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Dialogue on the Regime of Florence (Guicciardini)

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(excerpt)

By Francesco Guicciardini

1521-1526

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All footnotes are those of the translator.

SODERINI

Now we need to think about something else, because we have two mortal wounds: the loss of Pisa and the Medici exiles, who through the friends that they have in Florence^[1] and [its] dominion, and through the great reputation of [their] house, will give us [work] to do.^[2] And because we have heard your opinion about Pisa, I would like you to give us some reminder about how we could conduct ourselves concerning the Medici matters.

BERNARDO

Each wound is great, and the greater one is that of the Medici; because many chance events^[3] can come about that [could make] the Pisa matters end soon, but very few [such events] could make the danger from the Medici *not* last many years; for the latter is an evil that is within and touches our vital parts. Concerning Pisa I refer to that which I said above, adding that this evil, which is difficult to heal, would need a strong medicine: to speak bluntly^[4]—cruelty; which perhaps a prince or a state of one man would use, but a government of [the] people would be most averse to it. I say that the Pisans are our most stubborn enemies, nor do we have hope of taking hold of them ever, unless by force; therefore it would be necessary to kill always all the Pisans that shall be taken in war, in order to lessen the number of [our] enemies and make the others more afraid. And if they should do the same to you by means of your own [soldiers among their captives], the loss would be little because with money you would get other [soldiers];^[5] at least put [the captives you take] in prison so that that they could have no hope of leaving until you recovered Pisa. Because if you began to handle the matter^[6] by the custom of Italian wars, with bounties and prisoner-exchanges, you would foment a war longer than you might wish; and one who managed^[7] this point well—that is, killing or imprisoning everyone, or killing part of them and imprisoning part of them according to what the progress of affairs counseled,^[8] but never to let any of them go—would make them so cowardly^[9] that it would greatly ease this undertaking for you.

The last rout that the Genoans dealt to the Pisans at Meloria afflicted them so that never after did Pisa recover its strength. The cause was that [the Genoans] never let their prisoners go, [of] which there was a very great number; whence it came about that Pisa not only could no longer count on those that had been taken (which died in prison) but further it lost the offspring that would have been born to them had they remained in Pisa. And if one should say that by proceeding thus one would acquire a reputation for cruelty and even of [having] little conscience, I would admit to you both [points]; but I would tell you further that he who wishes nowadays to hold on to dominions and states should, where one can, use compassion^[10] and goodness, and where one cannot do otherwise, it is necessary that he use cruelty and little conscience. And for that reason did your great-grandfather Gino write in those last *Memoirs* of his, that he needed to make [his] ten men of war persons that loved their country more than their soul, because it is impossible to rule and govern states—if one wishes to hold on to them in the way they are held today—according to the precepts of the Christian law.

How will one be able in conscience to make a war out of greed^[11] for broadening one's domain, in which [war] one commits so many slaughters, so many sackings, so many violations of women, so many burnings of houses and of churches, and countless other evils? And nevertheless he who in a senate for this reason^[12] and no other would argue against embarking on a useful undertaking with a likelihood of success, would be refuted by everyone. But let us say further: How could you in conscience welcome a war for the greater defense of the lands that you possess?—Indeed, if war is not rightly^[13] made against you and no one demands war with you,^[14] how can you hold on to your domain, in which, if you consider rightly, there is perhaps nothing that is yours, if you have occupied the whole or at least the greater part with weapons, or by buying it from one who did not for his part have any reason in your favor?^[15] And the same arises for everyone else, because all states, that consider rightly their origin, are violent; and, setting aside the republics (in their own country, and not beyond), there is no power that is legitimate, and less so that of the emperor that has so much authority that he lays down what is right for the rest.^[16] Nor do I exempt the priests from this rule: their violence is twofold, because to hold you down they use spiritual and temporal weapons.

You see to what a man would be reduced who wished to direct states with the strictness of conscience. Therefore, when I have spoken about killing the Pisans or taking them prisoner, I perhaps have not spoken in a Christian manner, but I have spoken according to the reason and usage of states. Nor will he speak in a more Christian manner than me who, [although] refusing to be so cruel, will counsel that [we] make every effort to take Pisa—because that means nothing else than to be the cause of countless evils in order to occupy something that in conscience is not yours. And he who does not recognize this has no excuse before God, because as the friars are accustomed to say, “that is crass ignorance.” He who *does* recognize it can put forward no reason why in the one case one has to observe one's conscience, [but] in the other one does not have to take it into account. I have wished to say this not in order to pass judgment in these difficulties that are great (for he who wishes to live entirely according to God can ill attempt *not* to distance himself entirely from the life of the world, and ill can one live according to the world without offending God) but in order to speak according to what the nature of things aims at^[17] in truth, since the occasion has drawn us into this reasoning (which we can carry on among ourselves, but it would not therefore do to engage in it with others, nor where there were more persons [present]).

^[1] The dialogue is set in Florence.

^[2] *ci daranno che fare*

^[3] *accidenti*

[4] *in vulgare*

[5] *perché con danari ne aresti degli altri*: reading *aresti* as a corruption of *avresti*, a variant of *avreste*.

[6] *trattarla*

[7] *governassi*

[8] *consigliassi*

[9] *gli invilirebbe tanto*

[10] *pietà*

[11] *cupidità*

[12] That is, that such a war would be unjust.

[13] *bene*

[14] *nessuno non ve le dimandi*

[15] *chi non vi aveva drento [dentro] alcuna ragione*. *Dentro* literally means “inwardly.” Presumably Guicciardini describes instances when one state acquires another merely by offering money to the ruler, in which the purchased state has no other reason—such as reasons of the common good—to become annexed to the purchaser apart from the annexed ruler’s desire for money.

[16] *dà ragione agli altri*

[17] *ricerca*

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