

DID SAVONAROLA DISOBEY THE POPE?—III

THE fourth command of Alexander VI was contained in the Brief *Reformationi et augmento*, dated November 7th, 1496, but unlike the previous commands it was not imposed upon Savonarola only, it was given to the Priors and communities of sixteen Dominican houses, one of which was San Marco in Florence. No superior or religious was mentioned by name in the Brief. By this Brief a new Congregation or group of Dominican houses was established, to be known as the Tuscan-Roman Congregation of the Order of Preachers, and a Vicar General of this Congregation was to be appointed by Cardinal Caraffa after consultation with the Master General of the Order. He was to hold office for two years, and at the end of this time an election was to be held as prescribed by the Constitution of the Order. On November 17th, 1496, Father Jacopo da Sicilia was appointed Vicar-General of the newly established Tuscan-Roman Congregation and Savonarola acknowledged him as his Superior. We draw attention to this statement, for we shall see that some writers deny it.

The Brief of November pleased no one. The Tuscan houses did not wish to be separated from the Congregation of Lombardy, and the opposition to such separation was so strong that several superiors were deposed from office and threatened with imprisonment.¹

The religious of San Marco were greatly distressed. None of them wished to be sent to houses where religious observance was so notoriously lax as to be prac-

¹ Gherardi, *op. cit.*, pp. 145-146; Bayonne, *Etude*, p. 96, and note.

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tically non-existent.² Savonarola was convinced that the move was retrograde and would lead to grave disorder. He could not assent to or approve of it, but he did his duty.

The only command given by the Brief to all the Priors and religious of these sixteen houses was the following :

We wish, moreover, and in virtue of holy obedience by this present letter we strictly command, under penalty of excommunication *latae sententiae*, each and every one no matter of what condition, state, dignity, or grade, forbidding all concerned either to presume or dare, directly or indirectly, of themselves or by others, in any manner whatsoever, under any colour or pretext, to contradict or impede this Our letter.³

The precept is definite, comprehensive, strict; it leaves no means of escape. By this Brief Alexander VI :

1st. Established a new Congregation or group of Dominican houses. The action of any other person was not asked or required to establish this Congregation. When the Brief was promulgated and published in the houses to which it was sent, the Tuscan-Roman Congregation became an actually existing organisation. The houses in Tuscany, which had hitherto been incorporated with the Lombard Congregation, ceased to belong to that Congregation there and then and were incorporated into the new Congregation. The Congregation of San Marco, of which Savonarola was Vicar-General, *i.e.* the Priory of San Marco in Florence, those of San Domenico, Fiesole; of Prato, Bibbiena, Pian di Mugone and Lecceto, ceased to belong to this Congregation, which was dissolved by the Brief, and became part of the Tuscan-Roman

² Cf. Bayonne, *Etude*, pp. 92-93, note; O'Neil, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

³ Villari, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, Append., Doc. xxxiii, pp. cxliv-vii.

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Congregation. Savonarola ceased to be Vicar-General of the *Congregation* of San Marco, but continued in office as Prior of the *house* of San Marco in Florence.

2nd. The Pope forbade each and all under pain of excommunication *latae sententiae* to be incurred *ipso facto*, 'to contradict or oppose this Our *letter*.' He did not demand or command any religious, whether Prior or subject, to consent or assent to the Brief; to consent or assent to the union of the houses named, or the formation of the new Tuscan-Roman Congregation; or to take any steps or make any effort or move to effect this union. Such effort, move, consent or assent was not required to establish the Tuscan-Roman Congregation. The Pope's power and authority was sufficient. What he did command was that no one would dare or presume in any manner whatsoever 'to contradict or oppose Our *letter*.'

Acting on the principles that legal enactments must be strictly and literally interpreted, and that *res odiosa sunt restringenda*, penal enactments must be cut down to the minimum, the exact letter of the law is to be observed and no one has right or authority to read into such enactments more than the bare words contain, we ask: Did Savonarola obey this Brief *Reformationi et Augmento* of November 7th, 1496? The question is extremely important, because upon Savonarola's attitude to this Brief depends the validity of the Excommunication.

* * * * *

We are dealing with the fifteenth century, when the tone of society in general was very different from what it is to-day. The evil example set by those in authority had its inevitable effect upon the people, and rough treatment of the envoys or ambassadors of kings was not unknown. Papal envoys were not immune at times and Papal briefs did not always receive the re-

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spect due to them. They were sometimes not even accepted, much less published or read by those to whom they were addressed, and scant courtesy was not infrequently shown to the envoy who brought them.*

Now there were several ways of daring or presuming to contradict or oppose a Papal Brief. It could be destroyed; or not accepted; or not published so that it remained ineffective. This was not the manner in which the Brief of November 7th was treated by the Prior of San Marco. Savonarola received the Brief, read it to the assembled community, and by doing so gave effect to the command of Alexander VI. The moment the Brief was read, San Marco was incorporated into the new Tuscan-Roman Congregation. The Congregation of San Marco there and then ceased to exist and Savonarola was no longer Vicar-General of this Congregation, although he continued to be the Prior of the house and community of San Marco. By reading and publishing the Brief, Savonarola did all he had been ordered to do. The Community of San Marco objected to the change and its incorporation into the Tuscan-Roman Congregation, but it did not 'presume or dare to contradict or oppose the Brief.' To say that the letter addressed to the Pope by the Community of San Marco protesting against the union was opposition to or contradiction of the Papal Brief is to say what is incorrect. Neither Savonarola and his community, nor the Priors and communities of the other houses, were commanded not to oppose the *union* of the houses in the new Congregation, they were commanded not to oppose or contradict the *Brief*.

* Cf. Nardi, *Istorie Fiorentine*, p. 102, who tells us that Camerino, the bearer of the Brief of Excommunication against Savonarola and *molto inimico del frate*, was afraid to come to Florence with it, lest he should be torn in pieces.

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Father Lucas, S.J., in an article in *The Tablet* of June 2nd, 1900, disagrees with this argument. 'To read a Brief and obey its precepts,' he writes, 'are not quite the same thing.' We thoroughly agree if the Brief contains any precept over and above that of not contradicting or opposing it. But if no such precept is contained in the Brief, and the only command imposed is not to contradict or oppose the Brief itself; if there is no precept to do anything, or take any steps to render the Brief effective, then 'to read a Brief' is certainly to obey the Brief when the mere reading of it renders it effective. What precept was contained in the Brief of November 7th, 1496, which Savonarola did not obey? We have failed to discover any. We insist that Savonarola, in order to give full force to and render the Brief effective, was not commanded to do anything further than to read or publish it to his community; and this he did.

Father Lucas writes :

There are several indications, none of them absolutely convincing, but at least sufficient to establish with high probability, that it was not the spirit ('of submission and obedience' as Father O'Neil says) in which Savonarola received the Brief. The chief of these indications are three in number. (1) In a letter to the Ten, of March 19th, 1497, Becchi writes: 'If his Paternity will not consent to the union with the other convents of Tuscany, on which, after mature deliberation . . . Caraffa (the Cardinal Protector) has determined, they will proceed against him with censures and will excommunicate him. These words seem to imply some kind of opposition to the project . . . (2) The Brethren of San Marco, in their joint letter to the Pope on receipt of the Brief not only appealed to him to withdraw his ordinance, which they were perfectly justified in doing, but furthermore declared that they were ready to suffer the extreme penalty rather than consent to the union. If this be not "contradiction," then we do not know what contradiction is. Still *we cannot be quite sure* that Savonarola had any hand in drawing up this document, for it seems to have been the outcome of

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the deliberations of the Community after they had heard of the Brief. And as Savonarola declares that he could not act without their consent and *implies* that he left the decision in their hands, *it is at least possible, though hardly probable*, that he simply allowed the letter to be written and sent without expressing approval of it. But (3) there is one piece of evidence afforded by Savonarola himself. For in his letter "a tutti li Christiani" written subsequently to the publication of the Brief "Cum Saepe" (*i.e.*, the Brief of Excommunication, May 13th, 1497), he says: 'My adversaries foresaw that I would never consent to a union which they knew well to be mischievous.' The inference is that he never did consent to the union. *And he could hardly withhold his consent without putting some obstacles in the way.'*⁵

We have given the passages in their entirety that we may show the full force of the writer's arguments, and we reply: 1st, Father Lucas should have told us that Becchi's letter is clear evidence of the intrigues of Savonarola's enemies at Rome. The envoys of the League were bringing all the pressure possible on Alexander at the time Becchi wrote urging him not to have any further dealings with the Florentine Republic until it joined the League, and that they gave the Pope to understand that this obstinacy was due to Savonarola.⁶ When Caraffa spoke as he did about Savonarola's refusal to consent to the union, he demanded more than the Brief had demanded. Savonarola's consent or non-consent did not affect the union. The union was effected by the Brief and by it alone; 2nd, The letter written by the Community of San Marco was not a 'contradiction' of the Brief. The Brief came into force as soon as it was read, and the with-holding of the community's consent to the union did not prevent the union any more than their full consent would have brought it about. No one was asked to *consent* to the union. All were obliged under

⁵ *Tablet, ut supra* (our italics).

⁶ Gherardi, *op. cit.*, pp. 154-156.

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penalty of Excommunication not to 'contradict or oppose the Brief.' But on the supposition that this letter was a 'contradiction' of the Brief, why does Father Lucas blame Savonarola because the letter was written and sent? He grants that 'we cannot be quite sure that Savonarola had any hand in drawing it up,' and that 'it is at least possible, though not probable, that he simply allowed the letter to be written and sent without expressing approval of it.' Not only is it possible and probable, we are *quite sure* Savonarola had no 'hand in drawing up the document,' and our certainty rests on the best evidence, *Savonarola's own words*.

In his *Letter against the surreptitious Excommunication* written after the Brief of May 13th, 1497, Savonarola says:—

' Since our adversaries have maintained that I would not obey and consent to unite the Friars of San Marco with the rest of Tuscany, I have replied many times that those persons who carried such tales to the Pope did so not from a motive of religious zeal, but solely to persecute me, and in this manner find occasion to proceed against me, believing that I would not consent to such an ill-advised change, since conscience dictated that, being an evil thing, it should not be done. I have said that, since I am a stranger here, if the Fathers wish to consent I could not oppose them; if they do not wish (to consent), I cannot force them: and thus *I have left the matter to themselves*.

' They have written that they are unwilling to consent to the measure, but would rather suffer excommunication, imprisonment, and martyrdom. If this be so, *why am I accused of disobedience? Is it not because these adversaries are seeking for one man, and only one, out of hatred for the truth? You see clearly, my friends, so great is the effrontery of our enemies that they are not ashamed to tell barefaced lies to the Pope.*'⁷

⁷ Cf. Lottini, *Fu Veramente Excommunicato il Savonarola?* p. 12 (our italics), cf. *Irish Rosary*, Vol. II, p. 416.

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Surely Savonarola's own words are sufficient proof that he had 'no hand in drawing up the document.'

But the learned writer is still dissatisfied. 'It was possible to put difficulties in the way of its (the Brief of November 7th) execution by declining to obey the commands of those superiors of the Order to whom its execution had been, or should be entrusted, or by a declaration not to obey. Whether or not Savonarola opposed the Brief in this way it is impossible to determine with certainty.'⁸

It seems to us that the writer, in his determination to convict Savonarola of disobedience, has allowed his zeal to carry him away. Not only is it impossible to determine with certainty that Savonarola opposed the Brief in this way, it can be shown that he did not oppose the Brief in the manner suggested by Father Lucas. The learned writer seeks to support his insinuation by a reference to *three* letters from Turriano, General of the Order, as evidence that he 'was active in carrying out the provisions of the Brief,' and adds, 'not one of them was addressed to Fra Girolamo.' There are *four* letters, and they are published by Gherardi in the same edition to which Father Lucas refers.⁹

The first letter, dated November 17th, 1496, appoints Jacopo da Sicilia Vicar-General of the new Tuscan-Roman Congregation. The second letter, dated November 24th, 1496, is significant, for it forbids all the religious of the Tuscan Convents to murmur against their separation from the Lombard Congregation, and *deposes from office the Priors and Superiors of the Convents of the Quercia, Siena, Pisa, and San Gemignano on account of their opposition to*

⁸ *Tablet, ut supra.*

⁹ *Nuovi Documenti*, p. 144, *sqq.*, Edizione seconda, 1887.

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the Brief of November 7th, 1496. As Father Lucas tells us, 'not one of them (the letters) was addressed to Fra Girolamo.' Have we not evidence from this fact that the General did not consider Savonarola had opposed the Brief? If he had done so, would not Turriano have deposed him from his Priorship as he had deposed the Tuscan Priors?

The third letter, dated December 12th, 1496, confirms the appointment of Jacopo da Sicilia as Vicar General of the new Congregation.

The fourth letter—which Father Lucas has forgotten to mention—is the important one. It is dated January 14th, 1497 and is a command to the new Vicar, Jacopo da Sicilia, *at Savonarola's request*, to send some of the brethren of San Marco to the Convents of the Quercia and San Gemignano and to remove those who were in residence there at the time who were not acceptable to Fra Girolamo. Do these letters support the writer's insinuation that Savonarola had declined to obey the commands of the superiors of the Order? or had made a 'declaration not to obey'? We leave the answer to our readers.

We said at the beginning of this article that Savonarola acknowledged Jacopo da Sicilia as his superior.' Father O'Neil stated that, 'On the appointment of the new Vicar for the new province Savonarola at once relinquished his office as head of St. Mark's Congregation and accepted the jurisdiction placed over him.'¹⁰

To this statement Father Lucas replies: 'Unfortunately he gives no authority for this statement; and if we are not very much mistaken, no authority can be given.'¹¹

¹⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 141.

¹¹ *Tablet*, *ut sup.*

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Father Lucas is very much mistaken. The fourth letter, which he has overlooked, is authority for the statement. If Savonarola had not acknowledged Jacopo da Sicilia as his superior, the General would not have written to Jacopo *at Savonarola's request* to make the desired changes.

We think we may assert with confidence that Savonarola did not disobey the Pope; that not a single precept imposed upon him by the Pope was violated by him, but that he quite literally obeyed each of them. Some critics persist in asserting that if Savonarola had not disobeyed, he would not have been declared excommunicate by the Brief *Cum Saepe* of May 13th, 1496, but that this Brief very definitely declares him to be excommunicate *because* he had disobeyed the repeated commands of the Pope. The Brief *Cum Saepe* does so indeed, but it does not follow that the Brief was right in its declaration. This Brief, which was not published in Florence until June 18th, contains *substantial errors*. It states that Savonarola had 'preached pernicious doctrine,' though the Pope had said he was quite satisfied concerning Savonarola; that he 'had *refused* to come to Rome to clear himself,' though Savonarola had never been summoned to Rome for this purpose and very distinctly had not refused to go; that he had 'refused to abstain from preaching when he had been forbidden to preach,' although we have seen that Savonarola had received permission to preach. Then the Brief continues, 'We commanded him, in virtue of holy obedience, and under pain of excommunication to be incurred *ipso facto*, to unite his convent with a certain new Congregation styled "of the Tuscan and Roman province," recently erected by *Us*. This ordinance he failed to carry out, nor would he in any wise obey our

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letters, disregarding the ecclesiastical censures which he thereby incurred, and under which he now lies.¹²

With all respect we insist that Savonarola had not been commanded by the Brief of November 7th, 1496, 'to unite his convent,' or 'obey in the matter of the union,' or 'obey in uniting' his Convent with the Tuscan Roman Congregation. No such command is contained in or imposed by the Brief, and to say that Savonarola 'failed to carry out this ordinance' is to say he failed to carry out an ordinance he had not received, while to punish him for not having obeyed was to punish him for a fault he had not committed. It was no wonder that Alexander VI declared later that the Brief of Excommunication 'was displeasing to him, and altogether contrary to his intention,'¹³ and that Cardinal Caraffa called it 'a bungle' (*cosa mal fatta*) and said the Pope 'was sorry he had sent it' (*che se ne penitiva d'avergli mandati*), particularly when Giovanni La Camerino, a bitter enemy of Savonarola, was the bearer, and that the said Camerino

¹² Lucas, *op. cit.*, p. 236 (italics ours). We give the translation of Father Lucas and make the following remarks: first, the phrase in the original Latin, '*ut obediret . . . in uniendo*' is rendered by Father Lucas as *to unite his Convent*, and he finds fault with Father O'Neil for translating it by the words 'to unite.' In his opinion the translation 'to obey in the matter of the union' would be nearer the mark. We have Father O'Neil's volume before us, and the translation he gives is 'to obey in uniting,' which, we suggest, is the correct equivalent. Second, the Pope says the new Congregation was '*erected by Us*,' which is precisely our contention. The consent or assent of any others was not required to erect the Congregation.'

¹³ *Omnino praeter mentem suam*. Bracci to the Ten, June 27th, 1497. Gerardi, *op. cit.*, p. 172.

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‘ would be wise if he did not go to Florence ’ (*Et se sara savio non vi arrivera.*)¹⁴

It was no wonder that the Pope was haunted by doubts as to whether Savonarola had really been guilty of the charges made against him, and consequently lay under the censures he had inflicted.¹⁵

‘ How can a man be excommunicate, ’ asks Luotto, ‘ when the judge does not know whether he is guilty or innocent? ’¹⁶

And how can any writer assert with such persistent, unconditional certitude as some do, that Savonarola did disobey the Pope when the Pope himself was not certain? It is gratifying to find such an eminent authority as the late Cardinal Capecelatro writing ‘ On account of the documents which have been discovered, we are forced to conclude that Savonarola was never disobedient. ’¹⁷

In a letter to the Editor of the *Quarto Centenario*, on December 29th, 1897, the same illustrious historian wrote : ‘ Living only a century after Savonarola, St. Philip must assuredly have known that this wonderful man *had never disobeyed the Sovereign Pontiff*. If

¹⁴ Gherardi, *op. cit.*, p. 166. It is rather remarkable that the Brief of Excommunication was published only in certain Churches of Florence, ‘ because, ’ says Nardi, ‘ others did not wish to receive it as it was not brought by the Apostolic Secretary as it should have been, but its publication was seen to and undertaken by adversaries for the gratification of their own personal spite ’ (*tal pubblicazione era stata procacciata e fatta fare da cittadini inimica per la loro passione.*’ *Istorie Fiorentine* Lib. II, pp. 102-103, Firenze 1888.

¹⁵ ‘ The Pontiff said if Fra Girolamo would submit to remain quiet and not preach, it would not be long before he would completely absolve him from every censure which he *might* have incurred. ’ Bonsi to the Ten, February 27th, 1498.

¹⁶ *Il vero Savonarola*, p. 533.

¹⁷ ‘ Per questi e altri documenti fattini conoscere e forza conchiudere che la disubbedienza no ci fu. ’ *Vita di San Filippo Neri*. IIIa, Edizione, Vol. I, p. 308.

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he had not been convinced of this, how could he, Saint as he was and most devoted to the Holy See, have venerated Savonarola, treasured his image, and crowned it with the aureola of the saints?'

There is one document which in the opinion of Father Lucas 'ought to be regarded as a contradiction and hindrance to the Brief 'Reformationi,' the *Apologeticum Fratrum S. Marci*.¹⁸

We beg to disagree with him. This document was not published by Savonarola until the Brief *Reformationi et Augmento* had been published in Florence eight months previously. The Tuscan-Roman Congregation had been in existence during this time and Savonarola had uttered no word of protest. Then came the brief *Cum Saepe* with its declaration that Savonarola was excommunicate because he had disobeyed, and was 'a teacher of false and pestiferous doctrine.' The greatest culprit has the right to speak and be heard in his own defence, and so had Savonarola. The *Apologeticum* and the 'Letter to all Christians' was Savonarola's defence. 'Why am I accused of disobedience,' he asks, 'I who have never disobeyed the Roman Church, the Pope or my superiors? I do not speak in self-praise but for the sake of the truth, *and it is on this account I have resolved to write this.*'

In those words Savonarola tells us why he published these documents. They were a defence of his conduct, not a contradiction of the Brief, nor were they regarded to be a contradiction or hindrance of this Brief by the man who published it, Alexander VI.

THE END.

STANISLAUS M. HOGAN, O.P.

¹⁸ *Tablet, ut Supra.*