The Exhortation to Penitence: Machiavelli’s Criticism of the Church

Photo of Machiavelli in the Uffizi courtyard, Florence (taken by the author).

By

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“No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.” (John Donne, 1624)

This quotation perhaps best characterizes my experience with preparing this project. No manuscript is wholly the creation of one person, but rather involves a myriad of formal and informal collaborators and mentors, each of whom contributes and helps mold the final product. My study of Machiavelli has been no exception.

In my case there are many who deserve special credit and enduring thanks. I am especially indebted to Professor Thomas Robisheaux, who started me on my journey of exploring Machiavelli through course-work in Florence, Italy. His encouragement to study Machiavelli outside the mainstream scholarship and explore my own ideas was invaluable. Similarly, I owe a huge debt to Professor Bruce Lawrence, who has, in areas far different from the mainstream of this thesis, taught me “how to think” rather than “what to think.” As friend, mentor, and collaborator, he has been an indispensable part of my Duke experience. Finally I owe special thanks to my first advisor, Professor Kalman Bland. Crafting a thesis based on original ideas, and especially those that challenge the conventional discourse about Machiavelli, was a daunting task. His guidance and challenge to explore different ways of viewing this project were invaluable, while still granting me the flexibility to independently evolve the structure and ideas in my research and writing.

I also want to thank my parents, Dr. James and Karen Cross, and my best friend, Lindsay Emery, for their unparalleled support. They have patiently endured listening to my musings on Machiavelli, and have provided unbounded advice and unwavering encouragement along the way.

Over the last year I have cultivated a relationship with a Florentine who died nearly five hundred years ago. He is unaware of our friendship; he knows nothing of my boundless curiosity for his brilliantly enigmatic character. Niccolò once wrote that, at the end of the day, he found sanctuary with the figures of the past; these sparkling personalities, along with their grand victories and tragic failures, provided a template for his reading of contemporary Italy. But he was not an armchair academic; he was involved in the critical matters of his day until his death. This project is an attempt to join Niccolò in his private study, to listen to his musings and to perhaps even catch a glimpse of his mind at work. It is to him that this project is dedicated.

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The Exhortation to Penitence: Machiavelli’s Criticism of the Church

Isaiah Berlin has observed, “there is something surprising about the sheer number of interpretations of Machiavelli’s political opinions.”¹ For Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527), religion and politics were intimately connected activities; his views on religion were integral to his political opinions. Consequently, Machiavelli’s views on religion, and his assessment of Christianity in particular, have captured the attention of nearly every scholar of the great Florentine thinker and have produced a multitude of interpretations.² This plethora of interpretations is due to the variety and complexity of Machiavelli’s thought, to which Dante Germino confessed, “I do not think that there exists a Rosetta stone to decipher the Machiavellian hieroglyph.”³ Although this investigation will not propose a template with which to elucidate Machiavelli’s thought, it will address his views on religion and more specifically, his criticisms of the Renaissance Italian Church.

In the corpus of Machiavelli’s literature there is one text that has received scant scholarly attention, his Exhortation to Penitence (Esoritazione alla Penitenza).⁴ This pithy sermon was probably composed and delivered to a religious confraternity in the last years of Machiavelli’s

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² John M. Najemy has observed, “no aspect of Machiavelli’s thought elicits a wider range of interpretations than religion, and one may wonder why his utterances on this subject appear to move in so many different directions and cause his readers to see such different things.” John M. Najemy, "Papirius and the Chickens, or Machiavelli on the Necessity of Interpreting Religion," The Journal of the History of Ideas 60, no. 4 (1999): 658.
⁴ See Appendix A for the Exhortation in its original Italian (Esoritazione alla Penitenza). See Appendix B for Allan Gilbert’s rendering of the Exhortation into English. All Italian terms and sources are from Guido Mazzoni, Mario Casella. Tutte Le Opere Di Niccoló Machiavelli (Firenze: G. Barbera Editore, 1929).
life, sometime between 1525 and 1527. However, given the dearth of records it is possible that Machiavelli presented his sermon earlier in his life, meaning that contextualizing the sermon against the background of Italian events—invasions as well as internal strife—is problematic.

This investigation will examine the extent to which the content of the *Exhortation* is an echo of Machiavelli’s other literature and ideas, or is instead just a minor, anomalous work. The node of comparison will be Machiavelli’s criticism of the Italian Church; specifically, that the Church has failed to stem ingratitude (towards God as well as towards one’s neighbor), and that it has inculcated sloth (the failure to participate civically in social and political affairs) in the Italian populace.

Machiavelli’s *Exhortation to Penitence* opens with a Psalm of David—“from the depths I have called upon you, O Lord; O Lord, hear my voice”—and ends with a sobering line from Petrarch, the great Italian poet: “and repent and understand clearly/that as much as pleases the world is a short dream.” A humanist ends what a prophet begins; Machiavelli revealed his intellectual familiarity with Renaissance humanism as well as Christian doctrine (his affinity for Petrarch is evident in his *magnum opus*, *The Prince*, where this political treaty concludes with


7 In the *Exhortation*, Machiavelli wrote that sins “can be divided into two groups: one is to be ungrateful to God, the second is to be unfriendly to one’s neighbor.” Later in the *Exhortation*, he condemns sloth: “But, because it is not enough to repent and to weep (for it is necessary to prepare oneself by means of the actions opposed to the sin), in order not to sin further, to take away opportunity for evil, one must imitate Saint Francis and Saint Jerome…” (Gilbert, *Exhortation*, 174).

Petrarch’s exhortation to Italian nationalism). Nestled between these two terse invocations of David and Petrarch are words that might unsettle the casual reader of Machiavelli—the rhetoric of theology rather than of politics, language more akin to a passionate friar than to an impartial theorist. In his *Exhortation*, Machiavelli challenges his audience to consider the importance of charitable penitence in nullifying the vice of ingratitude towards God and its product, enmity towards one’s neighbor. Given that the sermon’s original title was *Discorso morale* (when and by whom the title was changed to the *Exhortation* is unknown), and that a discourse on morality is a broader topic than that of penitence, we should not assume that Machiavelli sought only to address penitence.\(^9\)

There is an abundance of scholarship on Machiavelli’s critique of the Church,\(^11\) but these assessments have largely failed to leverage input from the *Exhortation*.\(^12\) Therefore, we will address Dante Germino’s appeal that the *Exhortation* is a “problem [that] in the future will merit far greater attention than it has received thus far, especially from those who defend the view of

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\(^10\) Ridolfi, 328 n. 2; Ridolfi cites Tommasini, who wrote: “Puó essere che componesse per questa il *Discorso morale*, che si à di lui autografo...” (Oreste Tommasini, *La Vita E Gli Scritti Di Niccoló Machiavelli*, 2 vols (Torino: Ermanno Loescher, 1883), 386 n. 1). On the subject of morality Ridolfi notes “we know furthermore that while many pages of the *Discourses* and *The Prince* might seem to justify the conclusion that ‘the patria is the limit and the basis of Machiavelli’s moral thought,’ we must acknowledge that Machiavelli possessed a concept of morality which goes beyond that limit, and recognize in his works ‘visible signs of austerity and painful moral conscience” (Ridolfi 252).


Machiavelli as atheist.”13 This investigation will situate the *Exhortation* as the central node against which other texts, namely Machiavelli’s *Discourses on the First Decade of Titus Livy* (hereafter referred to as the *Discourses*), *The Prince*, *La Mandragola*, and the *Tercets on Ingratitude* (another often ignored work) will be compared. Although this investigation will focus on the *Exhortation*, it will not eclipse Machiavelli’s other literature. The preeminent biographer of Machiavelli, Roberto Ridolfi, recognized the value of examining Machiavelli’s literature inter-textually when he wrote:

> He was and remains a politician, an artist, a poet, who besides his scientific reasoning power felt the sudden and varied impulses of artists and poets; and if one cannot cast doubts on the fundamental coherence and logic of his thought, in order to understand what has been and still is called the enigma of Machiavelli, we must take account of those impulses and of his nature full of contrast and variety.14

With an attention similar to Ridolfi’s, Anthony Parel has concluded that Machiavelli’s literary works—his poetry and his plays—deserve sharper scrutiny. Parel argues that the genius of Machiavelli is only comprehensible when we consider the breadth of his literature, for “they [the entire collection of Machiavelli’s writings] formally reveal Machiavelli the artist, the poet, the writer who uses literary imagination as a vehicle of political truth.”15

The roadmap for this investigation is straightforward, beginning with an exposition of the context in which the sermon was composed and delivered, with specific attention to Florentine confraternities and Machiavelli’s anti-clericalism. We will then address the previous methodological shortcomings that have shrouded the *Exhortation*. After exposing these

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14 Ridolfi, 252.
limitations, we will consider the vices of ingratitude and sloth as they appear in the *Exhortation* as well as in Machiavelli’s other writings. Although this exposition acknowledges the ongoing dialogue over Machiavelli’s piety, it will not attempt to resolve this dense scholarly debate. To date, no scholar has read the *Exhortation* as a criticism of the Church and only three—Paul Norton, Andrea Ciliotta-Rubery, and Rebecca McCumbers—have situated the sermon on center stage in their respective studies on Machiavelli. Analyzing the sermon through this new lens will offer a refreshing perspective on Machiavelli’s relationship with Christianity.

The *Exhortation* in Context: An Anti-Clerical Audience

In her close reading of the *Exhortation*, McCumbers has proposed that “by combining aspects of the different [scholarly] approaches with an understanding of his historical circumstances, a more complete view of Machiavelli’s thought [referring to the *Exhortation* in particular] can be attained.” In response to her acute suggestion, this investigation will address several contextual realities that may have influenced the sermon’s content.

Machiavelli’s *Exhortation* was most likely presented before the Company of Charity, a Florentine religious confraternity. This was not, however, Machiavelli’s first appearance

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17 McCumbers, p. 43.
18 Tommasini, 734 n. 2.
before a confraternity: in 1495, at the age of 26, he joined a minor confraternity, the Company of Piety.\textsuperscript{19} How long he retained his membership, or if this affiliation was of any significance at all, remains a mystery.\textsuperscript{20} The duration and extent of Machiavelli’s participation in the Company of Piety is indeed uncertain, given that his extant correspondences are curiously absent of any reference to membership in a confraternity.\textsuperscript{21} Without additional documentation we are left to speculate as to whether or not Machiavelli’s membership in the Company of Piety was an influential association or a fleeting fancy that he abandoned upon entering Florentine civil service in 1498.\textsuperscript{22}

Despite the lack of records (largely due to natural disaster and warfare), we can safely posit that joining a Florentine confraternity would have been a savvy move for an aspiring young man like Machiavelli.\textsuperscript{23} Despite his commoner’s background, he would have been eligible for the Company of Piety because, according to Ciliotta-Rubery, “unlike most other civic organizations, confraternities welcomed members from various trades, families, and geographic

\textsuperscript{19} The \textit{Exhortation to Penitence}, Gilbert, 171; See also Tommasini, 386 n. 1.
\textsuperscript{20} Machiavelli’s father Bernardo diligently recorded the affairs of his family in his \textit{Libro di Ricordi}, which ceased in 1487 and therefore offers no record of his son’s membership in the Company of Piety (Ridolfi, 2). Ridolfi notes that “the memoirs run from 30 Sept. 1471 to 19 Aug. 1487. Up to now biographers have had no information on the early studies and family of Niccolò ... We are therefore greatly indebted to Cesare Olschki for having discovered and edited with impeccable diligence Bernardo’s precious notebook” (Ridolfi, 257 n.6).
\textsuperscript{22} “It was the 28th of May 1498 when the council unexpectedly designated as second Chancellor the young Niccolò Machiavelli, barely five days after the execution of Savonarola. Biographers have not up to now realized that it was the fall of the ‘unarmed prophet’ that opened this career to Machiavelli” (Ridolfi, 15).
\textsuperscript{23} Ciliotta-Rubery 19.
As Ronald Weissman has observed, Florentine confraternities represented the full range of the prevailing economic and social spectrum, including merchants, bankers, and laborers. These confraternities therefore served not only as a laymen’s society intent on “extend[ing] such [ritual] practices, formerly reserved to the clergy, to the urban laity” but as a networking hub as well. As social groups “established in an attempt to help lay individuals lead a pious life without entering religious orders,” these confraternities often met in private to exercise their faith without the intervention of clergy, thereby decentralizing the religious authority of the Church.

Another key consideration for our appraisal of the Exhortation is the practice of these religious confraternities. According to Weissman, there were two types of confraternities: the laudesi and the disciplinati. As their name suggests, the laudesi focused on singing praise to saints and the Virgin Mary. However, the laudesi did not restrict their activity to praise alone; they often delivered “regular masses for civic peace” and offered services to the poor. The laudesi did not ignore temporal needs, but sought to repair the relationships between man and God through praise and action alike—members of the laudesi confraternities were civically active in public Florentine life. Marvin Becker offers a succinct description of the laudesi mission: the humanistic tradition “proclaimed a new ideal; a Christian community located in a more ample social space generated by broader human concerns [that] could be realized in

24 Ciliotta-Rubery, 19.
25 Weissman, Ritual Brotherhood in Renaissance Florence, 46.
26 Weissman, Ritual Brotherhood in Renaissance Florence, 46.
27 Weissman, Ritual Brotherhood in Renaissance Florence, 46, 50.
historical time.”\textsuperscript{28} Laudesi confraternities saw an intersection of temporal and spiritual affairs, and used their associations and practices to address the problems of Florentine life.

The Company of Charity, however, was a disciplinati organization.\textsuperscript{29} The disciplinati were generally focused more on purification of the spirit than on temporal affairs. Many disciplinati gatherings would open with a sermon and be followed by flagellation, a form of self-mortification recommended by clergy “as an excellent means of conquering the flesh.”\textsuperscript{30} This practice was adopted by the disciplinati as a method for spiritual self-improvement; it is probable that Machiavelli’s sermon preceded one of these violent displays. \textsuperscript{31} His invitation to speak before the confraternity was conventional as well, for “lay sermons recited by an officer, a member, or an invited guest had been a confraternity tradition throughout Italy since the thirteenth century.”\textsuperscript{32} Because “religious confraternities soon became the locus for the spread of humanistic ideals, and these congregations took the place of the universities as the primary inculcator of cultural and civic values”\textsuperscript{33} Machiavelli may have viewed his invitation to preach as an opportunity to share his criticisms of the Church with an audience not of friars or clergymen, but of Florentine citizens who congregated outside the Church to practice their faith. These Florentines would have been well aware of the widespread ecclesiastical corruption in

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\textsuperscript{29} Ciliotta-Rubery, 19.
\textsuperscript{30} Weissman, \textit{Ritual Brotherhood in Renaissance Florence}, 50.
\textsuperscript{33} McCumbers, 12.
\end{flushright}
contemporary Italy.\textsuperscript{34} According to McCumbers, Machiavelli’s sermon exhibits a translation of his political views into the language of theology; the \textit{Exhortation} “could be viewed as Machiavelli’s message to the people.”\textsuperscript{35} It in this light that McCumbers justifies her assessment of the \textit{Exhortation}, that the “sermon potentially serves for the advancement of Machiavelli’s political ideas.”\textsuperscript{36} Having considered Florentine religious confraternities in general we may better understand Machiavelli’s audience for the \textit{Exhortation}—the Company of Charity—and his motives for speaking to this particular assemblage of Florentines. This reading of Machiavelli’s motives falls in line with de Grazia’s assertion that Machiavelli was a teacher, for “teaching can better men.”\textsuperscript{37}

Given the focus of the \textit{disciplinati} confraternities, Machiavelli’s topic of penitence was unexceptional and probably anticipated.\textsuperscript{38} Beseeching the attention of God, the sermon’s opening invocation would have been an appropriate prelude for a \textit{disciplinati} gathering.\textsuperscript{39} Moreover, his opening lines articulate a clear statement of purpose:

\begin{quote}
Since this evening, honored Fathers and superior Brothers, I am to speak to Your Charities, in order to obey my superiors, and am to say something on penitence, it has seemed to me good to begin my exhortation with the words of that teacher of the Holy Spirit, David the Prophet, so that those who have sinned with him may, according to his words, hope they can receive mercy from God all-powerful and all-merciful.\textsuperscript{40}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{34} In his discussion of Machiavelli’s play \textit{La Mandragola}, Sumberg notes that “Florence of his [Machiavelli’s] day was decidedly corrupt and there is evidence enough in the simple fact that \textit{La Mandragola} went over so well with all the best people from the Pope on down” (Theodore A. Sumberg, "La Mandragola: An Interpretation," \textit{The Journal of Politics} 23, no. 2 (1961): 328).
\textsuperscript{35} McCumbers, 43.
\textsuperscript{36} McCumbers, 44.
\textsuperscript{37} De Grazia, 367. On the same page de Grazia observes that Machiavelli’s \textit{Art of War} exhibits Machiavelli’s pedagogy.
\textsuperscript{38} Ciliotta-Rubery, 20.
\textsuperscript{39} \textit{Exhortation to Penitence}, Gilbert, 171.
\textsuperscript{40} \textit{Exhortation to Penitence}, Gilbert, 171.
The sermon’s preamble is telling of Machiavelli’s invitation to speak before the confraternity—he was directed by a higher authority (we are left to speculate as to whom this figure may have been) to deliver a sermon on penitence. However, given the purpose of religious confraternities, and that Machiavelli was known for his famous play *La Mandragola*—which delivers a caustic assault on clerical corruption and hypocrisy—it is unsurprising that he spoke to a society that was critical of the Church.¹¹ To better understand Machiavelli’s anti-clerical sentiments and his criticisms of the Church, let us briefly consider *La Mandragola*.

Machiavelli’s *La Mandragola* is a tragedy within a comedy, for it exposes the thorough ecclesiastical corruption of Renaissance Italy. It is, as Theodore Sumberg has observed, “two plays in one: one light and frivolous, the other serious and even didactic.”⁴² The play was an enormous success for Machiavelli; it was performed not only in Florence, but in Venice (1525) and Faenza (1526) as well.⁴³ Similarly, there is an abundance of modern critical praise for *La Mandragola*; Allan Gilbert writes “for an estimate of Machiavelli’s nature and genius, no work is at present, after centuries of concentration on *The Prince*, so important as *La Mandragola*, one of the greatest, perhaps the very greatest, of Italian comedies.”⁴⁴ Ridolfi offers a similar encomium of the play, deeming it “perhaps the best Italian play of all time.”⁴⁵ *La Mandragola* is a translucent reflection of Machiavelli’s life and times, for it begins with the author drawing the

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¹¹ Ridolfi notes that “in the chronology of M.’s works the date of *La Mandragola* (the Mandrake Root) has till now been one of the most controversial and uncertain” and posits that the play was composed in early 1518 (Ridolfi, 301-303 n. 19). More recently, Sergio Bertelli has contested Ridolfi, as well as other Machiavelli scholars, suggesting two likely dates: 1504 or 1519 (Sergio Bertelli, "When Did Machiavelli Write Mandragola?" *Renaissance Quarterly* 24, no. 3 (1971): 326).

⁴² Sumberg, 320.

⁴³ Bertelli, 318.

⁴⁴ Gilbert, 774.

⁴⁵ Ridolfi, 175.
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audience’s attention to the present: “look at the scenery that now is put before you: this is your Florence; another time it will be Rome or Pisa—a thing to make you laugh till you crack your cheeks.” Here, Machiavelli’s poetic sensibilities coalesce with his prosaic concreteness to offer a comedic take on the serious matters of his day.

The play is about the amorous desire of a young Florentine, Calimaco, to steal the beautiful Lucrezia away from her vacuous husband, Nicia. Frate Timoteo, the play’s only clergyman, collaborates with Calimaco in hopes of augmenting the Church’s wealth. As Carnes Lord has observed in his interpretation of the play, “the prominence of Frate Timoteo in La Mandragola—a prominence clearly not proportional to his role in the actual plot—suggests something of the importance of religion for the play’s analysis of contemporary political reality.” The depiction of Frate Timoteo, as the representative of the ecclesiastical order, exemplifies Machiavelli’s staunch anti-clericalism. The theme of clerical corruption would have been comical to the wider audience, but to the more astute Florentines, the problems of corruption and hypocrisy pointed to the shaky foundations of Florentine society. Machiavelli’s La Mandragola offers, through a poetic adaptation of his political thought, a concise critique of the Church: how hypocrisy destroyed the institution’s credibility. The Church’s failures led to the moral demise of the populace (exemplified by the “sudden and thorough moral collapse” of Lucrezia and the success of Calimaco). The corruption of the Church and the weakness of Florence are intimately linked, not distinct phenomena.

Yet we should not confuse Machiavelli’s anti-clericalism with anti-Christian sentiments, for as Marcia Colish has observed, “Catholics before, during, and after Machiavelli’s time have

46 Gilbert, 777. See Gilbert 776-822 for the complete play.  
47 Sumberg, 321.  
48 Lord, 811.
been able to mix anticlericalism and criticism of the popes with sincere religious belief, and there is good evidence to suggest that Machiavelli is one of them.”

Paul Norton offers a similar assessment similar: Machiavelli distinguished his criticism of the Church from his discussion of Christianity in accenting the significance of the ‘new orders’ (particularly the Franciscans and Dominicans) in sustaining Christianity.

Because the *Exhortation* was delivered before a confraternity, rather than a religious order or a group of clergymen, there is no evidence that Machiavelli held the Company of Charity in disdain or disregard. When we engage his criticism of the Church, we speak of his condemnation of those “bad examples of that court [the Church],” the clergy that have, as he noted in his *Discourses*, “[brought] about countless evils and countless disorders, because, just as we assume everything good where we find religion, so when it is lacking we assume the contrary.”

**Previous Evaluations of the Exhortation**

Having addressed Machiavelli’s audience and his proclivity for sharing a message that might galvanize action against the corruption of the Church, it is now critical to consider the limitations of previous evaluations of the *Exhortation*, and why it has received so little attention.

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49 Marcia Colish, "Republicanism, Religion, and Machiavelli's Savonarolan Moment," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 60, no. 4 (1999), 602. Germino adopts a similar vantage point: “[Machiavelli] was bitter about the extent of corruption in the high councils of the Church” (Germino, “Second Thoughts on Leo Strauss’s Machiavelli,” 802).

50 Norton, 32. Norton refers to Machiavelli’s *Discourses*: “In religious bodies these renewals are also necessary, as we see through the example of our religion, which, if Saint Francis and Saint Dominic had not brought it back toward its beginnings, would have entirely disappeared. They with their poverty and with the example of Christ’s life brought it back into the minds of men when it had disappeared from them” (*Discourses*, Book 3, Chapter 1, Gilbert, 422).

51 *Discourses*, Book 1, Chapter 12, Gilbert, 228.
As Andrea Ciliotta-Rubery has suggested, scholars who have neglected the *Exhortation* have acted on bias (a limitation of prejudice so to speak):

Scholars, convinced of Machiavelli’s impiety, seem to have left the *Exhortation* out of the debate because of its puzzling and seemingly incongruous nature, relative to other works. However, for those convinced of his piety, this piece has been neglected wrongfully. Viewing it as a reflection of sincere religious conviction, these scholars insist the *Exhortation* may be the most revealing work of Machiavelli’s piety and thus deserving of serious attention.52

That the *Exhortation* has been neglected, or at best, glossed over, by most scholars is a result of what Cary Nederman describes as the dominant image of Machiavelli as “satirist, purveyor of parody.”53 This lens—which selectively interprets Machiavelli’s writings as either sincere or sarcastic—has constricted previous readings of the *Exhortation*. For example, hesitant to entertain the possibility that Machiavelli was a pious Christian, Berlin subtly dismisses the sermon on the grounds that it may have been a forgery, a possibility that he leaves unjustified.54 It is curious that Berlin disregards a text laden with Machiavelli’s commentary on Christianity, especially given his assessment that “Machiavelli may at times have been represented as too Machiavellian [referring to the dominant image of Machiavelli as anti-Christian].”55

Given that “Niccolò Machiavelli’s attitude toward Christianity remains both an enigmatic and problematic issue for Machiavelli scholars,” as Andrea Ciliotta-Rubery has observed, it is

52 Ciliotta-Rubery, 12.
54 Berlin, 202 n. 102. There is no evidence to date that suggests that the *Exhortation* may have been forged.
55 “Machiavelli may at times have been represented as too Machiavellian; but to suppose that he believed that the claims of God and of Caesar were perfectly reconcilable reduces his central thesis to absurdity. Yet of course this does not prove that he lacked all Christian sentiment: the *Esorazione alla Penitenza* composed in the last year of his life (if it is genuine and not a later forgery) may well be wholly sincere...” (Berlin, 202, n. 102)
imperative to expand our analysis to a fuller set of Machiavelli’s writings.\textsuperscript{56} The scope of analysis has proven to be a shortcoming in previous scholarship, as some scholars have analyzed Machiavelli using a narrow selection of his writings, without addressing the immense diversity of his works, which include prose, poetry, plays, and sermons.

An example of the limitations in scope is Vickie B. Sullivan’s conclusion that Machiavelli “accept[ed] the strengths and discard[ed] the defects of each [Christian Rome and pagan Rome], he creates an amalgamation that is neither Christian nor pagan.”\textsuperscript{57} Although she offers a well-articulated case for Machiavelli’s anti-Christian sentiments, her analysis is narrowly limited to Machiavelli’s \textit{Discourses}. According to Mark Hulliung, the \textit{Discourses} offer an unparalleled (in comparison to Machiavelli’s other literature) encomium for pagan Rome, making it a prime wellspring of Machiavelli’s anti-Christian sentiments.\textsuperscript{58}

A similar methodological shortcoming is evident in Clifford Orwin’s critique of Machiavelli.\textsuperscript{59} Despite his acute sensitivity to the historical context of Renaissance Florence and Machiavelli’s deviation from ancient as well as Renaissance sources, Orwin focuses his analysis exclusively on chapters 15-17 of \textit{The Prince}. However, he acknowledges the intentionally limited scope of his analysis, “I have not mistaken this argument for the whole of the Prince,

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\textsuperscript{56} Ciliotta-Rubery, 11.
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much less for the whole of Machiavelli." The narrow focus on select texts precludes the ability to precisely and appropriately assesses Machiavelli’s sentiments about Christianity.

Roberto Ridolfi offered the first evaluation of the *Exhortation*, albeit tersely, in his biography of Machiavelli (published in 1963). His examination was based on an interpretation of the sermon in its original Italian, for Gilbert’s translated collection (from Italian to English) of Machiavelli’s writings was not published until 1965. It is still the most complete compendium in English to date, lacking only the full collection of extant correspondences between Machiavelli and his contemporaries. Using the sermon primarily as ammunition against those who accused Machiavelli of impiety, Ridolfi offers little commentary on its content. Fully convinced of Machiavelli’s deference to and belief in Christianity, he argues that bias—Machiavelli as anti-Christian—has shrouded the importance of the *Exhortation*, relegating it to the dimmest background of Machiavelli’s writings. In his passionate defense of Machiavelli, Ridolfi writes:

> Thus through the centuries there was built up layer by layer a mass of prejudices under which the religious and Christian conscience of the Florentine Secretary was deeply buried. Prejudice is so weighty and potent, particularly when petrified by time, that even the sad and pious pages of his *Esortazione alla Penitenza*, rightly described as the climax of the author’s Christian thought, have yet been adjudged by some otherwise most clear-sighted scholars, who had upheld his moral and religious qualities as a frivolous joke!

Whereas Benedetto Croce called the sermon a “frivolous joke” and Pasquale Villari called it a “certain veiled irony,” Ridolfi argued (although he never cites the original text) that the *Exhortation* indicated the “intimate religious foundation of his conscience which breathes from all his works.” For him, it is untenable to read Machiavelli’s sermon as anything but

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60 Orwin, 1217
61 Ridolfi, 253, 328 n. 2
62 Ridolfi, 253, 328 n. 2
conclusive proof of piety. This evaluation necessitates reading the sermon as a sincere text; Ridolfi’s fundamental assumption (that Machiavelli was a pious Christian) ignores the positions of Croce and Villari.

Rather than engage the content of the sermon, Ridolfi, Croce, and Villari situate it as evidence for or against Machiavelli’s piety and, consequently, lack the justification for their resolute assessments of the Exhortation. Should we dismiss it as an irony or as a joke, or should we lend it such gravitas as to call it the climax of Machiavelli’s Christian thought, as Ridolfi has suggested? Although Ridolfi’s high praise of the Exhortation deserves scrutiny, Giuseppe Prezzolini’s affirmation that “in his [Machiavelli's] writing there is no trace of a sense of sin, or of charity, or of love of neighbor” merits critical attention as well. Prezzolini seems to have fallen into the trap of bias, for if he had possibly considered the Exhortation as sincere he would have noticed the explicit discussion of all three topics—sin, charity, and love of neighbor—that he claims are absent in Machiavelli’s work. Germino, on the other hand, is more forgiving, having argued “in the ‘Exhortation to Penitence’ Machiavelli appears to take sin—defined ultimately as ingratitude to God and enmity toward one’s neighbor—seriously.” Closely aligned with Ridolfi’s views is the supporting voice of Anthony Parel, who challenges Prezzolini’s position, claiming:

The essential point of the Exhortation is that it puts in correct perspective Machiavelli’s view of man and mortality. It clearly and formally subscribes to the Christian doctrines of creation, original sin, redemption, grace, repentance, and salvation through good works. Evil in man and society is finally traceable to the orthodox doctrine of original sin.

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64 See McCumbers for a detailed analysis of charity in the Exhortation.
65 Germino, “Blasphemy and Leo Strauss’s Machiavelli,” 152
66 Parel, 187.
Through this lens it seems that the *Exhortation* was a sincere articulation of Machiavelli’s piety. But Leo Strauss, a figure omnipresent in twentieth-century discussion of Machiavelli, offered a brief riposte (referring to the *Exhortation* only once in his text and twice in his notes) to the position adopted by Ridolfi and Parel. According to Strauss, the sermon was merely a panicked “repentance on the deathbed” by a man who saw his life quickly coming to a close.67 Citing but one line from the sermon—“penitence is the sole remedy which can wipe out all evils, all errors of men”—Strauss lambastes Machiavelli’s duplicity. Claiming that this theme of penitence is absent in *The Prince* and the *Discourses*, Strauss concludes that the sermon was induced by a sudden fear of death, and was therefore an anomalous text.68 If the *Exhortation* was indeed delivered sometime in the last two years of Machiavelli’s life, Strauss’s notion of the ‘deathbed’ sermon is contestable: Machiavelli was active on diplomatic missions to Lombardy, Romagna, and Rome until he unexpectedly died within several days of contracting a sudden illness in the summer of 1527.69 He may have delivered the *Exhortation* late in life, but it was not on the precipice of an anticipated death. However, to his credit, Strauss is correct that penitence does not appear in Machiavelli’s other writings; however, the sermon’s content is not limited to the theme of penitence.

In response to Strauss’s claim that the *Exhortation* is incongruent with Machiavelli’s other writings, Germino notes, “it is disappointing that he [Strauss] barely hints at the nature of its content, and gives no explicit justification for his refusal to regard the work as important.”70 Certainly the sermon merits at least a question mark in Strauss’s monolithic characterization of

68 Strauss, 201, 322 n. 133, 332 n. 47.
69 Ridolfi, 248-249.
70 Germino, “Second Thoughts on Leo Strauss’s Machiavelli,” 797.
Machiavelli as arch-atheist. In his repudiation of Strauss’s assessment of Machiavelli, Germino claims “Strauss may be said to have gone too far in portraying the Florentine Secretary as deliberately irreligious and anti-religious.”

Sebastian de Grazia, in counterpoint to Strauss’s assessment, suggests that Machiavelli’s sermon was a meticulously prepared exposition of the contemporary tragedies that had befallen Italy. This position on the *Exhortation* exemplifies his comprehensive review of Machiavelli’s corpus, his fervent commitment to depicting Machiavelli as a pious Christian, and his attempt to rescue Machiavelli from centuries of slander. In his appraisal of de Grazia’s intellectual biography of the Florentine, Nederman writes, “in recent times, the only dissenting voice [against the claim that Machiavelli was anti-Christian] of note has been Sebastian de Grazia, whose Pulitzer Prize-Winning biography *Machiavelli in Hell*, attempts to rescue Machiavelli’s reputation from those who view him as deeply hostile to Christianity.”

De Grazia’s intellectual biography of the Florentine is unmatched in both scale and scope, drawing from every extant document of Machiavelli and setting them in conversation not only with one another, but also with ancient and contemporary voices. Like Strauss, de Grazia reads not only the lines written by Machiavelli, but also the spaces between the lines, drawing conclusions about Machiavelli’s piety that are not always evident in the original texts. He argues that the *Exhortation* accents Machiavelli’s moral sources: that Machiavelli drew from the Bible as well as from Dante and Aquinas, which proves that the sermon demonstrates a thorough and well-versed Christian attitude.

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71 Germino, “Second Thoughts on Leo Strauss’s Machiavelli,” 800.
72 De Grazia, 59.
73 Nederman, 618.
Germino convincingly argues that both Strauss and de Grazia rely less, if at all, on the content of the sermon for their analyses, but on their respective interpretations of Machiavelli. They betray their resolute attention to the texts in order to supply their interpretive models with additional scaffolding. In this case, the *Exhortation* is applied to fit either the Straussian (Machiavelli as anti-Christian) or the de Grazian (Machiavelli as Christian) model. Germino claims that the difference between the respective systems of Strauss and de Grazia is fundamentally methodological. De Grazia relies on the “author’s own words—and from all of those words—placed in biographical context” whereas Strauss conforms Machiavelli to a superimposed template, that of the ‘teacher of evil.’

How then, should we read the *Exhortation*? Given these polar choices—sincere or spurious, Christian or anti-Christian—how do we situate the sermon within the larger Machiavellian corpus?

The trend among many scholars is to footnote the *Exhortation*, to relinquish it to a place on the periphery of Machiavelli’s writing. This is not an entirely illogical move, however, for the precise history of the sermon’s composition and delivery is murky. In reality, the scope of the text pales in comparison to the *Discourses* and *The Prince*. Consider some of the divergent approaches various scholars have taken. Parel reviews the sermon’s content in his sketch of Machiavelli’s minor literature. Germino uses the *Exhortation* to contest Strauss. Nederman mentions the *Exhortation* to illustrate how the popular image of Machiavelli skews our reading of the primary sources. Strauss glosses over the text because he deems it a hypocritical farce, seemingly aligning himself with Villari and Croce. De Grazia maintains that

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the sermon exemplifies Machiavelli’s conventional acceptance of Christian doctrine. These previous evaluations, burdened as they are by various limitations, have proffered unflinching conclusions but without exposing the content of the sermon. To enrich our discussion of the *Exhortation*, it is critical to examine the content of Machiavelli’s sermon, unfettered by bias or other methodological flaws. Thus, we now turn our attention to the two major themes (ingratitude and sloth) addressed in the *Exhortation*, beginning with ingratitude, the supreme vice.

**Ingratitude: The Supreme Vice**

According to Machiavelli’s *Exhortation*, ingratitude is a supreme vice: “all the sins of men, which, though they are many and in many and various ways are committed, nonetheless for the most part can be divided into two groups: one is to be ungrateful to God, the second is to be unfriendly to one’s neighbor.” For Machiavelli, the source of all sin is ingratitude towards God and enmity towards man. But the two are not equal, for as Parel has observed “the first sin necessarily leads to the second: ‘Whoever, then, lacks it [grace] must necessarily be unfriendly to his neighbor.’ Of the two sins, the first is more fundamental.” De Grazia offers a similar assessment of Machiavelli’s notion of ingratitude:

> Ingratitude is more than a fault; it is a sin, for man’s greatest sin is ‘ingratitude against God.’ The offense of ‘ingratitude against God is the greatest.’ It leads inevitably to man’s second great sin, enmity to his neighbor. ‘Those who are ungrateful to God, it is impossible that they not be enemies to [their] neighbor.’

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76 *Exhortation to Penitence*, Gilbert, 171.
77 Parel, 189.
The *Art of War* puts it as a question. ‘How can those who scorn God respect men?’

According to de Grazia’s reading of the *Exhortation*, Machiavelli’s treatment of ingratitude is critical to his political thought. If men scorn God, the highest authority, and subsequently scorn their fellow men, enmity divides men and precludes political stability. Set in Machiavelli’s context, this would be plausible: ingratitude is ultimately one of the prime reasons (along with the failure of Florence to maintain a standing army) for the collapse of the Florentine Republic.

This vice of ingratitude shattered Machiavelli’s career and was undoubtedly of great importance to him personally as well as politically. For over 16 years Machiavelli served his native Florence as the Secretary to the Chancery of the Republic of Florence, as a *de facto* ambassador in various diplomatic missions to France, Spain and the Papal Court, and as the head of the Florentine militia. Machiavelli’s life was spent in service to Florence. This was emphasized when he wrote to his friend Francesco Vettori, “I love my native city more than my own soul” he spoke with utmost gravity. His expression may have been commonplace in the Renaissance, as Viroli has suggested, but the sincerity was “much more than a manner of speech; [it was] the confession of a profound passion.” But in 1512, Machiavelli was deposed by the Medici family and subsequently tortured for his allegiance to Piero Soderini, his previous employer. Machiavelli clearly felt that the Medici family was ungrateful for his talents, and

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78 De Grazia, 82.
79 De Grazia, 82.
80 Ridolfi, 15-21.
81 Viroli, 254.
82 Ridolfi describes Machiavelli’s ejection from his position as Florentine Secretary by the Medici family in 1513: “In all this upheaval no one was concerned about Machiavelli, and even these pages of ours seem to have neglected him. We do not know what he did under Ridolfi’s
Jonathan Cross  
4.6.10

passionately proclaimed his marketable abilities in the preface to the *The Prince*. Dedicating the text to Lorenzo de’Medici, Machiavelli writes:

> Wishing, then, for my part to come before Your Magnificence with some proof that I am your loyal subject, I have found among my treasures nothing I hold dearer or value so high as my understanding of great men’s actions, gained in my lengthy experience with recent matters and my continual reading on ancient ones.  

The Florentine Secretary was himself a victim of ingratitude, a reality that would never depart him. Felix Gilbert recognized Machiavelli’s plight in the wake of the Medici’s return to Florence when Gilbert remarked “the most famous victim of the restoration of the Medici rule in 1512 was Niccolò Machiavelli.”  

Machiavelli’s *Tercets on Ingratitude* (another often ignored text; written between 1507 and 1515) offers a similar condemnation of ingratitude: “Hence often you labor in serving and then for your good service receive in return a wretched life and violent death. So then, Ingratitude not being dead, let everyone flee from courts and governments, for there is no road that takes a man faster to weeping over what he longed for, when once he has gained it.”

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[the new Medici gonfalonier] regime; public and private documents are silent on the matter, and biographers have not tried to fill the gap with probable explanations. Yet it is obvious that the grave leader of the optimates, former follower of Savonarola and rival of Soderini [Machiavelli’s previous employer], could not feel sympathetic or kindly towards the plebeian and not very moral ‘puppet’ of the deposed Gonfalonier. Nor do I think it is stretching imagination too far if I see the Secretary forgotten and fallen from favour, withdrawn into a corner of the Chancery and into his own abasement. There he ruminates on ‘his troubles which are endless’ and dispatches what little he is given to do. Everything around him is changed, faces are no longer the same. He once had authority in the Palazzo, greater than his rank warranted. Now he is in a position of inferiority” (Ridolfi, 130-131).

83 *The Prince*, Gilbert, p. 10.  
85 De Grazia, 82-83.  
86 *Tercets on Ingratitude*, Lines 181-186, Gilbert, 744.
Jonathan Cross
4.6.10

Indeed, the vice of ingratitude appears not only in the *Tercets* and the *Exhortation*, but also with “notable frequency and intensity in Niccolò’s varied genres and his groupings of sins, faults and bad qualities,” as de Grazia has observed.\(^{88}\) His words in the *Tercets* are painfully autobiographical. For Machiavelli, ingratitude was an undoubtedly poignant vice—personally as well as politically.

But ingratitude was relevant not only to Machiavelli, but to the Florentine populace as well, for Savonarola preached against this vice in many of his sermons.\(^{89}\) It is plausible that Machiavelli understood ingratitude as Savonarola did: a deplorable social sin with expansive repercussions.\(^{90}\) Moreover, as de Grazia has observed, Machiavelli’s introduction of ingratitude and enmity in the *Exhortation* echoes the seven cardinal sins (wrath, greed, sloth, pride, lust, envy, and gluttony)\(^{91}\) "which Thomas Aquinas made capital and which Dante [Alighieri] incorporates in the *Inferno*."\(^{92}\) We know from his father’s *Libro di Ricordi* that Machiavelli was fond of Dante; the Company of Charity would have recognized Machiavelli’s reference to the cardinal sins, which were so popular in Renaissance Florence.\(^{93}\) In the *Exhortation*, he presents ingratitude as a cardinal sin. Although ingratitude does not appear in Aquinas’ list, in the *Tercets*

\(^{87}\) Gilbert suggests, “this subject [of ingratitude] was close to Machiavelli’s heart, as it appears in his emphasis on public ingratitude to Michele di Lando, in the *History of Florence*” (Gilbert, 171). The poem, written in *terza rima* (rhyme scheme of three lines; invented by Dante) is addressed to Giovanni Folchi, a friend of Machiavelli and an enemy of the Medici family (Ridolfi, 135).

\(^{88}\) De Grazia, 80.


\(^{90}\) De Grazia, 80.

\(^{91}\) For the seminal work on the cardinal sins and their origins in medieval thought, see Morton W. Bloomfield, *The Seven Deadly Sins* (East Lansing: Michigan State College Press, 1952).

\(^{92}\) De Grazia, 79.

\(^{93}\) Ridolfi, 3; Viroli, 8-10.
Machiavelli describes ingratitude as sin produced by avarice (synonymous with greed), envy, and suspicion.⁹⁴

Yet Norton interprets Machiavelli’s notion of ingratitude in a different light. The division of sin into two categories, ingratitude towards God and enmity towards man, is, as Norton argues, a demotion of Christ’s two prime Commandments:

‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.⁹⁵

According to Norton, Machiavelli changed “love” to “gratitude” and thereby decreased the importance of Christ’s teaching to ‘love thy God’ and ‘love thy neighbor.’ This modification of Christ’s prime Commandments demonstrates a thinker who “taught a way of looking at the world that required a repudiation, at its core, of Christianity as too difficult to live by or even to believe.”⁹⁶ Norton thereby concluded that the sermon was frivolous, that Machiavelli has intentionally reduced our commitment to God, which proves that his idea of repentance was “a mere afterthought.”⁹⁷

In response to Norton, we should note that Machiavelli does not explicitly replace the first two Commandments of Christ with gratitude and friendliness. Despite his translucent analysis of the Exhortation set in light of Christian doctrine, Norton fails to read Machiavelli’s

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⁹⁴ “When the stars, when the heavens were indignant at human pride, for man’s abasement Ingratitude then was born in the world./Of Avarice she was the daughter and of Suspicion; she was nursed in the arms of Envy; in the breasts of princes and kings she lives.” (Tercets on Ingratitude, Lines 22-27, Gilbert, p. 740.
⁹⁶ Norton, 40.
⁹⁷ Norton, 41.
discussion of ingratitude and enmity with the possibility that Machiavelli chose to accentuate these terms by alluding to the Commandments. Moreover, knowing that the Company of Charity was well acquainted with the Commandments, is it reasonable to assume that Machiavelli’s deviation was nefarious, rather than pedagogical? It very well could have been a rhetorical trick, not necessarily a perversion of Christian doctrine.

Like Norton, Andrea Ciliotta-Rubery challenges the degree to which the sermon was consistent with Christian doctrine. She aligns with and expands on Norton’s arguments, contending that “the replacement of love with ‘gratitude’ and ‘friendship’ in the first two commandments of Christ seems to diminish the spirit in which these commandments were given.” A relationship founded on gratitude is, according to her, inferior to a relationship based on love because gratitude necessitates appreciation, rather than reciprocal commitment. In the end, her argument rests on a definitional difference: “to love someone requires a degree of selflessness and openness that is not necessarily present in feelings of gratitude.”

Machiavelli’s “spiritual reduction” of Christianity has led her to conclude that Machiavelli “ha[d] modified two of Christ’s most basic and direct teachings in a way that diminishes their moral intention.” Ciliotta-Rubery questions the sincerity of sermon, arguing that the Exhortation was composed out of compliance with the audience’s request, rather than personal piety. In light of Renaissance humanism and Christian doctrine, she finds it difficult to accept the

98 “Whatever the brother’s [in a confraternity] level of education or literacy, he could be expected to be familiar with the statutes of the company. The statute book was a compendium of organizational rules, procedures, and standards of behavior amply sprinkled with quotations from the church fathers and the scriptures. For many confraternity members, the statue book was undoubtedly the most familiar of all religious documents” (Weissman, Ritual Brotherhood in Renaissance Florence, 85).
99 Ciliotta-Rubery, 26.
100 Ciliotta-Rubery, 23.
101 Ciliotta-Rubery, 39.
Exhortation as proof for Machiavelli’s piety, for the sermon “does little to convince us that he is a believer.”

Yet, in her discussion of ingratitude, Ciliotta-Rubery limits herself to one passage in the Discourses and does not even consider the Tercets. In repudiating the possibility that the assault on ingratitude in the Exhortation was sincere, she cites Machiavelli’s chapter titled “Which is More Ungrateful: A People or a Prince?” where he invokes Cornelius Tacitus (historian and senator of the Roman Empire): “we are more inclined to make a return for an injury than for a benefit, for gratitude is looked on as a burden, revenge as a gain.” Basing her analysis on this line alone, she concludes that Machiavelli rejected gratitude. However, in the preceding line in the same chapter of the Discourses, Machiavelli notes that there are “many princes who sin in this way;” the reason for this “way” is provided by Tacitus, but never does Machiavelli approve of said reason. In the same chapter in the Discourses, Machiavelli writes, “this vice of ingratitude comes from either avarice or suspicious fear.”

To evidence the danger of such a vice, Machiavelli offers a brief case study of his Spanish contemporaries Gonsalvo Ferrante and King Ferdinand II of Aragon:

In our time everybody knows with what labor and ability Gonsalvo Ferrante, campaigning in the Kingdom of Naples against the French for Ferdinand of Aragon, conquered and subdued that kingdom. Yet as the reward of his victories what he obtained was that Ferdinand, leaving Aragon and coming to Naples, first stripped away his command of the soldiers, then deprived him of the fortresses, and at last took him back to Spain, where after a short time he died unhonored. So natural to princes, then, is suspicious fear that they cannot defend themselves from it and cannot show gratitude to men who by victory have under the princely banners made great gains.

102 Ciliotta-Rubery, 41.
103 Discourses, Book 1, Chapter 29, Gilbert, 257.
104 Discourses, Book 1, Chapter 29, Gilbert, 257.
105 Discourses, Book 1, Chapter 29, Gilbert, 258.
Thus, Machiavelli condemned the vice of suspicion; it was fear that induced ingratitude in Ferdinand. In princes, ingratitude is to be expected, but not promoted. Turning to republics, Machiavelli notes, “so if a prince cannot defend himself against ingratitude, we need not think it a miracle or worthy of special notice if a people cannot defend itself.” Such a vice is deplorable, but to some extent, unavoidable. Offering a solution to “this vice of ingratitude” in the next chapter of the *Discourses*, Machiavelli suggests mandating martial activity for citizens of a republic, and for generals, he offers two solutions: either placate the prince to ease his suspicion, or, use the armies to dispose of the prince.\footnote{Discourses, Book 1, Chapter 30, Gilbert, 260-261.}

In both the *Tercets* and the *Discourses* Machiavelli compares the disastrous effects of ingratitude in the Roman and Athenian polities. In the *Discourses*, he asks of the reader “Why the Romans were less Ungrateful to their Citizens than the Athenians,” and concludes that “the Romans had less reason than the Athenians for being suspicious of their fellow citizens.”\footnote{Discourses, Book 1, Chapter 30, Gilbert, 255-256.} Suspicion engenders ingratitude, which may be necessary for a prince intent on maintaining sovereignty, but is nevertheless a threat to stability. There is perhaps no more concise, nor more exacting, evaluation of ingratitude by Machiavelli as that found in the *Tercets*:

> By no means was Rome the only city ungrateful to the utmost; look at Athens, where Ingratitude made her nest fouler than elsewhere;
> and it was of no use to take up the shield against her, though against her many laws were made, to restrain a vice so terrible and cruel.\footnote{Tercets on Ingratitude, Lines 130-135, Gilbert, 743.}

Ingratitude is depicted in the *Tercets* as a beast that infects the populace with perfidy; great cities like Rome, Athens, and by extension, Florence, made ‘her’ an indefensible threat. As a victim of ingratitude himself, Machiavelli certainly saw this vice as a potent and destructive
force in his beloved city. He used the *Exhortation* to highlight ingratitude to God as the prime sin, which was left to spread unchecked by the Church. This criticism—that the Church had failed to stem ingratitude—is not limited to Christian Florence, however, for Machiavelli saw the corrosive effects of ingratitude in pagan Rome as well.

The *Tercets* describe ingratitude as a “pestilent creature” wielding a bow and an inexhaustible quiver stocked with “three cruel arrows”: the recognition of benefit without reciprocity, ignorance of benefit, and retaliation against the benefactor. Machiavelli writes, “the first of the three that comes from her quiver makes a man merely bear witness that he has received a benefit; without according any return he confesses it.” This line, which addresses ingratitude towards man, parallels the *Exhortation*’s first exposition of ingratitude:

But in order to realize our ingratitude, it is necessary to consider how many and of what sort are the benefits we have received from God. Consider, then, how all things made and created are made and created for the benefit of man. You see first of all the huge extent of the land, which, in order that it could be inhabited by men, he did not allow to be wholly covered over with water but left in part exposed for their use. Then he made to grow on it so many animals, so many plants, so many grasses, and whatever upon it is produced, for their benefit; and not merely did he wish that the earth should provide for their living, but commanded the waters also to support countless animals for their food.

Machiavelli describes the world as anthropocentric (as was the normative narrative in Christian doctrine); in both texts the focus is on the human relationship towards God, who has provided countless physical gifts for ‘the benefit of man.’ Despite their differing conclusions on the *Exhortation*’s sincerity, Nederman and Parel both identify this passage as consistent with Christian doctrine. Lacking mention of ‘spiritual gifts’ (there is no mention of Christ, or the

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111 *Exhortation to Penitence*, Gilbert, 172.
proceeding notions of grace and salvation), this passage instead accents Machiavelli’s temporal focus—because God has provided such bountiful gifts, it is the responsibility of humans to recognize and appreciate these gifts.

The second “arrow” manifests ignorance: “and the second, which next she [Ingratitude] takes out, makes a man forget the favor he receives; yet doing the giver no injury, he merely denies it.”\textsuperscript{112} Similarly, the Exhortation describes God’s temporal benefits to man:

So every object is created for the glory and good of man, and man is alone in being created for the good and glory of God, who gave him speech that he might praise him, gave him sight, turned not to the ground as for the other animals but turned to the sky, in order that he might always see it, gave him hands in order that he might build temples, offer sacrifices in His honor, gave him reason and intellect in order that he might consider and understand the greatness of God.\textsuperscript{113}

These passages in the Tercets aptly reflect what Germino called Machiavelli’s “object[ion] to what he [Machiavelli] regarded as an exclusively other-worldly interpretation of Christianity.”\textsuperscript{114} The Tercets reveal a thinker who was intent on correcting the problems of this world; hence, his understanding of God’s benefits is those gifts that affect temporal affairs. Ignorance of the world—which is imbued with God’s gifts—leads to the third sin: “the last [arrow] makes a man never remember or return a favor, and to the extent of his power he rends and bites his benefactor.”\textsuperscript{115} Whether the benefactor is God or human, Machiavelli’s understanding of ingratitude catalyzes enmity.
Denying our benefits erodes the human-God relationship, and thus, man degenerates into a beast. For Machiavelli, ignorance, as the product of ingratitude, is an active rather than a passive expression for it produces violence:

See, then, with how much ingratitude man rises against such a great benefactor! And how much punishment he deserves when he perverts the use of these things and turns them to toward evil! That tongue made to glorify God blasphemes; that mouth, through which he must be fed, he makes into a sewer and a way for satisfying the appetite and the belly with luxurious and excessive food; those thoughts about God he changes into thoughts about the world; that desire to preserve the human species turns into lust and many other dissipations. Thus with these brutish deeds man changes himself from a rational animal into a brute animal. Man changes, therefore, by practicing this ingratitude to God, from angel to devil, from master to servant, from man to beast.\textsuperscript{116}

According to Machiavelli, in the \textit{Tercets} as well as in the \textit{Exhortation}, those who are ignorant of their benefits retaliate against their benefactors, devolving from man to beast. On this topic, Machiavelli’s diction is consistent across his writings, for in the \textit{Discourses} he prescribes methods for those hoping to “avoid Ingratitude’s teeth.”\textsuperscript{117}

For Machiavelli, “those who are ungrateful to God—it is impossible that they are not unfriendly to their neighbors.”\textsuperscript{118} Ingratitude breeds enmity, and consequently, “offenses against one’s neighbor are grave; ingratitude against God is very grave.”\textsuperscript{119,120} The “vertical”

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\item\textsuperscript{116} \textit{Exhortation to Penitence}, Gilbert, 172.
\item\textsuperscript{117} \textit{Discourses}, Book 1, Chapter 30, Gilbert, 260-261
\item\textsuperscript{118} \textit{Exhortation to Penitence}, Gilbert, 172.
\item\textsuperscript{119} \textit{Exhortation to Penitence}, Gilbert, 172.
\item\textsuperscript{120} Machiavelli defines these offenses in the \textit{Exhortation} as “‘be[ing] unfriendly to his neighbor: he does not aid him, he does not endure his faults, he does not console him in tribulation, he does not teach the ignorant, he does not advise him who errs, he does not help the good, he does not punish the evil” (\textit{Exhortation to Penitence}, Gilbert, 173). In the \textit{Prince} these themes appear as well “it cannot, however, be called virtue to kill one’s fellow-citizens, to betray friends, to be without fidelity, without mercy, without religion...” (\textit{The Prince}, Chapter 8, Gilbert, 36). The list of offenses in the \textit{Exhortation} are similar to “Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps
\end{itemize}
relationship (human-God) dictates the “horizontal” relationship (human-human). Without social comity there is chaos, and for Machiavelli curbing this vice of ingratitude was of utmost importance. Ingratitude corrupts not only social, but political life as well; it was for Machiavelli the “root of all sin.”

Machiavelli’s vehement assault on ingratitude, echoes consistently throughout and across the Exhortation, the Tercets on Ingratitude, and the Discourses, and demonstrates one of his criticisms of the Church—its inability to stem this corrosive vice. In the Exhortation, ingratitude towards God leads to enmity; in the Tercets and the Discourses, ingratitude towards one’s neighbor leads to enmity. While the benefactors may vary, the effect of ingratitude is always enmity. Moreover, because the vice of ingratitude affects Athenian, Roman, as well as Italian societies his criticism is trans-cultural; ingratitude is pertinent to every polity. The Italian Church, like its pagan predecessors, failed to curb ingratitude. But Machiavelli does not just retreat, without suggesting possible solutions. Just as he proposed methods to princes and republics in his Discourses, he proposes penitence in his Exhortation as a way for suppressing ingratitude (for the vice cannot be eliminated in full). Turning now to the second theme in the Exhortation (and in the Discourses as well), the next section addresses Machiavelli’s accusation that the Church had encouraged sloth.

no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails” (1 Corinthians 13:1-13). It is probable that Machiavelli drew from this list to compose his “offenses.”

121 Germino, “Second Thoughts on Leo Strauss’s Machiavelli,” 797.
122 “Never does Ingratitude perish; never is she destroyed; a thousand times she rises up, if once she dies, because her father [Suspicion] and her mother [Avarice] are immortal” (Tercets on Ingratitude, Lines 58-60, Gilbert, 741).
Sloth: The Antithesis of Civic Engagement

Whereas ingratitude is featured prominently in the *Exhortation*, Machiavelli’s condemnation of sloth in the sermon is less explicit. However, when we consider the sermon in tandem with the *Discourses* and *The Prince*, it is clear that the *Exhortation* offers a concise criticism of sloth, a vice that, according to Machiavelli, has been inculcated in the masses by the Church. In his *Discourses*, Machiavelli wrote:

Though it may appear that the world has grown effeminate, and heaven has laid aside her arms, this without doubt comes chiefly from the worthlessness of men, who have interpreted our religion [*nostra religione*] according to sloth [*l’ozio*] and not according to vigor [*virtu*]. For if they would consider that it [our religion] allows us the betterment and the defense of our country, they would see that it intends that we love and honor her and prepare ourselves to be such that we can defend her.123

Machiavelli’s criticism is not an outright rejection of Christianity, but rather an assault on the contemporary interpretation, as propagated by the Church, that emphasized sloth over vigor.124 For Machiavelli, sloth constituted more than laziness and apathy, it was an outward rejection of civic engagement, the failure to concern oneself with the affairs of the world. According to Germino, “the problem as he [Machiavelli] sees it is not that Christianity is either untrue or hopelessly defective for the demands of the world, but rather that ‘worthless men’ have

123 *Discourses*, Book 2, Chapter 2, Gilbert, 331.
interpreted it wrongly.” Machiavelli saw Christianity as a religion with worldly obligations (which does not obviate spiritual obligations); Christianity could protect the state’s stability, rather than let it fall into disarray—as was the case in Machiavelli’s Italy. Consider his frustration with the Church of his day, as expressed in the *Discourses*:

> We Italians, then, have as our first debt to the Church and to the priests that we have become without religion and wicked. But we have one still greater, which is the second reason for our ruin: this is that the Church has kept and still keeps this region divided. And truly no region is ever united or happy if all of it is not under the sway of one republic or one prince, as happened to France and to Spain.126

In his *Discourses*, Machiavelli offers one method for quelling ingratitude: that princes and citizens alike should be engaged in martial affairs: princes should participate in military campaigns; republics should require their citizens to participate in war.127 His advocacy was for vigorous activity rather than slothful passivity. Those who ignored the affairs of the state through sloth practiced ingratitude. For Machiavelli, the propagation of sloth was dependent on the abundance of ingratitude. When we consider his treatment of David in the *Exhortation* it is clear that his understanding of penitence opposed sloth, for proper penitence was an outward action: civic engagement.

Both the opening and closing passages of the sermon cite Saint Peter and David as the model penitential sinners; Machiavelli accents how even the most pious (“for neither greater transgression nor greater penitence for a man [David] than in this instance can be conceived”) are prone to sin, be it adultery (David) or repeated denial of Christ (Peter).128 As de Grazia has observed “In the *Exhortation* his exemplars are two—Peter and David—and they repent without

125 Germino, “Second Thoughts on Leo Strauss’s Machiavelli,” 802.
126 *Discourses*, Book 1, Chapter 12, Gilbert 228.
127 *Discourses*, Book 1, Chapter 30, Gilbert 260-261.
128 *Exhortation to Penitence*, Gilbert, 171.
benefit of clergy: they confess their sins and contrition directly to a forgiving God." That Machiavelli’s exemplars repent without ecclesiastical intervention is a salient reflection of his anti-clericalism, and a likely point of agreement among the confraternity members, who sought a Christian life beyond the clerical structure.

The selection of David as exemplar is unsurprising for two reasons: the biblical figure appears elsewhere in Machiavelli’s literature and, as Ciliotta-Rubery notes:

It is not unlikely that Machiavelli would choose the story of King David as his illustration of a penitent. In fact, throughout the Middle Ages and even up to the beginning of the seventeenth century, David was the most popular example of a penitent. While the story of David was conveyed in a variety of ways during this period, certain characteristics were common to most of them. One of the most noticeably common themes was the emphasis placed on David’s sincerity.

The sermon presents a figure well known not only to the author but this audience as well. Moreover, if David’s sincerity was a common motif in Medieval and Renaissance depictions, Machiavelli could very well have relied on a figure who not only was popular, but whose character was trustworthy as well. When we consider the structure of the *Exhortation* it is apparent that David’s position is situated to maximize the impact of Machiavelli’s message. The sermon opens with an invocation directly from David, who is then described and exalted. After discussing ingratitude and enmity at length, the sermon flows back to David. Forming the bookends of the *Exhortation*, David is highlighted at opening and closing.

Ciliotta-Rubery discusses the inclusion of David in the *Exhortation* at length, concluding that although David is included in the sermon, his depiction lacks the high praise typical of

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129 De Grazia, 111.
130 Ciliotta-Rubery, 27.
popular literature about David in Renaissance Italy.\footnote{According to Ciliotta-Rubery, Machiavelli lacked “the same passionate transmission of the story that was so common to this period” (Ciliotta-Rubery, 28).} Machiavelli, according to her, stepped outside the popular narrative of David and concentrated only on the personal crime of adultery, rather than the publicly violent political deeds. For her, this discrepancy begs the question of the sermon’s sincerity and the degree to which its content conforms to Christian doctrine. Norton also questions Machiavelli’s adherence to Christian doctrine in the *Exhortation*, by illustrating its treatment of David and Jesus. That Machiavelli refers to David, as ‘prophet’ and Jesus as ‘emperor,’ rather than the other way around, is Norton’s evidence for Machiavelli’s disdain for the spiritual life. By elevating David to prophet and demoting Jesus to emperor, he contends that Machiavelli was mocking the conventional Christian doctrine by promoting David’s temporality over Jesus’ divinity. It seems that these evaluations rely on the assumption that Machiavelli would have followed the popular precedent, rather than his own personal interest in David. Machiavelli’s choice to set David center stage in *Exhortation* is in fact consistent with his high praise of David in *The Prince* and the *Discourses*.

In *The Prince*, Machiavelli employs the story of David’s epic battle with Goliath to illustrate the importance of self-sustenance and to advise against the adoption of mercenary forces. In Chapter 13, citing Cesare Borgia, Hiero of Syracuse, Charles VII of France, and King David, Machiavelli offers several examples of how mercenaries are unreliable, and more importantly, detrimental to an army’s effectiveness. In the case of David, Machiavelli likens mercenaries to the borrowed armor:

I am going to remind you of an Old Testament figure bearing on this theme [the impotency and danger of mercenaries]. David offered himself to Saul to fight with Goliath the Philistian challenger; then Saul, to give him courage, armed him with the king’s own armor. But when David tried it on, he refused it, saying that...
it did not permit him to make good use of his strength; therefore he preferred to encounter the enemy with his sling and his knife. In short, the armor of another man either falls off your back or weighs you down or binds you.  

By shedding the armor of another, David demonstrates his martial acumen. Machiavelli does not praise David for his sincerity (as was common in the Renaissance), or for his penitence (as in the Exhortation). For Machiavelli, David is the counter-example to the Church, which failed to “maintain its own forces and thus relies heavily on the arms of foreign powers.” David was Machiavelli’s archetypal leader because David understood the intrinsic relationships between religion, martial power, and political success.

In the Discourses, Machiavelli offers even higher praise of David, who “without doubt, was a man of the highest excellence in arms, in learning, in judgment. So great was his ability that, having conquered and crushed all his neighbors, he left Solomon his son a peaceful kingdom, which could be retained with the arts of peace and without war.” Again, David is praised for his foresight: in The Prince he recognized the problem of foreign support; in the Discourses, he is the ideal statesmen who eliminated the immediate foreign threat, established his successor, and obviated the need for war by stabilizing his kingdom. We find further evidence for Machiavelli’s positive evaluation of David elsewhere in the Discourses:

“Among all famous men those are most famous who have been heads and organizers of religions. Next after them are those who have founded either republics or kingdoms. After these, they are famous who, when set over armies, have enlarged their own dominion or that of their native land.”

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132 The Prince, Chapter 13, Gilbert, 53.
133 Ciliotta-Rubery, 16.
134 For Machiavelli’s discussion of the necessity of religion in maintaining martial authority and political success see the Discourses, Books 11-15, Gilbert, 223-234.
135 Discourses, Book 1, Chapter 19, Gilbert, 244.
136 Discourses, Book 1, Chapter 10, Gilbert, 220.
David did not introduce a new religion or create a government; David fits the third category because he enlarged his monarchy with raw ability. As an effective military leader and statesmen, David fits Machiavelli’s prescriptions for all princes—he acted with vigor, rather than sloth.

Machiavelli’s depiction of David in the *Exhortation*, as being outwardly penitential, is consistent with his encomium of David in *The Prince* and the *Discourses*. According to Machiavelli, David was successful in his endeavors—whether martial or penitential—because he was civically engaged in the temporal affairs of his day. Citing Donald Weinstein, McCumbers suggests that the *Exhortation’s* emphasis on outward penitence for public sins was not uncommon in Renaissance Italy. It is therefore “unfair to state that this [penitence in its outward expression] alone proves Machiavelli’s discussion of penitence, one that advocates insincere confessions or wanton sinning, as some scholars [referring to Ciliotta-Rubery] have argued.”  

Ciliotta-Rubery misses two critical points in her assessment that Machiavelli’s “portrayal of [David’s] penitential experience [sic] seems to focus more on the physical act of asking for forgiveness and less on the internal elements of humility and remorse.” First, the treatment of penitence as an outward, as well an inward, struggle was normative in quattrocentro Florence; and second, in the *Exhortation*, Machiavelli describes penitence as a process, rather than a transient moment: “for it is necessary to prepare oneself by means of the actions opposed to the


\[138\] Ciliotta-Rubery, 28.
sin.” In other words, genuine penitence requires prolonged action against sin, rather than a momentary eradication of the sin.

Unlike the “unarmed prophet” Savonarola, who lacked the martial force and political allies to convince the populace of his teachings, David was an armed prophet who enlarged his empire through martial and political action. The depictions of David found in the Discourses, The Prince, and the Exhortation reveal a character that sinned and annulled his sins through outward penitence. David’s absolution of sin required action, a theme echoed in the closing passage of the Exhortation, where Machiavelli returns to the theme of penitence, “because it is not enough to repent and to weep (for it is necessary to prepare oneself by means of the actions opposed to the sin), in order not to sin further, to take away opportunity for evil, one must imitate Saint Francis and Saint Jerome....”

Like his discussion of ingratitude (particularly in the

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139 Exhortation to Penitence, Gilbert, 174.
140 “In our times Fra [friar] Girolamo Savonarola was unarmed; hence he was destroyed amid his institutions when they were still new, as soon as the multitude ceased to believe him, because he had no way to keep firm those who had once believed or to make the unbelieving believe” (The Prince, Chapter 6, Gilbert, 27). For a reappraisal of the Machiavelli’s reflections on Savonarola see Colish, 597-616.
141 Exhortation to Penitence, Gilbert, 174.
142 Machiavelli praises Saint Francis in the Discourses when the former describes the importance of renewal in religions and republics: “In religious bodies these renewals are also necessary, as we see through the example of our religion, which, if Saint Francis and Saint Dominic had not brought it back toward its beginnings, would have entirely disappeared” (Discourses, Book 2, Chapter 2, Gilbert, 331). This positive evaluation of Saint Francis is consistent with that in the Exhortation. However, Saint Jerome appears in the sermon, whereas Saint Dominic appears in the Discourses. At present, this is an inexplicable discrepancy, for Saint Dominic was a penitential flagellant, as was Saint Jerome. It is curious that Machiavelli would invoke Saint Francis in the sermon but switch Saint Dominic with Saint Jerome. Perhaps the Company of Charity held the Dominicans in disdain, or Machiavelli simply saw these penitential figures and founders of religious orders as relatively synonymous in nature.
Tercets), Machiavelli’s condemnation of sloth refers to the deadly sins; in Dante’s *Inferno* the slothful are described as those who rejected the divine benefits in the world.  

After alluding to the vice of sloth as it relates to penitence, Machiavelli describes how Saint Francis and Saint Jerome set the example for flagelllation as a solution to penitence. But then Machiavelli declares this method to be insufficient for quelling “our appetite for usury, for slander, for deceptions practiced against our neighbor....” This overt claim that flagellation is insufficient for acquiring forgiveness is evidence against those scholars who have dismissed the sermon as a text of trickery, for Machiavelli openly discouraged self-mortification in front of an audience keen on the practice of flagellation.

When read in light of his claim, as articulated in the following quotation, Machiavelli’s rejection of flagellation is clear.

“Our religion [Christianity] has glorified humble and contemplative men rather than active ones. It has, then, set up as the greatest good humility, abjectness and contempt for human things.... Though our religion asks that you have fortitude in you, it prefers that you be adapted to suffering rather than to doing something vigorous.”

Flagellants held “contempt for human things” and pursued suffering over “doing something vigorous.” Flagellation may have been a violent and vigorous activity, but its impact was restricted to the individual. For Machiavelli, flagellation was an inward form of penitence that ignored the affairs of the world. This message was no doubt calibrated to the *disciplinati* Company of Charity, for whom he proffered the model of the *laudesi* companies—to embrace the social and political challenges of Florence through civic engagement. Penitence was possible

144 *Exhortation to Penitence*, Gilbert, 174.  
145 *Discourses*, Book 2, Chapter 2, Gilbert, 331.
through vigor, but futile through sloth. Machiavelli’s condemnation of sloth is present not only in the *Discourses* and *The Prince*, but in the *Exhortation* as well. In the sermon, he echoes his criticism of the Church, which has inculcated sloth, the anti-thesis of civic engagement, which has rendered Italy weak and “the prey not merely of powerful barbarians but of whoever assails her. For this we Italians are indebted to the Church and not to any other.”

**Final Thoughts: Machiavelli the Reformer?**

Regarding the question of Machiavelli and religion, Marcia Colish offers a succinct categorization of the various camps into which scholars typically congregate. There are those who claim that Machiavelli’s criticism of Christianity is a marker of his modernity, his outright rejection of religion, and his demand for a secular state devoid of religious influences. Another camp regards Machiavelli’s reading of religion as purely functional, “as an instrument promoting desirable political behavior.” On this point, Colish defers to Maury D. Feld, who notes that Machiavelli was following the example of Roman historians. A third camp posits that Machiavelli was a pious Christian, his praise of religious leaders being an indicator of the depth of his piety. Yet another camp of scholars suggests that Machiavelli was a conventional Christian whose piety is best exemplified by his *Exhortation to Penitence*.

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146 *Discourses*, Book 1, Chapter 12, Gilbert, 229.
147 Colish, 597-600 n. 1-7.
148 Colish, 598 n. 3.
149 Colish, 598 n. 3.
150 Colish, 599 n. 7.
This investigation of the *Exhortation* has demonstrated that Machiavelli understood
religion as an instrument adaptable to the state; he employed a functionalist reading of
religion. However, this does not obviate the possibility of his Christian piety, as Germino and
de Grazia have argued. This analysis confirms that Machiavelli was intensely concerned with
the state of the Italian Church, and that its inculcation of sloth (a vice which precludes civic
engagement, a critical component of Machiavelli’s political thought) and the failure to curb
ingratitude (a social vice with political repercussions) had disastrous results for his native
Florence. The sincerity of Machiavelli’s *Exhortation* is indicated by how the sermon echoes,
both explicitly and implicitly, his other literature. In fact, there is a high degree of consistency
between the *Exhortation*’s exposition of ingratitude and sloth and the *Discourses, The Prince, La
Mandragola*, and the *Tercets on Ingratitude*. When in the *Discourses* Machiavelli wrote about
the “countless evils and countless disorders” in Italy he was no doubt referring, at least in part, to
the vices of ingratitude and sloth. The Church had failed to defend Italy; a grave frustration
that Machiavelli shared with the Company of Charity, perhaps hoping that they would pursue a
reform of the Church. To consider the sermon a “frivolous joke” or a “veiled irony” is to dismiss
it without considering the challenge of interpreting the *Exhortation*.

But does the *Exhortation* resolve the embroiled debate over Machiavelli’s Christian
piety? While Norton rests with Villari’s and Croce’s negative evaluations of the sermon,
claiming that it is insincere and anti-Christian, both Ciliotta-Rubery and McCumbers avoid such
narrow judgments. Rather, they argue that although the sermon’s content does little to prove

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151 Ridolfi, 252-253. See Samuel J. Preus, "Machiavelli’s Functional Analysis of Religion:
Context and Object" (*Journal of the History of Ideas* 40, no. 2, 979) for a complete exposition
of this interpretation of Machiavelli’s functionalist reading of religion.
152 *Discourses*, Book 1, Chapter 12, Gilbert, 228.
Machiavelli’s Christian impiety, it is far from the trump card needed to unequivocally demonstrate his genuine piety. Each avoids both the Straussian conclusion (Machiavelli as virulently anti-Christian) just as they dodge the de Grazian case (Machiavelli as devoutly Christian). All three scholars have enriched the discussion about the *Exhortation*, lending the brief text the unprecedented center stage in their analyses, a technique adopted in this investigation of the sermon. This investigation does not submit that the sermon was Machiavelli’s ‘highest form of Christian thought,’ as Ridolfi concluded. Nor does it agree with Prezzolini, that Machiavelli was “the most anti-Christian thinker of his time.”¹⁵³ Whether this debate is even solvable is uncertain, given the variety of Machiavelli’s commentary on Christianity. For as T. S. Eliot has observed “no account of Machiavelli’s views can be more than fragmentary. For though he is constructive he is not a system builder; and his thoughts can be repeated but not summarized.”¹⁵⁴

Perhaps Sheldon Wolin was correct when he suggested that Machiavelli was torn between his Christian beliefs and political necessity, leaving these disparities unresolved.¹⁵⁵ J. Samuel Preus offers the possibility that the *Exhortation* “may be evidence for a residual private faith that might have remained unexamined and/or relatively unscathed despite the negative results of Machiavelli’s study of history.”¹⁵⁶ This position seems to suggest that Machiavelli could maintain his Christian piety alongside a sharp critique of those practices and interpretations that he deemed corrosive to social and political comity. Indeed, critique is perhaps the clearest sign of concern. By offering sharp criticisms of the Church, Machiavelli

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¹⁵³ Prezzolini, 26.
¹⁵⁴ Cited in Parel, 185.
¹⁵⁵ Wolin, 175-213.
¹⁵⁶ Preus, 188 n. 70.
exhibits a reformist attitude, one that was a popular current throughout Europe in his day. Machiavelli sought to correct “certain ‘excesses’ in current interpretations of Christianity rather than as an opponent of Christian morality.” It is therefore possible to read the *Exhortation* as a conventional plea for reform, rather than dissolution, of the Church.

Berlin has argued that Machiavelli was a dramatically original thinker who revamped the Western notions of religion and state, thereby developing competing moral systems that required conscious choice, rather than simple compliance. While Berlin’s thesis is convincing, this investigation has proposed that Machiavelli was at times also a conventional thinker. According to Machiavelli, the Church could rescue itself from its own failures by aggressively pursued reform through the renewal. But reform of the Church had a higher purpose for Machiavelli: the stability of Florence. As Wolin has deftly observed, Machiavelli’s “important substratum of religious feeling” often emerged in his discussion of “national revival.” When we interpret the *Exhortation* as a constructive criticism of the Church, we see that Machiavelli was a reformer, whose voice was one of many across Europe. While his voice was not always harmonious with other reformers, Machiavelli nevertheless saw religious reform as an expedient catalyst for political revival. To date, Machiavelli has been heralded as a theorist, a pragmatist, a dramatist, a comedian, and a historian. Given the spectrum of interpretations regarding his relationship with religion, could we not also call him a reformer?

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158 “And therefore those [religions and republics] are best organized and have longest life that through their institutions can often renew themselves…” (*Discourses*, Book 3, Chapter 1, Gilbert, 419).
159 Wolin, 184.
Appendix A: Esortazione alla Penitenza

De profundis clamavi ad te, Domine; Domine, exaudi vocem meam. Avendo io questa sera, onorando padri e maggiori frateggi, a parlare alle carità vostre, per ubbidire a tutti miei maggiori: a parlare qualche cosa della penitenza, mi è parso cominciare la esortazione mia con le parole del lettore dello Spirito Santo, Davit profeta, acclamò che quelli che con lui hanno peccato, con le parole sue sperino di potere dallo altissimo e clementissimo Iddio misericordia ricevere; né di poterla ottenere, avendola quella ostentata, si sbigotto schino, perché da quello esempio né maggiore errore, né maggiore penitenza in uno uomo si può comprendere, né in Dio maggiore liberalità al perdonar si può trovare. E però con le parole del Profeta diremo: «O Signore, io, [confinato] nel profondo del peccato, ho con voce umile e plena di lacrime chiamato a te, o
ESORTAZIONE ALLA PENITENZA

Signore, misericordia; e ti prego, e tu sia contento per la tua infinita bontà, concedercela. Nè sia alcuno pertanto che si disperi di poterla ottenere, pure che con li occhi lacrimosi, con il cuore afflitto, con la voce mesta l'addimmendi. O immensa Pietà di Dio! o infinita bontà! Cognobbe lo altissimo Iddio quanto era facile l'uomo a scorrere nel peccato; vide che, avendo a stare in sul rigore della vendetta, era impossibile che niuno uomo si salvasse; né potette con il più pio remedio alla umana fragilità provvedere, che con ammonire la umana generazione che, non il peccato, ma la perseveranza del peccato lo poteva fare implacabile; e perciò aperse alli uomini la via della penitenza per la quale, avendo l'altra via smarrita, e' potessino per quella salire al cielo.

È pertanto la penitenza unico remedio a cancellare tutti i mali, tutti gli errori degli uomini; i quali, ancora che sieno molti e in molti e vari modi si commettino, non di meno si possono largo modo in due parti dividere; l'uno, è essere ingrato a Dio; l'altro, essere inimico al prossimo.

Ma a volere cognoscere la ingratiitudine nostra, conviene considerare quali sieno i benfici che noi abbiamo ricevuti da Dio. Pensate pertanto come tutte le cose fatte e create sono fatte e create a benficio dell'uomo. Voi vedete in prima lo immense spazio della terra; la quale, perché potessi essere dagli uomini abitata, non permesse che la fusse circumposta tutta da le acque, ma ne lasciò parte scoperta per suo uso. Fece di poi nasere in quella tanti animali, tante piante, tante erbe, e qualunque cosa sopra quella si genera, a benficio suo; e non solo volle che la terra provvedessi al vivere di quello, ma comandò ancora alle acque che nutrissero infiniti animali per il suo vitto. Ma spicchiamoci da queste cose terrene; alziamo gli occhi al cielo; consideriamo la bellezza di quelle cose che noi vediamo; delle quali, parte ne ha fatte per nostro uso; parte perché, cognoendo lo splendore e la mirabile opera di quelle, ci venga sete e desiderio di possedere quelle altre che ci sono nasoste. Non vedete voi quanta fatica dura il sole per farci parte della sua luce, per fare vivere con la sua potenza e noi e quelle cose che da Dio sono state create per noi? Adunque ogni cosa è creata per onore e bene dello uomo; e l'uomo è solo creato per bene e onore d'Iddio; al quale dì il parlare, ch'è potessi subdurre; gli dette il viso non volto alla terra, come a li altri animali, ma volto al cielo, perché potessi continuamente vederlo; diede le mani, perchè potessi fabbricare i templi, fare i sacrifici in onore suo; diede la ragione e lo intelletto, perchè potessi speculare e cognosere la grandezza d'Iddio. Vedete adunque con quanta ingratiitudine l'uomo contro a tanto beneficatore insurga! e quanta punizione meriti quando e' perverte l'uso di queste cose, e volti al male! e quella lingua fatta per onorare Iddio lo be-stemmia; la bocca donde si ha a nutrirs, la fa diventare una cloaca e una via per sodisfare allo appetito e al vendere con diletto e superflu cibi; quelle speculazioni d'Iddio in speculazioni del mondo converte; quello appetito di conservare la umana spezie in lussuria e molte altre lascivie diventa; e così l'uomo, mediante queste brutte operi, di animale razionale in animale brutto si trasforma. Diventa pertanto l'uomo, usando questa ingratiitudine contro a Dio, di angelo dia-volo, di signore servo, di uomo bestia. Questi che sono ingrati a Dio, è impossibile che non sieno inimici al prossimo. Sono quelli inimici al prossimo che mancano della carità. Questa, padri e fratelli miei, è quella sola che conduce l'anime nostre in cielo;
questa è quella sola che vale più che tutte le altre virtù degli uomini; questa è di cui la chiesa si largamente parla: che chi non ha la carità non ha nulla. Di questa dice san Paolo: "Si linguis non somn hominum, sed angelorum loguar, caritatem autem non habeam, factus sum sciat aes sonans" (Se io parlassi con tutte le lingue dei uomini e degli angeli, e non avessi carità, io son proprio come un suono senza frutto). Sopra questa è fondata la fede di Cristo. Non può essere pieno di carità quello che non sia pieno di religione; perché la carità è paziente, è benigna, non ha invidia, non è perversa, non insuperbisce, non è ambiziosa, non cerca il suo proprio commodo, non si segna, ripensa il male, non si rallegra di quello, non gode delle vanità, tutto patisce, tutto crede, tutto spera, O divina virtù! o felice coloro che ti posseggono! Questa, quella celestiale veste della quale noi dobbiamo vestirci se vogliamo essere intromessi alle celestiale nozze dello imperatore nostro Cristo Iesù nel celeste regno! questa, quella della quale chi non sia [ornato] sarà cacciato dal convito e posto nel sempiterno incendio! Qualunque, adunque, manca di quella, conviene di necessità che sia inimico al prossimo: non subvenga a quello, non sopporti i suoi difetti, non lo consoli nelle tribulazioni, non insegni alli ignoranti, non consigli chi erra, non aiuti i buoni, non punisca i tristi. Queste offese contro al prossimo sono grandi: l'ingratitudine contro a Dio è grandissima: nei quali dui vizi perché noi caggiamo spesso, Iddio, benigno creatore, ci ha mostrato la via del rizzarsi, la quale è la penitenza. La potenza della quale con le opere e con le parole ci ha dimostrato: con le pa-
role, quando comandò a san Piero che perdonasse settanta volte sette il di all'uomo che perdonanza gli domandasse; con l'opere, quando perdonò a Davit lo adulterio e lo omicidio, e a san Piero la ingiuria di averlo non solo una volta, ma tre, negato. Quale peccato non perdonerà Iddio, fratelli miei, a voi, se veramente voi vi ritirerete a penitenza, poi che perdonò questi a loro? E non solamente perdonò, ma li onorò in ta i primi eletti nel cielo; solamente perché Davit, prostrato in terra, pieno di afflizione e di lacrime, gridava: Miserere mei, Deus; solamente perché san Piero festa amare, pianse sempre amaramente il suo peccato: pianselo Davit: meritò l'uno e l'altro il perdono.

Ma perché e' non basta pentirsi e piangere, (ch'è bisona prepararsi in le opere contrarie al peccato) per non potere errare più, per levare via l'occasione del male, conviene imitare san Francesco e san Girolamo; i quali, per reprimere la carne e tolere facoltà a sforzarsi alle iniquo operazioni, l'uno si rivolta su per li pruni, l'altro con un sasso il petto si lacerava. Ma con quali sassi o con quali pruni reprimero noi la volontà delle usure, delle infamie, dell inganni che si fanno al prossimo, se non con le lemoine e con onoreare, beneficare quello? Ma noi siamo ingannati dalla libidine, involti nelli errori e inviluppati ne' lacci del peccato; e nelle mani del diavolo ci troviamo; per ciò conviene, a uscirne, ricorrere alla penitenza, e gridar con Davit Miserere mei, Deus! e con san Piero piangere amaramente, e di tutti i falli commessi vergognarsi e pentirsi e cognoecer chiaramente che quanto piace al mondo è breve [sogno.
Appendix B

Exhortation to Penitence – English Translation by Allan Gilbert

AN EXHORTATION TO PENITENCE

[There is an autograph manuscript of undetermined date.

Orations of this sort, before religious companies, were common in Florence. In 1495 Machiavelli became a member of the Company of Piety. To the Company of Charity, Pope Clement VII in 1523 directed a Brief; for that fraternity Machiavelli’s oration, in its praise of charity, would have been especially suitable.

Part of the oration is conventional in lauding the outward signs of penitence, even in taking as models the saints who inflicted on themselves bodily pain. Machiavelli may have accepted these things as normal without much consideration, or he may have been ironical in a way apparent to few hearers or later readers. At least, he characteristically declares weeping not enough; action is necessary. Similarly he said in The Prince that the sins of the Italians were not those charged by the preachers, but such ones as reliance on mercenary soldiers. Even the instruments of self-chastisement used by the saints immediately become allegories for good deeds directed against conduct injurious to one’s fellows. Machiavelli’s friend Vettori stated thus his view of religion:

The theologians are the chief ones of our religion who have made and continue making so many books, so many debates, so many syllogisms, so many clever doctrines that they fill not merely the libraries but the shops of the booksellers. Nevertheless, our Savior Jesus Christ says in the Gospel: “You shall love God your Lord with all your heart, with all your mind, with all your spirit, and your neighbor as yourself; in these two precepts are summed up all the laws and the prophets.” What need is there then for debates about the Incarnation, the Trinity, the Resurrection, the Eucharist?

This or an even simpler religion is that of Machiavelli. In his letters especially there are frequent and apparently spontaneous references to God. But always he considers what religion will do for one’s neighbors, as when in The

1. Tommasini, Vita di Machiavelli, 2. 734.
2. Ibid., 386.
3. Ibid., 734.
Art of War he attributes much of the wickedness of mercenary troops to lack of religion, and makes the soldier who serves society a religious man. In the History of Florence, in his account of a violent storm as a divine warning, occurs the harmonious reverse of his suggestion in this little work that the goodness of God is shown in providing the world for the happiness of man.

"From the depths I have called upon you, O Lord; O Lord, hear my voice" (Psalm 130).

Since this evening, honored fathers and superior brothers, I am to speak to Your Charities, in order to obey my superiors, and am to say something on penitence, it has seemed to me good to begin my exhortation with words of that teacher of the Holy Spirit, David the Prophet, so that those who have sinned with him may, according to his words, hope they can receive mercy from God all-powerful and all-merciful. And that they can obtain it, since David obtained it, they should not fear, because neither greater transgression nor greater penitence for a man than in his instance can be conceived, nor in God can greater generosity to pardon be found. And therefore with the words of the Prophet we shall say: "O Lord, I, imprisoned in the depths of sin, with a voice humble and full of tears have called upon you, O Lord, for mercy; and I pray you that in your infinite goodness you may be willing to grant it to me."

There should be no one, then, who should despair of obtaining it, if only with eyes full of tears, with distressed heart, with sad voice he asks for it. O immense pity of God! O boundless goodness! It was known to the most high God how easy it was for man to rush into sin; he saw that, if he had to endure the harshness of vengeance, it was impossible that any man should be saved; he could not with a more merciful remedy provide against human frailty than by admonishing the human race that not sin but persistence in sin could make him unforgiving; and therefore he opened to men the way of penitence so that, having lost the other way, they could by it rise to heaven.

Penitence therefore is the only means for annulling all the ills, all the sins of men, which, though they are many and in many and various ways are committed, nonetheless for the most part can be
Exhortation to Penitence

divided into two groups: one is to be ungrateful to God, the second is to be unfriendly to one’s neighbor.

But in order to realize our ingratitude, it is necessary to consider how many and of what sort are the benefits we have received from God. Consider, then, how all things made and created are made and created for the benefit of man. You see first of all the huge extent of the land, which, in order that it could be inhabited by men, he did not allow to be wholly covered over with water but left in part exposed for their use. Then he made to grow on it so many animals, so many plants, so many grasses, and whatever upon it is produced, for their benefit; and not merely did he wish that the earth should provide for their living, but commanded the waters also to support countless animals for their food.

But let us leave these earthly things; let us raise our eyes to the sky; let us consider the beauty of the things we see. Of these, part he has made for our use, part in order that, as we observe the glory and the marvelous workmanship of these things, upon us may come a thirst and a longing to possess those other things that are hidden from us. Do you not see how much toil the sun undertakes, to cause us to share in his light, to cause to live, through his energy, both ourselves and those things that have been created by God for us? So every object is created for the glory and good of man, and man is alone in being created for the good and glory of God, who gave him speech that he might praise him, gave him sight, turned not to the ground as for the other animals but turned to the sky, in order that he might always see it, gave him hands in order that he might build temples, offer sacrifices in His honor, gave him reason and intellect in order that he might consider and understand the greatness of God. See, then, with how much ingratitude man rises against such a great benefactor! And how much punishment he deserves when he perverts the use of these things and turns them toward evil! That tongue made to glorify God blasphemes him; that mouth, through which he must be fed, he makes into a sewer and a way for satisfying the appetite and the belly with luxurious and excessive food; those thoughts about God he changes into thoughts about the world; that desire to preserve the human species turns into lust and many other dissipations. Thus with these brutish deeds man changes himself from a rational animal into a brute animal. Man changes, therefore,
by practicing this ingratitude to God, from angel to devil, from master to servant, from man to beast.

These who are ungrateful to God—it is impossible that they are not unfriendly to their neighbors. Those are unfriendly to their neighbors who are without charity. This, my Fathers and Brothers, is the only thing that takes our souls to Heaven; this is the only thing that has more worth than all the other virtues of men; this is that of which the Church says at such length that he who does not have charity does not have anything. Of this Saint Paul says: “If I speak with all the tongues of men and of angels, and do not have charity, I am just like a worthless musical instrument.” On this is based the Christian faith. He cannot be full of charity who is not full of religion, because charity is patient, is kindly, is not envious, is not perverse, does not show pride, is not ambitious, 4 does not seek her own profit, does not get angry, meditates on the wicked man, does not delight in him, does not take pleasure in vanity, suffers everything, believes everything, hopes everything. Oh divine virtue! Oh, happy are those that possess you! This is that heavenly garment in which we must be clad if we are to be admitted to the celestial marriage feast of our Emperor Jesus Christ in the heavenly kingdom! This is that in which we must be dressed if we are not to be driven from the banquet and put in the everlasting fire! Whoever, then, lacks it must necessarily be unfriendly to his neighbor: he does not aid him, he does not endure his faults, he does not console him in tribulation, he does not teach the ignorant, he does not advise him who errs, he does not help the good, he does not punish the evil. These offenses against one’s neighbor are grave; ingratitude against God is very grave.

Because into these two vices we often fall, God the gracious creator has showed us the way for raising ourselves up, which is penitence. The might of this he has shown with his works and his words: with words when he commanded Saint Peter to forgive seventy times seven in one day the man who asked forgiveness from him; with his works when he forgave David for his adultery and murder, and Saint Peter for the offense of having denied him not once but three times. What sin will God not forgive you, my

5. I Corinthians 13:4-7. The word ambitious does not occur in the English version. For its importance to Machiavelli, see his TERCETS ON AMBITION.
Exhortation to Penitence

brothers, if you sincerely resort to penitence, since he forgave these to
them? And not merely did he forgive them, but he honored them
among the highest of those chosen in heaven; merely because David,
prostrate on the earth, full of affliction and of tears, cried out: “Pity
me, God”; merely because Saint Peter without ceasing wept bitterly
for his sin. David wept for his. They deserved, both of them,
forgiveness.

But, because it is not enough to repent and to weep (for it is
necessary to prepare oneself by means of the actions opposed to the
sin), in order not to sin further, to take away opportunity for evil, one
must imitate Saint Francis and Saint Jerome; they, in order to re-
strain the flesh and take from it means for forcing them into sinful
deeds, would, one of them, roll himself in thorns, the other with a
stone would tear his breast. But with what stones or what thorns
shall we keep down our appetite for usury, for slander, for deceptions
practiced against our neighbor, if not with alms and with honoring
him and doing good to him? But we are deceived by lust, involved
in transgressions, and enmeshed by the snares of sin; and we fall into
the power of the Devil. Hence, to get out of it, we must resort to
penitence and cry out with David: “Have mercy upon me, oh God!”
and with Saint Peter weep bitterly, and for all the misdeeds we have
committed feel shame

And repent and understand clearly
that as much as pleases the world is a short dream.⁶

⁶ Petrarch, Sonnet 1.
Bibliography


