

## DID SAVONAROLA DISOBEY THE POPE?

### II

SAVONAROLA'S adversaries had failed in their attempt to have him condemned, but as Florence was firm in her refusal to break the alliance with Charles VIII, and as this attitude was attributed to Savonarola's exhortations, in all probability another effort would be made to have him silenced. One of the strongest opponents of the Alliance was Alexander VI. He knew that Cardinal della Rovere had urged Charles to have him deposed and that this same Cardinal, a refugee in France, was pressing the King to have a Council summoned for the reformation of the Church.<sup>1</sup> The fear of a Council was therefore a very real one for Alexander, and in order to paralyse Charles VIII, it was necessary to cripple Savonarola.

On October 16th, 1495, Alexander VI issued another *Brief, Licet uberius*, by which the former Brief *Quia divini consilii* of September 8th was annulled. The Pope had received Savonarola's letter of September 29th and the copy of the letter of July 31st, and accepted Savonarola's reasons for not having gone to Rome. By 'some hitherto unexplained cause,' Pastor tells us, this Brief 'did not arrive till after the 26th of October.'<sup>2</sup>

Savonarola had preached in the Cathedral of Florence on October 11th, and again on the 18th and 25th. Pastor condemns him for having done so, but, in his eagerness to discover even the appearance of disobedience in Savonarola, he forgets or ignores the fact

<sup>1</sup>Desjardins. *Negociations Diplomatiques de la France avec la Toscane*. Vol. I, p. 2242, cf. Bayonne, *Etude*, p. 148, note.

<sup>2</sup>*History of the Popes*. English translation. Vol. 6, p. 9.

## *Did Savonarola Disobey the Pope?*

that the suspension from preaching, inflicted by Alexander VI in the Brief of September 8th, was limited by a condition, and that this condition, as we have already seen, had been observed. Parenti tells us that 'the Pope had been reconciled with Fra Girolamo, had revoked his command and had given him permission to preach.'<sup>3</sup>

Now came a renewed prohibition to preach. The Brief *Licet Uberius* of October 16th makes this prohibition absolute. Savonarola was forbidden to preach either in public or in private. He was effectively silenced. How did he act? Savonarola obeyed the command to the letter. He remained in seclusion until February 1496, and did not resume his preaching until that time. We hope to show that when he began to preach again he did not violate the commands of the Pope.

When the Brief of October 16th, 1495, was received by Savonarola after October 26th or on that date, he retired, as has been stated, from the pulpit and did not resume his sermons until the February of the following year. He had no intention of preaching in defiance of the Papal precept, as the following incident clearly proves. The Prior of Prato, Father Antonio d'Ollandia, wrote to Savonarola asking him to send him a preacher for Lent. Savonarola replied: 'If permission to preach is obtained for me from the Sovereign Pontiff, I will send Father Domenico La Pescia. Urge the brethren, therefore, and other devout persons to pray for this intention, for there are difficulties in the way. If this permission is not granted, I do not see how I am to make provision for you. I order, therefore, that the community shall sing the *Alma Redemptoris Mater* after the morning Office for this intention, and after Vespers and Com-

<sup>3</sup>*Historie*. Vol. I, p. 154, *ap.* Luotto, *op. cit.* p. 483.

## Blackfriars

pline the usual prayers, *Ave Regina* and *Recordare*. They might also recite the seven (Penitential) Psalms after Compline for this intention : do this if you wish to have a preacher. If we pray fervently I believe we shall obtain favours from the Lord and great good for souls.’<sup>4</sup>

This letter was dated February 2nd, 1496, and on February 17th Savonarola resumed his sermons. Had the prayers been answered, and did Savonarola receive permission from Alexander VI to preach? Somenzi wrote to Lodovico Sforza on February 16th : ‘The Friar has publicly announced he will preach during Lent, because, he says, he has received permission to do so from the Pope.’<sup>5</sup>

Aquarone tells us : ‘The Pope could not persistently refuse to allow the Friar to preach when the Signory had asked his permission. He granted the permission and Fra Girolamo resumed his sermons.’<sup>6</sup> Cosci states that historians are unanimous in asserting that Alexander VI gave permission to Savonarola to resume his preaching.’<sup>7</sup> Monsignor Ferretti, O.P., had reason to insist that the proofs of Savonarola’s announcement ‘were well known to his contemporaries and were affirmed by many of his biographers.’<sup>8</sup> In the *Cronica Forlivese* of Andrea Bernardi, the writer, who was in Florence at the time, mentions the Procession which took place on February 16th, 1496, and adds : ‘At this time, the afore-mentioned Signory

<sup>4</sup>Villari, *op. cit.* Vol. I. I Append. Doc. XXVIII, p. CXVI. *cf.* Luotto, *op. cit.* p. 488, note.

<sup>5</sup>Del Lungo. *Documenti*. No. V, in *Arch. Stov. Italiano*. Nuova Serie. Tome XVIII. Par II. Firenze. 1863.

<sup>6</sup>Lib. II, p. 355, *ap.* Luotto, *op. cit.*, p. 489.

<sup>7</sup>*Arch. Stor. Italiano*. Serie IVa, Tome IV, p. 430.

<sup>8</sup>*Il Rosario. Memorie Domenicane*. Anno XIII, Fasc. 4, p. 98.

## *Did Savonarola Disobey the Pope?*

had obtained the favour from the Pope that the said Jeronimo might preach.”

Before going further we ask, if Savonarola had not received the Pope's permission to preach when he publicly announced that he had received it, were there not many persons in Florence only too ready to accuse and convict him of falsehood? And is it probable that the man who wrote the letter on February 2nd to Father Antonio d'Ollandia, and the previous letter on September 15th, 1495 (in both of which he expressed his purpose not to preach unless the Pope gave him permission) would resume his sermons without this permission?

We have said that Savonarola retired from the pulpit when the Brief *Licet uberius* was received. The Signory felt the injustice done to the man who had quite literally saved Florence from sack and bloodshed at the hands of the soldiers of Charles VIII. On November 13th, 1495, the Signory wrote to Cardinal Caraffa complaining of the malevolence of Savonarola's enemies, who were trying to turn the Pope against him, and asked the Cardinal to obtain permission from Alexander VI for Savonarola to preach during Advent.<sup>10</sup> Another letter was sent by the Signory on November 17th in which the Cardinal was urged to make the request.<sup>11</sup>

These letters apparently were unsuccessful, and a third letter was sent on January 28th, and a fourth on February 5th, 1496, begging the Cardinal to obtain permission for 'the aforesaid Fra. Girolamo to preach during the coming Lent.'<sup>12</sup> Another letter was

<sup>9</sup>cf Lottini, O.P. *Fu veramente scomunicato il Savonarola?* p. 6, note.

<sup>10</sup> Cherardi, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibd.*, pp. 131-132.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibd.*, pp. 132-133.

## *Blackfriars*

addressed to the Cardinal of Lisbon on the same day, February 5th, making a similar request.

The Ten had written to Becchi on December 5th, 1495, and bade him ask Cardinal Caraffa to obtain this permission from the Pope 'either by word of mouth (*vivae vocis oraculo*) or by a Brief.'<sup>13</sup> On February 11th, 1496, the Signory held a session at which it was decided to command 'the venerable Prior, Fra Giralamo of Ferrara, of the Order of Preachers, at the present time Prior of San Marco in Florence, to preach during the coming Lent, and (if it seemed good to him) before that time, and announce the word of God in the Church of Santa Maria del Fiore in Florence, and elsewhere in the same city as he deemed fitting, under penalty of incurring the displeasure of the said Signory.'<sup>14</sup>

Now we have to deal with certain definite evidence of fact: first, there is Savonarola's unquestionable refusal to preach unless he received the Pope's permission; second, there are the urgent appeals of the Signory and the Ten to Caraffa to obtain this permission either verbally or in writing; third, there is the command given by the Signory on February 11th, and lastly, the fact that Savonarola resumed his preaching on February 17th. If only the desired permission was granted it matters little how it was obtained. It was not Savonarola who made the request but the Florentine Government. The negotiations were carried on by the Government and its representative at the Papal Court, and hence we are justified in asserting that, when Savonarola resumed his sermons, he did so because of assurances given him by the Florentine Government that the Pope had acceded to its urgent and repeated request. There is no reason for Pastor's

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 132.

<sup>14</sup> Gherardi, *op. cit.*, p. 133.

## Did Savonarola Disobey the Pope?

ungracious remarks concerning the promptitude with which Savonarola obeyed the order of the Signory and his tardy obedience to the command of Alexander VI. The outstanding fact is that Savonarola preached because he was granted permission to do so, and, as we have said, publicly announced this in his sermon. It may be, as Father Lucas suggests, 'that Caraffa succeeded in extorting from Alexander either an explicit verbal permission, or, more probably, some words which might be interpreted as implying a tacit consent. . . .'<sup>15</sup>

It is very evident from Becchi's official communications that the League's envoys were working hard to prevent any *rapprochement* between Alexander and Savonarola. Reporting a conversation he had with Cardinal Lopez, the Cardinal spoke of the Pope's displeasure that Savonarola had preached despite the Pope's will and prohibition. The enemies of the Friar had succeeded only too well in their campaign of misrepresentation and calumny. Then Becchi informed the Cardinal that 'Fra Girolamo had preached because of the representations made (to the Signory) by the Cardinal of Naples (Caraffa) and myself, and that we had made these representations *on the strength of the Pope's promise*' (*havamo facto costi, della promissione del Papa*).<sup>16</sup> In a letter from Mgr. Nicolo Pandolfini to the Ten on March 23rd, there is an account of a conversation he had with Alexander VI. The Pope complained of the action of the Republic in allowing Savonarola to preach contrary to his wishes. Pandolfini replied that 'He had heard Fra Giolamo had been forbidden to preach by His Holiness but had been permitted to resume his sermons on account of the representations made by a cer-

<sup>15</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 199.

<sup>16</sup> Gherardi, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

## *Blackfriars*

tain Cardinal, and that they did not consider Savonarola had disobeyed His Holiness, especially since the Friar in all his discourses only intended the good of others.' To this the Pope replied: 'Well, we shall not speak of Fra. Hyeronimo now; we shall speak later and more effectively.'<sup>17</sup> The Pope did not deny that he had given the permission, but allowed Pandolfini to believe he had done so, and through a 'certain Cardinal.' The Signory was right, therefore, when, discussing the reports of Gualterotti, the envoy at Milan, it insisted that, 'As regards Fra Girolamo, he has preached because of his great confidence in His Holiness, *but above all because of the letters of the Cardinal of Naples.*'<sup>18</sup>

It is well known that Alexander VI changed his mind frequently, so frequently indeed, that he did not remember, or perhaps found it convenient to forget, promises he had made and decisions arrived at. He was so intent upon the success of the League of Italian States that he could think of nothing else at the moment, and was wroth with the Florentine Republic for persisting in its refusal to join the League, and Cardinal Ascanio Sforza, his brother Ludovico and their party fanned the flame of his resentment. Becchi writes more than once that the Republic was made a laughing stock in Rome because Florence was 'governed by a Friar and some children.' But Alexander had given permission to Savonarola to preach. This is evident. And however angry he may have been at times he nevertheless expressed himself as being 'quite satisfied in regard to the affairs of Fra Jeronimo' when Becchi told him about Savonarola's good disposition, 'even though there are many who are trying to spoil everything.'<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 491.

<sup>18</sup> Gherardi, *op. cit.*, p. 136.

<sup>19</sup> Gherardi, *op. cit.*, pp. 143-144.

## *Did Savonarola Disobey the Pope?*

Savonarola, therefore, did not disobey the Pope when he resumed his sermons in Lent, 1496, neither was he regarded as disobedient by the authorities of the Order, as the following incidents clearly prove.

Father Joachim Turriano, Master-General of the Order of Preachers, with the approbation of Alexander VI, placed the Dominican Priory of Prato under the jurisdiction of Fra Girolamo Savonarola at the beginning of the year 1496.<sup>20</sup> The same Master-General, in a letter dated June 26th, 1496, delegated Savonarola to give the veil to certain nuns in the Convent of Santa Lucia in Florence, and to take charge of the said Convent and instruct the sisters.<sup>21</sup> We may say with absolute certainty that, if Savonarola had been guilty of disobedience, or if there had been any doubt concerning his obedience to the commands of the Pope imposed upon him by the Briefs of July 21st, September 8th, and October 16th, the General of the Order would not have written these letters or given him this jurisdiction.

STANISLAUS M. HOGAN, O.P.

*(To be concluded.)*

<sup>20</sup> Gherardi, *op. cit.*, pp. 69-84.

<sup>21</sup> Gherardi, *op. cit.*, p. 699.