

DID SAVONAROLA DISOBEY THE POPE?

IT is generally recognised that the conflict between Alexander VI and Savonarola was political rather than canonical; that political reasons more than zeal for the welfare of the Church and the salvation of souls dictated every move made by Alexander in his dealings with the Friar; and, furthermore, that the Pope's mind had been poisoned by the false accusations and slanders of Savonarola's implacable enemies. Both men were strong characters. They clashed, and the general opinion obtains that Savonarola flatly disobeyed the commands of the Supreme Pontiff. Savonarola has been pilloried by some writers as the unique example of grave disobedience to the Vicar of Christ, since no one except heresiarchs ever dared to flout Papal commands as he did yet die in communion with the Holy See. But others are convinced that the Friar did not disobey, and therefore he neither incurred nor deserved censure. We shall examine the question as briefly, yet as fully, as possible, and shall confine ourselves strictly to the query: Did Savonarola disobey the Pope?

I

On May 22nd, 1493, Savonarola had obtained a Brief from Pope Alexander VI, by which the Priory of San Marco was separated from the Congregation of Lombardy and given an independent existence under the immediate jurisdiction of the Master-General of the Order.¹ Savonarola asked for this separation that the work of reform he had set himself to bring about might begin in San Marco itself where he was Prior. Things went well for a time, but the preaching of Savonarola, his fierce denunciation of

¹ Cf. Villari, *La Storia di Girolamo Savonarola e de Suoi Tempi*, Vol. I, Appendice xlii-xliv (Firenze, 1910).

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irreligion and vice, his stern attitude towards Charles VIII of France, whom Lodovico Sforza, Duke of Milan, had invited to invade Italy, then the Alliance between Charles and the Florentine Republic on November 24th, 1494 (an alliance Savonarola was credited with having promoted) and the refusal of the Florentine Republic to break with Charles and join the League of Italian States established on March 1st, 1495, by Alexander VI, the Emperor Maximilian, the King of Spain, as the Lord of Naples, and Lodovico Sforza, who had changed his policy (a refusal Savonarola was credited with having urged and strengthened) brought about a change. The opponents of the Alliance, the Pallesechi who favoured the Medici, the Arrabbiati who were opposed to the new form of popular Government, and the Compagnacci, the loose livers of Florence, who hated Savonarola's moral reformation, determined to get rid of him. Lodovico Sforza and his brother, Cardinal Ascanio Sforza, were the ring-leaders in the plot, and Ascanio wrote to his brother that 'he had obtained Alexander's promise to call Fra Girolamo to Rome and appoint another superior in San Marco.'² Nardi and Landucci confirm this statement,³ and Alexander acted. For the sake of clearness we shall give his commands in their order; there were four of them.

First. By a Brief dated July 21st, 1495, Savonarola was ordered to go to Rome that the Pope 'might confer with him and learn what it was God's pleasure he should do.'

Second. By a Brief dated September 8th, 1495, Savonarola was forbidden to preach until his case had been tried

² *Archivio Storico Italiano*. Nuova Serie. Tome xviii, p. 10, cf. *Il Vero Savonarola e il Savonarola* di L. Pastor. By Professor Luotto (Firenze, 1900, pp. 442-443), and the long note, pp. 442-444, especially.

³ Nardi, *Istorie della Città di Firenze*, Vol. I, p. 73 (Firenze, 1888). Landucci, *Diario Fiorentino*, p. 97 (Firenze, 1893); cf. Marchese, *Sunto Storico*, p. 172, sqq.

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and judgment pronounced by (Blessed) Sebastian Maggi, Vicar-General of the Congregation of Lombardy. San Marco was again united with the Congregation of Lombardy.

Third. By a Brief dated October 16th, 1495, San Marco was permitted to retain its independence, and the command of the previous decree was revoked and annulled. But Savonarola was again forbidden to preach. There was no condition whatever; the prohibition was absolute.

Fourth. By a Brief dated November 7th, 1496, addressed to the Priors and religious of sixteen Dominican houses, Alexander VI established a new Congregation or group of Dominican houses to be known as 'the Tuscan-Roman Congregation of the Order of Preachers.' The *Congregation* of San Marco, of which Savonarola was Vicar-General, was dissolved, and the *Priory* of San Marco, of which Savonarola was Prior, was incorporated into the newly-formed Tuscan-Roman Congregation. A Vicar-General of this new Congregation would be appointed whom the Priors and religious of the sixteen houses were to recognize and obey as their lawful superior. All the Priors and religious of these houses were commanded 'collectively and individually, whatever their status, condition, dignity or office, in virtue of holy obedience and under pain of excommunication *latae sententiae*, not to dare or presume to contradict or impede these Our letters, directly or indirectly, by themselves or by others, in any manner whatsoever under any colour or pretext.'⁴

These were the commands given by Alexander VI, but while the first, second, and third were imposed upon Savonarola by name as personal precepts, the fourth command was not. His name is not mentioned in the Brief *Reformationi et augmento* of November 7th, 1496. He and the religious of San Marco were in exactly the same position as the Priors and religious of the other fifteen houses to which the Brief was sent. Furthermore, neither Savonarola nor any other Prior or religious was commanded *to do anything*

⁴The text of the Brief is given in Villari, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, Append., pp. cxliv-vii.

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to effect the union of the different houses and thus form the new Congregation. He and all the other Priors and religious were ordered 'not to dare or to presume to contradict these Our Letters.'⁶

We call attention to this fact, which has apparently been ignored by certain historians and biographers of the Friar. Did Savonarola disobey any of these Papal commands?

II

By the Brief of July 21st, 1495, Savonarola was called to Rome. He did not go, but on July 31st he wrote to Alexander VI, giving his reasons for not going. As a matter of fact, Savonarola was so seriously ill with fever and dysentery that the doctors had forbidden all study or work, and ordered him a long rest. Savonarola's letter concludes as follows:

'I beg your Holiness to accept these excuses as true and sincere, and to believe that I desire nothing more than to obey you and carry out your commands I shall require no other incentive than my own desire to satisfy your Holiness as soon as these obstacles are removed.'⁶

It is abundantly evident from this letter that Savonarola had not *refused* to obey the summons of the Pope. He expressed his readiness and desire to go, and, furthermore, his hope to go to Rome later. It is practically certain that the Pope did not receive this letter, and that the only communication he did

⁶ 'Volumus insuper et praesentium tenore, in virtute sanctae obedientiae districti praescipiendo, sub excommunicationis latae sententiae paena quatenus *praesentibus literis* nullo modo contradicere, sive impedimentum praestare audeat aut praesumat.'

⁶ Villari, *op. cit.*, Doc. xxiv, Appendice, pp. cvii-cix.

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receive at the time was the *Compendium Revelationum* Savonarola had sent with the letter in explanation and exposition of what he preached.

On September 8th, 1495, a second Brief was sent to 'Our beloved sons, the Prior and community of San Marco, Florence,' but by some inexplicable mischance the Brief was delivered to the Franciscans of Santa Croce, some of whom were very unfriendly towards Savonarola. He is referred to as 'a certain Girolamo Savonarola of Ferrara,' and he is blamed for his 'unbridled arrogance' in having San Marco separated from the Congregation of Lombardy through the craft and cunning of certain perverse friars'; the Brief asserts that, although he had been summoned to Rome 'in virtue of holy obedience . . . he not only refused to obey Us, but rendered our sorrow more bitter by impudently printing and publishing what he had previously only rashly spoken.' Savonarola's case is referred to (Blessed) Sebastian Maggi, whom he must recognize as his judge, whose commands he must accept, and he must go without delay and without appeal wherever he may be sent. While his case is being examined, Savonarola is suspended from all manner of public speaking or preaching,' and the Congregation of San Marco is re-united with that of Lombardy.⁸

Savonarola was at Fiesole when the Brief arrived, but returned to Florence at once. He read the Brief to the community of San Marco and prepared his reply to the charges made against him. Space will not per-

⁷ 'Interea vero dum hac causa coram praefato vicario discutitur ab omni declamandi in populo et publice legendi officio per praesentes litteras praefatum hieronimum suspensum esse decernimus.'

⁸ Luotto gives the Brief in full, *op. cit.*, pp. 606-608, and a translation is given in the volume by the late Father J. L. O'Neil, O.P., *Was Savonarola Excommunicated?* pp. 38-41.

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mit us to give the full text of this reply, which is dignified, calm, convincing.*

The community of San Marco wrote to the Pope on September 28th, and sent a copy of Savonarola's letter of July 31st; Savonarola sent his reply on September 29th. He writes: 'At the close of my letter (July 31st) I besought your Holiness to excuse me because on another occasion I would be able to go to Rome to my greater satisfaction. *I am surprised that your Holiness did not receive my answer*, and therefore I took care to enclose a copy of it in the letter sent to your Holiness yesterday by the Community, so that your Holiness might see that they have spoken falsely who said I had refused to obey As I have already stated, I have so many powerful and bitter enemies that I cannot go outside this city, or even from the Priory, without taking the greatest precautions, because of the countless snares laid to entrap me. How is it, therefore, that the Brief summons me to appear before the Vicar of Lombardy, wherever he may summon me, when there are so many places in Italy where I could not go without exposing myself to certain danger of death? Why is this, save

* Father O'Neil gives the translation of Savonarola's reply in full, *op. cit.*, pp. 22-37. Father Lucas, S.J., in his biographical study of Savonarola (London, Sands and Co., second edition), gives portions of this reply with a running commentary upon them. It is regrettable that he should state: 'This letter . . . is not among the writings of Fra Girolamo which have been declared to be free from dogmatic or moral error' (p. 189). The statement would lead an ordinary reader to infer that *some* writings of Savonarola had been declared to be infected with 'dogmatic or moral error.' The truth is *none* of Savonarola's writings have been declared to be infected with error, either dogmatic or moral. Cf. *Etude sur Jérôme Savonarole*, by Père Bayonne, O.P. (Paris, 1879), pp. 276-298: *Quarto centenario* (Fierenze, 1898), pp. 87-89, 110-111, 114-115, 351-354. *The Life of St. Philip Neri*, by Cardinal Capecelatro, English translation, second edition, pp. 269-272.

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because wicked men have craftily suggested falsehoods to your Holiness and have not given you my letter?'¹⁰

The Brief *Quia divini consilii*, of September 8th, was followed by another, *Quam multa et varia*, on September 9th, addressed to Father Sebastian Maggi, ordering him 'in virtue of holy obedience, and under penalty of excommunication *latae sententiae*, that *immediately (statim)* on receipt of this letter he shall summon Savonarola to appear in person before him within a certain time appointed by Maggi, and demand a sincere and true explanation of Savonarola's sermons and published writings.'¹¹

Now let us remember that by the Brief of September 8th the Pope had suspended Savonarola from all public speaking 'while his case was being examined by the aforesaid Vicar' Maggi. Did Savonarola appear before him, and was his case examined by Maggi? We may presume that Maggi, whose holiness has received the official recognition of the Church, would not delay in carrying out the order he had received, but no official record of the trial has been discovered so far. It may be that Savonarola's adversaries took care that such records should not remain, and Tancredino and other bitter enemies of Savonarola were at Bologna where Maggi resided. If the verdict had been against Savonarola it would assuredly have been published. But we possess indirect evidence that the trial had taken place, and that judgment had been given in Savonarola's favour.

On March 26th, 1496, Becchi, the Florentine Envoy at Rome, wrote to the Ten that Savonarola's enemies were moving heaven and earth to have his preaching suspended completely and Savonarola con-

¹⁰ Cf. O'Neil, *op. cit.*, pp. 31-33.

¹¹ Cf. O'Neil, *op. cit.*, p. 40. This Brief was first published by Luotto. *Op. cit.*, Appendice, Doc. I, pp. 605-606.

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demned. 'I understand,' he continues, 'that they have sent and are diligently searching for *certain indictments which were made against Fra Girolamo at Bologna*; altogether the Pope is of a mind to chastise and punish him. The general of the Dominicans here, and many other learned religious, holy and saintly men, are reassured concerning the motives and cause of Fra Girolamo.'¹²

They found nothing incriminating, however, and a month later, on April 23rd, Becchi again wrote to the Ten: 'The Pope is fairly well satisfied concerning the affairs of Fra Girolamo.'¹³ In the sermon Savonarola preached on the Third Sunday of Lent, 1496, he declared: 'They (his adversaries) have not discovered any falsehoods spoken or written by me You know what you brought about at Bologna, but you see how mistaken you were, and how you were unable to convict me of untruth. If I had not spoken the truth, you may be assured that, after the lapse of such a time, the fact would be known everywhere.' It is worthy of remark that he did not blame Alexander VI as the cause of the trouble, but invariably threw the blame upon certain other men who had deceived the Pope, nor was he wrong in doing so. Paolo Somenzi, Envoy of Lodovico Sforza, had written to his master on January 29th, 1495: 'That Friar Girolamo of Ferrara still persists in his evil disposition and deeds. *For this reason I will do something to embroil him with the people I hope that within a few days I shall be able to convince the people effectively that this Friar is their enemy and is deceiving them.*'¹⁴

¹² *Nuovi documenti e Studi intorno a Girolamo Savonarola*, per cura di Alessandro Gherardi, IIa, Edizione (Firenze, 1887), pp. 140-142.

¹³ Il Papa resta assai bene satisfatto circha alle cose di fra Jeronimo, *ibid.*, p. 143.

¹⁴ Arch. Stor. Italiano. Nuova Serie. Tome. xviii, pp., 2, 6, sqq.

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Savonarola's sentiments in regard to the Brief of September 8th were made known in a letter he wrote to a fellow Dominican in Rome on September 15th, which he concludes with the following words: 'If I cannot otherwise save my conscience than by obeying the Brief, obey it I certainly will, even though the whole world should go to ruin, for I have no wish to sin in this matter in any way even venially.'¹⁵

When he preached in the Cathedral of Florence, therefore, on October 11th, 1495, Girolamo Savonarola did not disobey the commands of Alexander VI, he was under no censure at the time, and had incurred none. He was free to preach when he pleased, since the condition imposed by the Pope when he suspended him from preaching had been observed. We do not agree with Father Lucas, who says that by the subsequent Brief of October 16th, 1495, the Pope 'suspends the appointment of Maggi as judge in the case,'¹⁶ because the reasons we have given are against his statement, even though the Brief, *Licet uberius*, was not published in Florence until October 26th and Savonarola's case had been heard before this date. Neither do we agree with the same writer when he tells us that Maggi was the man to whom Savonarola 'refused to submit when ordered to do so by the Pope.'¹⁷ Savonarola protested against the appointment of Maggi as judge, but we have no evidence that he 'refused to submit' to him.

(To be continued.)

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¹⁵ Cf. O'Neil, *op. cit.*, pp. 41-45.

¹⁶ *Op. cit.*, pp. 194-195.

¹⁷ *Op. cit.*, p. 10, note.