

Lettres de Savonarole aux Princes Chrétiens pour la réunion d'un concile (Étude doctrinale) (*Letters of Savonarola to Christian Princes for the Convocation of a Council (Doctrinal Study)*)

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SAVONAROLA'S LETTERS TO CHRISTIAN PRINCES FOR THE CONVOCATION OF A COUNCIL

DOCTRINAL STUDY

The pages devoted by Mr. Louis Pastor ¹ to the Florentine Reformer and the just or severe responses that he has drawn have raised anew, not only in the hearts of the *Piagnoni* who faithfully maintain the fervent cult of his memory, but before the opinion of the Catholic world, the Savonarola question. For four centuries, the case has been debated and the cause is still pending. Our intention is not, at least here, to throw ourselves into the fray and to penetrate to the heart of the debates; we wish only to draw attention to one of the pieces of evidence in the case, and not the least, which, we believe, has not been interpreted until now as it should be, neither by the most resolute adversaries of the Frate, nor even by his most convinced apologists. We wish to speak of the Letters to Christian princes for the convocation of a council.

These letters, in the project, were to be five in number, addressed to the Emperor, to the King of France, to the King and Queen of Spain, to the King of England, and to the King of Hungary. Only the first three have been preserved for us. We shall give here in its entirety the letter to the Emperor: from the other two we shall present only the passages relating to the council. From the comparison of the different texts will emerge more evidently both the literal interpretation and the theological doctrine which they express or to which they refer.

¹ {org. 1} History of the Popes since the end of the Middle Ages, vol. V and VI.

LETTER TO THE EMPEROR ²

“Most Serene Emperor, God, father of immense benefits, source and principle of all goodness, wishing to manifest His providence and His particular and perpetual mercy toward mankind, has promised through His prophet Amos that He would not carry out His designs without having revealed His secret to His servants the prophets. Having resolved to exercise on earth in our days His justice and His mercy, that is to say, to chastise with rods the abomination that reigns in the Temple and to restore to His Church her ancient dignity by rooting out from her bosom perverse ministers, He deigned to reveal His designs to me, His useless servant. For eight years I have not ceased—as the rumor has already spread far and wide—to call sinners to penitence and to announce that the wrath of God is becoming threatening. This is why, through numerous predictions and very solid arguments, I have striven to exalt the faith of Our Lord Jesus Christ, and to recall men to true religion and to piety by pursuing vice without truce or mercy. But the wicked hate the truth. It has wounded several of them and has roused them against me. Glorifying in their vices, they persecute the just so as not to be confounded by the reprobation of their crimes. God laughs at them and will Himself confound them. The time of His vengeance is near and He orders me to reveal to all of you, kings and princes of the Christian republic, certain secret things so that you may know in what extreme peril, through your fault, through your weakness no less than through your discord, *the barque of Peter finds itself*. It is for this that the rod of His anger has fallen also upon kings—to whom it principally belonged to remedy these evils—by taking from them the dearest pledges. There is no crime greater under heaven than that of lèse-majesté divine and profanation of the worship of God. To appear not to see it and to leave it unpunished when one can and must repress it, is this not giving free course to all vices, is this not even stirring up the hearth of iniquity, as is seen today in the Church of God? From the sole of the foot to the top of the head, one would seek in vain for an organ that is sound. All abominations, all villainies spread without shame throughout the earth, and you keep silent, and you venerate the pestilence seated on the chair of Peter.

“This is *why the Lord, angered by this intolerable corruption, has for some time now allowed the Church to be without a Shepherd*. For I testify to you in the name of God, in Verbo Domini, that *this Alexander VI is not pope and in no way can be pope*. Because, beyond the execrable crime of simony, through which he stole the tiara through a sacrilegious bargain, and through which each day he auctions off and confers ecclesiastical benefices to the highest bidders, beyond his other vices known to all, which I shall pass over in silence, *here is what I declare first and foremost, hoc primum assero*, what I affirm with complete certainty, *this man is not Christian, he no longer even believes that there is a God, he has exceeded the ultimate bounds of infidelity and impiety*. There

² {org. 1} The translation is made from the Latin text published by M. PERRENS (*Life of Savonarola*). Appendix. — With corrections and restitutions made by Prof. Alex. GUÉRARDI, *Nuovi Documenti*, p. 281-288.

are other secret crimes, abhorrent to the entire world, which I shall reveal to you at a suitable time and place; thus God has ordained it.

“Therefore, on behalf of Almighty God, from whom you have received the imperial dignity, most serene Caesar, I warn and adjure you, among all other defenders of the Christian Republic, to set aside all earthly ambition and rivalry, to devote all your care to the convening, in a suitable and free place, of a solemn council, which might without delay come to the rescue of souls in peril and of the bark of Peter in perdition. Otherwise, you will not avoid a most grave fault and you will not escape the wrath of God.”

“I write likewise, and by God’s command, to the Most Christian King of France, to the sacred Kings of Spain, England, and Hungary, so that all together they may work with understanding and concord for the common salvation.

“Whatever obligations I assume through this promise, I irrevocably commit myself to bringing before the most holy council the most convincing proofs, and I promise that God will confirm them with the most evident miracles. And, having received from Him inviolable assurance, we promise this test with full confidence, seeking God’s glory and not our own. However rare God’s miracles may be, He has never refused them when they were opportune or necessary. He is ready to help again those who invoke Him in all truth.

“Most Serene Emperor, do not, to your own detriment, disregard the mandate that God has given you, but, girding yourself with the sword of Christ, execute manfully what your dignity commands you, no less than your piety toward God: after having vanquished within the enemies of Christ, the most pernicious of all, you will effortlessly win over your external enemies, the victory that God will grant to your powerful hand as a reward. I will add in conclusion that nothing is more worthy of Your Majesty and Your Greatness, nothing is more glorious, nothing is more sacred — had you even subjected the entire earth to the empire of Christ — than to avenge the honor of the Lord your God, which is the greatest thing in the world, from this monstrous injury, and to cleanse His sanctuary of the most abominable defilement. May Our Lord Jesus Christ grant you spiritual grace and eternal happiness! Vale.”

EXTRACT FROM THE LETTER TO THE KING OF FRANCE

“Rex in æternum vive... Listen then: the Lord orders me to reveal to you today a very grave matter, a matter of the utmost importance. The Church of God is now without head and without pontiff. For this Alexander VI is no longer pontiff, nor can he be, *not so much because of his simoniacal and sacrilegious election and the public disorders of his life, but because he is not Christian, he has no faith whatsoever, and he abhors it as the most wretched of men*. I shall publish, at an appropriate time and place, facts that will be the terror and horror of all. This is why, on behalf of Almighty God, I warn you and entreat you to employ your care as soon as possible *to convene a solemn council so that the Church, to the great detriment of souls, may not perish for lack of a shepherd*. Otherwise you and others charged with this care will incur a very heavy responsibility. And, lest you think these are arbitrary judgments, I undertake to prove the facts I advance in the presence of the

most holy council, by the most convincing reasons, and I promise that God will confirm them by supernatural signs. For He Himself has promised me this with certainty. This is what I signify to the King of the Romans and to the sacred kings of Spain, England, and Hungary, as I do first to Your Majesty, so that, out of respect for you and by reason of their royal dignity, renouncing all other rivalry for earthly empire, they may be unanimously aroused to the restoration of the Church in peril. This role falls to you first of all: God's election as well as the example of your ancestors make it your duty."

EXCERPT FROM THE LETTER TO THE KING AND QUEEN OF SPAIN

"Serenissimi conjuges... The Lord, in His wrath, has allowed the Church to drift, deprived of a pontiff and a pilot. This is what must finally be revealed. For know that this Alexander VI is by no means a pontiff, nor can he be, not only because of the simoniacal and sacrilegious usurpation of the pontificate and his public vices, but because of crimes that we shall uncover in due time and place and which will be an object of horror and execration for the entire universe. Of all these crimes, I first unveil one, by the order of God, and I affirm, with all certainty, that he is not Christian, that he no longer has even the shadow of faith, even in its unformed state.

"This is why I transmit to you the order of Almighty God and I attest that your souls will suffer the gravest harm if, setting aside all other concerns and all dissension, you do not hasten *the convocation of a solemn council in a suitable and free place so that the Christian republic might not suffer any longer such a mortal detriment*: I commit not only to prove the facts stated before the most holy council by the most certain arguments, but I also promise that God will establish them by supernatural signs and by miracles... etc."

Some have seen in these letters the desperate act of a mind at the end of its tether³, or at the very least the consequence of false theories concerning the supremacy of the Pope over the council⁴.

It does not seem that those who have spoken of him with the most sympathy and admiration for his work have discovered a different doctrine therein. Among the latter, some, with a less certain doctrinal sense, found nothing unusual in such an undertaking and have sought to clear him of any reproach of insubordination and violence through the doctrines of the Council of Constance and certain decisions of the Sorbonne⁵.

Others, with a firmer theological judgment, while finding excuses for his approach, have not dared to undertake his justification⁶. Some, finally, noting how such a theory was in

³ {org. 1} PERRENS, Life of Savonarola. — History of Florence.

⁴ {org. 2} PASTOR, History of the Popes.

⁵ {org. 3} VILLARI, Girolamo Savonarola, vol. II, p. 399 et seq.

⁶ {org. 4} MARCHESE, Arch. stor. ital., app. VIII, p. 85.

absolute opposition to the teachings of the School where Savonarola was formed, as well as with his earlier doctrine, not wishing, on the other hand, to admit a weakness in his thought or conduct, deny or at least attempt to cast doubt upon the authenticity of these letters⁷.

THE AUTHENTICITY OF THESE LETTERS

According to historians, it was Ludovico il Moro who intercepted the letter to the King of France and sent it to the Sovereign Pontiff. It is certainly true that the intervention of the Duke of Milan in this affair does not make it less suspicious.

Nevertheless, these letters, through Burlamacchi, Fra Benedetto, Nardi, and Razzi, have entered into the possession of history. Modern scholars, for the most part, do not doubt their authenticity, and the silence of some is far more easily explicable than the fact that the cited authors would have accepted them.

If some ⁸, acknowledging that they were seized as drafts from the Friar's desk, go so far as to claim that, not having been dispatched, they do not truly belong to history, we cannot be expected to accept such a categorical conclusion. They would still demonstrate a premeditated design on Savonarole's part, although in this case they would not be sufficient to charge him with an attempted crime. And even in draft form, even unsent, even without date or signature, they are nonetheless a fact; they express a thought upon which we remain judges insofar as we can understand it.

As for the opinion that these letters must have been altered, one must indeed acknowledge that the proceedings of the trial would make this believable; but no one has determined in detail what these falsifications or alleged interpolations are. It would indeed be difficult to identify even a single one. Our view is that this document bears the unmistakable mark of the Frate. We dare believe that if one could establish that, in these letters, Brother Jerome remained always true to himself, that one could not discover a thought that was not in perfect conformity with the doctrine he professed throughout his life, not only would no one have difficulty admitting their authenticity, but no one would even feel the need to resort to this expedient of supposed alterations that cannot be defined.

Our sole purpose in this study is to provide this demonstration.

THE CONTENT OF THE LETTERS TO THE PRINCES

What has not been said about these letters and about their content?

⁷ {org. 5} LUOTTO, Il vero Savonarola, p. 594.

⁸ {org. 6} P. BAYONNE, Study on Savonarola. — GHERARDI, in the Quarto centenario, p. 221, supports Luotto's thesis with serious observations, without however resolving to conclude against authenticity.

1° Some have seen in this act of Savonarola an appeal to the council, to plead his own case before it⁹, the ordinary recourse of the faithful who are discontented with the Holy See¹⁰.

Yet there is no trace of an appeal to the council in these letters.

2° Most believed they discovered in it the act of a man imbued with false theories of the council's supremacy over the Pope¹¹.

However, one would search in vain for this doctrine: these letters are the work of a theologian who firmly champions pontifical supremacy.

3° It is commonly repeated that this attempt, as it boldly affirms itself in this serious document, is an anti-Catholic and revolutionary act to operate without the Pope and against the Pope in reforming the Church.

However, *a)* the object specially assigned in these letters to the convocation of the council is not the general reform of the Church without the Pope and despite the Pope;

b) The means they advocate is not *in itself* an anti-Catholic means, but a *regular though exceptional act* in the life of the Church;

c) Finally, viewed in light of the realities surrounding it, the circumstances accompanying it and amid which it occurs, *not only is this act not revolutionary*, but it can be considered *in fact* as a *reactionary act* against conciliar supremacy, in favor of pontifical supremacy.

This is all that we need to establish.

APPEAL TO THE COUNCIL

If, when speaking of *appeal*, one wishes, however slightly, to take into account the ordinary meaning of words so as not to get lost in empty declamations, it is important to note that this has a well-defined juridical meaning. It expresses the act by which an accused, condemned by a jurisdiction and not recognizing the justice of the ruling against him, either from the point of view of law or from the point of view of fact, invokes the judgment of a higher jurisdiction with the aim of having the sentence reformed by it. To see in this document "*the recourse of a faithful discontented with the Holy See*¹²," who asks "*to plead his own cause before the council*¹³," is this not to discover in it the juridical act we have just defined? The execution of such a design would have had, for its author, the most serious

⁹ {org. 1} VILLARI, II. p. 308.

¹⁰ {org. 2} PERRENS, *History of Florence*. II. p. 285.

¹¹ {org. 3} PASTOR, *History of the Popes*, VI. p. 32.

¹² {org. 1} PEHRENS, *l. c.*

¹³ {org. 2} VILLARI, *l. c.*

consequences. The fact of appealing from papal sentences to the judgment of a council incurred of itself (*ipso facto*) excommunication and interdict, and made the guilty party liable to the penalties reserved for the crime of heresy and lèse-majesté. This penal sanction extended to all those who favored this appeal, advised it, or lent their hands to it (Bull *Execrabilis*. In *synodo Mantuana* 1459). This bull of Pius II had been confirmed by Sixtus IV. — Later it was to be confirmed again by Julius II and extended by him to all categories of accomplices.

But where in these letters can one read an appeal from the Pope to the council? What phrase can be cited where there is mention of a judgment rendered by the Roman pontiff? Where is it stated that the condemned man does not accept this judgment and that he submits himself to the supreme jurisdiction of the assembly of Bishops for the revision of the pontifical sentence and the proclamation of his own innocence? Can one find a single word, an allusion however remote, to a judgment rendered, to an accused who believes himself oppressed? Could one, with the help of this document alone, establish, with any appearance, that its author has undergone a judgment and incurred any condemnation whatsoever? Obviously not! There is barely mention of *the persecutions of the wicked* that the hatred of truth has stirred up against him. And that is all. One sees an accuser who offers to prove the crime he alleges, but nothing that suggests that this accuser is himself accused.

Indeed, we think that such an interpretation is the effect of a lapse in language¹⁴ more than a failure of thought. But any formula that carries within itself an ambiguity introduces it into the reader's thought, and it is not uncommon to hear repeated, on the faith of similar assertions, that Savonarole, to avoid submitting to pontifical decisions, appealed from the Pope to the council.

This is a serious error. It is serious in itself because it contradicts the facts, because nothing in these letters provides the slightest foundation for such an interpretation: it is also serious in its consequences.

In *these Letters* there is mention of convening a council. Yes. — To reform papal sentences? — No. — But to summon Alexander VI and declare him fallen from primacy as a heretic and infidel.

But what! is this not precisely the doctrine of council supremacy?

¹⁴ {org. 1} Professor Villari (IV Centenary) reproduces even more clearly this interpretation (Conferenze, p. 223). "When the excommunication arrived, he did not remain silent *and appealed to a council*." And he congratulates Savonarola for this. May the celebrated Professor pardon us, but this is an assertion that History cannot embrace, nor could a sincere Catholic accept his congratulations. — The Editorial staff of the *Review* moreover disclaims responsibility for this.

My God! we must indeed recognize that all or almost all ¹⁵ until now, admirers and adversaries of the reformer alike, have believed they saw it there. This unanimity of interpretation is certainly cause for more than one reflection and more than one hesitation on our part. It is so terrible and seems so unwise to claim to be right against everyone! If our action seems strange, we are all the more authorized to ask permission to justify it, it is an obligation incumbent upon us. To fulfill this, it will suffice for us:

1° To state briefly the doctrine of conciliar supremacy and the practical applications that follow from it;

2° To explain in a few words the doctrine of papal supremacy and the consequences it implies in the governance of Christian society;

3° Finally, to compare with both of these theories the very terms of the letters to the princes.

The conclusion that will result from this comparison, immediately and with evidence, we believe, will be this: here is the work of a Roman theologian; it cannot be the work of a Gallican.

THE DOCTRINE OF CONCILIAR SUPREMACY

The error of the Greeks concerning papal supremacy constitutes in itself a schism: for, recognizing in the Bishop of Rome only a *primacy of honor*, they thereby break all *real bonds* with him.

It was not so with what was the *Gallican doctrine*. According to it, the Church of Rome was, *by a power of jurisdiction*, above each particular Church; each bishop was obliged to the Pope, not only by the bonds of respect, but also *by those of obedience*.

The Pope, in the universal Church, is the judge of each bishop. — But who will judge the Pope? — for the Bishop of Rome, however elevated he may be, is not impeccable. This very authority, superior to that of each of his brothers in the episcopate, he may abuse, not to build up, but to destroy. Who would recognize in a single man such a formidable power without recourse against him?

Who will judge the judgments of the Pope, to reform them if they are tainted with injustice or error, to correct him himself if he misuses the power entrusted to him? — The assembly of Bishops. Superior to each one, he remains inferior to all.

This theory sought its official confirmation in these canons of the Council of Constance: “This holy synod declares that it, legitimately assembled in the Holy Spirit, constituting a general council and representing the Catholic Church, *has power directly from Christ*, whom everyone of whatever state or dignity, *even papal*, is bound to obey in matters which

¹⁵ {org. 1} We do not know of any author, historian or theologian who has clearly given these letters the doctrinal interpretation that we ourselves submit to the readers.

pertain to the faith and the eradication of the said schism and the reformation of the said Church in head and members.

“It also declares that anyone of whatever condition, state, or dignity, *even papal*, who shall contumaciously refuse to obey the mandates, statutes, ordinances, or instructions of this sacred synod and of any other general council legitimately assembled, concerning the aforesaid matters or things pertaining to them, shall, unless he repents, be subjected to condign penance and be suitably punished, even by recourse to other supports of the law, if necessary.”

From which it follows that:

1° The universal council possesses an authority which comes to it directly from Christ;

2° The Pope is subject to it and owes it obedience;

3° The council possesses coercive power over the Pope to impose its decisions upon him.

However, it is manifest that this supreme authority does not exist in a permanent state in the Church. Who then shall convoke the bishops to constitute the council? *Regularly*, it is the Pope. But, *exceptionally*, in certain cases where the law that dominates all others prevails: “*Salus populi suprema lex*” [the welfare of the people is the supreme law], if the Pope, when required, refuses to convene the ecumenical synod, one may proceed without him, convoke it without him and despite him.

What are the cases that legitimize this exception of a council assembled without the Pope and against the Pope?

1° When there is no longer a Pope, which can be verified in three ways, — either by natural death, — or by civil death, for example if the pontiff is afflicted, without hope of recovery, with mental alienation — or by canonical death, or deposition;

2° When the Pope, having been sufficiently requested to convoke the council, obstinately refuses, to the great detriment of the Church which calls for a reform, especially if he is personally implicated, by reason of the disorders and scandals of his life;

3° If, in a council legitimately convoked by the Pope, a place and time are stipulated where the future synod must assemble, for example every five years or every ten years, the council may meet at the appointed time and place, despite the opposition of the Pope. In this case, the council assembled without the Bishop of Rome has Jesus Christ himself as its head who guarantees its indefectibility;

4° When the Pope must be legitimately deposed.

For, as it pertains to the council, distinct from the Pope, to depose the Pope for certain crimes, it is necessary, by that very fact, that the council have the power to assemble itself: it is manifest, indeed, that it would be too much to require of the Bishop of Rome to convoke himself the assembly charged with undertaking his deposition.

What are the circumstances or crimes that could motivate the deposition of the Pontiff?

This is the case of a doubtful Pope, or of several without being able to determine with certainty which is the true Pope; the Church has a right to a Pope; consequently, she has the right to be drawn out of this uncertainty, in which she does not know whether or not she possesses a pontiff.

It is the crime of heresy, by which the pontiff excludes himself from the Church, and it is also any grave and manifest fault, which the pontiff refuses to correct and which is of a nature to harm the honor or the good of the Church, such as the simoniacal sale of benefices, favors lavished upon the unworthy, the exclusion of the good, tyrannical oppression, public and manifest vices, and generally any crime for which the Bishop of Rome can depose another prelate. Just as the Roman pontiff can, for cause of unworthiness, remove the powers from one of his colleagues in the episcopate, likewise the assembly of bishops, which is, ultimately, the *plenary primacy* of the Church, can divest the Bishop of Rome of a pontificate which is called supreme only in relation to each of his brothers. And *for all these crimes*, the Pope is summoned by the council, judged by the council, deposed by the council, as by an authority in itself superior to his own.

According to this doctrine, the Sovereign Pontiff was less the Bishop of Bishops than the Bishop of *each* Bishop.

DOCTRINE OF PONTIFICAL SUPREMACY

Vicar of Christ, the Roman pontiff possesses the fullness of authority in the Church; the council partakes of it from him. No power in the Church, — not even the council, — is above him because no power is intermediate between Christ and him. The Bishops, consequently, cannot have the right to assemble without him and despite him.

What motive, moreover, could be assigned to this meeting, and who will be its judge? It cannot be the Council. For, assuming that its authority is above the Pope, it must still exist to exercise it. But it does not exist before its assembly. What authority, then, will judge its necessity and the Pope's refusal to convene it?

If, regularly, the right to convene the ecumenical assembly belongs to the Bishop of Rome, it is in vain that one seeks an exception to this law. If there are exceptions to human laws, there are none for divine laws, at least insofar as God himself has formally reserved them. Now, where does one find in the divine constitution of the Pontifical Primacy the reservations introduced by the doctrine of conciliar supremacy? Therefore:

1° Never can a council meet *without the Pope and despite the Pope*, to undertake the reform of the Church. An assembly constituted under these conditions will never be anything but a conciliabule, a shadow of a council rightly suspected, on this ground alone, of sacrilegious conspiracy and schismatic tendencies.

2° Whatever laws may be enacted by councils regarding the convocation of subsequent synods, these positive decrees, having force only through papal confirmation and not

through any superior authority of the Council, cannot bind the Roman Pontiff. Positive laws may vary according to circumstances; the Pope remains the judge of these, and the law which derives its force only from him can be abrogated or suspended by him.

3° The Pope being above the council, the latter cannot claim to exercise over him any doctrinal, legislative, or coercive jurisdiction. Any attempt of this kind would never be anything but usurpation.

But if there cannot be a true council without *the* Pope and despite *the* Pope, there can nevertheless be a true council *without a Pope*, in certain painful or extraordinary circumstances, where the assembly of Bishops remains the only standing and fixed authority in the Church of God.

What are these cases?

They may vary infinitely, says Cajetan; for example, if an epidemic carried away both the Pope and the electors before the latter could name a successor, or if circumstances were such that the cardinals themselves judged they could not ensure the election without convening a council, to suppress certain maneuvers, to gain clarity on the choice of the subject, or to bring peace amid competitions or intrigues.

But there are especially two well-defined cases that have occurred in the life of the Church, or that may still be encountered.

1° When one is faced with a Pope whose election remains doubtful or with several Popes, without being able to determine who is the true Pope, as happened during the Great Schism. In such an occurrence, to extricate the Church from a similar perplexity, the council may assemble to judge who is the true Pontiff. If it cannot define this, it may convoke the electors; and if the electors themselves remain doubtful, having been appointed by doubtful Pontiffs, the election devolves to the Church and the council may institute the electoral college, as happened at the Synod of Constance. The declaration of jurisdiction received immediately from Christ and exercised over the Pope himself, which defenders of conciliar supremacy would like to invoke, concerns only this particular case of *doubtful* Popes, with a view to the extinction of schism, "*ad extirpationem schismatis*". But the authority of such a council, arising entirely from the present necessity which it must address, could not extend further and ceases with it.

2° If the Roman Pontiff, in his official teaching, cannot fail in doctrine, — as a Christian, he can sin not only against the moral law, but against the truth, become unfaithful, heretical. — And, in this case, he forfeits his supremacy. This is the only exception reserved by Pope Boniface the martyr to his inviolable Primacy (40 Dist. Si Papa): "*Nisi si a Fide deviaverit Papa, redarguere ejus culpas nullus præsumit.*" And Augustine of Ancona tells us that the Pope must not be deposed for any crime, however notorious it may be, except for the crime of voluntary and obstinate heresy.

What is the role and action of the council, the proper object of its intervention in this forfeiture?

On this point, theologians of pontifical supremacy remain divided.

Cajetan (and after him, Suarez)¹⁶ admits that the council thus assembled judges, condemns, and deposes the Pope. However, according to him, it does not act in this case by an authority proper to itself, but as a minister of Christ, and its action does not extend directly to the Pontificate itself. The conciliar action is exercised upon the person of the Pontiff: as, through election, the Church deputed him to this honor, so too, through deposition, it revokes in some manner its designation. It does not remove the Primacy from the Pope; it withdraws the person of the Pope from the Primacy. Thus, it remains true, in this somewhat subtle explanation, that even in deposing the Pope, the council is not superior to the Pope, since its action is not exercised upon the sovereign Pontificate itself.

Others, who do not wish, even in appearance, to grant the council the slightest right to undertake anything against the Pope, say that in such circumstances, the council judges and determines the fact of heresy, and simply ascertains, in order to signify it to the Church, that he who was Pope has fallen from the Primacy. Who takes it away from him and who deprives him of it? — None other than himself. Just as, by an act of his will, he can abdicate sovereignty, so too voluntarily, by his heresy, he himself accomplishes his own downfall. The council can only take note of it as an accomplished fact. The reason is that in denying the faith, he thereby ceases to be part of the Church, to be a member of the Church, and thus cannot continue to be its head. This opinion was common among Roman theologians of Savonarola's time.

If it were necessary to establish a hierarchy among the proponents of pontifical supremacy, who does not see that the most intransigent would be precisely those who wish in all circumstances to place the Papacy beyond any direct or indirect reach of the conciliar assembly? The Lord's elect has no judge on earth. He can lose his supremacy only through spiritual suicide. This suicide is heresy.

Now, let us compare these doctrines with the passages from the letters to Christian Princes concerning the downfall of Alexander VI, and we shall determine to which theological school they are connected.

— “The Lord, irritated by this intolerable corruption of His Church, has permitted it to be without a Shepherd. For I attest to you, in the name of God, that this Alexander VI is in no way a Pontiff, and cannot be one in any manner. For, *besides* the execrable crime of simony by which he has stolen a sacrilegious tiara, and by which every day he auctions off ecclesiastical benefices, besides his manifest vices that I shall pass over in silence, here is what I first declare, *hoc primum assero et certissime affirmo* [this I first assert and most certainly affirm]: this man is not a Christian, he does not even believe in God, he has exceeded all limits of infidelity and incredulity...”

¹⁶ {org. 1} CAJETAN. — De auctoritate Papæ et Concilii, passim.

Note this formula. Alexander is no longer Pope and cannot be! Why? Because he is a heretic. And tell me from which theological school does this idea draw inspiration? Can one discover in it a trace of conciliar supremacy? But, according to this doctrine, no crime in itself entails the *deposition* of the Pope. The latter retains his primacy, and in this concession made to him, it is the supremacy of the council that the Gallican affirms. The dignity that he still recognizes in him, he leaves it to him only to reserve for the council the right and power to take it away.

Only a theologian of the Roman school could have written this sentence, and within this school, a member of the most intransigent group that does not accept that the council has any action over the Pope in any manner. Only he can deliver this definitive sentence: “*this man is no longer Pope.*” For, indeed, the sentence has been delivered; it is the Pontiff himself who has rendered it against himself through his infidelity, and this sentence is without appeal, since there is no authority above his own.

This conclusion would already impose itself with evidence, if it were not for the mention, in this accusation, of crimes other than that of heresy. Is there not question of the simony that tainted the election of Rodrigo Borgia, of the trafficking of benefices, of the public disorders of his life? How then can one classify the author of the *Letters to Princes* among the partisans of pontifical supremacy who recognize only a single crime entailing the downfall of the Pope?

The difficulty is more apparent than real. To see *that there is mention*, in the statement of accusation, of simony and of the vices of Alexander VI, is something that even a very superficial reading suffices to establish. But that they are invoked *as grounds for nullity*, is something that could not be admitted by a somewhat careful examination, such as is required when dealing with a subject of this importance and whose resolution calls into question the honor of a Christian like Girolamo Savonarola.

Read: *Ultra execrabile simoniæ scelus quo sacrilega mitram emptione subripuit, et quotidie conferendo sacra beneficia licitatoribus exponit, manifesta que vitia obmittam.* I shall set aside simony and public disorders, and here is what I affirm first, *hoc primum assero et certissimè affirmo.*

Of simony and other vices, he does speak of them, yes: but only to exclude them from the proof he wishes to make; and setting them aside, he goes straight to the precise point, to the formal reason, as a scholastic would say, which he wants to make the core of his argument, *Alexander's absolute infidelity*: this man no longer even believes in God. Can one find a more explicit and uncompromising formula of the theory of pontifical supremacy in such a case? For the crime of heresy, but for that alone, Alexander VI *is deposed, by the fact itself*, from the Pontificate. *He disregards* the insufficient motives that various schools might invoke and stops only where he finds solid ground for his proof, *hoc primum assero et certissimè affirmo.*

Why then, one might ask, does he speak of these facts? My God! truly speaking, he alone could explain this with complete certainty. But it is perhaps not impossible to define the

state of his mind at the moment when he wrote these lines, to reconstruct, as one would say today, his mentality.

He attests to these princes, in the name of God, that Alexander is no longer Pope, and anticipating the thought of his august correspondents: "Yes, undoubtedly, he hears them say, we know that his election was simoniacal, and good minds hold that on this account it may be null; he sells to the highest bidders all functions and all benefices, his vices are the scandal and shame of Christendom. Let us set this aside, he says, *omittam. Hoc primum assero...*

And certainly, for anyone who knows a little the nature of his spirit, lively, intuitive, vehement, who does not know that precisely this is the note of his genius as the characteristic of his discourses. He seems to read the mind of his interlocutor, he anticipates the objection, he is a man capable of holding a conversation or sustaining a discussion entirely by himself, and on this account, how many of his sermons are nothing but a continuous dialogue between his audience and himself.

There is another reason to speak here of these crimes, although they do not legally entail the downfall of Alexander and he dismisses them on this account. They naturally prepare the minds of his correspondents for the revelation he will make to them of the Pontiff's infidelity. They constitute what is called, in pleading, *the argument of morality*, by which the prosecution or the defense seek in the antecedents of the accused, in his character, his acts, his habits, his tendencies, analogies that predispose to the crime with which he is charged or contradictions that oppose it.

And that is undoubtedly why these allusions came naturally and instinctively from his pen.

Let us already conclude, with regard to the letter to the Emperor. The only fact invoked in this document to establish that the Church no longer has a pontiff is the heresy of Alexander VI. As for the other crimes, he mentions them only to exclude them from his proof, or to make the revelation of that one more acceptable.

Let us now examine the content of the letter to the king of France. "This Alexander VI is not pope, nor can he be, *not so much because of (non tam ob)* his simoniacal and sacrilegious election and the vices of his life, *but because* he is not Christian, he has no kind of faith whatsoever, he abhors it as the most detestable of men."

A first observation that must be made is that Savonarole attaches so little importance, from the perspective of the proof to be established, to the statement of these preliminary grievances, that here he omits one, and yet one of the most serious, the simoniacal trafficking of offices and benefices.

On the others, the simoniacal election, the scandalous life, we see them put forward first, but only to set them aside. If one wishes to press the matter and extract from the material rigor of the words all that they can express, one will draw this, and nothing more: the simoniacal election, the scandals of the Pope, can prove something, but not as much as this fact that I reveal to you, apostasy. Now what is a proof that is not as strong as another,

if not a proof that could never amount to more than a probability? For if there are degrees in knowledge, there are none in certainty. It would therefore simply be an opinion that is negligently touched upon in passing, to arrive at the demonstrative reason.

But we do not think even this. These turns of phrase must be taken for what they signify according to the conventions of human language. Now who does not know that, in universal language, even in philosophical language, this formula: *it is not so much for... as for, non tam ob... quam ob...* is nothing but a circumlocution, of elementary politeness and a modesty that is in no way excessive, to set aside the reasons of an interlocutor or an adversary and substitute one's own. And one would surely not wish that Savonarola, writing to the king of France, would have lacked any element of politeness or modesty.

In the letter to the king and queen of Spain, we find yet another turn of phrase:

Scitote ergo hunc Alexandrum VI minime pontificem esse, qui nec potest, *non modo* ob simoniacam sacrilegamque Pontificatus usurpationem et manifesta ejus scelera, *sed propter* secreta facinora. Ex quibus hoc primum, Deo jubente, aperio et certissime affirmo ipsum non esse christianum, neque ullam prorsus fidem vel informem habere.

Of the three texts, this is the only one, in our opinion, that presents some difficulty.

First of all, it is evident that, if it presents a doubtful meaning, it would be good exegesis to determine it through the other two, but we hope to establish it through intrinsic analysis alone.

“Alexander is no longer pope, *not only because he* is simoniacal and leads a scandalous life, *but because he* is unfaithful.”

The first part of the phrase, considered apart from the rest, can have a double meaning. It can signify that Alexander is no longer pope, *not because of his simoniacal election alone*, and the meaning is that simony does not in itself entail loss of office.

It can also mean that Alexander is no longer pope, *not only because of the simoniacal election which would be sufficient to establish it; but also because of his unfaithfulness: two reasons instead of one.*

Between these two opposing interpretations, what will guide our choice and our thinking? It will be the second part of the phrase.

The second meaning, to be sustained, must lead to this phrase: *but also, but furthermore. Not only for this reason, but also, but furthermore* for that other. This manner of phrasing is conjunctive.

The first meaning, on the contrary, is expressed thus: *not only for this reason, but for that other.* The word *etiam, adhuc, also still*, is suppressed. This construction is disjunctive and exclusive. The two parts of the phrase stand in opposition.

Well then! let us reread the text of the letter: *non modo* ob simoniacam sacrilegamque pontificatus usurpationem et manifesta ejus scelera; *sed propter* secreta facinora.

The two parts of the phrase are in opposition. It is not only because of the simoniacal election that Alexander is no longer pope, *but it is because of* his apostasy.

Thus we establish the same meaning for each of these three Letters and the significance they convey, once again, is that they are the work of the most uncompromising theologian of pontifical supremacy.

Here, another question may arise. The heresy of the Pope, in itself, entails his deposition; but, to cause the convocation of a Council on this basis, it is still necessary that it can be established! An occult crime cannot justify a judicial action, say the canonists, since proof of it cannot be produced in a debate. Now, this crime of heresy denounced by Savonarole is, by his own admission, *secret*: it is part of those “*secreta facinora*,” those “*occulta vitia*” that he proposes to reveal at an appropriate time and place, if God inspires him to do so. How then can such a grave and solemn approach on his part be canonically legitimized? It could only be legitimized by the denunciation of a “public” transgression, the proof of which could be juridically established in a trial.

The solution to this difficulty is, as often in such cases, in a clear and precise definition of terms.

When canonists speak of a “*public*” crime, they do not necessarily mean that this crime is known *to the public*, although it may be, as one might ordinarily understand it, but only *that it can be juridically proven* before the judges charged with rendering the sentence. Also, to avoid ambiguity, some call it “*notorious*.”

Now, when Savonarola denounces¹⁷ this crime of heresy in Alexander VI, he offers to provide proof, and not only does he appeal to the testimony of God Himself, but he also commits to satisfy all requirements and promises to furnish the most convincing reasons:

¹⁷ {org. 1} We use the terms *denunciation* or *accusation* indifferently—but it must be said that in reality Savonarola does not merely *denounce* Alexander VI’s heresy to the council. He becomes an *accuser*. This obligated him, as all canonists know: 1° to designate the crime and its author; 2° to pursue the cause himself, that is, to provide proof and to request action against the guilty party; 3° to incur himself the penalty requested against the accused if he cannot prove the crime. This is expressed in this sentence from the Letter to the Emperor: *Ego vero quibuscumque nexibus me obstringens talia probabiliter promitto me non tam probaturos certissimas*, etc. Clerics and regulars did not have the right to act as accusers for common law crimes, unless it concerned an injury affecting themselves or their close ones. But they could do so for exceptional crimes against the honor of God, blasphemy, apostasy, heresy, simony, magic, sacrilege. Denunciation is merely the revelation of the crime and the guilty party made to the judge who takes it upon himself to prosecute. — Prosecution by mode of particular accusation is out of use today.

“rationibus efficacissimis, argumentis certissimis, probationes certissimas.” This crime, he does not intend it to be *secret* and occult in the canonical sense of the word. Why then does he qualify it as such? Solely to contrast it with the others that he wishes to set aside and of which he says: *“manifesta vitia omittam ea quæ palam extant ipsius flagitia, manifesta ejus scelera,”* crimes of simony and immorality which he calls public and manifest because proof of them no longer needs to be established. They are the scandal of the Church; all of Christendom could bear witness to them. It is evident that a crime, canonically notorious or public, can appear secret in comparison with such publicity¹⁸. The text of the Letters to the Princes signifies nothing other than this, or it signifies nothing at all.

If any of our readers still maintains the slightest doubt about the content of these Letters, let him reread them, pen in hand, noting each word, weighing in his conscience the author's thought, and he will see nothing else therein. It has been years since we ourselves read them with the common prejudices. And when we came to these words: *nullum esse pontificem... hoc primum assero et certissime affirmo ipsum non esse christianum*, it suddenly became apparent to us that this proposition could not have been written by a defender of conciliar supremacy. We have remained silent until now, hoping that a more penetrating mind, a more skillful and authoritative pen would rectify the error committed; it is upon realizing that the best friends of the Florentine apostle were passing by the truth, that the same accusations against him were constantly being renewed, that we decided to speak. If it had been a matter of some abstract doctrine delivered to the eternal disputes of schools, we might have continued to keep silent, but the honor of a Christian is at stake, and what a Christian! the orthodoxy of Jerome Savonarola and the integrity of his faith are at stake. He is our brother, he is our blood. We remembered the words of blessed Dominic our Father, selling his books to aid a Christian in distress: “How can one study on dead skins, when our brothers suffer from hunger?”

We have established thus far that, in fact, this document emanates from the purest doctrine concerning pontifical supremacy; but, since this work is above all a doctrinal study, it is perhaps not useless to indicate here what consequences it would imply for doctrine, if it were to be read as Mr. Pastor understood it! “Savonarola embarked on the path of all rebels and demanded the convocation of a council that would pronounce the deposition of the Pope as *simoniac, heretic and unfaithful*.”¹⁹

¹⁸ {org. 2} We find these terms even among certain canonists; Saint Antoninus gives the explanation, tit. IX, c. VII, p. 101: “De modo procedendi per accusationem.” “Aliud famosum, aliud manifestum aliud notorium. Fama quandoque ex scientia quandoque ex suspicione procedit manifestum, quod ex scientia et certo auctore procedit et quod potest probari.” Et etiam dicitur *quandoque occultum quod potest probari*. Et occultum dicitur quod quinque sciunt. Item notorium dicitur manifestum quod patet per probationem vel per evidentiam rei.”

¹⁹ {org. 1} Op. c., t. VI, p. 32.

And Mr. Pastor still omits some of the grievances. One should say: *as simoniac in his own election, as simoniac in the conferral of ecclesiastical functions, as scandalous in his life, as heretic and unfaithful.*

Since Savonarola does not invite the council to *depose* Alexander VI, but declares him *fallen by that fact*, “*minime est Pontifex*,” the question that would arise is this: what should we think of these assertions?

1° Alexander VI is not pope, by reason of his simoniacal election, and the council must assemble to declare his deposition.

2° Alexander is no longer pope, because of the simoniacal sale of benefices and the public scandals of his life.

The response to these two questions will be as brief and as categorical as possible.

Is simoniacal election invalid?

In the Summa Theologica (II^a II^{ae}, q. c.), Saint Thomas treats simony as a crime against the virtue of Religion. He establishes that buying and selling spiritual things for money or any other material compensation assessable in terms of money is in itself a sin. — For spiritual things cannot be compensated by anything earthly — for they are from God and of God, and no human authority can act as owner over them to alienate them in this way — for, finally, they are *graces* granted by divine liberality, and as such they cannot be the object of a contract that confers a right. — Such a traffic is therefore a direct outrage to the right of God as well as to His goodness; it is consequently contrary to the virtue of religion by which we render to God the honor due to Him (art. 1).

As one can see, Saint Thomas’s conclusion rests on the very nature of spiritual things, as well as on God’s positive prohibition. Simony is contrary to both natural and positive divine law.

Speaking of the penalty incurred by simoniacs, the Angelic Doctor establishes this penalty through a disciplinary decree of the Council of Chalcedon, c. 2: “*Qui ordinatus est (simoniace) nil ex ordinatione vel promotione quæ est per negotiationem facta proficiat, sed sit alienus a dignitate vel sollicitudine quam pecuniis acquisivit.*”

Then he demonstrates the legitimacy of this punishment, through the positive prohibition made by God. No one can legitimately keep what he has acquired against the will of the owner. For example, if an administrator gave something from his master’s goods against the latter’s will, the one who received it could not retain it under any title. Now, the Lord, of whom the prelates of the Church are but ministers and stewards, has ordered that spiritual things be distributed freely... *Quod gratis accepistis gratis date* [Freely you have received, freely give]. Therefore, whoever has acquired spiritual things for money cannot legitimately retain them.

Thus, St. Thomas concludes only that simony is a crime in itself and justly punished by the loss of benefits or offices obtained by such means. But he does not pose the question of

whether the *spiritual things are truly acquired* albeit unjustly through this simoniacal act. The possessor is bound to restore as an unjust holder. *But does he truly possess this power, though criminally?* — One does not find this solution in the conclusions of St. Thomas.

But it must be acknowledged that, unlike certain dialecticians whose conclusions sometimes exceed their premises, our Doctor has that good fortune which is customary only among geniuses of his caliber, that his principles overflow his conclusions, and that one can deduce from them not only the legitimacy of the penalty actually imposed by the decree of the council, but also the necessity of this penalty as naturally and necessarily implied in simony itself. So that the positive decree of the Synod of Chalcedon is merely an application or a more explicit promulgation of divine natural law.

It is not difficult to conceive indeed that if spiritual power, essentially and *by its very nature*, cannot be the object of such a contract, and if it is conferred only under this title, its purchaser does not obtain it by that very fact. He may possess its shadow, its outward appearances, its benefits, and perform its external acts, albeit unjustly; but *the power itself, he does not hold it; and the restitution he must make concerns much more the insignia of power than the power itself.*

Do these consequences apply to the supreme power in the visible Church of Christ?

In the time of Saint Thomas, some theologians would not admit it: “Secundum quosdam Papa non potest committere simoniam” (art. 1, obj. 7). Thomas Campegius would not fail to see in such an affirmation an act of courtly flattery and adulation toward the Roman Pontiff, “quem plures plus nimio faventes, ne dicamus adulantes, Romano Pontifici.” This leads us to recognize that there was never in the Church a shortage of theologians subtle enough to display ingenious virtuosities, nor of court canonists eager to collect these precious distinctions as pearls.

The Angelic Doctor does not linger on these reflections. With the customary gravity for which he is known, and which here seems to become more solemn, he responds: “The Pope can incur this vice of simony like any mortal man. The fault does not disappear by reason of the elevation of the one who commits it: it only becomes more criminal. Although he is the primary dispenser of the Church’s goods, he is neither their master nor their owner. And if he were to sell spiritual things for money, he would be simoniacal like any other” (art. 1, ad 7).

If the consequences of simony reach the Pontiff himself in the conferral of benefices through such trafficking, what would it be if, not yet being Pope, he seeks to secure the sovereign Pontificate by this means?

The Pontificate, it is true, is not conferred by the election: the Pontiff does not hold his power from his electors as from his mandators. He is the representative, the vicar of Christ. He does not represent the Church, he represents Christ, the essential head of the Church. It is from Him and from Him alone that he holds his Primacy. The electors have

merely designated him to the Consecration of Christ. This power could not, therefore, have been targeted in the contract that leads him to the supreme dignity, and its bestowal cannot therefore be simoniacal.

Saint Thomas (art. 4) had already addressed this subtlety by telling us that what is connected to spiritual goods such as benefices cannot for this reason be the object of trafficking; all the more reason, we may conclude, the pontifical election which is of itself ordained to the creation of spiritual power in the elect, like the generative act which, though not producing the human soul, is itself linked to the creation of the spiritual principle and calls for it as much as lies within its power.

The invalidity of the simoniacal election was therefore one of the most certain *theological conclusions*.

Now, a theological conclusion as well-reasoned as this one establishes law *for the Christian conscience*. Indeed, if Savonarola, in the aftermath of the election of August 11, 1492, had been called to hear the confession of the newly elected, he would have had every right to say to him, before hearing him: “Cardinal Borgia, the Shepherd must not enter the Sheepfold through the door of Wolves. I command you, in the name of God, to restore to the Church this usurped power of which you have, moreover, only the appearance, or else I cannot absolve you in the name of Christ.”

Certainly, we do not believe we are slandering Alexander Borgia in thinking that he would have done as Lorenzo de’ Medici, that he would have turned his back on the Frate, looked toward the wall and kept his Pontificate. But, in Rome, as in Florence, Brother Jerome would have only done his duty, and, as there are duties whose fulfillment requires an uncommon strength of soul, one can say that in fulfilling this one, he would have earned the gratitude and admiration of all truly Catholic and truly Roman souls.

Could he, with the same right, appeal to the Church, and call for the convening of a council to proclaim the nullity of the election?

We do not think so.

It is that, if theologians provide, through their deductions, a rule of life for the individual conscience that they enlighten, if they can even thus provide the motives and considerations for a law, their conclusions, nevertheless, cannot suffice to make a general law imposing itself *in the external forum*, and becoming, thereby, the principle of a juridical action. Just as theological conclusions, in the doctrinal order, cannot by themselves constitute an article of faith, imposing itself universally, necessarily and essentially on the belief of the faithful, without the definition made by the infallible authority, likewise, the deductions of theologians, in the practical order of the Church’s governance, cannot constitute a law whose observance obligates all the faithful, and which one can use as authority for a juridical action, as long as they are not sanctioned by a positive decree, emanating from the legislative authority in Christian society.

Now, from this purely canonical perspective, what was the state of the legislation concerning the election of the Pope, and on this specific point of simony, at the moment when the Letters to Christian Princes were written?

In 1059, through his Bull *In nomine Jesu*, Nicholas II had wanted to put an end to these sacrilegious bargainings. After lamenting the countless wounds that the sovereign Pontificate had received under the hammer blows of *the simoniac heresy*, he decreed, to make these attempts more difficult, to reserve the election of the Bishop of Rome to the cardinal-bishops. The lay cardinals were called only to give their adherence; the lower clergy and the faithful brought only their consent: neither had the initiative of choice:

A Pontiff elected against the rules of this decree, even if ordained and enthroned, would incur, along with his accomplices, perpetual anathema: he is declared separated from the Church as an antichrist, invader and destroyer of all Christianity, and thereby deprived of all prior dignity.

But, to escape this anathema, it suffices to observe the content of the decree, that is, to be elected by the majority of the cardinal-bishops, considered as metropolitans in the Roman Church.

This mechanism could place obstacles to corruption, but it did not strike simony at its heart by declaring invalid an election obtained by this means.

Alexander III (1180, through his bull *Licet de vitanda*) determined and specified the number of electors and the number of votes required to be elected.

The electoral college is composed not only of cardinal-bishops, but of all cardinals.

Moreover, until then, election was secured by simple majority. The determination of this majority sometimes remained uncertain and, more importantly, could be disputed: hence, an open door to schism. Henceforth, if the cardinals cannot agree on the unanimous election of the Sovereign Pontiff, only he who is elected by two-thirds of the cardinals shall, without any exception or opposition, be considered by the entire Church as the true Pope.

He who, without having obtained two-thirds of the votes, would usurp the Episcopate, would incur excommunication and deprivation of all sacred orders; but, to escape this, it is sufficient to obtain them. There is no mention of simony.

Gregory X (1272, Bull *Ubi periculum*) confirms the prior provisions, especially the decree of Alexander III, regarding the number of votes required, which has always remained since then the foundation of every papal election. He institutes the conclave and establishes its ceremonial. Finally, he threatens the cardinal electors with divine punishment and exhorts them to set aside any consideration foreign to the good and honor of the Church. They must proceed to the election with a free mind and naked conscience. And for this, he says, *“we nullify and annul all contracts, obligations, conventions and oaths made or consented to in advance, so that no one may believe himself bound to observe them, nor fear failing in his given word by transgressing them, but on the contrary may judge it meritorious to*

violate them, for, as human law itself attests, it is more pleasing to God to violate than to keep such oaths."

The consequence of this decree is as follows: Whatever commitments may have been made previously, the conclavist must not consider himself bound by them when voting; all these agreements cannot bind his conscience, which he liberates, on the contrary, by not observing them. The elected candidate likewise is not bound to fulfill his promises. Every obligation is nullified by this decree. And he could respond to his electors, through a bull in the grand style of the Curia, that he does not wish to take part in the crime by paying them the price of their shame. But nothing in this decree invalidates the election itself: it nullifies only the arrangements that precede it and of which it is the fruit.

Until the Bull of Julius II (*Cum tam divino* 1505), one finds no positive decree declaring null any election of the Bishop of Rome obtained by simoniacal means.

In the absence of a positive law, do we find any jurisprudence? Some canonists have attempted to establish one by relying *a)* on the decree of Pope Boniface, recognizing that in case of heresy the Pope must be deposed. Now *b)* simony is a heresy. Does not Nicholas II speak in the preamble of his bull about simoniacal heresy? The ancient canons frequently employ this designation, and in the 9th and 10th centuries, those guilty of simony were commonly treated as heretics.

This is, it must be said, merely an equivocation of words, which Saint Thomas himself explains to us (II^a IIae q. c., art. 4, ad 1m).

When Simon the magician, after seeing the wonders performed by the apostles, *believed* that one could purchase the virtue of the Holy Spirit with money, he was heretical. But one can act like Simon without sharing his belief. If simony is called a heresy, it is because simoniacal practices, especially when they are displayed openly, without shame as without repression, can *lead one to believe* that one truly purchases the gift of God. But when it is said that the Pope can be deposed *for heresy*, it must be understood as a voluntary and obstinate error in belief and not as a failing in conduct.

Thus, most canonists prior to the bull of Julius II (we need not speak of those who followed) always preserve the validity of the simoniacal election of the Roman Pontiff. "*Et nota,*" says Saint Antonin, "*quod ex hoc quod electio Papæ simoniacè facta esset a cardinalibus, dummodo aliàs rite, cassari non potest nec tolli quin sit verus Papa.*"

And Cajetan, commenting on the bull of Julius II, or rather, the excommunication that sanctions it, adds: *Ubi nota quod secundum antiqua jura* (that is to say prior to the bull *Cum tam divino*) — *non potuisset excipi contra Papam simonicæ electum (quia quantumcumque simoniacus, erat verus Papa)* post hanc tamen constitutionem Papa simoniace electus non est Papa in veritate.

Whatever value, moreover, one might wish to give to the theory of those who, equating simony with heresy, maintain that it entails the nullity of the election — and understood in this manner, simony practiced by a regularly elected Pope in the conferral of benefices

would entail his deposition — whatever authority one might wish to draw from examples more or less well established — both as regards the facts themselves and as regards their causes — one would never arrive at any conclusion other than this: the question was canonically doubtful.

Now this doubt could not establish a juridical action.

The value that one could give to it could be none other than this.

If it remains doubtful in the external forum whether the election is valid, does not the Pope who emerges from this election himself become doubtful? And is this not a case for convening a council to deliver the Church from this uncertainty?

We answer, no:

Canonically, a Pope resulting from a dubious election is dubious when the doubt concerns the very substance of the election regarding its essential conditions, as they are *defined* by natural law or positive law. For example, if there had been serious reasons to believe that the election had been forced, or that the elect had not received two-thirds of the votes. On the observance of these conditions depends *certainly* the validity and consequently the reality of the election. If opposing cardinals seriously contest the freedom of electoral operations, or the number of votes obtained, etc., then the principle *factum non supponitur sed probatur* applies, the fact of a free and regular election must be established. And one finds for recourse to a council an incontestable principle of prosecution in certain laws. But here the doubt concerns this circumstance of simony, not as to the fact, but insofar as it may vitiate the election and render it null. The doubt is a doubt of law. In this case, in the absence of a positive decree resolving the question, one must govern one's conduct by this principle: *Lex dubia, lex nulla*. The elect is in possession of his election through the fulfillment of the *certain* conditions necessarily required; it is not the infraction of a *doubtful law* that can dispossess him of it. It is not a *doubtful law*, and thereby of no effect, that can serve as a foundation to require the declaration of nullity, and, consequently, to justify an act as serious as calling into question the reality of pontifical power in the holder of the Primacy, at the risk of causing disorder in the Church.

It is understandable, therefore, that in practice, a Pope emerging from a notoriously simoniacal election was or should be considered a true Pope, at least *juridically*.

Was he *really* so? — Nothing less certain.

It is manifest, indeed, that if such an election is null in itself, as one may theologically believe, the absence of a positive decree explaining divine law and allowing for the canonical pursuit of its invalidity would not suffice to validate it.

But it remains established that if the elect did not emerge as Pope from the operations of the Conclave, he could become one. How? — Through the acceptance of the Church.

It must be noted, indeed, that the initial right of election originally belongs to Christian society. The Sovereign Pontiffs were able to limit the use of this right, reserving its exercise

to the college of cardinals, but they did not intend to extinguish it, precisely for the case where it becomes the only resource to address this distress of society. The Church, in this case, does not supply jurisdiction, as some theologians wrongly say; it supplies the election through the oath of obedience given by the different parts of Christendom ²⁰.

Alexander VI had received these oaths of obedience, quite hesitant obedience it is true, not to say somewhat bargained for, always ready to withdraw itself, yet secure enough that Charles VIII, for example, resisted the suggestions of the cardinals and considered himself fortunate to be admitted to make his three reverences to Alexander VI, before kissing his feet.

We do not therefore think that the mere fact of simony, even as well established as was the shameful bargain to which Rodrigue Borgia owed his elevation, could justify Savonarola's initiative to have a council assembled. The juridical doubt was insufficient at the very moment of the election, and it even lost its value once the elect had been recognized by the Church.

In this case, the good faith of the Friar might well not be in question, his intimate and speculative conviction of the nullity of the election on these theological grounds, yet his conduct would nonetheless remain subject to criticism from the perspective of Christian prudence as well as from the standpoint of canon law. It would be easy to find a thousand excuses for him, as one grants to Joseph de Maistre, hardly suspect of sympathy for conciliar supremacy and who nevertheless wrote in his book *On the Pope* ²¹: "When all-powerful courtesans, monsters of crime and wickedness, taking advantage of public disorders, had seized power, disposed of everything in Rome, and placed on the throne of Saint Peter, by the most culpable means, either their sons or their lovers, I *expressly deny that these men were Popes*. Anyone who would undertake to prove the contrary proposition *would certainly find himself greatly hindered*." De Maistre adds in a footnote that he could defend or explain this paragraph, but that he prefers to relinquish it.

Thus one could defend Savonarole, explain his conduct, show that, if certain disorders are capable of arousing, across centuries of distance, such violent indignation in a Pontifical like Joseph de Maistre, it is not difficult to understand what holy furies they must have kindled in the deeply religious and proud soul of Savonarole, when he saw them with his own eyes, when this corruption came beating at the walls of Saint Mark's and imperiled not only his life, but the submissive dignity of his religious obedience and the honor of his faith.

But this is all that would be permissible to explain this act of his life: ultimately, one would have to do as Joseph de Maistre did—one would have to abdicate it.

²⁰ {org. 1} This principle applies even after the Bull of Julius II, in the case where the secret of the simoniacal transaction would be so well kept that one could not juridically prove it.

²¹ {org. 2} *On the Pope*, t. II, chap. VII.

We have established that this fault need not be explained, nor should we accuse Savonarola of it or justify him for it: this fault, he did not commit it²².

Finally, if one were to understand that all the grievances enumerated in the Letters to the Princes are invoked as grounds for deposition, one would also have to include these: simony in the selling of benefices, and the scandals given by Alexander VI. Here, the assertion would be of the utmost gravity.

It is not merely of Gallicanism that the author of the Letter to the Princes could be accused. Certainly, for the Gallicans, these crimes might suffice to *provoke the deposition of Alexander VI* by a council, but they never claimed to say that the Pope, by the mere fact of his disorders, lost his power and his Primacy. Such a proposition does not appear very different from these, of which it is merely the practical application:

1° If a Pope, a bishop, a prelate is in a state of mortal sin, he is neither Pope, nor bishop, nor prelate.

2° If the Pope is wicked and reprobate like Judas, he is a devil, a thief, a son of perdition, and in no way the head of the Church militant, since he is not even a member of it.

3° If a Pope lives in a manner contrary to Jesus Christ and the Prince of the Apostles, even if he was canonically and legitimately elected according to human election, he would nonetheless have entered by a way other than through Jesus Christ.

All propositions deriving from this common error that the loss of grace entails in itself the loss of all spiritual power and jurisdiction.

These propositions were condemned by the Council of Constance as heretical — they belong to John Huss — and Martin V, on this specific point, confirmed the sentence of the ecumenical assembly.

This is an argument that we point out to all those who wish to see in Savonarola's doctrine a kinship with that of John Huss²³. But we invite them beforehand to ascertain whether the doctrines they attribute to him were truly professed by him.

²² {org. 1} As we were completing this work, we were presented with a study by Dr. Commer on this question (*Jahrbuch für Philosophie und spekulative Theologie*, 1899). His conclusions differ from ours on several points: 1° In that he supposes that the fact of the simoniacal election is invoked in these Letters *as a sufficient and true reason* for its nullity; 2° In that, after having established theologically and canonically that this election was considered doubtful, he believes Savonarola to be justified by reason; 3° Although he carefully distinguishes the theological point of view from the canonical point of view, he seems to us to depart, in application, from this valuable distinction, at least as far as we have been able to follow his thinking amid citations from the greatest canonists accumulated without restraint. The venerable and learned professor will forgive us if we tell him that we have found nothing in his scholarly study that could modify our opinion.

THE GENERAL REFORM OF THE CHURCH WITHOUT THE POPE, DESPITE THE POPE

Finally, some have wanted to discover, in the invitation addressed to Christian princes to assemble a council, an anti-Catholic and revolutionary act to accomplish the general reform of the Church without the Pope and against the Pope, which was the surest way to compromise the cause of true Reform²⁴.”

Before leveling such a grave accusation against the author of the Letters to the Princes, it would have been prudent and equitable to ascertain clearly whether these Letters are indeed concerned with *the General Reform of the Church*. Had the accusers committed themselves beforehand to *suffer the punishment due to the fault* with which they charge Savonarola, it is reasonable to believe that they would have shown somewhat less levity or carelessness in making such an accusation, and if they had been somewhat concerned with their obligation in this regard to *provide evidence*, there is no doubt that they would have inquired more carefully into the means of supporting their indictment, and they would have been led to give somewhat more attention to the sole document capable of motivating a judgment. Since this examination does not seem to have been conducted with the circumspection and seriousness that equity demands, we must revisit it with that freedom which holds that the verdicts of history must always remain subject to revision²⁵.

What, then, is the purpose assigned to the convocation of a council in these Letters?

It is a matter of *providing relief for this particular distress* of Christendom. *The Church is without a Pontiff, the barque of Peter without a Pilot*. “Therefore, on behalf of Almighty God from whom you hold your empire, I beseech and implore you, Most Serene Caesar, among all the defenders of the Christian Republic, to set aside all earthly rivalry and dissension, and to employ your care toward the convocation of a solemn council, which may without delay provide relief for *such* a disaster so deadly to souls *and rescue the imperiled vessel*

²³ {org. 1} The comparison has been made on this particular point by M. PERRENS (*Life of Savonarola*, vol. III, ch. IX, p. “In his letters he endeavors to develop this maxim of John Huss that the Pope is not the true successor of the chief of the apostles if his morals are not similar to those of Peter.” If you want proof, continue reading: “He showed that Alexander VI was not even Christian, and that consequently he could not be considered as pope, and that he should be deposed as soon as possible.” — This is Hussism! — O improvised theologians!

²⁴ {org. 2} PASTOR, *Op. c.*, t. V, p. 209, 210.

²⁵ {org. 1} We do not intend to make, on this account, a special grievance against M. Pastor. Fr. Bartoli (*Apologia* c. XIX, p. 914) while doubting the authenticity of these Letters, maintains that their author does not request the deposition of Alexander, but solely the reform of the Church. “This is false!” simply states Fr. Marchese. He could have added: This is quite clumsy as an apology.

of Peter.” — And to the King and Queen of Spain: “Hasten the convocation of a Council to put *an end to a distress so deadly to Christian society.*”

One cannot claim that these terms are vague enough to apply to the general situation of the Church. They are determined by the context itself. This invitation is framed in the letter by the author’s declaration that there is no longer a Pontiff, and by the obligation he assumes to prove Alexander’s heresy. It is therefore to this fact that it refers, it is to this particular misery that help must be brought. If any doubt still remained, it would be sufficient to dispel it by reading the text of the Letter to the King of France where we find the most precise formula capable of satisfying all requirements: “On behalf of Almighty God, I warn and adjure you to employ all your care to the convening of a council... *so that the Church may not perish for want of a Pastor at the great peril of souls.* Ne tanto animarum periculo, sine pastore labatur Ecclesia.”

No other purpose is proposed for the activity of the Council than to give a pilot to the bark of Peter which no longer has one. And this is not the least proof that these Letters could not have been the work of a theologian “imbued with the false theory of the supremacy of the Council.”

What! here is a Gallican who professes that the Council is superior to the Pope, that if the Pope, when so required, refuses to convene it, when disorder is everywhere in the Church, when corruption threatens all souls, it can meet despite him, and accomplish without him, beginning with him, this reform which he refuses; here is a Gallican who turns out to be Savonarola, that is to say, a man who, since his voice has been able to be heard, has not ceased to condemn the vices of the clergy and the people, to call with all his wishes for the moment when the morality of the Gospel will be restored to honor, the hour when one will find again “Prelates who are of gold, even if the chalices must be of wood” and in an appeal to the council, he says nothing of this work to be accomplished, he has not a word for this reform which occupies his every thought and takes his entire life! After having spoken of the state of the Church, invaded by leprosy from head to foot, he determines as the sole objective for the meeting of the assembly of Bishops, to give a Pope to the Church which no longer has one!!! — What explanation can be given for such an oversight? unless — that, precisely, Savonarola is not Gallican, but Roman, — that he knows that the Reform of the Church could not be accomplished without the Vicar of Christ and despite him, — that if he asks for a council without a Pope and outside of a Pope, it is solely because there is no longer a Pope, — that he reserves for the hour when the conciliar assembly will have addressed this affliction of the Church and given a Pilot back to the fisherman’s vessel, to entrust to him this supreme prayer — that he believes that only Peter’s boat carries, with the authority of Christ, the hope of Redemption, the salvation that is through the Gospel, and with the Gospel the fortune of Christianity?

Certainly he speaks at the beginning of this letter about corruption, about vices that reign in the Church of God, but he mentions them only to prepare minds for the revelation of this extreme disorder, punishment for all the others, that there is no longer a Pontiff,—just as he speaks of the simony and other scandals of Alexander VI to lead to that other revelation

he makes of his total heresy. This is the logic of his thinking. But when it comes to establishing a goal for the action of the council, he defines no other than that of giving a Pastor to the Church “*ne sine Pastore labatur Ecclesia*” [lest the Church falter without a Pastor]. Why once again? if not because he professes that the activity of a council without a Pope, legitimate in this case, would become usurpatory if it dared to claim to cross these limits to extend further.

But then what is anti-Catholic in such an undertaking? Would it be the means employed that would be revolutionary: the recourse to secular Princes?

On this point it would not be useless to come to an understanding.

When Christians, steadfast believers and otherwise great servants of the Church, speak, due to present circumstances, of liberating the spiritual society from the guardianship of princes, which has become too easily oppressive, they are inflicted with the epithet of *Liberals*, which can mean anything, since people have developed the habit of making it signify, most of the time, the opposite of what it actually means. When, on the other hand, equally valiant Christians call upon this protection for the good of the Church, there are still minds that censure their conduct, accusing them of subjecting ecclesiastical power, which derives immediately from Christ himself, to secular power.

We must nevertheless recognize that while *temporal* princes have on this account no right to intervene in Church matters, as *Christian princes*, they have duties and rights that are recognized by the Church itself, and which are the very foundation of the *Christian State*.

What were these rights and duties in the present question, that is to say, for the convocation of a council, in the case where the Church is without a Pastor, as a result of the heresy of the Pontiff? — Let us consult Sylvester Prieras, an intransigent defender of Pontifical supremacy, who has been reproached precisely — though unjustly — for opposing all of Luther’s reasonings with this single argument of authority²⁶.

In these extreme circumstances, the mission of convening the council falls first and foremost to the cardinals, who are specially associated by the Pope with the general government of the Church, by virtue of these words pronounced at their creation: “*Estote Fratres mei et Principes mundi.*”

This right then belongs to the Patriarchs and primates, if they are Catholic, especially to the patriarch of Constantinople, if he is in communion with the Roman Church.

In the third place, to the Emperor and then to the Christian Kings, then to other Princes; finally to any faithful who by his power, his wisdom, the authority he possesses, the esteem he enjoys, can effectively employ himself in this task. This, by virtue of the principle that regularly in such a case power descends from the superior to the inferior through the negligence of the former.

²⁶ {org. 1} *De irrefragabili veritate Romanæ Ecclesiæ*, c. XI.

If the cardinals are omitted in the Letters to the Princes, one could therefore plead their negligence, but this judgment would perhaps not be in perfect conformity with the facts. It is more accurate to say that Savonarola knew the cardinals' thinking on this point.

During the occupation of Rome by Charles VIII, the Bishop of Saint-Malo, Briçonnet, wrote to the Queen on January 13, 1495: "Our Holy Father is more indebted to the King than one might think. For, if the said lord had wished to comply with the majority of My Lords the Cardinals, they would have made another Pope, with the intention of reforming the Church as they claimed." — "With the King," recounts Commynes, "were well eighteen cardinals and others who all wanted to hold a new election and that the Pope be put on trial. Twice the artillery was ready, as the highest-ranking have told me, but always the King in his goodness resisted"...

And, it must be noted, in this Letter there is no appeal to Christian Princes *to convoke* the council themselves. Cajetan does not hesitate to say that in this instance, the Emperor can convene the ecumenical synod, for it is understood that he does so only as vicar of the Church. But how well the terms used by the author of the Letters define this role, its nature and its limits! He implores them to *procure* a council, to hasten a council, "*procurare, maturare*," they have no authority to convoke it, but they are bound to devote their care to it, acting as Christian princes, by *procuration* of the Church. It is not said that they must assemble it themselves, but that they should endeavor to have it assembled. How, then, can one see in this a thought that is not of Catholic essence and that does not fully safeguard the true doctrine concerning the authority of the Priesthood vis-à-vis the Empire.

Finally, as we have said, if one considers the Letter to the Princes in light of the circumstances in which it was written, the goal that its author proposes and the means he advocates, far from being regarded as *a revolutionary act*, can be considered on the contrary as *a reactionary movement* in favor of Pontifical Primacy.

Charles VIII, drawn to Italy by Julian della Rovere, had not followed through on the designs of the implacable cardinal: he had not "undertaken the deposition" of Alexander VI, as Briçonnet put it, and had postponed his reform projects. He had done well "to compromise," says Commynes, "for he was young and poorly accompanied to conduct so great a design as reforming the Church." The Cardinal of Saint Peter in Chains, seeing his hopes dashed, had one of those violent fits of anger that the King had great difficulty appeasing.

Upon his return from Naples, the latter received a visit from Savonarola. The Frate threatened him with divine wrath for having abandoned the work for which God had chosen him, and predicted that if he tried to evade divine orders, he would endure trials greater than any he had experienced up to that point.

Once back in France, did Charles VIII remember Savonarola's predictions? Did the misfortunes that befell him bring to mind the Reformer's threats? What is certain is that he prompted a consultation with the Sorbonne on the following questions:

1° Is the Pope obliged to convene a council every ten years, by virtue of the decrees of Pisa and Constance, and can he be compelled to do so now because of the serious disorders reigning in the Church?

2° If he [the Pope] obstinately refuses, do the dispersed members of the Church have the right to gather, with the assistance of Christian Princes, and would they, in this case, represent the universal Church?

3° If the other Princes refuse to involve themselves, can the King take it upon himself to convene them, in order to provide for the general needs of the Church?

The Faculty responded affirmatively to these three questions by an act of January 11, 1497.

Certainly, these are decisions sanctioning means that today, rightfully, we would qualify as revolutionary. But is it appropriate, through a retroactive effect of the Vatican definitions, to apply to the error of these doctors who were believers, true sons of the Church, this mark of infamy? Is it not a more certain Catholic sense to draw inspiration from the example of Leo XIII, who, speaking of Bossuet, forgets certain opinions—debatable then, condemned since—to remember only the services rendered by him to the very unity of the Church.

Be that as it may, the consultation of the Sorbonne regarding the convening of a council, along with the doctrines that inspired it, must have been known in Florence before the drafting of the letters to the princes, through the report of the Florentine ambassador to the French court. The Republic was still engaged in French politics, and certainly the plan to convene a council amid the circumstances in which the Church found itself could not go unnoticed. Note that at the time when Savonarola had to draft these letters (March 1494), the Florentine orator at the king's court was Joachim Guasconi, an intimate friend of Dominique Mazzinghi, formerly gonfalonier of justice, currently one of the ten of Balie, and a fervent *piagnone*. Mazzinghi must therefore have known through Guasconi, both as a friend and as a member of Balie, what was being prepared in France, and it is not believable that he would have said nothing about it to the Frate, especially considering that Dominique Mazzinghi was specifically charged by the prior of Saint Mark to correspond with the orator in Paris, so that the latter might prepare the way and bring Charles VIII to actively employ himself for the convening of a council.

Now, it is not without interest to compare the decision of the Paris doctors with the letters to the Christian princes.

If the other princes refuse to lend their hands to it, said the Faculty, the King of France can take it upon himself to convene the council.

Would this not ultimately lead to a national council, which would easily claim to be ecumenical? The project was pregnant with schismatic consequences.

Not a national council, *but a solemn council*, the letters state. And to succeed in this, with what ardor he entreats all these princes to forget all their personal ambitions, to set aside

everything that is not the salvation of the Church, to act in concert, with unity, and all together *unanimiter, concorditer, so that the Church does not remain any longer without a Pastor.*

If the Pope, when so requested, refuses to convene the assembly, the Sorbonne continued, the dispersed members of the Church have the right to gather. In this case, they will represent the universal Church and may undertake the general reform of Christianity.

To this proclamation of the supremacy of the council assembled without the Pope and despite the Pope, the author of the letter to the princes substitutes the only unitary principle that allows for the gathering of the council apart from the Pope and without a Pope, which is the case where the holder of pontifical primacy has placed himself outside the Church and has, through heresy, forfeited his supremacy.

Thus Savonarole, instead of making himself guilty of a revolutionary act, would have merely taken up, following the teaching of the purest Roman doctrine, a revolutionary project, in order to rectify it and direct it toward papal supremacy. He would have done nothing, as we have said, but accomplish a *regular though exceptional act* in the life of the Church, which assumes, due to the circumstances in which it occurred, the character of a reaction against conciliar supremacy.

This is what the most attentive and scrupulous study reveals. This document, we may conclude, does not emanate from a Gallican theologian, but from a Roman theologian: it makes sense only through the theory of pontifical supremacy: it is to this doctrine that it is attached, and in writing it, Savonarole did not have to renounce any of the articles of his previous doctrine.

Why, among all those who have spoken of Savonarole, was this not realized earlier? The matter cannot seem strange from historians' perspective.

It is not enough to be in full and complete possession of the documents concerning the history of this man, and to have established, beyond doubt, the sequence of events in his life, in order to be able to make a fair and true judgment on the Christian morality of his actions. It is not surprising that those who do not have the Catholic faith, despite the efforts of the most sincere and conscientious impartiality, do not manage to speak of him with competence and full fairness. But even Catholic historians will find it difficult to appreciate him as they should. The judgment to be made about him falls within the realm of theology and law more than history. And elementary notions or general syntheses are not sufficient to resolve questions whose solution often depends on the most precise determinations of doctrine. We do not even know if incomplete data are not, in this case, more harmful than useful, for there is no weapon so dangerous, we believe, and with effects so pernicious as principles insufficiently understood in all their extension and exceptions, and blindly applied to facts that do not fall under them.

This is why a historian²⁷, for example, who has rendered notable services to the cause of the Florentine apostle, whose research did not stop with the success of his History of Savonarola, and whose entire life remains devoted to this great memory, could write, summarizing these Letters to Princes: *“He intended to plead his own cause before the council, to publicly condemn the abominable life and morals of Alexander Borgia, and to have the election of this Pope annulled as simoniacal. He thus wanted to demonstrate that the heretical and unfaithful Sovereign Pontiff was the principal cause of all the evils of the Church.”* In which one can observe, based on what we have shown, that there are almost as many inaccuracies as there are assertions. Even this last proposition—that he wanted to demonstrate that heresy was the principal cause of all the evils of the Church—although defensible in itself, one cannot say that it conforms with Savonarola’s thought. The latter does not tell us that the Pontiff’s heresy was the cause of all the disorders in the Church, but that it was the result and punishment of them: *“Idcirco Dominus adversus propter intolerabilem foetorem, jamdudum nullum in Ecclesia pastorem esse permisit.”*

It is less easy to explain how theologians have shared in the common error, except that they allowed themselves to be influenced by a preconceived judgment, that they approached the study of this document as a matter now closed, that they stopped at the fact of the request for a council outside the Pope, without examining closely enough the reasons that motivated it. And certainly there were twenty chances against one that such an approach was inspired by the doctrine of conciliar supremacy. What has not been examined is whether the single chance left to the theory of papal supremacy might not be verified here.

The acts of Savonarola, his words—and most of his words are acts—demand to be examined in detail. One must weigh each of his words, omit no circumstance of his actions. For this Frate is a master of doctrine. Not only does he know it; but he lives it as well. Nothing in his conduct is left to chance or to the whim of the moment. Behind each of his determinations, there is a principle of theology or law. Do not judge him by general laws; he guides himself only by exceptional principles. By this, we do not mean to say that he places himself outside or above common law. No. The rules to which he appeals are accepted by the best Catholic doctors; what makes them exceptional are only the circumstances and facts that they command in law—and that condition their application.

Until now, we have demonstrated only *that in doctrine and in law*, the Letters to Princes are unassailable. The definitive judgment to be made on them still requires another important element. A question must be resolved! — *In reality*, was Alexander VI a heretic²⁸, unfaithful, no longer even believing in God? What words, what facts, what crimes, what monstrous practices perhaps, could make one believe this? Unheard-of wickedness, Savonarola said, the revelation of which would cause stupefaction and horror throughout mankind. —

²⁷ {org. 1} VILLARI. History of Savonarole, t. II, p. 313.

²⁸ {org. 1} Op. c., t. VI, p. 131.

Which amounts to asking what proofs should the accuser have provided to support such an accusation?

The Friar took his secret to the grave!

We need not supplement it here. It is enough for us to have determined the precise point of debate. In the solution to come, the first and largest place is given to historical research.

M. Pastor said of Alexander VI²⁹: “This man placed like a sentinel on an elevated post, to save what could be saved, contributed more than any other to the progress of corruption in the Church. The life of this sensualist given to the most unbridled sensuality was, in all respects, a contradiction to the teachings of Him whom he was called to represent on earth. Until his last day, he never ceased to display to all, with absolute shamelessness, his guilty existence. And yet, a fact worthy of note, in purely religious questions, Alexander VI did not give rise to any well-founded criticism, and never could his most bitter enemies formulate against him a precise accusation of any significance. The purity of religious doctrine remained intact. It seems that Providence wanted to demonstrate that while men are capable of harming the Church, they are incapable of destroying it.”

If one wishes to speak of the official teaching guaranteed by the Spirit of God, these lines could not raise the slightest objection. But it is manifest that Savonarola’s accusation does not call into question the infallibility of the Pontiff, but the faith of the Christian. The special divine assistance, which is granted to him for his functions as supreme Doctor, does not at the same time ensure his own belief. He can infallibly define what must be believed, without giving to the truths that he proposes to the faith of the Church, that personal adherence of his intelligence, which presupposes this supernatural grace of God, common to all believers.

The vices of Alexander VI, — and one knows that on this point the most audacious imagination has little chance of exceeding reality! — this “tyranny of the demon of lust” under which he lived increasingly enslaved until the end, cannot in themselves be an accusation against his faith. But who does not know that the natural result of “this unbridled sensuality” is the loss of “all moral sense,” the blinding of the mind, and a silent hostility against God and everything that recalls Him to human conscience, which lead by degrees, in a soul thus mired in voluptuousness, to the loss of all belief³⁰? Would

²⁹ {org. 1} Savonarole, we believe, before solemnly denouncing Alexander’s heresy, must have addressed private admonitions to the Pontiff. These documents, if they exist, have not yet been brought to light. It is easy, however, to find traces of this thought in the letter he wrote to him after the assassination of the Duke of Gandia (July 17, 1497) where he preaches to him faith in God, not merely confidence, but first and foremost faith “which relies on innumerable miracles and the testimony of martyrs,” which, founded on the power and goodness of God, communicates to the human soul an incomparable greatness.

³⁰ {org. 1} le ler q. CLIII. a. 5.

one think, perchance, that Rodrigue Borgia's private faith was sheltered from these assaults because, to all his crimes, he added the forfeit of displaying his shame on the chair of Saint Peter? Is it quite certain that no testimony remains that he *attempted to justify his life* by principles contrary to the morality of the Gospel, with the same audacity that led him to legitimize, through authentic though secret bulls, the adulterous and sacrilegious fruits of his own disorders? Would there not remain traces of accusations similar to those of Savonarola?...

Once again, the answer lies with historians. A testimony cannot be supposed, but Mr. Pastor has told us enough to make perfectly acceptable all the revelations that might henceforth be made.

We have finished:

May God deign to bless these pages and make them not without use to the cause of his servant Brother Girolamo Savonarola.

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