

Italy, at the onset of the Reformation, was a territory of many states. Naples occupied the south, Tuscany the center, while the Papal states looped about Tuscany and in the north were the territories of Venice, Milan, etc. These territories were in a continuous rivalry of one sort or another and the renaissance found them pushing that rivalry into their understanding of man. Most of the thinkers were stunned, they tell us, when they suddenly realized that in 1300 they knew less about medicine, for example, than had been known by Galen about the time of Christ.

The Renaissance, therefore was really a rebellion against the autocracy of the church in the lives of men...without being articulated in that way. Some of the great renaissance leaders were popes! But they, too, were seeking to move from the sordid to the splendid. That is why the renaissance could never have reformed the church. It neither had the grounds nor the means. And it lacked the inclination. But it could call attention to the gross inadequacies of the religious structure and that alerted thinking persons to develop criticism that would later prove very effective.

In agreement with this thrust there were a few overt renaissance reactions that moved against the structured church. Poggio, an aid to Martin V and later the Papal secretary, served as a discoverer of lost works. He produced a dialogue on avarice that was an attack on the Mendicant orders, and gave a more sympathetic account of the death of Jerome of Prague (but I have never read this, myself). In this period the Vatican library was given great impetus and became a treasure trove of documents in the original and copied states.

Laurentius Valla (often disagreed with Poggio, incidentally) demonstrated that the Donation of Constantine was a forgery and he also proved that the Apostle's Creed did not come directly from the twelve apostles. That papal secretaries were allowed such freedom is only a comment on the nature of the age in which the press for literary form and expression dominated the minds of the leaders.

Florence, of course, became something of an Italian Renaissance center in art and culture. But the work of Savonarola as a challenger of the existing institution was no mean contribution. As with