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Translation of Girolamo Savonarola's "May I Love You, Lord," A Modern Psalm

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May I Love You, Lord

A Modern Psalm

Translated by John Patrick Donnelly SJ

This prose poem was written by Girolamo Savonarola (1452-1498), Dominican reformer and great preacher of the fifteenth century. Caught up in the mix of civil and ecclesial conflict represented in the papacy of his time, the controversial Savonarola was condemned to death for heresy, schism, and contempt of the Holy See when he invoked the civil power of European states to call a church council and depose Pope Alexander VI.

As the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* notes, "Savonarola was a great Christian and, in some sense, certainly a martyr. His subjective position regarding Alexander VI is beyond question; and only the matter of his objective guilt, depending on the legal judgment of his day, awaits further investigation. Indeed, as early as 1499, Savonarola was locally venerated as a saint."

The piety of this psalm remains a part of our rich Christian heritage. The prayer imitates the Psalms in its parallelisms and alludes to passages of Augustine's *Confessions*.

*May I love you, Lord, my courage.
 May I love you, Lord, my soul's strength.
 May I always love you, my inexpressible joy.
 May my whole life be lived not for me but for you:
 That life which had perished in my great misery,
 That life which was lifted up in your great mercy.
 For, had you not helped me, my soul could hardly
 have helped dwelling in hell.
 You lifted me up from the gates of death that I might
 proclaim your praises.
 Thanks be to you, my God, because you freed me.
 Thanks be to you, my light, because you enlightened me.*

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Thanks be to you, love of my heart, because you wounded me.
Late have I feared you, O infinite majesty.
Late have I known you, O beauty so ancient.
Late have I loved you, O goodness eternal.

I searched for you, my rest, and did not find you:
I found you not, because I searched the wrong way.
I sought you in outward things, and you dwelt within.
I wandered the lanes and paths, and I did not find rest.
I sought without what was within me.
I thought you were afar off, and you were close and within.
I was far from you, and you were close to me.
You spoke to me, and my heart heard:
"Seek within, and you will find your good."
But in my misery I sought my God without.

I asked the earth if it was my God.
I asked, I say, and it answered me:
"Seek higher than me; I am not your God."
I asked the sea, and it answered me:
"Thales is wrong: I am not your God."
I asked the air, and it answered me:
"Get yourself wings; I am not your God."
I asked the heavens, the sun, the moon, and the stars,
and they answered me:
"Mount up beyond us; we are not your God."
I asked the angels, and they answered me:
"Go deep into your heart; we are not your God."
I asked all the creatures, and they answered me;
They answered me, I say, with a voice great and strong:
"He who made us from nothing, he is your God."
"Where is my God? answer me.
Where should I seek him? teach me, I beg you."
"Your God is everywhere; seek him in your heart.
He fills heaven and earth; he fills your heart too."
Turning to my heart, I say to my God:
"How did you get in here, Lord my God?
By what door did you enter, my sweet love?"
I questioned my eyes, and they answered me:
"If he did not possess color, he did not come in through us."
I awakened my ears, and they answered me:
"If he made no sound, he did not enter through us."
I checked with my nostrils, and they answered me:

*"If he does not have a smell, he did not enter through us."
I checked with my taste, and it answered me:*

"If he does not have a flavor, he did not enter through me."

I put my sense of touch under oath, and it answered me:

"If he is without a body, he did not enter through me."

For you were within, but my senses did not know it.

*You entered into my soul, but you did not enter through
bodily senses.*

Your light shines where place does not catch it.

Your voice sounds where time does not snatch it.

Your scent is there where no breeze stirs.

Your flavor is there where there is no tasting.

Your embrace is felt where there is no separation.

What are you then, my God? What are you, my love?

I asked him, and he answered me:

"Go down into your human heart, and God shall be exalted."

You are truly a great God, surpassing our knowledge.

You alone are mighty and truly happy.

You are king of kings and lord of lords.

You alone have immortality and unapproachable light,

Which no human sees or can see.

We say much about you, but words fail us:

For you are greater than any heart and all praise.

You are the one God rejoicing in your Trinity:

God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit,

Three persons but not three essences,

One God and Lord, not three gods and lords.

This is my God, who has no need for my goods,

Who created this whole universe because of his goodness.

He lacks for nothing, and he carries and governs all things;

And he emptied himself for us humans:

He took on human nature and was crucified for us.

He rose from the dead and ascended above all the heavens

To prepare for us the place of immortality.

From there he will come to judge the living and the dead.

His kingdom will have no end, and we shall reign with him

for ever and ever:

For where my flesh reigns, there I believe that I reign.

If he did not spare his own Son for us,

We believe that he has given us all things along with him.

O unimaginable love of charity:
You handed over your Son to redeem your servant.
Greatly have you loved me, my only love.
You loved me before I loved you.
You created me in your own image;
You put me in charge of all your creatures:
For me you made your angels spirits
And commanded them to watch over me
Lest I dash my foot against a stone.
You did not create me among unbelievers:
You baptized me in water and the Spirit.
You did not give me riches and poverty:
You taught me understanding and wisdom.
When I wandered astray, you kept calling me.
You kept knocking at the door, and I did not open it for you:

I relied on my own strength, but it was not strength.
I kept trying to run and kept fainting;
I fell the most where I believed I could stand best.
I became refuse like a broken jug.
Alienated, I fled to a distant land.
I loved vanity and became vain.
I was blind and I loved my blindness.
I was a slave and I liked my slavery.
I was bound fast, but did not detest my bondage.
I thought that bitter was sweet and sweet bitter.
I was wretched but knew it not.
I sinned, and you visited me.
I fell, and you lifted me up.
I was ignorant, and you taught me.
I did not see, and you gave me light.
I wallowed in sin: I had been sold into it.

You came to me to buy me back.
You loved me so much that you gave your own blood
to purchase me.
You love me more than yourself, for you wanted to die for me.
In such a way you led me back from exile, at so great a price.
You redeemed me from punishment.
You called me by your own name,
You marked me with your own blood,
So that your memory would stay with me

*And that the one who for me did not leave the cross would
never leave my heart.*

*May I know you, who know me.
May I know you, strength of my soul.
Show yourself to me, my consoler.
May I see you, light of my eyes.
Come to me, joy of my spirit.
May I see you, joy of my heart.
All who know you love you.
They forget self and love you more than self.
They leave self to come to you.
Drive away, Lord, the darkness of my mind
So that my memory may rejoice in recalling you,
My eye may find joy in seeing you,
My soul may burn with love for you.
It is good for me to cling to my God,
To put all my hope in my Savior.
When I do not cling to you, I pour out my heart
on passing things;
My thought reels, my tongue trips.
I am miserable, I say, miserable!
When will I cling to you alone so that I sin not against you?
When can my twistedness be squared up with your
straightness?
You, Lord, love desert spaces; I love crowded places.
You love quiet, I love racket.
You love verity, I love vanity.
You love cleanness, I love meanness.*

*Therefore I beg you, Lord, because of your own goodness:
Give light to my eyes; wound my heart with your love.
Steady my stride along your paths
So that my steps do not stray.
Free the captive, gather the scattered,
Sew up the torn, lift up the fallen.
Give me a heart that ponders you;
Give me a mind that dwells on you.
Give me an intellect that understands you.
Give me reasoning that easily clings to you.
Give me a soul that loves you.
Give me a will that never parts from you.*

Be near to my heart, near to my words.
Be near to my work, near to help.
Be near to me, for I am faint with love.
Be near to me, because without you I die.
Be near to me, because I am uplifted by the thought of you.
Your scent refreshes me;
Your memory heals me;
Your pleasant light renews my life;
Your gentle voice gives me delight.
Then will I be satisfied when your glory appears.

To you my heart speaks; to you, I say, my soul speaks:
"I have searched for your face; your face, Lord, shall I seek.
Turn not your face away from me,
Nor pass by your servant in wrath.
Be my helper, do not desert me,
Do not despise me, God my savior."
My father and my mother have gone on without me,
But God in his mercy has adopted me.
Set your law before me on your path,
Direct me along the right road, because of my enemies.
Hand me not over to the designs of my tormentors;
For wicked witnesses have arisen against me,
And iniquity has lied to itself.
I believe that I shall see the good things of the Lord
in the land of the living.
Hence shall I sing to the Lord during my life;
I will chant psalms to my God as long as I live.
May my words be pleasant to him;
I, indeed, will be glad in the Lord. Amen.

The exact date of composition of this prose poem is unknown, but it was first published in an edition of St. Antoninus's *Triialogus* (Venice: Giovanni Emerico da Spira, 1495; folios 147r-150r). There have been thirteen Latin editions and one French, one German, and three Italian translations. This first English translation is based on the text of Savonarola's *Operette spirituali* edited by Mario Ferrara (Rome: Angelo Belardetti, 1976, pp. 281-287 of vol. 12, part 1, of the *Edizione nazionale delle Opere di Girolamo Savonarola*).