

DISCOURSE OF

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REFORMING THE STATE OF FLORENCE DONE AT THE
INSTANCE OF POPE LEO X

The reason why Florence has always so often changed its government has been because it has never been a Republic or a Principality of the proper kind; for that Principate cannot be called stable where things are done according to the desires of an individual but are decided by the consent of the many; nor can it be believed that that Republic will endure where those moods of the people are not satisfied, and which, if they are not satisfied, cause the ruin of the Republic: and that this is true can be seen from the States (governments) that that city has had from the year one thousand three hundred ninety three (1393) until now: and beginning with the Reform made in the said time by Messer Maso Degli Albizi, it will be seen how at that time it was desired to give it the form of a Republic governed by the Optimates (Aristocrats), but that there were so many defects in it, that it did not last forty years; and it would have lasted even less if the wars of the Visconti had not ensued and which kept it united. Among other defects there was the promulgation of a list of eligible candidates (Squittini) a long time in advance, in which fraud could easily be introduced, and in which the elections could be not good; but on the other hand, because men change easily, from good becoming wicked, giving eligibility to citizens a long time in advance, it could easily happen that while the selection might be good, the drawing (up of the lists) could be bad: in addition to this, there had not been instilled in great men a fear of creating Sects (Factions), which are the ruin of a State. The Signoria also had little reputation (influence) and too much authority, being able to dispose of the lives and possessions of the citizens without appeal, and being able to call the people to a parliament. So that the Signoria came to be, not the defenders of the State, but an instrument to cause its overthrow whenever an influential Citizen should be able either to govern her or swindle her. On the other hand, as has been said, as it had little reputation, and often consisted of abject young men, existed for only a short time, and did not apply itself to any serious business, it could not have much influence.

There also existed in that State a defect of no little importance, which was, that private individuals were founded in the councils of public affairs, which maintained the reputation of these private individuals but took it away from the public (officials), and resulted in taking away of authority from the Magistrates, something contrary to every civil institution. To which defect there was added yet another that mattered even more, which was, that the People did not participate in those councils; and these all together caused infinite troubles: and if, as I have said, the external wars had not served to keep her united, she would have been ruined earlier than she was.

After this, there sprung up the State of Cosimo, which learned more toward a Principality than a Republic, and if it lasted longer than the other, two things were the reasons: the one, it was created with the favor of the People; the other, it was governed by the prudence of two men, Cosimo and his grandson Lorenzo: none the less, his (Cosimo's) long deliberations so increased its weakness, that that which Cosimo wanted to bring about many times was brought to the point of danger of losing it; whence there arose frequent public assemblies and resultant frequent banishments during the existence of that State; and then it was lost because of the incident of the passage of King Charles into Italy. After which the City wanted to reestablish itself in the form of a Republic, but did not plan it in such a way that it should last; for, while the government did not satisfy all the

moods of the Citizens, yet on the other hand it could not furnish them; and was so weak and far from being a true Republic, that a Gonfalonier for life, if he was wise and wicked, could easily make himself Prince; if he was good and weak, could easily be driven out to the entire ruin of all that State.

And as it would be a lengthy matter to enlarge on all the reasons, I will mention only one, which is, that the Gonfalonier did not have around him those who could defend him if he were good or to restrain and correct him if he were bad. The reason why all these governments have been defective, is that their Reforms have not been made to satisfy the common good, but for the security and confirmation in power of one of the Parties; which security, however, has not been found, because one Party has always been discontent and it has been a powerful instrument to whoever has desired change.

There remains now for us to discuss the State from XII (1512) to the present, and what its strengths and weaknesses have been: but since it is a recent thing and everyone knows it, I will not speak of it. It is true that when this government comes to an end, as it has, by the death of the Duke, that new ways of governing have to be discussed, and as it appears proper to me to show my loyalty toward Your Holiness, not by telling you what occurs to me with the possibility of erring, but first to tell you the opinions of many others, according as they seemed to me when I heard them discussed, and afterwards adding my opinion, in which I should en, Your Holiness will excuse me for being more loving than prudent.

I say, therefore, that some judge that no other stable government can be organized than that which existed in the times of Cosimo and Lorenzo: Some others would have desired it much more liberal. Those who would want the government similar to that of Cosimo say, therefore, that things easily return to their nature; and, therefore, as it is natural for the Florentine Citizens to honor your House, to enjoy those benefits which proceed from You, to love those things which were loved by You, and having made a habit of this for sixty years, it is not possible for them not to return to the same mind and the same manners; and while a few may remain of a contrary mind, yet, because of their contrary temperament, they will easily extinguish themselves; and they add to these reasons one more, that of necessity, showing that Florence cannot remain without a Head, for without one she will live in confusion, but having to have one, it is much better that he be of that House which they are accustomed to revere than to select him from another place where there should be less reputation and everyone be less content.

In opposition to this opinion, it is answered that a State thus formed is dangerous for no other reason than because it is weak; for if Cosimo's State had had in those times so great a weakness, as has been alleged above, a similar State in these times would have double such weaknesses, because the City, the Citizens, and the times are different from those which existed then; so that it is impossible to look for a State in Florence which can exist and still be similar to that (of Cosimo).

Originally, that State had the general public as a friend, and this one has it as an enemy: the Citizens of the former had never found a State in Florence which was more generally liked than it, while the latter have found one that appears to be better ruled, and where men are more contended. In Italy at that time, there were no arms and no power which the Florentines could not, even when alone, sustain with their own arms; but now that Spain and France are there, they must side with one or the other, and when it happens that that one loses, she quickly becomes prey to the victor, a thing that formerly did not happen. Also, the Citizens were accustomed to paying heavy taxes: now, either being unable or from want of practice, they have

been weaned from them, and to want to reaccustom them is an obvious and dangerous thing.

The Medici who governed at that time, because they grew up and were raised with their Citizens, governed with such familiarity that it gained them favor: now they have become so great, surpassing all the other citizens, that such familiarity can no longer exist, and, as a consequence, neither can that favor: so that, considering the difference in times and men, there cannot be a greater deception than to believe that the same form of government can be impressed on so greatly different people. And if at that time, as has been said before, every ten years brought the danger of losing the State, today they would have lost it. Nor is it to be believed to be true that men easily return to their old and customary way of living, for this is proven true only when the old way of living pleases more than the new one: but when it pleases less, men do not return to it unless they are forced, and then only live that way as long as that force endures.

In addition to this, although it is true that Florence cannot remain without a head, and that it should have to judge between the head of one private group and another, she would love more a head from the House of Medici than from any other House, none the less, when one judges between the head of a private group and the head of a public group, the head of the public group drawn from that place will always be liked more than the head of the private group.

Some judged that the State could not be lost except by an assault from outside, and believed there was always time to be able to make friends with those who should assault her, and here they are greatly deceived; for very often a friendship is not made with one who is more capable of harming you, but with one who has more opportunity to do so at that time, or with one whom your mind and imagination more incline you to love; but it can easily happen that your friend is defeated, and having been defeated remains at the discretion of the Victor, so that he does not want an accord with you, either because you did not have the time to seek it, or because of the hatred he has conceived against you for the friendship you had with his enemies.

Lodovico, Duke of Milan, would have made such an accord with King Louis XII of France, if he had been able to obtain it. King Federigo (of Spain) would also have made an accord with that man (Louis), if he had met up with him: but not being able to make an accord with him, they both lost their States, since a thousand things arise which impede your making such accords; so that, everything considered, that State can neither be called secure nor stable, having had so many reasons for instability, so that it could not be able to please Your Holiness, or its Friends.

As to those who would want a Government broader than this, I say, that unless it is liberalized in a way that it becomes a well organized Republic, such broadening only causes it to be ruined more quickly; and if they would describe in detail how they would have it formed, I would answer them in detail: but as they speak in generalities, I cannot answer except generally. I only want that this reply be enough for me. And as to refuting Cosimo's State, it is this, that no stable State can be organized, unless it is either a true Principality or a true Republic: for all forms of Government situated between these two are defective. The reason is very clear; for the Principality has only one way to go towards its dissolution, which is to descend toward a Republic, and so also a Republic has only one way of dissolving itself, which is to rise toward a Principality. States between these have two ways, being able to rise toward a Principality or descend toward a Republic; from which results their instability.

If your Holiness desires to create a stable State in Florence for your glory and the safety of your friends, you cannot, therefore, organize anything else other than a true Principality or a Republic, which will have all the parts. All others are useless and will have only a very short life. And, as to the Principality, I will not discuss it in detail, as much because it would be difficult to do so, as because such an instrument is lacking: and Your Holiness has to understand this, that in all Cities where there is a great equality among Citizens, a Principality cannot be organized except with the greatest difficulty: for it want to create a Republic in Milan, where there is a great inequality among Citizens, it would be necessary to eliminate all the Nobility and reduce it to an equality with the others; for they behave so irregularly among themselves that laws are not enough to reproach them, but a strong voice and a Royal Power is needed which will reproach them. And on the other hand, to want a Principality in Florence, where there is a great equality, it would be necessary for you first to arrange an inequality, and create for yourself many nobles with Castles and Villas, who, together with the Prince, keep the City and all the Province in subjugation with their arms and adherents. For a Prince, despoiled of Nobility, cannot sustain the burden of the Principality; and, therefore, it is necessary that there be a middle group between him and the general public which would aid him in sustaining this burden. This is observed in all the States of Princes, and especially in the Kingdom of France, where the Gentlemen make themselves lords over the people, and the Princes over the Gentlemen, and the King over the Princes. But it is a difficult thing to create Principality where a Republic would work well, or a Republic where a Principality would work well, for, because it is difficult, it is inhumane and unworthy of anyone who wishes to be thought merciful and good. I will leave further discussion of a Principality and will speak of a Republic, because it is known that Your Holiness is most disposed toward this, and it is believed He delays its creation because He would desire to find a government in Florence wherein His authority would remain great, and his friends would live securely; and it seems to me having thought on it, that if there is only one good thing this serves, it is to make it possible through this for you to know what my loyalty (servitude) is toward You.

And you will see that in this Republic of mine, your authority not only is preserved, but will increase, and your Friends be honored and secure, and the other general mass of Citizens have a very evident reason to be content.

With reverence I pray Your Holiness that you neither censure nor praise this discussion of mine before you have read it entirely; and likewise, I pray that you be not dismayed at some changes (suggested) in the Magistracies, for where things are not well organized, the less that remains of the old, so much the less remains of the bad.

Those who institute Republics ought to assign a place to three different classes of men who are to be found in every City; that is, upper, middle, and lower; and although that equality which was mentioned above exists in Florence, none the less there are some there who are high minded who believe they merit taking precedence over the others and who it is necessary to satisfy in instituting a Republic; and, for no other reason than it did not satisfy such classes, the former State was ruined.

It is impossible to satisfy these people so constituted except by giving Majesty (power) to those of the highest offices in the Republic, and this Majesty must be sustained by their persons.

It is not possible to give this Majesty to those of the highest office in the State of Florence as long as the Signoria and their Colleagues maintain the conditions which have existed in the past; for they cannot be trusted as regards the manner of selecting them, instead of choosing serious men of

reputation, although rare, they will place this Majesty of the State either in the lower or middle classes, which is contrary to every political order, or turn it over to private individuals: and, therefore, it is necessary to correct this method, and together with such correction satisfy the more highly ambitious who are in the City; and the method of this.

Annul the Signoria, the Eight of the Practica, and the Twelve Good Men; and in place of these to give Majesty (Power) to the Government, choose sixty five citizens, who are at least forty five years of age, of whom fifty three will come from the major Guilds and twelve from the minor Guilds, and who would continue for life in the Government, in the manner to be described.

Create one a Gonfalonier of justice for two or three years, unless it seems proper to appoint him for life; and of the remaining sixty four Citizens, divide them into two parts, thirty two in each part; one part would govern one year with the Gonfalonier, and the other part the following year: and thus they should be exchanged successively, keeping this stated arrangement; and all together they should be called the Signoria.

The thirty two should be divided into four parts, eight per part, and each part should reside with the Gonfalonier three months in the Palace, and should take up the magistracy with the customary ceremonies, and should carry on all that business which the Signoria, the Eight of the Practica, and the Colleagues, carry on today, all of which were abolished above; and this (body of sixty five) should be the principal head of the state and its principal member; which arrangement, if it be well considered, will be seen by itself to have rendered Majesty and reputation to the Head of the State, and it will be seen that serious and authoritative men will always sit in the highest offices, and the Proceedings (Committees) of private men will not be necessary; which, as I have said above, are pernicious in the Republic, for the thirty two who would not be in the Magistracy that year can serve as consultants and as procedure (Committee) men: and Your Holiness can place in the first selection, as will be mentioned below, all your friends and confidants. But let us now go to the second rank in the State.

I believe, as was said above, that since there are three kinds of men, it is also necessary to have three ranks in a Republic, and no more. Therefore I believe it is well to remove the confusion of Councils that has existed for some time in Your City; these were created, not because they were necessary to civil existence, but in order to feed (the vanity) of some citizens, and to feed them with some things which in fact are of no importance in any way to the well-being of the City, because all of them could be corrupted by way of the Sects (Factions).

Since, I want, therefore, to restore a Republic with just three arms, it appears to me proper to abolish the Seventy, the Head, the Council of the People, and the Council of the Commons; and in place of all these, to summon a Council of two hundred, each (of whom would be) at least forty years of age; forty for the minor guilds and a hundred sixty for the major guilds, none of whom could be of the Sixty Five, but should (hold office) for life, and should be called the Council of the Selected; which Council, together with the sixty five already named, should carry on all those affairs, and should have all the Authority, that is held today by all the aforementioned Councils, which, by virtue of this, should be abolished; and this would be the second rank of the State: and all would be selected by Your Holiness. Whence to do this, and to maintain and regulate the institutions mentioned above, and those which will be mentioned below, and for the greater security of the Authority and friends of Your Holiness, there should be given to Your Holiness and to the Most Reverend Cardinal De'Medici, by means of a Balia (Committee with Power), for the lifetime of both of you, as much Authority as all the People of Florence now possess.

The Magistracy of the Eight of the Guard and the Balia should be chosen by Your Holiness from time to time.

Also for the greater security of the State and of the friends of Your Holiness, the organization of the Infantry should be divided into two bands, to which Your Holiness should on your Authority deputize two Commissioners, one Commissioner for each band.

From the above-mentioned proposals, it is seen that two kinds of men will be satisfied, that your Authority and that of your Friends will be corroborated in that City, for you will have the arms and criminal justice in your hands, the laws in your heart, and all the heads of the State are yours.

It remains now to satisfy the third and last class of men, which consists of the whole general mass of Citizens, who are never satisfied - and whoever believes otherwise is not wise - unless you restore, or promise to restore to them their Authority; and because to restore it all at once would not be for the security of Your Friends or the maintenance of the Authority of Your Holiness, it is necessary in part to restore it and in part to promise to restore it, so that they may be entirely certain of regaining them: and, therefore, I judge it will be necessary to reopen the Hall of the Council of the Thousand, or at least of the Six Hundred Citizens, who should distribute in the same manner as they have up to now all the offices and magistracies, except the afore-mentioned sixty five, the Two Hundred, and the Eight of the Balia, who during the life of Your Holiness and the Cardinal should be appointed by you. And so that your Friends should be certain of having their names in the ballot box when the Council makes its decision, Your Holiness should deputize eight Accoppiatori (Couplers), who being in on the secret, should be able to give the decision to whomever they wanted, and should not be able to take it away from anyone. And, so that the general public should believe that the names of those who were chosen were in the ballot box, the Council should be permitted to send secretly two Citizens chosen by it to be witnesses of the placing of the names in the ballot box.

No stable Republic was ever established without satisfying the general public. The general mass of Florentine Citizens will never be satisfied except the (Council) Chamber be reopened: therefore, in wanting to establish a Republic in Florence, this Chamber must be reopened and restore the distribution (of offices) to the general public. And Your Holiness knows, that whoever thinks of taking away the State, will think of reopening it (the Council Chamber) before he does anything else: and therefore it is the better proceeding that You open it with secure methods and means, and that You take away from whoever was your enemy, the opportunity to reopen it against your will, and with the destruction and ruin of your friends.

When the State was so organized, it would not be necessary to provide for anything else, if Your Holiness and the Most Reverend Monsignor were going to live always; but as you have to go, and wanting to leave a perfect Republic, and that everyone sees and understands that it is such, so that the general public ((and because of what given and what is promised to them)) may be contented, it is necessary to arrange further: That the sixteen Gonfaloniers of the Companies of the People be created by the method and for the time as is done up to the present, being created either by the Authority of Your Holiness, or allowing the Council to create them, as Your Holiness should please; and only those Prohibited (ineligible) should be increased, so that they (the Gonfaloniers) be better spread throughout the City; it should also be arranged that none of the Sixty-five Citizens be able to hold this office. When they (the Gonfaloniers) are summoned, four of those drawn should be Monitors and hold that office for a month, so that at the end of the term they all would have been monitors: Of these four, one

should be drawn, who would make his residence for a week with the nine Lords, so that by the end of the month all four would have resided there: the said Lords residing at the Palace should not be able to do anything if he (the Monitor) were absent, and he should not have to take part in the proceedings, but only be a witness to their actions: he should be able to stop them from deciding on a case and could ask judgment on it from all of them; nor could the Thirty-two decide anything without the presence of two of the monitors, yet they (the two monitors) should have no other authority than to stop a decision which has been discussed among them, and ask it (appeal) of the Council of the Selected; nor should the Council of the Two-hundred be able to do anything unless there should be at least six of the sixteen, including the two monitors, present: yet they (the Gonfaloniers) could do nothing except, if three of them were in accord, to take a Cause from that Council and ask (action on) it of the Grand Council: the Grand Council should not be able to convene without twelve of the above mentioned Gonfaloniers, including at least three Monitors, where they should be able to carry on proceedings like other Citizens.

Such an arrangement of these Colleges thusly constituted is necessary after the death of Your Holiness and the Most Reverend Monsignor, for two reasons: the one, because if the Signoria or the other Council did not decide a matter from a lack of union, or did something against the common good from malice, there would be at hand someone to take away that authority and reassign it to another (body); for it is not good that one kind of Magistracy or Council should be able to stop an action, without there being someone who likewise can provide for it. It is also not good that Citizens do not have someone to watch them, and who makes them abstain from actions that are not good: the other reason is, that taking away the Signoria as it is today takes away from the general mass of Citizens the ability to be members of the Signoria, so that it is necessary to restore to them some office which resembles that taken away from them; and this one is such that it is greater, more useful to the Republic, and more honorable than the former one: And for the present these Gonfaloniers are to be summoned to get the City properly organized, but not to allow them to perform their office without permission from Your Holiness, which could serve to make them review the actions of those bodies as they regard the Authority and the state of Your Holiness.

In addition, to this, to give perfection to the Republic after the death of Your Holiness and of the Most Reverend Monsignor, and to ascertain that no part should be lacking, it is necessary to arrange a (Court of) Appeal to the Eight of the Guard and a Balia of thirty Citizens, to be drawn from the names from the Ballot boxes of the Two Hundred and of the Six Hundred together. Which court should be able to call the accuser and the accused within a certain time, but I would not allow such a court to be called during your life (time) without your permission. This Court is necessary in a Republic, because a few Citizens do not dare to punish great men: and it is necessary, therefore, that many Citizens should get together for such an effort, so that the judgment may be concealed, and as it is concealed, everyone can excuse himself. Such a Court would also serve during your Life (time) to cause the Eight to expedite cases and render justice; for, from fear that You should not permit the meeting (for appeal), they would judge more justly, and no appeal should be possible for matters pertaining to fraud, unless they amount to at least fifty Ducats, nor for matters pertaining to violence, unless they are accompanied by broken bones or effusion of blood, or the damage should exceed the sum of fifty Ducats.

It appears to us, having considered all this organization for a Republic and without your authority, that there is nothing lacking, according to what has been debated and discussed above at length; but if it be considered while Your Holiness and the Most Reverend Monsignor are living, it is a Monarchy,

because You command the armies, you command the criminal Judges, you have the laws in your heart, and they are more than one can desire in a City. Nor is it seen what your friends, if they are good and want to live on their own (property), have to fear, as Your Holiness remains with so much authority, and they find themselves sitting in the first offices of the Government; nor do we see also how the general mass of Citizens should fail to be content, seeing the distribution of public offices already partly given to them and the others falling into their hands little allow the Council to choose some of the Sixty-five who should be missing (vacancies), and likewise for the Two Hundred, and You choose some according to the time; and I am certain that in a little while, through the authority of Your Holiness, who would guide everything, that the present State would be converted in a way that (I propose), and the later into the (present one), which would come to be the same thing, and all in one body, with peace to the City and the perpetual fame of Your Holiness, for the authority of Your Holiness can always remedy any defects that should spring up.

I believe that the greatest honor that men can have is that which is willingly given them by their Country, and I believe that the greatest good that is done, and the most pleasing to God, is that which is done for your Country. In addition to this, no man is exalted as much in any of his actions, as are those who have reformed Republics and Kingdoms with (new) Laws and Institutions. These are, after those who have been Gods, the highest praised: and as there have been few who have had opportunity to do so, and still fewer those who have known how to do it, the number of those who have done it is small; and this glory has been esteemed so much by men who have known nothing but glory, that not being able to establish a Republic in fact, have established it in writing; for Aristotle, Plato, and many others have wanted to show the World, that if they had not been able to found a Republic as Solon and Lycurgus did, they did not fail from ignorance but from being powerless to put it into effect.

Heaven does not, therefore, give a greater gift to man, nor can it show him a road more glorious than this: and among so much felicity that God has given to Your House and to the Person of Your Holiness, the greatest is that of giving you power and material for making yourself immortal, and surpass in this way the glory of your father and grandfather. Your Holiness should consider first, therefore, that if the City of Florence be kept in its present condition, you may run a thousand dangers, if incidents happen: and before they happen, Your Holiness has to endure a thousand annoyances unbearable to any man; of which annoyances the Most Reverend Monsignor the Cardinal can give witness, having been in Florence these past months; and these arise partly from the many Citizens who are presumptuous and unbearable in their demands, partly from the many who think they do not live securely, things being as they are, and therefore do nothing other than to assert that the government should be reorganized. And some talk of enlarging it, some that it ought to be restricted; and no one comes to particulars on the method of restricting or enlarging it, for they are all confused; and as they do not think they are living securely in the manner in which they live, they do not know how to prepare to do it, and they do not believe those who should know: such that with their confusion they are apt to confound any well regulated brain.

In wanting to avoid these annoyances, therefore, there are only two ways: either to withdraw yourself from audiences, and not give them the courage to ask even in an ordinary way, or of speaking unless requested to, as did the Duke of illustrious Memory: or rather, to organize the State in a way that it administers itself, and that it is enough for Your Holiness to keep only half an eye turned on it; of which methods, this last is free from both dangers and annoyances, while the other frees you from annoyances only.

But to return to the dangers which are incurred with things being as they are, I want to make a prophecy, that if an incident should happen, and the City is not otherwise reorganized, one of two things will happen, or both or them together: either there will be a head created instantly amid tumults, who will defend the State with arms and violence, or one party will run to open the Hall of the Council, and give the other in prey; and whichever of these two things ensues, which God forbid, Your Holiness may think of how many dead, how many exiles, how much extortion would ensue to make every most cruel man, not to mention Your Holiness who is most merciful, die of sorrow. Nor is there another way of avoiding these evils than to reorganize that City so that it may in itself be firm; and it will always be firm when every one has a part in it and knows what he has to do, and in whom to confide, and that no class of Citizen has to desire innovations, either through fear for himself or through ambition.