

Concise church biographies

Girolamo Savonarola

Girolamo Savonarola (also translated as Jerome Savonarola or Hieronymous Savonarola) [1452-1498] was a zealous Italian Dominican priest who is seen as a precursor of the Reformation and briefly became the ruler of Florence.

He was born in Ferrara and was originally destined to be a doctor but he joined the Dominican order in 1474. He gradually gained fame as a preacher after a series of orations on Revelation preached in Brescia in 1486. In 1490 he settled in Florence, preaching at the Medici foundation of San Marco where he called for the repentance of the city's leaders while pleading for the poor. He was elected prior of San Marco in 1491 and preached in the cathedral, gaining more influence. Originally Lorenzo de Medici, the previous ruler of Florence, was a patron of Savonarola but later became the target of Savonarola's radical preaching.

He preached divine judgment against the city in 1494. Then the French king Charles VIII invaded Italy [1494-5] fulfilling the prophecy but twice Savonarola persuaded the king not to sack Florence. Since the Medici leader Piero fled at the approach of the French leaving a political vacuum, Savonarola encouraged the establishment of a republic like Venice and announced a golden age.

He initiated tax reforms, aided the poor, reformed the courts, changing the morally lax city into monastic type community. This made sodomy, previously punishable by fine, into a capital offence. His chief enemies were the Duke of Milan and Pope Alexander VI, whom Savonarola ignored.

In 1496 he and his followers carried out the 'Bonfire of the Vanities'. 'Immoral', vain items, such as: mirrors, cosmetics, lewd pictures, pagan books, gambling tables, fine clothes, and bawdy poetry, were collected and burned in a large pile in the Piazza della Signoria of Florence. Renaissance artwork was lost in this, including paintings by Botticelli.

Savonarola also denounced the papacy as corrupt. In 1497 Pope Alexander VI, fearing Savonarola's association with France, excommunicated Savonarola and threatened to place Florence under an interdict, which frightened the people. Weaker rich people rebelled against Savonarola's attempt at righteous government. During his Ascension Day sermon on 4 May 1497, gangs of youths rioted, and this turned into a revolt.

The authorities charged him with false prophecies, sedition, and heresy. In 1498, he was simultaneously hanged and burned, in the same place as the previous bonfires. Niccolò Machiavelli, author of *The Prince* witnessed and wrote about the execution. The iniquitous Medici then regained control of Florence.

A plaque commemorates the site of Savonarola's execution in the Piazza della Signoria, Florence. In recent decades Dominicans sought to canonise Savonarola and reverse his unjust sentence of guilt, but this has been opposed by Jesuits.

Savonarola was one of many who sought to reform the church from its moral laxities and corruption but concentration on worldly issues ensured his failure. It would take Luther, centring on justification by faith, to really bring Reformation.