

## DID SAVONAROLA DISOBEY?

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ON 21 September, 1452, Girolamo Savonarola was born in Ferrara, the third of seven children. His father came of Paduan stock, his mother, Elena dei Bonacossi, from a noble family of Mantua. The centenary has naturally given rise to renewed interest in the great Dominican whose character has always been so much debated, who has been so much admired and so much condemned by Catholics and Protestants alike.

The attention of readers of *BLACKFRIARS* has already been drawn to the admirable *Vita di Girolamo Savonarola*<sup>1</sup> by the Marchese Roberto Ridolfi. This work, the outcome of twenty-four years of devoted and highly competent study, is certainly the most important literary contribution to the centenary celebration. As an account of Savonarola the man, viewed in relation to the events and spirit of his time, it will not easily be improved upon. Thanks to Ridolfi we have a reliable starting-point from which to proceed to some more general considerations touching the problems presented by the life of Savonarola.

What was Savonarola's aim, how did he understand his mission in life? Were his activities always in harmony with his convictions as a preacher of Catholic truth? Did he retain a steady conviction of the rightness of the initiatives he took and of the means he chose? In face of the opposition he met with on all sides, from lay and ecclesiastical authorities alike (whether this was or was not to be expected), was his persistence unto death based on really valid motives, valid for a Catholic and a religious? Was he always consistent? And if he was, is this to be set down to mere pride and obstinacy or to a well-tested conviction of being in the right?

And apart from Savonarola's own conscience there is the problem presented by his work taken objectively. Can we, in the light of modern historical criticism, not only find something to be said for it but also declare it soundly and authentically Catholic?

<sup>1</sup> Rome, 1952.

In short, is the person and message of Savonarola to be approved or condemned by us today?

Underlying all the intense apostolic activity of his religious life a definite vocation can be discerned: already visible in his youth, nourished assiduously by study and meditation. His earliest writings are poems reflecting a clear perception of the corruption of civil and religious society in his day; and his stern judgment on the evils which affected Italy and the Church is accompanied by the resolve to spend his life and life-blood in the cause of reform. To this end he became an ascetic, while at the same time undergoing a strict intellectual discipline in the study of the purest sources of Catholic teaching. Before entering the cloister he was already a diligent and loving student of 'the Book', as he called Holy Scripture, the revealed word of God; with which he ever associated the philosophy and theology of St Thomas. Of St Thomas he was to say, 'I have always loved him and revered him, even when I was still living in the world'. (*Sermons on Exodus*, XI.)

He had no doubt of his vocation: 'Under divine inspiration I began to despise earthly things. . . . I resolved to dedicate myself entirely to the service of my Lord Jesus Christ... knowing that I had found a most precious treasure.' (*De veritate prophetica*, Lib. III.) There was too the motive he expressed in a letter written to his father from Bologna on the 25th April, 1475, the day before his clothing: 'the wretched state of the world, the wickedness of men, their impurities, adulteries, rapacity, pride . . . all the evils that afflict the misguided people of Italy'.

So he turned to the austerity of the Order of St Dominic, 'wherein', he says, 'I found my freedom, where I could do all I wished to do because I had no other wish or desire than to do what I was told or commanded'. (*Sermons on Aggaeus*, XIX.) He gave himself to be trained by study and religious discipline—his ardour on behalf of the latter leading him to reject, privately, such mitigations of the ascetic tradition as had gained a foothold even at Bologna, the centre of the reformed Lombard Congregation.

At the age of thirty (May 1482) he saw Florence for the first time, remaining there until 1487; and returning in

1490, after three years absence, to stay there until his death. The refined and corrupt city with its merchants and artists, its banking houses and its humanist culture, affected him deeply. It was at that time under the astute government of Lorenzo the Magnificent, great politician and man of letters, superb patron of the arts, corrupt and corrupting others in order to undermine civic liberty. For Savonarola the spectacle was indeed a saddening one; while the prevalent mentality of the Church at the time, and the corruption or lukewarmness rife among the Florentine clergy in particular, continually intensified his distress. Of this state of mind we have precise evidence in Savonarola's own account of a vision which he had in 1484, in the church of San Giorgio at Florence; wherein the urgent need of reform was made clear to him by 'many reasons which proved that the Church would benefit by castigation'. He understood clearly that he was destined to play a chief part in this work of renewal. And in fact during the following Lent of 1485, when preaching at San Gimignano, he began openly to declare his belief: 'the Church', he said, 'was to be castigated and renewed; and this would happen soon'.

This then was the task: to reassert the Christian spirit against the prevalence of vice and the contamination of doctrine by a pagan humanism; to reform the morals of laity and clergy alike. And if as time went on he became persuaded that the providentially chosen place for the work of reform was Florence, 'the heart of the world', this implied no narrowing of, or deflection from, his original project; for it was ever his design that from a reformed Florence the true light of Christian life and teaching should shine out over the Church and world.

And his own part in all this? He was to be a voice of the Lord, like one of the prophets sent to call Israel back to righteousness. Speaking as a minister of the Church, wholeheartedly attached to revealed truth, Savonarola was, at the same time, convinced of having a special call and commission from God, which included the gift of prophecy, of predicting the future. That so many of his prophecies came true—to the strengthening naturally of his own belief in his mission, besides that of his followers—is a fact which

cannot but convince us of the truth of his claim. The events may be past history, but their record remains. Moreover, apart from this claim to predict the future, he had the prophet's gift of rousing dormant consciences, of reviving neglected virtues.

Speech was his instrument—strong speech, hot from the heart; strong with the speaker's integrity, burning with priestly solicitude; fervour and clarity combined; the lofty severity of a judge and compassionate love of a father. His preaching was both rough and sweet, with a masculine cordiality which stung his hearers and restored them to health; simple and doctrinal, without artifice, keeping close to everyday matters while alive to the course of history, interpreting and directing and ever tending to one clearly envisaged, supreme and definite end—a renovation of doctrine, of morals, of civil and religious discipline, a renovation in which liberty would mean responsibility and obedience would be rational.

This is not the place for a full account of his work. Enough to note its main lines: the judgment on the Medici; the persistent, outspoken denunciation of vice; the foretelling of chastisements to come upon Florence, Italy and the Church; the dauntless upbraiding of the Curia; the reform of the youth of Florence; the reform of S. Marco, as an example for the clergy in general; the recovery for Christianity of a largely paganised art and culture.

Decisive events were taking place: the death of Lorenzo de' Medici (8 April, 1492); the election as Pope Alexander VI of Rodrigo Borgia (11 August, 1492); the separation of S. Marco from the Lombard Congregation; the invasion of Italy by the 'new Cyrus', Charles VIII of France, whose easy military successes verified the Friar's predictions (1494-95); the expulsion of Piero de' Medici from Florence and the reconstitution of the city's government (1494-95). In the midst of all these external happenings his moral preoccupations and exertions continued. And externally the great contrasts imposed themselves: the policy of the Pope and of the other Italian states took shape in opposition to the pro-French policy of Florence; while within the city itself the 'lukewarm' began their selfishly conservative, stealthy and

stubborn resistance.

Meanwhile the man whom his critics have taxed with the restless worldliness of a political adventurer was multiplying his mortifications, shrinking always from applause, ever detached from and superior to the conflict of parties in the city, and always, even in the moments of his greatest success, prepared for self-sacrifice and martyrdom. Realising more and more the immensity of the evil and the scandalous example given by those in authority, he raised his voice ever more vehemently against the wickedness of the clergy, against the Court of Rome. Yet his faith in the Church never wavered, nor his readiness to submit his judgment to the Holy See. Doctrinal innovation was wholly alien to him.

His difficulties increased. He was summoned to Rome. The atmosphere grew dark around him. Envy and political self-interest worked against him, confusing the issue with false accusations. Fully aware of this, his constant preoccupation was to counteract the malevolence of his enemies, who did not scruple to add bribery to lying in their campaign against him. He seized every likely opportunity to inform the Pope of his aims and actions. He shrank from disobedience.

Excommunication, however, came at last; to be followed by that 'rebellion' which has seemed to so many Savonarola's one unpardonable crime. Let the facts speak for him.

On 7 November, 1496, the Pope issued a Brief commanding, on pain of excommunication for disobedience, the amalgamation of the recently set up Congregation of S. Marco into a Reformed Tuscano-Roman Congregation, this to consist of sixteen priories of which only four would come from the S. Marco Congregation. Savonarola was not mentioned in the Brief. The Vicar-General of the new Congregation was to be Fra Jacopo of Sicily, an excellent religious. The friars of S. Marco—about 250 in all—unanimously protested against the order. Savonarola was certainly with them in this; indeed 'it must be admitted that he was the soul of the resistance. The friars had addressed themselves directly to the Pope and for the time being they were not reproved or disturbed in any way. Savonarola for his part replied indirectly with his 'Defence (*apologeticum*) of the

Friars of the Congregation of S. Marco'. He had but recently started to preach again after having for a while abstained, in obedience to two other papal Briefs, dated 21 July and 8 September, 1495, which had been revoked, by word of mouth, in February 1496. Then, after an interval for political pressure and bribery to do their work, came the excommunication, promulgated in Briefs, dated 12 and 13 May, 1497 addressed to the Signory of Florence and to various churches and religious communities in the city.

The publication of these Briefs was delayed for about six weeks because their bearer Giovanvittorio da Camerino feared to show himself in Florence. In the meantime Savonarola, knowing what was toward, wrote the Pope a very humble and very dignified letter which made an excellent impression on Alexander, who was prepared to take a juster view of Savonarola than were others at his court, and was indeed already inclined to treat him kindly. Now in this letter Savonarola not only completely vindicated his doctrinal orthodoxy (the charge of heresy being one of the two accusations brought against him in the Brief) but offered incontrovertible proof that his conscience at least was clear, and that he was prepared to submit. Furthermore he promised to send the Pope, as soon as it was printed, a summary of all his teaching, in the shape of a book he was about to publish (the *De triumpho crucis*), in defence of the Catholic faith.<sup>2</sup>

The Brief of excommunication—which in fact was rejected, as incorrectly promulgated, by many of the churches and religious houses to which it had been addressed—rested on two charges: (1) heresy, (2) disobedience to the Holy See in the matter of the amalgamation of S. Marco with the projected but in fact not yet actualised Tuscano-Roman Congregation. Leaving aside the charge of heresy as sufficiently disposed of, let us examine that of disobedience, which is the heart of the matter.

Ridolfi is perfectly right in saying that there is no disobedience where there is no explicit command. The Brief of 7

<sup>2</sup> This book was not only later declared immune from error but was used as a manual of Catholic doctrine by the Roman College of Propaganda. It was often reprinted.

November, 1496, did not so much as mention Savonarola; if he had anything to do with the matter it was only as a member of the community which unanimously opposed that Brief. We have therefore good reason to think that the charge of disobedience was a mere pretext. Strictly speaking, one might also press the objection that the Brief was invalidated by its legally incorrect mode of publication. But there is a much stronger objection—an objection of which Savonarola was aware and on which he was able, with a clear conscience, to base his defence and justify his attitude.

It is usually said that Savonarola's reason for thinking that he ought not to obey was a consideration of the evils that would come upon the people of Florence if he did; that the Pope was ill-informed; that there was *error intolerabilis*; that the good work begun would suffer; that an order does not bind if it is contrary to charity. All this is true and in line with St Thomas's teaching on obedience and its limits. But it leaves the way open to a crushing objection. How could Savonarola be sure that his presence in the pulpit at Florence was absolutely indispensable? He certainly had some reasons for thinking this—to say the least, the experience of what had happened in the city during his enforced silence. But after all, might he not have done better to put the whole thing in God's hands, rather than risk committing a grave sin of pride by sticking so confidently to his own judgment?

If, however, we study the matter not merely from Savonarola's private point of view but from that of the general mentality of his age, we shall find his attitude and behaviour perfectly comprehensible and perfectly justifiable. In his day it was a principle universally admitted that religious vows, being *de jure divino*, were not dispensable; from which it was argued that while it was always permissible and praiseworthy for a man to pass from a less austere to a more austere religious Order, no one, not even the Pope, could oblige religious, against their expressed will, to pass from an austere Order, whose Rule had been publicly approved, to a less austere Order or to a mitigated Rule. Now the friars of the Congregation of S. Marco had decided, under Savonarola's influence, to return to the strict and

entire observance of their Rule, and notably to a practice of poverty which excluded even the possession of goods in common. To this they thought themselves obliged by their religious profession. But the Brief of 7 November, 1496, would have virtually compelled them to give up this ideal, since it was obvious that they would not be able to maintain it against the greater number of relaxed religious with whom they were now to be joined and among whom they would now be scattered. So they would not accept the Brief; and Savonarola supported their resistance with a clear conscience. To him and them alike it seemed that the Pope could not really mean such a thing: in sending that Brief he was either misinformed or he was not acting as Pope. The Vicar of Christ cannot, as such, issue commands against the law of God. It is in the light of this principle that Savonarola's stand can be understood.

Without therefore disparaging any of the reasons hitherto adduced by scholars in defence of Savonarola, it seems to us that the argument given above is the decisive one, the one most consonant with the facts and ideas of the time, the one which best explains his own and his contemporaries' attitude. It is very significant that when his religious brethren later abandoned him *they did not abandon him on this point*; they disavowed him because they were deceived by the notorious 'confessions' contained in the account published, before his death, of his infamous trial; believing these lies they thought his claim to be a prophet was a lie.

The argument which Savonarola drew from the supremacy of the law of charity and his appeal to the biblical text, *oportet magis obedire Deo quam hominibus*, must be understood in the light of the situation outlined above. This done, his inflexibility becomes comprehensible. As to his judgments on the Pope as a man, they were naturally affected by what Savonarola knew about Alexander's private life and about his policy with regard to Florence and the Friar's mission thereto. And as for the appeal to the Princes for a General Council, this, on the one hand, is evidence of Savonarola's readiness to take extreme risks in a good cause (which explains why the letters containing the appeal were drafted), while on the other hand it shows him so concerned for the



unity of the Church as finally to abandon such extreme measures (which explains why the above letters were in fact not despatched).

It should now be clear that the excommunication gave rise to no conflict in Savonarola's conscience. His attitude towards it was the logical expression of his sincerest convictions. Indeed, had he not denied its validity, had he submitted to it, he would have acted against his conscience in accepting a punishment he had not deserved—a far worse evil than the sentence which condemned him to death. And we know, in the light of recent studies, that he maintained this position, and also the certainty of his prophetic mission, through all the tortures, so long as life was in his body.

His doctrine, as the Church was to declare later, is untainted by heresy; the legitimacy of his conduct has been demonstrated. He was no precursor, in his reforms, of the northern rebels, but rather of those saints of the sixteenth century who renewed the face of the Church. His voice has outlived his own day; it belongs to the Church immortal. Witness the veneration of so many saints since his time, and the steady growth of a general appreciation of his achievement. Today the influence of his teaching and example is felt in the most diverse fields. He remains for us a model of dauntless and unshakeable integrity; a sign that is contradicted, but a sign of salvation for many!

### **BLACKFRIARS IN 1953**

The January issue of **BLACKFRIARS** will include the first in a series of quarterly surveys of international affairs by John Eppstein.

A special (enlarged) number in February will be devoted to Communism, and will include contributions by the Rev. D. J. B. Hawkins, D.D., Fr Ian Hislop, O.P., H. R. Brech, R. H. Richens, and Sir David Kelly, C.C.M.G.