar.

The word 'vulgar' is interesting because it carries within itself, as it were, the story of its own corruption. Its true meaning is something to do with the common people, that is, those least in danger of being vulgar in the modern sense, for the common people largely bound in mind and behaviour by God-made conditions of life are in least danger of falling from the rather better to the rather worse. They are what they are—and that is never being vulgar. Only with the rise of an educated class did the word 'vulgar' become associated with being uneducated. Thus it got its present pejorative significance. But it is only the educated who are liable to be vulgar in this sense, because it is only the educated who can fall from the rather better to the rather worse by giving themselves the air of truly educated people while in fact being only half-educated. As such they become less than themselves. They pretend to something they have not got, and instead of living true to themselves they live in terms of conventional values of what is respectable, what is the

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