Savonarola



Sometime between 1906 and 1925 Elizabeth fashioned out of plaster the above 5⅜-inch-diameter bas-relief medallion depicting Gerolamo Savonarola (1452–1498), an Italian Dominican friar who, while living in Florence, publicly exposed in his sermons what he claimed was papal corruption. For this he was excommunicated, imprisoned, tortured, and then burned at the stake.

In her diary (1903–1905), Elizabeth mentions two times having read biographies about the friar. In her 6 August 1903 entry Elizabeth writes, "Charlotte lent me a Little Journey of Savonarola to read." This is is a reference to Elbert Hubbard's *Little Journeys to the Homes of the Great: Great Philosophers. Savonarola* (East Aurora, New York: The Roycrafters, 1903), vol. XII, no. 3, pp. 67–95, published as a small magazine in March 1903.[1] Interestingly, in her diary entry for 3 March 1903, the month Hubbard's Savonarola account was published, Elizabeth mentions having "Read from Hubbard's account of Mark Antony." That publication[2] had been issued the prior month, February of 1903. So by March of 1903, when the Savonarola account was published, Elizabeth already was aware of Hubbard's *Little Journeys* series. But it was not until

[1] https://tinyurl.com/2p9uzmay
[2] https://tinyurl.com/2p9uzmay

August of 1903 that Charlotte lent her Hubbard's Savonarola account to read. Apparently, Elizabeth's 3 March 1903 diary entry predates the March 1903 publication of Hubbard's biography of Savonarola and she did not know about it until Charlotte lent a copy of it to her in August.

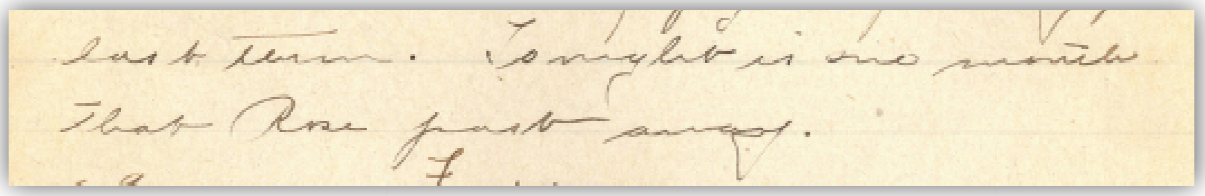
In her diary entry for 19 August 1903, Elizabeth mentions that she "took out" from the library "Ramulo (Eliot) for myself." This is a reference to the historical novel *Romola* (1863) by George Eliot [Mary Ann Evans] (1819–1880). Savonarola is one of the eleven characters in the plot of that work. He preaches to Florentines about ridding the Church of scourge and corruption. The Pope pressures Florentines to expel Savonarola and he is tried for heresy and burned at the stake.

Coincidentally, Hubbard visited San Francisco in April of 1903 "on a lecturing trip" (See *San Francisco Chronicle*, Tuesday, April 21, 1903, page 14, col. 6), but there is no indication in Elizabeth's diary that she attended any of his lectures.

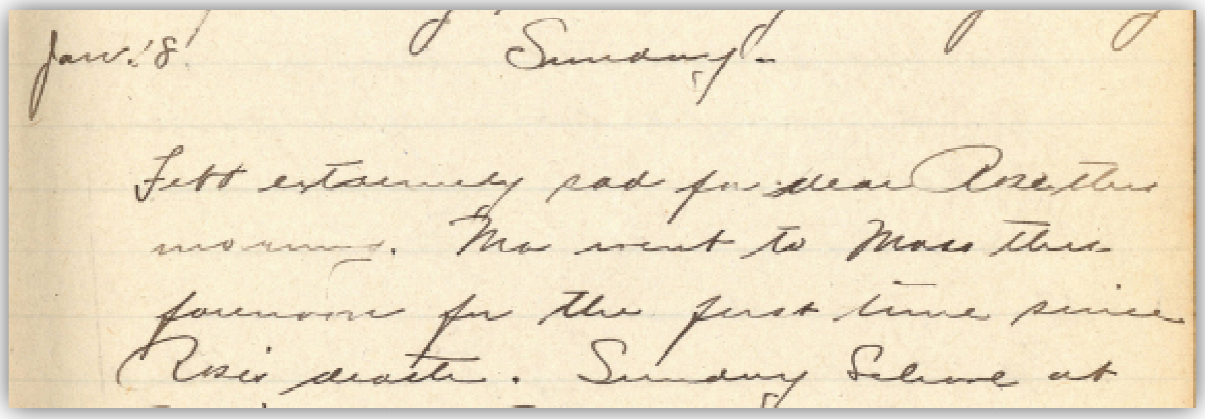
Savonarola, the Dominican reformer, came from an old family of Ferrara, located about 25 miles north of Bologna, about 50 miles south by southwest of Venice, and about 130 miles east by north east of Genova. A Dominican seven years, Savonarola preached in Florence beginning in 1481. Under his influence the city became a "republic" and he was elected city manager. Pope Alexander VI offered him the position of cardinal if he would quit exposing the Vatican. Refusing the "red hat" of cardinal he replied, "I'll take a 'red hat' of blood." He was excommunicated, imprisoned, tortured, then burned at the stake. Before dying he said, "Rome will not quench this fire . . . ." Discussion about Savonarola abounds.[3]

[3] https://www.google.com/search?q=girolamo+savonarola

In her diary, written in 1903–1905, Elizabeth often mentions the death of her younger sister, Rose. Elizabeth's entry for Thursday, 8 January 1903 states, "Tonight is one month that rose past [passed] away."


last time. Tonight is one month
that Rose past away.

Elizabeth's entry for Sunday, 18 January 1903 reads, "Felt extremely sad for dear Rose this morning. Ma went to Mass this forenoon for the first time since Rose's death." By then it had been six weeks since Rose's 8 December 1902 death.


Jan. 18 Sunday
Felt extremely sad for dear Rose this
morning. Ma went to Mass this
forenoon for the first time since
Rose's death. Sunday School at

However, Elizabeth makes no mention in her diary of how her younger sister, Rose, died. According to Elizabeth's daughter, nineteen-year-old Rose had been assaulted by a Catholic priest and left "in the mud to die."[4] The incident eventually led Elizabeth and also her own Italy-born immigrant mother leaving the Catholic Church. Elizabeth's diary entries, however, serve in part possibly to confirm an apparent instance of "priest shuffling" or "promotion for avoidance" ("*promoveatur ut amoveatur*"). The diary entries concern Father Valentino Cassini.

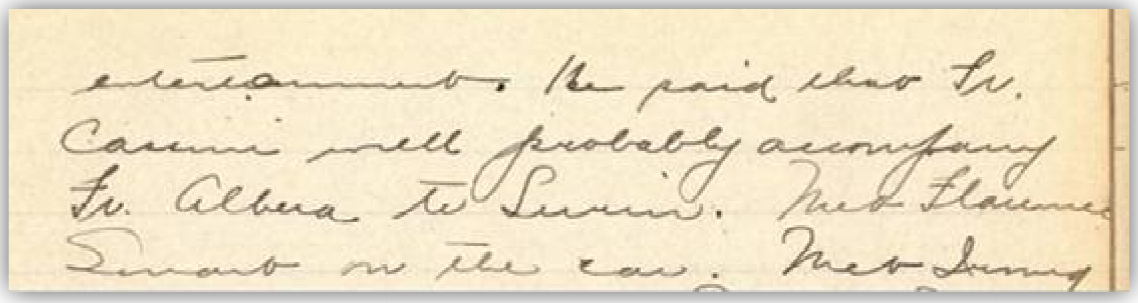
[4] Oral interview of Elizabeth's daughter, Noel Virginia Ehat Fallstrom, 21 August 1973, Menlo Park, California.

As Elizabeth's daughter, Noel, recounts, Rose was "determined one night to attend church" and "on her way home she was brutally raped by a Catholic priest and left to die in the mud."[5] Multiple sources attest to the manner of Rose's death. Florence Adele Smart Daly (1876–1957), second wife of "the father of Daly City," John Donald Daly, was a dear friend of Elizabeth (1880–1925). Florence knew of the incident and made Elizabeth's daughter, Noel, aware of it. (Noel was age 9 when her mother, Elizabeth, died.) Over the years, Elizabeth's daughter, Noel Ehat Fallstrom (1916–1989), told her own daughter, Christine Fallstrom Nishkian, about the matter. And Christine has told others that her mother also had told her. Noel's first cousins, Lucille Ehat (1916–2014) and Carletta Ehat (1918–2013), in turn also told Rosemary Ehat of the matter. And of course, Elizabeth's leaving the Church is well documented both in family history and in the artwork that Elizabeth created in later years (she was a sculptor and among other art pieces, she left bas-reliefs of "The Birthplace of Mary Baker Eddy," founder of the First Church of Christ, Scientist (Christian Science), to which Elizabeth gravitated after leaving Catholocism, and of the "Eddy Memorial" (the memorial rotunda at Eddy's burial site in Massachusetts). Elizabeth's mother, Virginia Risso Ferrea (1854–1935), also permanently disassociated herself from Roman Catholicism on account of the 1902 incident involving her 19-year-old daughter, Rose.

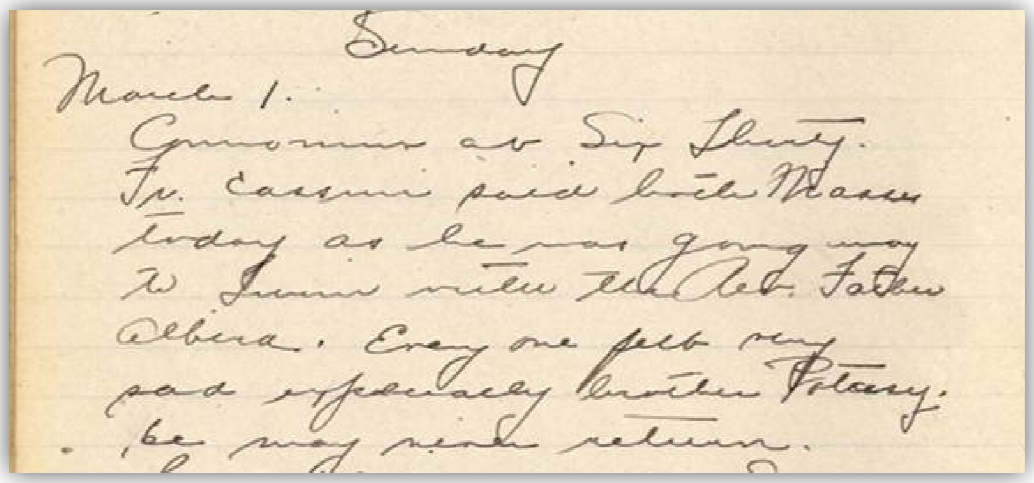
Elizabeth reports in her diary entry of Friday, 27 February 1903, just short of three months after her sister Rose's death, that Father Buss, the assistant rector of the Corpus Christi parish of which Elizabeth was a communicant, came to her home and, out of the blue, without prior mention of it (at least not in her diary), told her that Father Valentino Cassini, the parish priest, "will probably accompany Fr. Albera to Turin."

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[5] Quotation of the report by Noel Fallstrom née Ehat, Elizabeth Ferrea's daughter, 21 August 1973.



No prior mention of the trip or of Father Albera or of Turin is mentioned in the diary. Father Paul (Paolo) Albera was a Salesian living and serving at that time in Turin. Seven years later he would become Rector Major of the Salesians. In February of 1903 he had traveled to San Francisco to retrieve Father Cassini.[6] On Sunday, March 1, 1903, two days after Father Buss had told Elizabeth about Father Cassini probably accompanying Father Albera to Turin, she noted in her diary the following: "Fr. Cassini said both Masses today as he was going away to Turin with the Rev. Father Albera. Every one felt very sad expecially [*sic*] brother Potasy [*]. He may never return." [* Anselmo Petazzi was the parish sexton for Corpus Christi.]



[6] See Arthur J. Lenti, "The Founding and Early Expansion of the Salesian Work in the San Francisco Area from Archival Documents: Part II: Early Expansion (1897-1910)," *Journal of Salesian Studies* (Berkeley, CA: Institute of Salesian Studies, 1997) 21 (at p. 48, n. 56), available at https://journal.salesianstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/Lenti-The_Founding_and_ Early_Expansion_of_the_Salesian_Work_in_the_San_Francisco_Area_from_Archival_Documents-Part_2-Early_Expansion-1897_1910-Journal_Salesian_Studies-Vol08_No1-Spring1997.pdf.

Not knowing whether Father Cassini was the priest involved in Rose's death, personal and written communication with the Salesian Provincial Center, Salesians of Don Bosco in the United States (USA West Province) at 1100 Franklin Street, San Francisco, has resulted in the following disclaimer:

From: Tom Mass [mailto:suoeconomer@salesiansf.org]
Sent: Friday, 13 October, 2023 11:13 AM
To: stephen@ehat.org; 2645rosemaryehat@gmail.com
Subject: Inquiry of Fr. Cassini

Good morning, Rosemary and Stephen.

I received your addressed letter to Br. Larry King from a few weeks ago. I'm sorry to inform you that he has been living in a care facility down in the Los Angeles area and no longer works in our archival office. We have not found a replacement person for his vacated office. Yesterday morning, I received a set of email letters from you to our previous secretary.

We Salesians are very sorry that your family has been through such a traumatic event and the pain you have all gone through over the many years. Horrific acts as you have described in your letter should never occur to anyone, especially a child.

After receiving the letter to Br. Larry and Fr. Gael, I had a chance to go into our local archives here to see if there was any news or reports to indicate that Fr. Cassini had a questionable background. In my research, I found nothing to indicate that Fr. Cassini was reported to have committed any improper behavior while in our Province or any other ministry that he worked in before or after San Francisco. Also, there was no indication as to why he returned to Argentina. It is quite normal for missionaries to return to their home countries after a number of years serving in another country. The few notations in the archives indicated that he was a hard working and much appreciated Priest in San Francisco.

This is our first time hearing anything about a report of sexual abuse or assault by Fr. Cassini.

Thank you for reaching out to us. God bless,
Br. Tom

--
Br. Tom Mass, SDB
Treasurer
Salesian Society - Province of St. Andrew, San Francisco
1100 Franklin Street
San Francisco, CA 94109
Phone: (415) 441 - 7144 Ext. 8221
Direct line: (415) 441 - 4256
Fax: (415) 441-8151
Email: suoeconomer@salesiansf.org
Visit our Website:http://www.donboscowest.org

The above disclaimer, of course, is presumed credible, though given the destructive influence of the 1906 Earthquake and Fire, the usual absence of "news or reports" in such situations is only that: an absence of new or reports.

Communications also were made with the Archivio Salesiano Centrale (ASC) in Rome, asking for copies of correspondence exchanged during the years 1902 through 1905 between Father Cassini (who in 1903 was moved from San Francisco to Buenos Aires via Turin) and Father Michele Rua (who was Rector General, located in Turin). Michele Rua became the Rector Major of the Salesians following the 1888 death of Don Bosco, founder of the Salesians. ASC has shared copies of correspondence for years *surrounding* the requested 1902-to-1905 period (with only one letter in 1902, dated prior to the December 1902 death date of Rose) but none during that period. The following summarizes the copies of letters *requested* of the ASC for the years 1902, 1903, 1904, and 1905 (in green below) and copies of letters *received* from the ASC for the years 1876, 1881, 1882, 1887, 1889, 1896, 1897, 1898, 1899, 1900, 1901, 1901 (one letter written in August), and 1907 (orange below):

REQUESTED	RECEIVED
	1876 One letter
	1877
	1878
	1879
	1880
	1881 One letter
	1882 One letter
	1883

	1884
	1885
	1886
	1887 Two letters
	1888
	1889 One letter
	1890
	1891
	1892
	1893
	1894
	1895
	1896 One letter
	1897 Two letters
	1898 Two letters
	1899 Two letters
	1900 Five letters
	1901 Seven letters
1902	1902 One letter (in August)
1903	1903
1904	1904
1905	1905
	1906
	1907 One letter

Transcriptions and translations of a good number of the letters sent were already available publicly (see the Lenti source cited). Ffollow-up communication requested copies of all correspondence between and among all participating parties, seeking copies of correspondence during the 1902-to-1905 period between and among four priests: Fr. Cassini, Fr. Albera, Fr. Michael Borghino (who would become rector of the Corpus Christi parish), and Fr. Buss (who would remain as assistant rector of the parish). The response to that follow-up correspondence to the ASC was curt: "è tutto." ("That's all.")

The absence of letters written during the years 1903, 1904, and 1905 (and in the latter months of 1902) is curious. No letters from 1903, none from 1904, and none from 1905. Father Cassini and Father Albera corresponded twenty times between 1896 and 1901 and yet the ASC presented only one letter during the 1902-to-1905 period (and that 1902 letter pre-dates Rose's death). Do letters during that period exist? Of the 27 letters received from the ASC, twenty-five are from Albera to Cassini and two from Cassini to Albera (one in 1876 and one in 1901). Arthur J. Lenti (the now-deceased scholar cited below) characterizes the 1896-to-1902 correspondence as "lively" and notes that "with a couple of exceptions, Father Cassini's letters are not available to me," adding that "they are not found in the Rua microfiches [created by ASC], where they would have been catalogued under the subject heading, *Letters to Rua,*" and further noting that "they are probably to be found in Cassini's own files in the Central Archives (ASC)." (See page 27 and note 18 in the Lenti source cited below.) Apparently they are not to be found there (or not intended to be found there). Lenti notes that Cassini "seems to have been struggling with problems of a personal and social nature" and seems "to have been the object of some hostility on the part of some priests" and "to have suffered from certain ministerial inadequacies." (See page 27 of the Lenti source cited below.)

Traveling to the United States from Turin, Italy, Father Cassini had arrived in San Francisco in March of 1897. One year later, in March of 1898, the cornerstone of the Corpus Christi Parish Church was blessed and laid. Father Cassini was already slated to serve as the pastor of the new parish. The first mass in the new church was held in April of 1898 and on 19 June 1898, the church was dedicated. Father Cassini, the new pastor of the parish, served as sub-deacon during the solemn high mass that immediately followed the dedicatory prayers. He served as pastor of the parish from June of 1898 to 1 March 1903. One expert in the history of the Salesians in San Francisco described Cassini's tenure as the head priest at Corpus Christi as "all too brief."[7] His departure from Corpus Christi, from San Francisco, from California, and from the United States was abrupt. His 1922 obituary in Buenos Aires mentions that he served in California but does not say when and does not specify San Francisco as the place of service.

[7] See Arthur J. Lenti, "The Founding and Early Expansion of the Salesian Work in the San Francisco Area from Archival Documents: Part II: Early Expansion (1897-1910)," *Journal of Salesian Studies* (Berkeley, CA: Institute of Salesian Studies, 1997) 21 (at pp. 27-49), available at https://journal.salesianstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/ Lenti-The_Founding_and_Early_Expansion_of_the_Salesian_Work_in_the_San_Francisco_Area_from_Archival_Documents-Part_2-Early_Expansion-1897_1910-Journal_Salesian_Studies-Vol08_No1-Spring1997.pdf.