Lesson XII (1978-1979)

THE RENAISSANCE #2

Prayer
Scripture: Acts 17:16-31
Hymn: 377 "For the Beauty of the Earth"

INTRODUCTION: The early period of the Renaissance was roughly contemporary with the Avignon Papacy and the Great Schism, but its roots go back into the Middle Ages. Always there had been challenges to the control of the church and other-worldliness had never been completely dominant. Many royal courts were shockingly secular and pagan in outlook. Frederick II might even be considered a forerunner of the Renaissance. He was a patron of education and the arts and his court no stranger to literary activity. It was distinguished by a varied culture with the knowledge of a number of languages. There was a deep interest in Roman Law and his enlightened ideas of government have moved some to speak of him as the first modern man.

Despite the church's discouraging the reading of pagan literature, the literary monuments of Greek and Latin antiquity had never completely disappeared. Interest in Roman Law had awakened as early as the time of Frederick Barbarossa and had greatly increased in the time of the Crusades.

The Renaissance was a new awakening of the human spirit and involved a new outlook on the world. There was a growing curiosity about the natural world, an interest in man as man in the present, and an emphasis on beauty. There was a new appreciation of the glories of classical antiquity. Enchanted by the beauties of Greek and Latin literature, men cast off the restraints imposed by the church's fear of the classical pagan pantheon with its mythology. Also men turned from asceticism and renunciation to the Greek reverence for beauty, the Greek and Roman acceptance of the joys of the senses coupled with sensual indulgence of the baser nature.

The beginnings of the Renaissance were most pronounced in Italy. The collapse of imperial power and the removal of the papacy to Avignon brought a new freedom to Italy. The prosperity brought by Italian commerce that had increased from the beginning of the Crusades made possible a higher cultural development in Italy. The divisions and intense rivalries of Italian politics gave the Italian cities a freedom to reward talent and encourage individualism. The elite in these cities brought the awakening to the past glories of Greece and Rome--their history, art, literature and law. Greece and Rome again became the teachers. The free republic of Florence was the leader. Here appeared some of the earliest manifestations of the Renaissance, individualism found its widest sphere of self-expression, and it was the home of some of the finest products of this brilliant period. Rome soon tried to rival Florence. New tastes and pursuits flourished in Ferrara, Urbino, Naples, Milan and Mantua.

PETRARCH (1304-1374): The first great spirit of the Italian Renaissance was the first in whom the Renaissance spirit was a dominating force.

Petrarch's father, a notary, was exiled from Florence in a political revolution; the family took refuge in Arezzo in the Florentine countryside where Petrarch was born in 1304. Moved to another country town, then to Pisa and in 1312 to Avignon. Prominent in the Florentine circle in Avignon.
Petrarch received a good education in Latin literature, then was apprenticed to the law, spent four years studying law at Montpellier and three years at Bologna. When his father died executors cheated family out of the inheritance.

Petrarch gave up law for Latin literature. Since church was patron of learning he took minor orders in the church which made him eligible for benefices that required no residence, little time or labor. He used his freedom to study Latin literature—especially Cicero and the poets.

Diligent study made Petrarch a man of letters in great demand in royal and church circles. He became a figure of international influence. Tyrants felt honored by his presence in their dominions. Favored by the Colonias; the bloody Visconti of Milan one of his princely patrons; the republic of Venice gave him a palace. Avignon popes gave him friendship and preferment. He was the decorative member of many embassies. Visited Gascony, Paris, Netherlands, Rhineland, and Bohemia. He had charming country places at Vaucluse near Avignon and Arqua near Padua. He had servants and copyists.

Petrarch never married but had two illegitimate children. The mistress of his poetical affection was Laura, another man's wife. He said he first saw her in his early manhood in the church of Santa Clara in Avignon on April 6, 1327. She died in 1346. He wrote many poems praising her virtues but claimed she forced him to keep their relationship Platonic.

Latin writings: He thought Latin was superior to Greek (he knew no Greek). Voluminous Latin writings. His Of Famous Men included biographies of famous Romans. His Africa was an ambitious Latin epic on the Punic Wars.

Italian writings: Canzoniere (Song Book) contains 366 poems many of which have Laura as their theme.

Petrarch despised Scholasticism and Aristotle.

Religious work: His Secret was modeled on Augustine's Confessions. Expresses concern for his sins and his soul. Lacked deep seriousness and worshipped form more than substance. Egotistical and vain. Criticized church and popes but not strong enough to lose support.

Petrarch received on the same day the offer of the laurel crown from Paris and Rome. He accepted the Roman crown as Poet Laureate in 1341 at the court of Robert, King of Naples. This was an honor he had diligently courted and treasured.

Petrarch inaugurated the Revival of Learning in the Latin Classics. He was the first man of letters of his day.


The illegitimate son of a travelling agent of the banking and commercial house of Bardi in Florence and a French woman of Paris. Father married an Italian girl. Spent early years in Florence. Bookish. Father sent him to learn banking in Naples. Loved the luxurious and pleasure seeking life of Naples. After six years his father put him in the University of Naples to study canon law. Spent six years studying law but made little progress—spent much of his time on astronomy, mythology, Latin classics, and reading French romances and Provencal lyrics.
Amorous young Boccaccio fell in love with Maria d’Aquino, illegitimate daughter of King Robert of Naples and the wife of one of the nobles of his court. She became his mistress in 1336. After two years she left him for another paramour. Boccaccio tried for twelve years to win her back. She died in the Black Death of 1348-49.

Boccaccio received a small inheritance from his father and slight employment from the government of Florence. Though his means were slight he decided to refuse the support of princes preferring his independence.

Vernacular writings: In the vernacular period in Florence he filled prose and poetry works with classical lore. Filostrato and Ameto revolve around Maria d’Aquino as Flaminetta.

Decameron of the vernacular period his masterpiece. Seven young women and three young men flee to a country villa from the Black Death in Florence. With servants doing the work, they spend two weeks diverting themselves with banquets, dancing and story-telling. Friday a holy day and Saturday for bathing. Other five days each one tells a story on the chosen theme of the day. The hundred stories are a sort of "human comedy"—witty and scandalous. Worst stories told on clergy. Fidelity to marriage vow exceptional. Virtue is derided and vice exalted. Licentiousness is excused under the guise of depicting reality. Paints scenes of little decency without using indecorous words. The new culture paraded the gutters of human life. Mixed with the frivolity, obscene mockery and sensual cynicism are more serious notes. Man must accept life as it is and the consequences of his own actions. He should confine his desire to what is humanly possible and should renounce the absolute without regret.

Latin period: Boccaccio met Petrarch in Florence in 1350. They exchanged books and ideas. Petrarch proved a ready counselor and helper. Together they laid the foundations for the humanist reconquest of classical antiquity. Boccaccio turned from the vernacular to the Latin. He studied both prose and poets to imitate their styles. His Genealogy a dictionary of classical mythology. Lives of Illustrious Women included 101 women. Goddesses were included but no saints.

Boccaccio became interested in Greek and promoted the study of Classical Greek. He attempted to learn Greek with aid of Calabrian monk named Barlaam. In 1360 took another Calabrian, Leonzio Pilato, into his house. Together worked on Latin translation of Homer's Iliad and Odyssey. Plan for teaching Greek in the University of Florence collapsed when Pilato left Florence for Greece. Teaching of Greek resumed in closing years of century.

Florence appointed Boccaccio to a number of important ambassadorships: Romagna in 1350, Louis, Duke of Bavaria in 1351, to Pope Innocent VI in 1354, to Pope Urban V at Avignon in 1365 and in Rome in 1367.

Boccaccio returned to the vernacular in his Life of Dante (1357-62). Town government of Florence appointed him to lecture on Dante's Divine Comedy. Frightened at hell he turned more and more to religion, wearing a monastic robe and speaking regretfully of the lascivious writings of his earlier years.

THE REVIVAL OF GREEK STUDIES:
Knowledge of Greek had never died in Southern Italy.
Study of the Latin Classics led to interest in the Greek Classics.
1360 Boccaccio brought Leonzio Pilato (Leontius Pilatus) to Florence to teach Greek.
1397 Manuel Chrysoloras taught Greek under the auspices of the
government of Florence. Translated Homer and Plato into Latin and into the Italian vernacular of Florence.
Councils of Ferrara and Florence (1438-1439) brought Greeks and Latins together and helped foster desire for the treasures of Greece. Conditions in Constantinople led Greeks to flee West.
Bessarion, archbishop of Nicaea, was made a cardinal by Pope Eugene IV after the failure of the unity movement. Distinguished career in literary and ecclesiastical life in Rome. Encouraged the study of Greek.
Gemistos Plethon (1355-1450) a Greek who attended the Council of Basel stayed in the West. Influenced Cosmo d'Medici (1389-1464), ruler of Florence, to found a Platonic Academy in 1422. The Academy led by Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499) ardently pursued the study of Plato. Other Italian cities followed example of Florence in establishing academies for the study of Greek.

FALL OF CONSTANTINOPLE (1453): Renaissance in Italy in full swing before the fall of Constantinople but this event brought many Greek teachers to Italy and the West.

THE PRINTING PRESS AND THE RENAISSANCE:
Johannes Gutenberg of Mainz about 1450 invented the printing press. The first books to be printed were Bibles. The art of printing spread rapidly. Soon both religious works and pagan classics were pouring from the presses. By 1500 more than 30,000 different works had been printed. The availability of books brought a great explosion of learning.

THE PAGAN SIDE OF THE RENAISSANCE:
The Renaissance revived a pagan point of view. Knowledge of pagan mythology became widespread. The Renaissance dominated the educated class in Italy by the middle of the 15th century, bringing widespread effort to reproduce the life of antiquity in both its vices and its virtues.

Much of the Italian Renaissance was beastfully corrupt and pagan. Few periods of history have been so beastfully wicked. Rich and powerful tyrants had always been corrupt and pagan but now they had become patrons of arts and literature, giving a new respectability to their life style.
Renaissance popes plunged the church into the game of Italian politics and became great Renaissance princes--patrons of art, architecture and literature. They failed to give the spiritual leadership needed to bring new life to dead religious forms, ceremonies and relics. They left the masses sunk in superstition and poverty. They sold indulgences and relics to pay for their Renaissance splendor. The need for Reformation grew.