

## REVIEWS

THE MEDDLESOME FRIAR. By Michael de la Bedoyere. (Collins; 18s.)

Despite its title, this book is as much about Pope Alexander VI as about Savonarola. It is 'the story of their conflict', the subtitle says, but only the second half describes the actual clash, which itself lasted less than three years, from July 1495 to the death of the friar in May 1498. The first half—'Two Lives'—prepares the reader for that clash and the author's interpretation of it—unfavourable to Savonarola—by sketching the previous careers of the two adversaries, but giving considerably more space to Alexander than to Savonarola; which is reasonable, since in 1495 the friar was only forty-three while the Pope was already sixty-four. Besides, once the conflict is introduced the narrative has to be focussed chiefly upon Florence and Savonarola's sermons. Also, the life and career of Rodrigo (Alexander) Borgia are little known to most readers, and since what is known is mostly bad, and bad in a 'shocking' sort of way, imagination has dressed him up as a symbol of ecclesiastical villainy, as the Bad Pope *par excellence*, at once a fine target for the anti-Papist, at least of the old-fashioned kind, and a foil against which modern Catholics can set in clearer relief the virtues of more recent popes; and this melodramatic picture is just what Count de la Bedoyere is obliged to remove in order to make room for his own thesis. This thesis, roughly, is that Alexander was a much better man than he is popularly supposed to have been and that his good qualities were conspicuous in the affair with Savonarola—that this affair, in fact, brought out the best in Alexander, just as it brought out the worst in Savonarola. Thus the latter's rebellion is represented not only as wrong in principle (being against the papal authority) but also, by implication at least, as involving the friar and his admirers, down to our own day, in a harshly puritanical mis-judgment of what may be called the Renaissance Papacy in general and the Borgia Pope in particular.

The touch of paradox in the thesis, the clash of such strikingly different personalities, the colourful Italian background, above all the great issues at stake—it all makes an enchanting subject, particularly for a writer deeply committed (as this one is) to beliefs about the nature of Christianity and the Church as its vehicle.

Throughout the episode imagination easily pictures the friar and the pope moving and fighting like *dramatis personae*—as if the world really were a stage. But it is when history begins to look like a play or a novel that one is tempted, of course, to over-simplify, to make the

pattern stand out still clearer—to fit the facts to the formula. And such a formula Count de la Bedoyere finds bedevilling the history of the Savonarola affair; and he rightly attacks it. Perhaps, though, his motive is not so much historical—to see the past as it really was—as theological—to understand the working of the Church's authority by the study of a test case, a concrete situation where that authority may seem to have been pitched against good morals. Also, he is humanly attracted by the vein of warm humanity in Alexander's worldliness. For Savonarola he obviously cares less, though he is sorry for him.

The Introduction tells us that two books have especially helped the author: Herbert Lucas, s.j.'s *Savonarola* and Orestes Ferrara's *The Borgia Pope* ('for Alexander and his family'). But these books are very unequal as historical authorities. Fr Lucas's work deserves the praise it gets: I would agree with Count de la Bedoyere that it is still on the whole the best account of the friar; it is a masterly statement of the case against him, and I said as much in *BLACKFRIARS* six years ago, as I may be allowed to point out here since we are now told *tout court* that this monument of Jesuit judgment and scholarship 'has been forgotten'. But Ferrara's book on Alexander is quite a different matter and since the merciless drubbing it has received from Professor G. B. Picotti—in two reviews, much the longer and more important being published in vol. VIII (1954) of the *Rivista di Storia della Chiesa in Italia*, pp. 313-355—it may be as well to warn English readers that Count de la Bedoyere's praise of Ferrara as the 'most critical biographer' of Alexander VI is wholly unmerited. A worthier champion of that Pope is another Italian professor, G. Soranzo, whose *Studi intorno a papa Alessandro VI* came out in 1950 but is not mentioned by Count de la Bedoyere. Picotti and Soranzo—who are both Catholics—have since clashed in controversy over Alexander VI, particularly as to whether his election as Pope in 1492 was simoniacal and whether Giulia Farnese was his mistress; and it seems to me—speaking as a non-expert—that Picotti had the best of the argument. At any rate, this scholar's detailed exposition of the evidence that Alexander did persist in concubinage all through his years as Pope—to his seventieth year and beyond—must make anyone who has reflected on it find Count de la Bedoyere's presentation of Alexander as a relatively well-behaved old gentleman somewhat unconvincing, to say the least.

But this is not to deny that Alexander comes well out of the affair with Savonarola, and that under excessive provocation he treated the rebel 'indulgently until the end and as fairly and correctly as any Pope could have done, once the affair had started'. And I agree with the author that Savonarola seems, whatever his subjective intentions, to have been in fact a rebel against the papal authority and, implicitly at

least, a schismatic. I am clearer about this than I used to be and the later chapters of this book—which are much the best, I think—have greatly helped me here. In particular I think that the chief stress is rightly laid on Savonarola's disobedience in the matter of the establishment of the new Tuscan-Roman Congregation by the Brief of November 7th, 1496. This was indeed 'the real test-case', as the author says. One might wish for a little more sympathy for the Friar's reforming zeal, more admiration for his terrific (and pathetic) courage, but on the moral issue as a whole the author seems to me right and I find it hard to see how a Catholic could conclude differently. Of course this conclusion is not new; Count de la Bedoyere's judgment echoes Ludwig Pastor's—on the Savonarola affair. On Alexander's sins of simony and sensuality Pastor was far more severe; nor will Count de la Bedoyere's defence of the Pope on these issues much affect the usual verdict of historians. But he deserves praise at least for the second half of his book.

KENELM FOSTER, O.P.

STONES OR BREAD? A Study of Christ's Temptations. By Gerald Vann, O.P., and P. K. Meagher, O.P. (Collins; 12s. 6d.)

Father Kevin Meagher belongs to the Californian Province, and as a young Dominican he did a part of his theological studies at Blackfriars, Oxford, during the years 1930-1933. It was during those years that he became a close friend of Father Gerald Vann, who was also at Blackfriars during a part of that time. And now, during a prolonged recent visit of Father Vann to America, the two friends have written this exciting book together.

The story of Christ's temptation by the devil as told in the Gospel gets too easily passed over as we go on to the more well-known facts of the life of Christ, and that serious period of forty days gets forgotten, except on the first Sunday of Lent, when we read of it in the Gospel at Mass. Moreover we tend nowadays to discount the devil as a personal tempter, and although officially we of course believe in the devil (and all his works and all his pomps), for practical purposes we either dismiss him together with the medieval demons (whose tails and horns we cannot take seriously), or else identify him vaguely with a kind of evil inclination in humanity or some supreme evil spirit in everlasting conflict with the supreme spirit of God. Another approach of today is to suppose that Satan is in fact no more than a symbol of human psychological disorders: after all, 'we know so much more nowadays about our own urges and impulses and motivations' (p. 8), and according to this view Christ's temptations are no more than symbols of native human behaviour. Whichever way one takes it, then, Satan has become discredited, and the authors quote a remark that 'Satan's