

The Prince

by Niccolò Machiavelli

CHAPTER XI

Concerning Ecclesiastical Principalities

IT ONLY remains now to speak of ecclesiastical principalities. All difficulties with these states occur prior to getting possession, because they are acquired either by ability [*virtú*] or good fortune. But they can be held without either; for they are sustained by the antique ordinances of religion, which are so all-powerful, and of such a character that the principalities may be held no matter how their princes behave and live. These princes alone have states and do not defend them, they have subjects and do not rule them; and the states, although unguarded, are not taken from them, and the subjects, although not ruled, do not care, and they have neither the desire nor the ability to separate themselves. Such principalities only are secure and happy. But being upheld by powers, to which the human mind cannot reach, I shall speak no more of them, because, being exalted and maintained by God, it would be the act of a presumptuous and rash man to discuss them.¹

Nevertheless, if any one should ask of me how comes it that the Church has attained such greatness in temporal power, seeing that from Alexander backwards the Italian potentates (not only those who have been called potentates, but every baron and lord, though the smallest) have valued the temporal power very slightly — yet now a king of France trembles before it, and it has been able to drive him from Italy, and to ruin the Venetians — although this may be very manifest, it does not appear to me superfluous to recall it in some measure to memory.

Before Charles, King of France, passed into Italy, this country was under the dominion of the Pope, the Venetians, the King of Naples, the Duke of Milan, and the Florentines. These potentates had two principal anxieties: the one, that no foreigner should enter Italy under arms; the other, that none of themselves should seize more territory. Those about whom there was the most anxiety were the Pope and the Venetians. To restrain the Venetians the union of all the others was necessary, as it was for the defense of Ferrara; and to keep down the Pope they made use of the barons of Rome, who, being divided into two factions, Orsini and Colonna, had always a pretext for disorder, and, standing with arms in their hands under the eyes of the Pontiff, kept the pontificate weak and powerless. And although there might arise sometimes a courageous pope, such as Sixtus IV, yet neither fortune nor wisdom could rid him of these annoyances. And the short life of a pope is also a cause of weakness; for in the ten years, which is the average life of a pope, he can with difficulty lower one of the factions; and if, so to speak, one pope should almost destroy the Colonna, another would arise hostile to the Orsini, who would

¹ It is generally agreed that this is an ironic passage. Also note that, having said he won't discuss states ruled by the Church, Machiavelli goes on to do exactly that.

support their opponents, and yet would not have time to ruin the Orsini. This was the reason why the temporal powers of the pope were little esteemed in Italy.

Alexander VI arose afterwards, who of all the pontiffs that have ever been showed how a pope with both money and arms was able to prevail; through the instrument of Duke Valentino² and by reason of the entry of the French, he brought about all those things which I have discussed above concerning the actions of the duke. And although his intention was not to aggrandize the Church, but himself, nevertheless, what he did contributed to the greatness of the Church, which, after the Pope's death and the ruin of the duke, became the heir to all his labors.

Pope Julius II came afterwards and found the Church strong, possessing all the Romagna, the barons of Rome reduced to impotence, and, through the chastisements Alexander, the factions wiped out. He also found the way open to accumulate money in a manner such as had never been practiced before Alexander's time. Such things Julius not only followed, but improved upon, and he intended to gain Bologna, to ruin the Venetians, and to drive the French out of Italy. All of these enterprises prospered with him, and so much the more to his credit, inasmuch as he did everything to strengthen the Church and not any private person. He kept also the Orsini and Colonna factions within the bounds in which he found them; and although there was among them some mind to make disturbance, nevertheless he held two things firm: the one, the greatness of the church, with which he terrified them; and the other, not allowing them³ to have their own cardinals, who caused the disorders among them. For whenever these factions have their cardinals they do not remain quiet for long, because cardinals foster the factions in Rome and out of it, and the barons are compelled to support them, and thus from the ambitions of prelates arise disorders and tumults among the barons. For these reasons his Holiness Pope Leo X⁴ found the pontificate most powerful, and it is to be hoped that, if others made it great in arms, he will make it still greater and more venerated by his goodness and infinite other virtues.

CHAPTER XXVI

An Exhortation to Liberate Italy from the Barbarians

HAVING carefully considered the subject of the above discourses, and wondering within myself whether the present times were propitious to a new prince, and whether there were the elements that would give an opportunity to a wise and virtuous one to introduce a new order of things which would do honor to him and good to the people of this country, it appears to me that so many things concur to favor a new prince that I never knew a time more fit than the present.

² Valentino is Cesare Borgia, son of Pope Alexander VI and head of papal armies who conquered large areas of central Italy for the Papal States

³ The Orsini and Colonna

⁴ Leo X is the first Medici Pope, son of Lorenzo the Magnificent. Machiavelli was addressing The Prince to the current Medici ruler of Florence, Lorenzo Duke of Urbino, nephew of Pope Leo, so this is a piece of flattery.

And if, as I said, it was necessary that the people of Israel should be captive so as to make manifest the ability of Moses; that the Persians should be oppressed by the Medes so as to discover the greatness of the soul of Cyrus; and that the Athenians should be dispersed to illustrate the capabilities of Theseus: then at the present time, in order to discover the virtue of an Italian spirit, it was necessary that Italy should be reduced to the extremity she is now in, that she should be more enslaved than the Hebrews, more oppressed than the Persians, more scattered than the Athenians; without head, without order, beaten, despoiled, torn, overrun; and to have endured every kind of desolation.

Although lately some spark may have been shown by one, which made us think he was ordained by God for our redemption, nevertheless it was afterwards seen, in the height of his career, that fortune rejected him.⁵ So that Italy left as without life, waits for him who shall yet heal her wounds and put an end to the ravaging and plundering of Lombardy, to the swindling and taxing of the kingdom [of Naples] and of Tuscany, and cleanse those sores that for long have festered. It is seen how she entreats God to send someone who shall deliver her from these wrongs and barbarous insolence. It is seen also that she is ready and willing to follow a banner if only someone will raise it.

Nor is there to be seen at present one in whom she can place more hope than in your illustrious house,⁶ with its valor and fortune, favored by God and by the Church of which it is now the chief, and which could be made the head of this redemption. This will not be difficult if you will recall to yourself the actions and lives of the men I have named. And although they were great and wonderful men, yet they were men, and each one of them had no more opportunity than the present offers, for their enterprises were neither more just nor easier than this, nor was God more their friend than He is yours.

With us [the Italians] there is great justice, because that war is just which is necessary, and arms are hallowed when there is no other hope but in them. Here there is the greatest willingness, and where the willingness is great the difficulties cannot be great if you will only follow those men to whom I have directed your attention. Further than this, how extraordinarily the ways of God have been manifested beyond example: the sea is divided, a cloud has led the way, the rock has poured forth water, it has rained manna. Everything has contributed to your greatness; you ought to do the rest. God is not willing to do everything, and thus take away our free will and that share of glory which belongs to us.

And it is not to be wondered at if none of the above-named Italians have been able to accomplish all that is expected from your illustrious house; and if in so many revolutions in Italy, and in so many campaigns, it has always appeared as if military virtue were exhausted, this has happened because the old order of things was not good, and none of us have known how to find a new one. And nothing honors a man more than to establish new laws and new ordinances when he himself is newly risen.⁷ Such things when they

⁵ The near savior of Italy, in Machiavelli's view, had been Cesare Borgia, who was defeated by fortune (the death of his father Alexander VI) at the height of his powers.

⁶ That is the current leader the house of Medici in Florence, Lorenzo Duke of Urbino, the grandson of Lorenzo the Magnificent, to whom Machiavelli addressed The Prince.

⁷ A reference to the restoration of the Medici in 1512.

are well founded and dignified will make him revered and admired, and in Italy there are not wanting opportunities to bring such into use in every form.

Here there is great valor in the limbs while it fails in the head. Look attentively at the duels and the hand-to-hand combats, how superior the Italians are in strength, dexterity, and subtlety. But when it comes to armies they do not bear comparison, and this springs entirely from the insufficiency of the leaders, since those who are capable are not obedient, and each one seems to himself to know, there having never been any one so distinguished above the rest, either by valor or fortune, that others would yield to him. Hence it is that for so long a time, and during so much fighting in the past twenty years, whenever there has been an army wholly Italian, it has always given a poor account of itself; as witness Taro, Alessandria, Capua, Genoa, Vaila, Bologna, Mestre.⁸

If, therefore, your illustrious house wishes to follow those remarkable men who have redeemed their country, it is necessary before all things, as a true foundation for every enterprise, to be provided with your own forces, because there can be no more faithful, truer, or better soldiers. And although singly they are good, altogether they will be much better when they find themselves commanded by their prince, honored by him, and maintained at his expense. Therefore it is necessary to be prepared with such arms, so that you can be defended against foreigners by Italian valor.... And these are the kind of improvements which confer reputation and power upon a new prince.

This opportunity, therefore, ought not to be allowed to pass for letting Italy at last see her liberator appear. Nor can one express the love with which he would be received in all those provinces which have suffered so much from these foreign scourges -- with what thirst for revenge, with what stubborn faith, with what devotion, with what tears! What door would be closed to him? Who would refuse obedience to him? What envy would hinder him? What Italian would refuse him homage?

THIS BARBARIAN OCCUPATION STINKS TO ALL OF US. Let, therefore, your illustrious house take up this charge with that courage and hope with which all just enterprises are undertaken, so that under its standard our native country may be ennobled, and under its auspices may be verified that saying of Petrarch:

*Virtú contro al Furore/ Prenderá l'arme,
E fia il combatter corto:
Che l'antico valore
Negli italici cuor non é ancor morto.*

Virtue against fury will take up arms,
And make the combat short,
For the old [Roman] valor
Is not yet dead in Italian hearts

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⁸ These battles (Il Taro, 1495; Alessandria, 1499; Capua, 1501; Genoa, 1507; Vaila, 1509; Bologna, 1511; Mestri, 1513) all occurred as a result of the first two French invasions of Italy in 1494 and 1499.