

Beyond the Inquisition: Ambrogio Catarino Politi and the Origins of the Counter-Reformation**Giorgio Caravale****Publication Date**

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GIORGIO CARVALE *Translated by Don Weinstein*



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of the Counter-Reformation

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Translated by Don Weinstein

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*To Giovanni,
because to look at the world with his eyes
is to discover something new every day*

C O N T E N T S

	Preface	ix
	Acknowledgments	xiii
	List of Abbreviations	xv
1	Formation and Religious Choices	1
2	Origins of the Polemic against Heresy	45
3	Catarino Politi and the Spirituali	96
4	The First Phase of the Council of Trent	141
5	From Anti-Savonarolism to Anti-Machiavellianism	174
6	A Controversial Memory	201
	Notes	213
	Bibliography	375
	Index of Names	413

P R E F A C E

The protagonist of this book, the Sieneſe jurist Lancellotto Politi, better known as Ambrogio Catarino, figures moſt prominently in ſixteenth-century Italian historiography as the author of *Compendio d'errori et inganni luterani* (Compendium of Lutheran Errors and Deceptions), written in 1544 in reply to the beſt ſeller of the Reformation in Italy, the *Beneficio di Criſto crocifisso* (Venice, 1543). The Sieneſe Dominican was preſented by Carlo Ginzburg and Adriano Proſperi as the antihero of their *Giochi di pazienza* (Un ſeminario ſul *Beneficio di Criſto*, 1975), a fascinating and ſuggestive volume in which Politi's *Compendio* was read as a litmus teſt to verify the accuracy of the hypotheſis of the two editions of the *Beneficio di Criſto*. Politi's name has appeared many times in ſtudies dedicated to the diffusion of heretical doctrines on the Italian peninsula. He has for the moſt part, however, been connected to the image of heretic hunter, implacable adverſary of Italian heterodoxy; and his writings have been read more to call attention to the doctrines and texts refuted by him than to comprehend his own thought.

The aim of my reſearch has been to lift the veil that obſcures Politi as a perſon, reſtoring him to the complexity of his biographical and intellectual journey. In ſome reſpects the outcome of my work has been ſurprising. From his entry into the Dominican order in 1517, after a ſudden Savonarolan conversion that diverted him from an incipient career as a jurist and lawyer, Politi diſplayed an independence of judgment and freedom of thought unuſual for a novice. His maturity and ſolid juridical formation reinforced in him a character both independent and headſtrong, encouraging a path of doctrinal and theological learning free of the rigid precepts of the ſchools of theology. The ſtrong Marian devotion inherited from his Sieneſe birth ſoon guided him to the reading of works extraneous to Dominican culture, ſuch as thoſe of Duns Scotus and William of Ockham, which Politi took in avidly

along with the writings of Saint Thomas. The assignment to compose one of the first polemical responses to the Augustinian friar Martin Luther was given to him in 1520 while he was still intent on completing his theological studies. He finished them under the pressure of the controversy. The eclecticism of his thought and his polemical instinct led him more than once to bitter encounters with leading members of his order, among them Cardinal De Vio and the Master of the Sacred Palace Bartolomeo Spina. The clamorous accusations of heresy directed against him by Spina between 1542 and 1546, then repeated in the Council of Trent by his fellow Dominican Domingo de Soto during the controversy on the certitude of grace, not only testifies to the level of hostility that surrounded him but also offers a measure of Politi, a figure who could not be reduced to any one system, who did not adhere to any single one of the opposing theological schools (Thomist, Scotist, Dominican, Benedictine, Jesuit, etc.).

In the same years in which he began to distinguish himself as the most pugnacious anti-Lutheran polemicist, we find him absorbed in spiritual conversations with Vittoria Colonna and involved in intense epistolary exchanges with Jacopo Sadoletto. He was also a fervent admirer of Cardinal Gasparo Contarini, of whose doctrinal positions he became, at least for a time, a faithful advocate. Until the publication of *Beneficio di Cristo* announced the beginning of a phase of open proselytism and propaganda by the Viterbo group, Politi, despite his severe tone, left open a channel of dialogue and argument, convinced that it was both possible and necessary to find a meeting point even on those doctrinal questions that Luther had arbitrarily appropriated. And in the years that followed he never abandoned the hope of leading the most convinced dissenters back to orthodoxy. His aspirations and his attitude solidified in the course of his activity in the early 1540s in the noninquisitorial resolutions of numerous cases of heresy, activity Politi carried on with the collaboration of some members of the Company of Jesus, above all Alfonso Salmerón. This strategy tended toward the art of persuasion rather than the use of weapons of repression in order to lead heretics back to Catholic orthodoxy. It deliberately offered an alternative to inquisitorial activity, moving “beyond the inquisition.” In addition, while the *Beneficio* was directly opposed by

the *Compendio*, at the Council of Trent Politi shared his battles with personages such as the Benedictines Luciano degli Ottoni and Isidoro Cucchi da Chiari, colleagues of Benedetto da Mantova, author of the *Beneficio*. Readers will be able to judge for themselves whether these apparent contradictions are the fruit of an intellectual incoherence, a circumstantial opportunism, or instead, as I believe, a reflection of the variety and fluidity of doctrinal options that characterized the religious crisis of the 1540s and of the fragility of those historiographical interpretations that have used excessively schematic categories (e.g., the *Intransigenti* and the *Spirituali*) to study the furious encounters of those years on central themes of religious debate such as justification and the certitude of grace.

Certainly, Politi never hid his career ambitions and always succeeded in winning the sympathy and benevolence of the most influential personalities in the circles he chose to frequent, beginning with the popes he had the fortune to know. After all, his ecclesiology, centering on papal primacy, could only lead him in that direction. His choices and his comportment were, however, almost always guided by his innermost convictions, which he did not know how to forswear, even in the most delicate quandaries of his life's course. In the single case in which he was constrained to rethink in critical terms a choice made in his youth, that of his Savonarolan loyalties, which engaged him in a long and tormented process of self-reflection, he found a solution only in the last years of his life. And only then, when the name of his old master Savonarola was paired with that of his bitterest enemy, Bernardo Ochino, did the circle of his existence seem at last to close.

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At the University of Notre Dame Press I received invaluable help from Stephen Little. He believed in this book from the beginning and made it possible to finance the translation and finally publish the book. Thanks also to the anonymous reader for useful comments and suggestions. This English edition would not have been possible without the trust accorded to me by Donald Weinstein. He not only welcomed the Italian edition of the book, but promoted the English version and translated the text. Donald Weinstein sadly died after completing the translation of this book. The entire community of scholars mourn the death of a master of Renaissance studies.

Finally and above all I offer my thanks to my wife, Stefania, for the feelings we have shared and for all that we have created together in these years. If this book has overcome the difficulties it has encountered this also has been due to her merits.

Rome, November 2015

ABBREVIATIONS

ACDF	Archivio della Congregazione per la Dottrina della Fede, Vatican City
ADR	Archives départementales du Rhône, Lyon
AGOP	Archivio Generale dell'Ordine dei Predicatori, Rome
ASF	Archivio di Stato, Florence
ASP	Archivio di Stato, Parma
ASR	Archivio di Stato, Rome
ASS	Archivio di Stato, Siena
ASV	Archivio Segreto Vaticano, Vatican City
ASVe	Archivio di Stato, Venice
BCS	Biblioteca Comunale, Siena
BNF	Bibliothèque National de France, Paris
BNFi	Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Florence (Firenze)
BPP	Biblioteca Palatina, Parma
CT	<i>Concilium Tridentinum: Diariorum, actorum, epistolarum, tractatum nova collectio</i> , Freiburg im Breisgau, 1901–61
DBI	<i>Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani</i> , Rome, Istituto dell'Enciclopedia Italiana, 1960–
MHSI	Monumenta Historica Societatis Iesu

Formation and Religious Choices

SIENESE LAWYER

Lancelotto Politi was born in 1484 to a prominent Sieneese family.¹ With the completion of his studies in *philosophia civilis* at the age of seventeen he was awarded the degree of Doctor of Laws and launched a brief but active career as a jurisconsult.² This culminated a few years later in his appointment as an attorney of the consistory. The few sources we have of his activities in the law create an impression of a marked tendency toward controversy and contentiousness.³ Just what family influences or features of personality shaped this tendency, so prominent throughout his career, are difficult to determine, but no doubt his Sieneese roots played a central role in directing his personal and religious choices. The high incidence of conflict that characterized Sieneese political life from the late fifteenth to the early sixteenth century shaped, to some degree, the character of this young, ambitious lawyer: first, the clashes between the Noveschi and representatives of the Monte del Popolo; and second, the long, violent struggles of France, Spain, and Florence for influence in Sieneese territory. If, on the one hand, these made Politi sensitive to the sources of political factionalism, on the other, the future Dominican controversialist learned from them the nature and value of passionate defense of a cause.⁴

The principal legacy Politi inherited from his fellow Sieneſe was their devotion to the Immaculate Conception.⁵ Politi's first literary effort gives ſignificant testimony to this. *La ſconfitta di Monte Aperto* of 1502, which he wrote ſhortly after he received the Doctor of Laws degree, is an homage to his native city as well as early evidence of the ſolid Marian devotion that he as a good Sieneſe had absorbed from adolescence.⁶ The choice of theme was quite deliberate, it appears. The battle of Montaperti of September 4, 1260, was Siena's greateſt victory over its eternal rival, Florence. This was an event ſo exceptional in the panorama of the city's foreign relations that in their accounts of the battle Sieneſe chroniclers uſed the ſame title employed by Politi, *La ſconfitta di Monte Aperto*, to focus attention on the defeat of the Florentines and to remind the Sieneſe that their own city was not invincible. It had been defeated before and could be defeated again. For ſo clever a young Sieneſe as Politi it was not difficult to transform the ſtory of the defeat, ſo often recited by his elders, into an opportunity for literary renown and the regard of his fellow citizens.

Without loſing ourſelves in the pages of a work of little originality or coherence, it is ſtill intereſting to note that from the very firſt lines of the preface ſome of the principal features of Politi's character and intellect are already on diſplay, namely, personal ambition—proudly oſtentatious in one place, maladroitly diſguised in another⁷—habitual predilection for the contradictory, and what might be called a viſceral need to preſent queſtions in polemical terms.⁸ It alſo ſhows his very powerful devotion to the Virgin, in whoſe name ſome years later he would broach the queſtion of his membership in the Dominican order. "Only then," he wrote, explaining to the reader the underlying meaning of his literary effort, "ſimply informing all and ſundry and eſpecially the city of Siena, of the benefit to be received from that illuſtrious and radiant queen of the whole world and of heaven, ſo that our Sieneſe compatriots may render ſincere homage to her with heart and voice, and ſo that to others ſhe may be the moſt famous example of profound clemency and compaſſion toward thoſe who humbly ſeek her help."⁹

We will be able to follow cloſely the means by which theſe three characteristics—his ambition, polemical ſtance, and Marian devotion—gave form and ſubſtance to Politi's professional and religious choices.

After traveling through Italy and France, visiting “all the famous schools [of theology], defending a thousand conclusions which he proposed for ‘public debate’ with the most famous jurisconsults of the time,”¹⁰ Politi decided to become a teacher. First at Siena, then at Rome, he served as professor of law. In those years he published his four principal juridical works. The *Commentaria super difficillima legis Filium* concerning testamentary inheritance was published in Siena in 1513 with a dedication to his pupil, Sixtus della Rovere, bishop of Saluzzo.¹¹ The *Tractatus substitutionum* was published several years later at Lyon but was probably written in 1513–14. It is a work of no particular originality and characterized by an acerbic and polemical spirit. In it Politi offered the first example of his personal intolerance of the moral corruption of the times and the vices that afflicted the church. Echoing the tone of the *Libellum ad Leonem X*, he protested the grave corruption of the church to the pope himself, to whom he had dedicated the book.¹² The *Commentaria super difficillima legis Re coniuncti de lege III* was published at Pavia in 1516 and centered on questions of inheritance and patrimony. It was dedicated to Leonardo della Rovere, the senior penitentialist.¹³ Finally a brief treatise, *De officio advocati*, was published in 1516 on the occasion of his nomination as consistorial advocate. Politi had moved to Rome in 1513 and beginning the following year occupied the chair of law at la Sapienza.¹⁴ There he had assiduously frequented the curial circle and dedicated his writings to high ecclesiastical personalities, shrewdly cultivating his relations with the papal court and eventually earning the esteem and benevolence of the pontiff. The young Siennese quickly harvested the fruits of his political shrewdness. In the course of a trip to Bologna in which he had followed the papal party on its way to a meeting with Francis I, king of France,¹⁵ he stopped briefly in Florence, where he was named consistorial advocate.¹⁶ It was then, to celebrate his nomination, that he wrote *De officio advocati* in which he instructed his colleagues in the qualities required to be a good consistorial advocate¹⁷ and in the vices that were to be avoided by all means: greed, pride, ambition, and servile timidity.¹⁸ These vices, together with the ostentation and curial abuses of Renaissance Rome, heightened his indignation and lack of sufferance for the worldly circles he frequented. His mounting dissatisfaction led

him to cut short his career as a jurist. In the sermons of Savonarola, encountered by chance during a brief sojourn in Florence, Politi was to find a remedy for his misgivings. Savonarola's invective against the corruption of the times and the moral degeneration of the clergy gave Politi an outlet for his growing anger and offered him the occasion for redemption. In the promise of Savonarola's message Politi saw a means for an effective synthesis of two seemingly irreconcilable but equally demanding needs: his longing for spiritual regeneration and his innate ambition.

FLORENCE

In these years Florence was home to Cardinal Giulio de' Medici, archbishop of the city and future Clement VII. Among those attracted by the cultured, serene ambience around this authoritative personage and his refined secretary, Giberti,¹⁹ was Nicholas von Schömberg. A few months before the arrival in Florence of Politi and the papal court Schömberg had decided to quit the office of master of the sacred palace, which he had held since 1510, to enter Medici service.²⁰ Politi was acquainted with Schömberg from the time they had both taught at la Sapienza,²¹ and it is likely that it was he who now introduced Politi to the court of Giulio de' Medici,²² arranging for his lodgings "in the house of a citizen who was one of those called Piagnoni."²³ Cardinal de' Medici, in fact, had never concealed his Savonarolan sympathies; on the contrary, he had gathered about him many exponents of the Piagnoni party. Politi himself was to recall, some decades later, the importance of those days in determining his future biographical and spiritual path.

In the time of Pope Leo X, when he [the pope] left Rome for a meeting with the king of France in Bologna, I, following the court, found myself in Florence with it, and for the few days we remained in that city I was assigned lodgings in the house of a citizen who was one of those called Piagnoni. As I was at leisure from my law studies and had nothing to do, my host set before me the sermons and other works of

frate Girolamo. Reading them to pass the time gave me no little consolation, and I thought them precious pearls.²⁴

Weary and bored by the verbose, arid books of law, Catarino discovered the “precious pearls” of the great Ferrarese preacher offered him by his unexpected host.²⁵ He did not disclose the man’s name, but it is very probable that this Florentine Piagnone was Girolamo Benivieni,²⁶ who in 1520 was to write a letter to the attorney Antonio Negusantio of Fano that Politi inserted as a preface to the *Apologia pro veritate catholica*.²⁷ During the long period of Cardinal Giulio de’ Medici’s residence in Florence, Benivieni often accepted pressing invitations from him, frequenting the table and court of the prelate, wishing to consult him even on political matters.²⁸ This hypothesis affords insight into Politi’s remarkably premature capacity to always put himself at the center of the political and cultural life of the places where he was living, to form influential friendships that could shield him from snares and dangers and at the same time guarantee him visibility and success.

Girolamo Benivieni, the older brother of the noted humanist Domenico,²⁹ who translated various Savonarolan works, was a clear example of a fervent Savonarolan perfectly integrated into the Medici mechanisms of power, reconciling his new political orientation in the regime with a coherent, passionate Piagnone profession of faith.³⁰ In 1513, immediately after the Medici restoration, he paid homage to the newly elected Medici pope, Leo X, with a *Frottola pro papa Leone in renovatione Ecclesiae* in which he expressed the hope that this very Medici might be the Papa Angelico foretold by Savonarola, capable of realizing through direct divine inspiration the greatly hoped for reform of the church. Despite the Medici crackdown following the conspiracy of 1522, Benivieni succeeded in saving his position and authority and was even proposed as the tutor of the future duke Cosimo.³¹

One of those who put Benivieni forward was, as previously indicated, the archbishop of Florence, Giulio de’ Medici, cousin of the newly elected Leo X and himself a Piagnone sympathizer and promoter of a policy of conciliation toward the supporters of the previous regime. Against the most intransigent Medici faction, it seems to have been Giulio who promoted an atmosphere of openness and dialogue even

in those most delicate moments of Florentine history when extremists violently attempted to reverse the political direction of the city and involved him personally. The first hard challenge to his policy was the Boscoli-Capponi conspiracy of 1513. The Convent of San Marco came to be involved in the plot, and Giulio de' Medici was constrained to immediately dispatch a trusted agent reclaiming the right to inspect the interior of the convent. The incident in effect marked the beginning of the spiral of repression by Medici authority that culminated in the decrees of 1516–17. Yet, even in these changed circumstances, Giulio de' Medici gave proof of his moderation and liberality. Although perfectly aware of the Savonarolan overtones of the conspiracy, he did not give way to the new climate of repression many tried to impose. In December 1513 he contacted his nephew Lorenzo, asking him to monitor the repercussions of the preaching in Florence of the Franciscan Francesco of Montepulciano. He bid his correspondent not to exaggerate the matter and minimized its significance.³² Although it is not known what position the cardinal took with regard to the repressive action coordinated by Leo X, it is known that after the decrees of 1516–17 Giulio de' Medici continued to pursue his usual conciliatory policy, despite the general hostility of the more intransigent Medici supporters.³³

The cardinal continued to cultivate popular consensus supported by Benivieni, frequently yielding to demagogy while dealing with the Piagnoni sympathizers. The response came soon: "To manifest effectively his popular sympathies, he began to gather and preserve the relics of the friar's devotees [among whom Girolamo Benivieni]. They, celebrating and extolling the cardinal's generosity, went so far as to claim that this was the man and this was the moment of Florentine liberty prophesied by the padre."³⁴ When the Piagnone Francesco de' Ricci, inspired by a divine revelation, assigned Giulio de' Medici a salvific role in the destiny of the city, his investiture followed promptly.³⁵ Thus, in a city destabilized by continuous political upheavals, Giulio de' Medici and Girolamo Benivieni represented a guarantee of continuity. It was an association destined to endure for some time. As late as 1530, after the tragic siege of Florence and the cardinal's election to the papacy, Benivieni sent him an impassioned letter recording their common Savonarolan past: "Your Holiness can recall what I told you years

ago about fra Girolamo Savonarola and of the things he predicted.”³⁶ Benivieni’s appeals on behalf of a papal intervention to promote democratic reforms in view of the new Florentine government went unheeded. Yet, apart from its more ingenuous aspects, Benivieni’s proposal was evidence of the solid relationship between two personalities who, however diverse, nevertheless were linked by a common disposition toward conciliation. In a Florence characterized by hatreds and divisions, both of them sought to pacify hearts and promote Savonarolan aspirations for reform of the church.

Not until the failed conspiracy of the Orti Oricellari of 1522 did Giulio de’ Medici choose to end the dialogue permanently. A few months later, in Rome for the conclave that was to elect him pope, he left Florence in the hands of the cardinal of Cortona, Silvio Passerini, promoter of a definite hardening toward the Piagnoni opposition. Politi, however, was already distant from Florence. He had left the city before the conspiracy to begin a long peregrination to various Dominican convents of Tuscany. On March 6 he was already at the Convent of Santo Stefano in Pistoia. Politi left Florence barely in advance of his Medici “protector,” whether because he had had an inkling of the change of climate in Florence, or because of the hostility of the pro-Piagnoni party that had leaked into the conspiracy against Giulio de’ Medici, or because of the stiffening of Giulio’s attitude toward the Florentine Piagnoni. Politi, therefore, is to be connected by a double thread to Benivieni and Giulio de’ Medici. In the tutelage of the first and the protection of the second he had found the best way to consolidate his position as a Dominican novice in the difficult Florentine universe. The benevolence of the cardinal had given him the necessary protection for his Savonarolan conversion, making it possible for him to pass safely through the violent anti-Piagnoni storm that blew from Rome (and from Florence) in the years 1516 and 1517 when he decided to enter the Dominican order.

A SAVONAROLAN CONVERSION

Politi’s conversion, as I have indicated, apparently began casually but was expeditious: only fifteen months passed between his first reading

of Savonarola and his formal entry into the Dominican order. During the course of his travels in the entourage of Leo X, with its extended stop in Bologna while the pope and his court were engaged in negotiating and signing the concordat with Francis I, Politi had been able to continue the reflections he had begun in Florence between December 22, 1515, and mid-February 1516. In all likelihood this provided a new opportunity for him to deepen his contacts with the Piagnoni circles in which he had first begun to read Savonarola's works.³⁷

In these same months the followers of Savonarola had come under heavy repression. In the case of the monk Theodore, the Medici authorities began serious questioning of the Savonarolans' orthodoxy, demonizing their message as doctrinally irregular and increasingly dangerous to the stability of the political order.³⁸ Theodore filled his preaching with millenarian and prophetic themes and Savonarolan reminiscences that culminated in proclaiming himself the new Angelic Pope. It took no more than a few months of Theodore's preaching before the archiepiscopal vicar initiated a proceeding against him. In a short time (January 12 to February 11, 1515) this proceeding concluded with a public abjuration by the accused. But his incrimination was above all the occasion for increasing the severity of penalties that had been invoked after the Boscoli-Capponi conspiracy. On April 7, 1515, Leo X sent to Giulio de' Medici, archbishop of Florence, and to the chapter of Santa Maria del Fiore a breve in which he added to his condemnation of the monk Theodore a condemnation of two other preachers separate in time, Pietro Bernardino and Girolamo Savonarola. On May 4 of the same year, during the tenth session of the Fifth Lateran Council, two papal bulls were issued prohibiting in the archdiocese of Florence unauthorized preaching and confession, free interpretations of the sacred text, visions of the divine, and veneration of images and unauthenticated relics, with particular reference, naturally, to those of Savonarola.³⁹

During that same Florentine sojourn of December 1515 to February 1516, Leo decided to confront the question more comprehensively in the Provincial Synod of Florence that was to be convoked in October 1516.⁴⁰ The pontiff intended to obtain a condemnation of

Savonarola that could be used as a model and be ratified by the Fifth Lateran Council sitting in Rome since 1512. But this objective was only partially achieved. In the eleventh session of the council, on December 19, 1516, the bulls *Supernae maiestatis praesidio* and *Dum intra mentis arcana* approved a disciplinary norm for all preachers. It was decreed that preaching of the Gospel conform to patristic interpretation and that it avoid any suggestion of future calamities and tribulations, setting a clear limit to Piagnoni friars and their followers. Next, in January 1517, the Florentine synod condemned the preaching and works of Francesco da Meleto, with that author's abjuration and the burning of his writings.⁴¹ Although the vigorous Piagnoni reaction that followed was unable to prevent the issuing of other repressive provisions, it did manage to avoid the explicit condemnation of Savonarola.

Politi was to offer a fundamental contribution on that occasion. As he himself emphasized, this was the context in which he made his final decision to abandon his activity as a jurist and enter the Dominican order, becoming "[Savonarola's] partisan and defender against all who impugned him."⁴² One can easily imagine him dedicating himself to employing all his rhetorical and polemical abilities at the side of the most intransigent Savonarolans of San Marco, above all Luca Bettini⁴³ and Zaccaria di Lunigiana.⁴⁴ At that moment the profound diversity of attitudes toward the Medici regime disappeared in the common battle in defense of the friar's memory. Politi's letter of May 5, 1520, to the young Cervini, the future pope Marcellus II, gives us the first testimony of the spiritual motives that had brought him to the decision to enter the order three years earlier. The specific purpose of that letter was to convince the young jurist to follow his path, abandoning the "secular" road for that which was "more secure," that is, the "religious" road.⁴⁵ Politi's argument, however, despite its mildly pedagogical tone, seems to have been a fairly accurate mirror of his sentiments and state of mind. The dissatisfaction he felt for the corrupt life that he saw around him and by which, as he had already indicated, he seems to have felt himself contaminated was one of the principal spurs that turned him toward the religious life. "If you humiliate yourself," he wrote, obviously referring to himself,

and live purely, serving [God] with good will, with assiduous prayer, fleeing sin and especially fleeing pride, vainglory and jealousy, and meditate frequently on death, worldly vanity, the mutability and instability of states, riches and honors, while maintaining a modest level . . . of living, of your actions and aims[,] . . . if you devote yourself to thinking often about God's incarnation, His passion, His life, His teaching, about those who have imitated it, of their flight from pleasures, and of the brevity and moderation of their sweetness, of the continuous suffering that followed them, of their flight from prophecies and how they are not suitable to future glory lasting forever . . . you will at last be able to set your mind on reaching that . . . treasure of purity and innocence of soul, of quiet and peace, that one acquires in our holy religion.⁴⁶

"To deny yourself and your will," "take the holy cross and follow it manfully with a humble, true and sincere heart": this was the path Politi had chosen, guided by the prophet Savonarola to enter the "Congregation of Saint Dominic," "the order of good men of wonderful discretion . . . founded to assist God's work, that is, the salvation of souls."⁴⁷ A path of purification by the abandonment of the vices of his former worldly life and a radical abjuration of the pride, vainglory, and envy that had characterized his activities and his ambitions as a jurist should have brought him to a profound, contemplative meditation and to the gift of eternal salvation.

However, this primary, sincere level of commitment and spiritual inspiration obscured another type of motivation, of which at first he probably was unaware ("Which, however, I didn't know myself," he later wrote of those years).⁴⁸ This was decidedly more materialistic and worldly than the first. Only some ten years later did it reveal itself, and in an explosive, scarcely manageable way. The *Discorso contro la dottrina di fra Girolamo Savonarola*, published in 1548, was not only, or even primarily, an anti-Savonarolan work; it was heavily autobiographical. "In the first [part]," Politi began, "I will give all the reasons that persuaded me to believe, and for a long time nourished me in that faith."⁴⁹ The first fifty pages were entirely devoted to reconstructing the motives that had brought him to commit what in retrospect he

considered the greatest mistake of his life, that is, his decision to enter the lists on the side of the friar of Ferrara.⁵⁰ "I am not so indignant toward him as toward myself. What a wretch, what a fool I am!"⁵¹ In conclusion he added, "Everything I have written I have written against myself because I don't forgive myself anything, and I want to imitate the just man of whom it has been written 'The just man is the first to accuse himself.'"⁵² It was, then, an act of personal liberation rather than an exercise of controversial polemic that as the pages unfolded became an increasingly tormented discourse on self-knowledge and self-purification before God's severe tribunal.⁵³

The initial tone was no different from that of the letter to Cervini. Politi recalled his "ignorance" of doctrine and the guiding role of Savonarola's writings, as well as his former admiration for the friar. At that time, he wrote, "I knew nothing of Scripture nor was I familiar with the writings of the Holy Fathers and other ancient doctors."⁵⁴ For him, Savonarola's works had truly been an introduction to Christian teachings, which in a brief time had led him to convert to Christ: "In those readings I learned a great deal about Christian doctrine which I had not previously known, having always been immersed in secular studies, and, loving him as my teacher, step by step I became inclined to put all my faith in him."⁵⁵ To Savonarola's "teaching of the articles and dogmas of the faith[,] . . . which I was soon persuaded were good, holy and without error," were then added "the opinion and fame of his good and holy life,"⁵⁶ that is, the moral example of his life to which everyone who had known him could confidently give witness.⁵⁷

After this first glimmering of his doctrinal apprenticeship and admiration for Savonarola's teaching and moral qualities, the qualities of the friar that most engaged Politi's attention and imagination began to emerge. The "intrinsic light his innocence gave him," the "serenity of conscience" and "the great certainty he had of his prophecies"; in sum, if "the testimony he gave of himself" appeared, on the one hand, to be "excessive," on the other, it had intimidated him and "inclined him to believe it."⁵⁸ "The certainty of his prophecy" was so instilled in him that "there was scarcely a sermon that did not contain the same refrain" as to appear an irresistible siren, he maintained.⁵⁹ An ambitious young man dominated by "a curiosity stemming from human

pride,” so ambitious “that he wished to know the future, usurping that which belongs to God,” could only be attracted to that “little man” as to a magnet.⁶⁰

To be sure, Savonarola offered a solution to Politi’s concern for the reform of the church, which had preoccupied him since his first works on jurisprudence.⁶¹ “We cannot deny,” Politi wrote, “that the Church of Christ has for many many years suffered a very great malady due to poor governance and the bad example of many of its pastors and almost all the clergy, false monks and other friars regular.” “For this reason,” he added, “I have come to believe in the coming wrath of God, or, even sooner, the compassion he employs in sending tribulations, wars, plague, hunger and other misfortunes, so that many wretched sinners recognize their sins and come to penitence at least by way of a scourging, thus obtaining eternal salvation.”⁶² Still, it was not indignation alone that stimulated Politi’s conversion. There was something else that made the choice of Savonarola absolutely irresistible. “It is also worth considering,” he declared explicitly, “that [Savonarola] had prophesied on behalf of his Congregation, as if to say that it had been particularly elected by God for the renovation of the Church.”⁶³ To enter the Dominican order in response to the words of Savonarola signified for Politi the opportunity to have a special position in that project of church reform in which he believed so completely. What Politi found irresistible was the presumption of being in possession of truth, the certitude of belonging to a community of elect. It was just those “characteristics” that now, at a distance of three decades, he attributed with detachment and disdain to “the followers of fra Girolamo,”⁶⁴ those very qualities that had at one time “nursed him in that belief.”⁶⁵

Thus, in attempting to flee a worldly society and a legal profession now become corrupted by vices and money,⁶⁶ Politi, in his choice of a spiritual life, had let himself be guided by another set of worldly desires, namely, glory and personal ambition. “In their pride and self-love, their desire for glory and worldly honors are worse than love of material possessions, pleasures and carnal delights,”⁶⁷ he reflected bitterly some years later. “O foolish credulity paired with love of earthly glory.”⁶⁸ Political motivation played no part in this: “What did I have to do with Piagnoni or Arrabbiati, fool that I was?”⁶⁹ And even if his choice of Savonarola had

made it possible for him to enter one of the most prominent circles of Florence, that of Cardinals Medici and Schömborg and of Benivieni, his main goal was to ally himself with the party of “the just,” so as to assure himself of divine grace and eternal salvation. “Fra Girolamo repeatedly included in his preaching . . . that since all those who didn’t believe in him were wicked, infamous, reprobates, regarded as barbarians, tepid, and other peculiar names . . . he called them Arrabbiati. So, having already entered in that circle . . . I concluded with him that it was better to join the circle of the good, which however one entered by believing in fra Girolamo, than to be with his enemies.”⁷⁰

The “foolish credulity” that had induced him to identify himself with Savonarola,⁷¹ and convinced him that he had earned “the light of grace and . . . our salvation,” was also to be the greatest obstacle to his recovery of himself. Fear of losing that hard-won “salvation” held him “bound” for “a long time”: “I believed that whoever let go of that faith would return into the shadows, lose God’s grace, be reprobate, done for, singled out and barred from the ark when the flood came.”⁷²

The course of emancipation from Savonarola would be long⁷³ and exhausting,⁷⁴ an unremitting struggle to demystify the friar’s persona and his prophecies. “Those claimed certainties and declarations must not have been so powerful in me as to hold me in that belief,” Politi wrote. “When I challenged them there were, without doubt, unanswerable arguments to persuade me of the contrary, and I discovered them day by day.”⁷⁵ The memory of that deception was to mark strongly Politi’s mental universe. His self-enlightenment was, in the years that followed, his daily mission. Just as he had been deceived by Savonarola when he was “simple and ignorant,” so now many other “simpletons and ignoramuses” were at risk of being deceived by the new word of Lutheranism. Politi thus faced a dual task. He had to continue to work toward his own emancipation, demonstrating to himself the completely illusory nature of Savonarolan prophecy; and at the same time, he had to devote himself to keeping the faithful from being entangled in the Lutheran deception. In other words, just as he saw himself as having gone through a parabola from deception to liberation, so he now saw deception as the key to understanding the danger posed by the newly emerging heresies.

The more deeply he had invested spiritually and emotionally in the Savonarolan deception, the more painful and exhausting it was to free himself from it. Seven years later, in 1524, Politi was still spending his energy defending the value of Savonarolan prophecy against its detractors. At Siena he published an Italian translation of *Vita miracolosa della seraphica santa Catarina da Siena. Composta in latino dal beato padre Raimondo da Capua già maestro generale de l'ordine de' predicatori, et tradotta in lingua volgare dal reverendo padre frate Ambrosio Catherino da Siena del medesimo*.⁷⁶ To present it to readers he not only translated the Latin text with the usual dedicatory preface, but eliminated some parts⁷⁷ and added "some others (especially necessary for our times) drawn faithfully from the learned, divine letters of the same saint, or from other truly proven testimonies."⁷⁸ In particular, in the third part of the work, after chapters dedicated by Raymond Da Capua to Catherine's prophecies about the renovation of the church, the scourging of its leaders, the conversion of the infidels, the coming of a reforming pope, and more about the fruits of his work,⁷⁹ Politi inserted a long *Digressione del traduttore circa le verità profetate dalla sancta nostra, ove si assegnano dodici ragioni contra le opinioni dei contradictori*.⁸⁰ This was, in fact, a true and proper apology for prophecy: a careful listing of "twelve reasons . . . why the world does not believe in prophets, and particularly in the truth of the coming renovation of the Church,"⁸¹ with the single aim of demonstrating their lack of foundation. In several points Politi seemed to be echoing the treatise against the astrologers by his master Savonarola, recalling attention to the need to distinguish "the true" prophets from "the many lying prophets and those who expounded scripture out of their own heads,"⁸² in other words, from all those "men who earn their living with lies[,] . . . enemies and mockers of the wisdom of Christ, [who] invent many calumnies against true prophets and easily spread them among the crowd and, since the rabble are always ready to believe the worst, take faith from prophecies that are true."⁸³ Politi's *Digressione* thus presented itself as an apology for the true prophecy of Savonarola, developed in pages where the friar of Ferrara was vividly present although never explicitly named.⁸⁴

Unless we fully comprehend his investment in this idealized spiritual and psychological portrait it would be impossible to understand why Politi's conversion to anti-Savonarolanism was so passionate and violent, or why it took him so long to arrive at that point. I will try to follow the gradual evolution of this second conversion which, as late as 1541, during his stop in Florence on the way to France, had seen him engaged in searching for evidence and proofs that might discredit one of the numerous prophecies that had so fascinated him a couple of decades earlier.⁸⁵

There is, however, another significant indication that can be drawn from the *Discorso contro la dottrina . . . di fra Girolamo Savonarola*. In the preceding pages I briefly noted that in Politi's earliest writings his taste for the contradictory went well beyond that of a healthy competitive spirit. This predilection for controversy had found an important outlet in his youthful choice of legal studies and in his activity as a trial lawyer, but soon controversy became more than a career: it was the meaning and purpose of his life. Indeed, a passing note concealed among the pages of the *Discorso* gives us further perspective on this. "And the more I warmed to disputation," he wrote about his becoming a Savonarolan, "the more certain I became; it seemed to me that I always overcame my opponents with reasons I learned in his books."⁸⁶ This observation is especially interesting when we relate it to the historical moment Politi chose to enter the Dominican order. That moment, as already emphasized, coincided with one of the strongest campaigns against them that the followers of Savonarola ever had to face.⁸⁷ Above all, however, Politi's words reflected the characteristic mental mechanism of his methods: the intuition, the acquisition, the knowledge he drew from books was reinforced by his public polemic against the opponents of Savonarola, until his ideas were transformed into solid conviction. Grasping a concept, adhering to a doctrine, this was only the first step of a gradual process of self-conviction. Next he made a passionate and polemical defense of that idea or position but then challenged the idea or position, consolidating the new ideas he had acquired. In other words, Politi assimilated a given position by submitting ideas to counterargument, in the process strengthening his

convictions. Without it they would have been weaker (if they did not disappear altogether).

This was the complex of reflections and choices with which the relatively mature Politi (he was over thirty) entered upon his new calling. On April 5, 1517, precisely fifteen months after his first Florentine sojourn, he took the habit in the Convent of San Marco from the hands of fra Filippo Strozzi, vicar general of the congregation.⁸⁸ Politi's maturity, his brilliant academic career, and his fame as a jurist contributed to distinguishing him from the other, much younger novices. It is plausible that his superiors at San Marco allowed this impressive recruit certain freedoms not usually permitted by the rigid rules of the order. His novitiate, conducted by Niccolò Biliotti, the deputy master of the novices, was unusually brief. After barely six months,⁸⁹ he took his solemn vows.⁹⁰ His choice of name formally indicated his definitive passage to a new phase of life: the former jurist Lancellotto Politi now assumed the vestments of fra Ambrogio Catarino, having cast off the garments he had worn until that time.⁹¹

In the first period of his convent life Catarino Politi dedicated himself to the study of scripture and to the necessary preparations for preaching, as required by the rules of the order.⁹² However, he was exempted from following the regular course of theological studies (which generally could be pursued in one of the order's provincial houses or in the theological faculty of one of the neighboring universities), indicating that his training must have been very flexible and individualized.⁹³ The atypical nature of his novitiate and the early years of his life in the convent explain, at least in part, the particular characteristics of his theological formation. He had developed an ambiguous mode of thought difficult to categorize and variously interpreted by historians as generalist rather than eclectic or as original or incoherent. But there was another element. The important assignment Politi was given barely two years after his entry into the order, that is, the task of replying in writing to the young Augustinian Martin Luther, impeded the novice Politi from completing and perfecting his formation of a mature theological position. The anti-Lutheran *Apologia* produced in 1520 marked Politi's career in two respects: it linked his name with one of the early attacks by Rome against the Saxon monk,

and it saw to it that he completed his theological training in the context of controversy.

AGAINST LUTHER

Politi was later to recall in his autobiographical notes that his first theological work, written “when [I was] still a novice knight in the order” was “a juvenile pamphlet . . . against Luther’s heresy which I dedicated to Caesar.”⁹⁴ Exactly twelve days after Ambrogio Catarino Politi made his solemn profession in the Florentine Convent of San Marco (October 19, 1517) Luther, in a distant part of Catholic Europe, began circulating his theses among bishops and university colleagues. Thus in the very days in which the Dominican began a new religious life the German Augustinian friar opened Christianity’s greatest fissure. The destiny of these two men who at the time seemed so remote from each other was to intersect very quickly.

Between January and March 1517 Politi’s own German associates, together with Archbishop Alberto di Magonza, denounced the rebellious friar to the Roman authorities. In May 1518 the first trial,⁹⁵ actually a preliminary inquest, began against Martin Luther.⁹⁶ Master of the Sacred Palace Silvester (Mazzolini) Prierias was asked to prepare a first response to Luther’s ninety-five theses. A few weeks later, in June 1518, Prierias’s *In praesumptuosas Martini Lutheri conclusiones de potestate papae dialogus* was ready for the press.⁹⁷ Luther was ordered to appear in Rome at the beginning of July to answer five accusations of heresy. Prierias’s *Dialogus* and the court citation were sent to Augsburg, where since the spring of that year Cajetan was papal legate to the Imperial Diet with the explicit objective of obtaining financial support for a projected crusade against the Turks. Luther refused to obey the summons and, with the assistance of the principal elector, Frederick of Saxony, obtained permission to meet Cajetan in Germany. Meanwhile, the battle with Prierias continued at long range, via *replicationes* and *responsiones*.⁹⁸ While Cajetan took the path of what has been described as “paternalistic” dialogue,⁹⁹ Prierias instead chose to launch a frontal attack.

The negative reactions that Prierias's *Dialogus* and the successive stages of his anti-Lutheran polemic aroused in Roman circles have been noted. The decision to receive Luther's theses as conclusions instead of as debating points as Luther intended seemed all too blatant. Prierias offered only two alternatives: either this was the proposal of a jealous friar who would have held different views had he received a bishopric for himself or an indulgence for his church, or it was the assertion of an impenitent heretic who in criticizing the practice of issuing indulgences was denying papal authority. Either the one or the other.¹⁰⁰ This seemed to many a gross strategical error. Prierias was reproved for having aggravated a situation until then still fluid, for having treated propositions Luther put forward only for debate as categorical, thereby transforming an erroneous point of view into a heresy.¹⁰¹ At Rome a search for a valid successor to Prierias was quickly begun. However, it would be stretching a point to connect the ensuing choice of Politi as Rome's official controversialist to curial dissatisfaction with the work of Prierias.¹⁰² By the time Politi was chosen to write his *Apologia* the context had changed radically. Events had accelerated in just a few weeks. On June 15, 1520, with the bull *Exsurge Domini*, Luther had been formally condemned and ordered to retract within sixty days. On January 3 of the next year he would be excommunicated by the bull *Decet romanum pontificem*. In the meantime, on July 17, 1520, Girolamo Aleandro was chosen by Leo X as papal nuncio to promulgate the bull in Germany. He was accompanied by Eck, the newly appointed apostolic protonotary.¹⁰³

It was Nuncio Aleandro himself who suggested Politi to the pope.¹⁰⁴ In his long years in the service of Cardinal Giulio de' Medici, Aleandro had probably had various opportunities to know and personally evaluate young Catarino Politi. The latter's comfortable relations with Schömburg, his friendship with the Piagnone Girolamo Benivieni, and his strong ties to the Florentine court all explain the agreement on the choice by Aleandro, Cardinal Giulio de' Medici, and Schömburg himself.¹⁰⁵ Schömburg had been Politi's colleague when the latter still occupied the chair of civil law in Rome, and Aleandro and Giulio de' Medici had known him in Florence at the time of his nomination as consistorial attorney and had closely followed his lively dispute with numerous opponents of Savonarola. All these ecclesiastical personages had had

opportunities to evaluate Politi's reputation as jurisconsult and legal disputant as well as his ability as a fervent polemicist, the qualities they would look for in a person to oppose Luther.

Politi's lively and unusual career would have counted in his favor. Even his deficient theological preparation turned out to be an asset. Luther had already been officially condemned, so there was no need to engage the German monk on narrowly theological grounds as an exponent of new doctrines replacing Catholic orthodoxy. The question of heresy was no longer under discussion, at least not in Luther's teaching. Instead, he was to be engaged on the same polemical ground he himself had chosen, the interpretation of certain Catholic truths. To press the case the men at the summit of the ecclesiastical hierarchy needed a talented and skillful polemicist, adequately prepared at the doctrinal level, not a learned and sophisticated theologian.¹⁰⁶

Thus, between the end of the summer¹⁰⁷ and December 1520 Politi worked on his *Apologia pro veritate catholicae et apostolicae fidei et doctrinae*.¹⁰⁸ In those months he read Luther's theses on indulgences, Luther's response to Prierias's *De potestate papae*, the *Acta augustana*, the Leipzig Disputes, Luther's *Comment on the Letters to the Galatians*, his treatise on the Ten Commandments, and his reply to the faculties of Louvain and Cologne¹⁰⁹—some but not all of Luther's rapid-fire production during that period. Between August and December of that year, while Politi worked diligently on his assignment, Luther was to send to the press his celebrated trilogy, *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, *On the Babylonian Captivity* (between the end of August and early September), and *On the Liberty of a Christian* (in November). Clearly, his rate of publication was speedier than that of Politi, the professional polemicist, and the latter, as Luther promptly taunted him, was unable to keep up the pace. In the early 1520s, while Catholic controversialists were kept on the defensive, the choice of succeeding moves was in the hands of their adversary. Thus, while the Catholics often lost themselves in marginal details, their opponent had already occupied new positions. As he said ironically in *On the Babylonian Captivity*: "I will keep ahead of them, so that while they celebrate their glorious triumph over one of my heresies (as they call them), I will be preparing another."¹¹⁰

Politi's *Apologia* was a baptism by fire for him.¹¹¹ Most important, it gave him an opportunity to test and sharpen the rhetorical and polemical skills he was to employ so fully in the decades to come. In fact, we can easily retrace in this work many of the stylistic and semantic characteristics, as well as the polemical arguments, refined in the works of controversy of the 1540s. Published by Giunti in Florence, the text was subdivided into five books. The first was dedicated to a detailed exposition of the eleven artifices with which Luther intended to deceive the ignorant public.¹¹² The second and third were on the primacy of the Roman papacy, a theme to which Luther was to dedicate a great deal of attention in his reply. The fourth centered on the theme of penitence and Purgatory. The fifth was presented as a kind of compendium of Luther's doctrine, in part schematically reviewing other aspects of his thought.¹¹³

The first reply Politi offered in his work was methodological in nature. In confronting the pestiferous Lutheran doctrines, it was not enough for the Catholic religion to be proven and demonstrated; it required defending by reference to its sources, the Bible and the holy Fathers, as well as conciliar decrees and papal canons.¹¹⁴ It was, therefore, not necessary to follow Luther's lead in offering a radical defense of the church's scriptural foundations, ignoring the Fathers, tradition, councils, and popes. "As I say," Politi wrote, "these matters are clear in Holy Scripture, defined by the Fathers and great popes in infallible synods, reconfirmed by many of the highest and holiest of popes and by many unimpeachable oracles."¹¹⁵ The most original contribution of Politi's *Apologia*, however, is its attempt to expose the artifices Luther used to capture the attention of "simple" and "unsophisticated" people.¹¹⁶ Already in his dedication to the emperor Charles V,¹¹⁷ Politi insisted on this aspect: "A certain Martinus, Luther by name, perverse, bold and tenacious sower of leprous new doctrines, who, as is well known, seduces Christ's vulnerable sheep with pestiferous, poisonous, wretched and noxious teachings."¹¹⁸ In the first chapter he examines the question in detail, identifying in Luther's strategic propaganda no less than eleven insidious deceptions. The Saxon reformer had lied to conceal his persistent error in his recent letter to Leo X.¹¹⁹ He had invoked "a council of diabolic vanity," implicitly eulogizing Christian

schism,¹²⁰ not hesitating to use the moral weakness of church leaders in order to cast disdain upon them for having introduced doctrinal errors,¹²¹ spreading dispute everywhere and with everyone, without discussing the principal questions.¹²² He had flaunted a lofty vocabulary full of words like “Christ,” “Paul,” and “Pauline,” a clever stragem to capture the attention of the weakest people,¹²³ using aggressive, acrimonious, or the most satirical tricks of speech sure to attract the attention of “perverse human nature.” This was a semantic artifice to hide his intention of introducing new heretical blasphemies.¹²⁴ He continually referred to Saint Augustine, distorting his doctrine to defend his own errors¹²⁵ or exaggerating divergences between interpretations furnished by the ancient doctors and by some of the more recent, such as Thomas Aquinas,¹²⁶ thus betraying the profoundest teaching of the church. Luther chose a passage from one of the Fathers to set against another, in this way obliging the faithful to choose one church father rather than another, disrupting the consensus that Rome had created among their interpretations of the sacred scriptures.¹²⁷ Approaching the end of his harangue, Politi accused Luther of attributing nonexistent vices and habits to his adversaries.¹²⁸ Luther loved to present himself as the sole defender of truths in order to amaze the ingenuous.¹²⁹ But when the facts were known, said Politi, these truths proved to be shared completely with Luther’s opponents. Thus one had only to reread correctly the writings of the church fathers cited by Luther to be able to demonstrate that they moved in a direction radically opposite to his. (Politi did not fail to give himself the satisfaction of putting in the mouths of the authors cited by Luther—Origen, Jerome, Chrysostom, Gregory, Ambrose, Bernard—the quotations that would discredit his adversary.)¹³⁰ In some cases the employment of a rhetorical tactic of the law courts proved effective: he used the very quotation Luther did in order to refute him with his own words.¹³¹ Politi’s *Apologia* won the applause of Leo X, who, it was said, spent several hours of his day reading the work.¹³² Aleandro and Cardinal de’ Medici repeatedly exchanged copies of the book. On February 6, 1521, Cardinal de’ Medici promptly sent Aleandro an early copy (“I send you one of the books of frate Ambrogio, as you requested”).¹³³ Aleandro, the papal nuncio at Worms, received the book a few days later.¹³⁴

By the end of that February the *Apologia* had already arrived in Nüremberg and, thanks to Wenzel Linck, was turned over to Luther, who mentioned it immediately in two letters to Linck himself and to Spalatin.¹³⁵ The response was not long in coming. On April 1, 1520, Luther was struck by papal excommunication, *Decet romanum pontificem*, effective January 3. On the same day, preparing to go to Worms to defend his cause before the German national Diet and the newly elected Hapsburg emperor, Charles V, he threw down his *Responsio ad librum eximii magistri nostri, magistri Ambrosii Catharinii, defensoris Silvestri Prieratis*. In it he reiterated his absolute refusal of a dialogue with the papacy, which he labeled a direct emanation of diabolic power and true incarnation of the Antichrist.¹³⁶ However, Luther's *Responsio* did not appear until June. Before then, at the end of April, Politi was able to publish a second anti-Lutheran tract, the short *Excusatio disputationes contra Martinum ad universas Ecclesias*,¹³⁷ with which he apologizes for having given leeway to such a significant heretic. Actually, this work was evidence of Politi's steady disengagement after Luther had burned the first bull and received the papal excommunication, eliminating all room for dialogue.¹³⁸ Politi reiterates his position on the matter of papal authority and infallibility, on papal power to determine the authority of Sacred Scripture, to set the laws of the church, and to correctly interpret the sacred text. Not missing the occasion to reconfirm the falsity of Luther's contentions,¹³⁹ he then encourages the pope to withstand the outrage perpetrated on him personally, encouraging him to continue giving his good example to his "flock."¹⁴⁰ His customary polemical spirit was tempered by his bitter realization that the battle was over. Now there was not the slightest reason to continue the long-range dialogue.¹⁴¹ Having reached that point, he concluded, "I therefore let the case rest and I return and commend it to God Almighty."¹⁴²

It was not long before Politi's *Excusatio* was in the hands of Cardinal de' Medici. In May of the same year the cardinal was able to send a copy to Aleandro.¹⁴³ For a few months the exchange of copies continued at a frenetic pace. At Florence the receipt of Luther's *Responsio* was acknowledged and other copies of Politi's writings were sent.¹⁴⁴ This was Politi's main objective: what counted most to him was the approval

and gratitude of the Holy See. His *Apologia* had already achieved public recognition;¹⁴⁵ the *Excusatio* must also.¹⁴⁶

THE CONTROVERSY OVER THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

During the 1520s Ambrogio Catarino Politi dedicated himself to itinerant preaching.¹⁴⁷ Although the documentation is sparse, it allows us to follow his tracks to the various Dominican convents in which he stayed, all of them houses of the Congregation of San Marco of Florence to which he belonged. After passing his early years in the Florentine convent where he fought his pen battles with Martin Luther,¹⁴⁸ on March 6, 1522, he was at Pistoia where he took part in the chapter meeting in the Convent of San Domenico.¹⁴⁹ After this first Pistoia sojourn he spent about two and a half years in the Convent of Santo Spirito in Siena, and between at least June 1522 and May 1524 he resided in his native city,¹⁵⁰ dedicating himself, among others things, to the translation into Italian of the *Vita miracolosa della seraphyca santa Catherina da Siena* by the Blessed Raymond of Capua.¹⁵¹ After a Florentine sojourn in the Convent of San Marco,¹⁵² he participated on September 14, 1525, in the chapter meeting of the Convent of Santa Maria del Sasso at Bibbiena. There it was decided that his next destination would be the Convent of San Domenico of Pistoia.¹⁵³ He arrived there a few weeks later and took part in the convent chapter meeting on December 1.¹⁵⁴ Politi was preceded by the echoes of his polemic with Cardinal De Vio, one of the order's major authorities, a learned theologian who had taken part with him in the earliest anti-Lutheran battles.¹⁵⁵ In March 1525 De Vio (Cajetan) had published his first exegetical work, the *Ientacula Novi Testamenti*,¹⁵⁶ in which he laid the foundations for a method of exegesis clearly based on literal interpretation with obvious Erasmian influences, employing a somewhat radical critical attitude.¹⁵⁷

Faced with Cajetan's decision to debate and confront Erasmus and Luther on their own battleground, Politi was unable to continue in a polemical vein. "I confess, I dared at first to spread talk about this

matter among the friars,” he admitted some years later.¹⁵⁸ The leaders of the order had responded unanimously: no one should dare criticize their most renowned theologian. The general of the order personally intervened to silence Politi, forbidding him to publish anything against Cajetan “under pain of a more serious punishment,” at least without permission of De Vio himself.¹⁵⁹ This was only the first act of a long-lasting drama. In these same weeks, the asperities of an encounter around the cult of the Immaculate Conception were superimposed on the polemic with De Vio.¹⁶⁰ Soon after his arrival in Pistoia Politi happened to witness a miraculous cure brought about by a (supposed) intervention of the Virgin.¹⁶¹ In response to his fervent reaction and, presumably, to the flurry of devotion that surrounded this event, local spokesmen for the Dominican order reacted firmly, identifying Politi as their principal target. “Heretic,” “charlatan,” superstitious, proud son of Lucifer: he received every sort of insult, even “in your customary refectory sermons your boys [novices]” made fun of him. He was firmly warned “never speak good or ill of conception,” on pain of expulsion from the order and prison.¹⁶² These were obvious signs of a hostility that gave no sign of diminishing during the months he passed in the Dominican Convent of Fiesole.¹⁶³ The Dominican order, following the teaching of Saint Thomas, had always been opposed to recognizing and celebrating the Immaculate Conception. Politi, however, as he himself was candidly to admit, was in no way disposed to abandon the deep devotional fervor rooted in his Sienese culture. If anything he was inclined to find further nourishment for it in the pages of authors who were traditionally averse to Thomist orthodoxy.¹⁶⁴ General of the Order Francesco Silvestri da Ferrara, in the wake of the silence imposed on Politi, directed an absolute ban on any recurrence of the celebration in any form by the friars of the Sienese Convents of San Domenico and Santo Spirito.¹⁶⁵

As was predictable, that ban was followed by a long string of polemics, particularly at Siena, where the Florentine Congregation of San Marco soon found itself having to contend with the magistrates of the Sienese government in a contest with significant political implications. The important role of the Virgin in the affairs of the city of Siena has already been noted.¹⁶⁶ The political-military events of spring

1526 (a siege in which the Medici-pontifical forces surrounded the city of Siena in order to overthrow the government installed after the killing of Alessandro Bichi and restore the Siennese exiles to power) had given to the Marian devotion a clear anti-Florentine and anti-Medicean coloration.¹⁶⁷ A Franciscan tertiary, Margherita Buonsignori Bichi, a woman with an aura of sanctity and great popular esteem, when questioned as to the outcome of the battle, presented a memorandum to the Balìa in which she claimed that she had had a revelation according to which victory against the Medicean-papal troops would be guaranteed upon the formal acceptance of three conditions. The first was the promise to renew the ancient dedication of the city to the Virgin Mary with a solemn symbolic ceremony. The second was the pledge to celebrate the future victory “with a feast of the Immaculate Conception, a feast more solemn than any other.” The third, most important of the conditions (and most controversial) was to deny anyone the possibility of contesting the Marian privilege that the city reaffirmed for itself.¹⁶⁸ The Siennese victory of July 25 and the feasts that followed marked the beginning of a long standoff. The Dominicans of the two Siennese convents, San Domenico (member of the Roman province) and Santo Spirito (member of the Congregation of Tuscany, i.e., San Marco) in observance of the commands of the general of the order, rigidly abstained from all celebration. For the friars of Santo Spirito the decision was a precise political signal as well. The convent was closely allied to the Florentine interest, the majority of its friars Florentine. Their refusal to celebrate the Virgin was also a refusal to join in celebrating the defeat of their native city.¹⁶⁹

The political roots of the convent’s resistance were dealt with firmly by the Siennese magistrates. After a few months, in mid-November 1526, the prior of the convent, Zenobio Pieri, was forced to leave the city with the other Florentine fathers. In spite of everything the show of force did not change the substance of the argument: the Santo Spirito friars persisted in their course. On July 28, 1527, they refused to celebrate the first anniversary of the Siennese victory. The following December 8, Pieri’s replacement, fra Zaccaria di Lunigiana, blocked any kind of celebration for the Feast of the Conception, giving as his motive the inflexible censures with which the general of the order had threatened anyone

who might dare participate in those rites.¹⁷⁰ At this point, the Sienese convent seemed to be gravely threatened with definitive expulsion.¹⁷¹

Searching for a remedy for a situation that was getting dangerously out of hand, the Congregation of San Marco, in its chapter meeting of May 2, 1528, decided to send fra Ambrogio Catarino Politi and fra Tommaso da San Miniato, prior of San Domenico of Fiesole, to Siena to find a compromise with the Sienese magistrates.¹⁷² Politi's selection was risky but was at the same time the choice with the greatest likelihood of success. His Marian sympathies were well known, as were his close ties with the Sienese Balìa of which his brother Giovan Battista was prior.¹⁷³ The San Marco fathers probably counted on or at least hoped for Politi to use this occasion to recover his personal position in the order, employing all his influence and ability to provide grist for the Dominican mill. Events took a different turn.

Politi, in fact, used all his rhetorical and juristic skills to convince the magistrates of the illegality of the expulsion, achieving complete success. However, with seeming ingenuousness he proposed that the Balìa should leave the Dominicans of Santo Spirito in peace and instead turn to the competent ecclesiastical authorities, that is, to the Holy See directly, to obtain an official dispensation from the censures threatened by the general of the order in 1525. In this way Sienese friars might also celebrate the Virgin.¹⁷⁴ Politi's effort was rewarded. The Balìa followed his suggestion and, thanks also to his personal mediation at the Roman Curia,¹⁷⁵ on October 13, 1528, the pope issued a breve. This breve did not go so far as to command Marian celebrations (as the Sienese magistracy and probably Politi himself had requested). But it guaranteed to them that "in celebrating they do not incur excommunication from their superiors," nor if their superiors did excommunicate them would the excommunication be valid.¹⁷⁶ In reality, the breve, removing the power of censure from the general of the order behind which the Florentine Dominicans and their prior had taken cover, only deprived the Congregation of San Marco of its formidable alibi. Florentine opponents of the Immaculate Conception now had to assume all responsibility for their position and Politi would feel freer to follow his own conscience and personal convictions without fear of incurring the anger of the order's leaders. In a long letter to Niccolò Michelozzi,

prior of San Marco in Florence, Politi indirectly replied to the complete refutation of the papal breve by Zenobio Pieri, now vicar general of the order.¹⁷⁷ Politi was trying to convince Michelozzi to relax the intransigent position of his superior. He emphasized the political and moral motives in favor of accepting the celebration of the Immaculate Conception. There was the invalidity of the censures in the first place, then the irritation of the Sienese magistrates at what appeared to be the useless stubbornness of presumptuous friars. Also in France not only did the Dominican order solemnize the Conception, but even more important the University of Paris had made it an indispensable condition that teaching in the faculty required a formal oath to uphold it.¹⁷⁸ Notwithstanding this dedicated effort at persuasion, Politi had no illusions as to the readiness of his Dominican interlocutors to heed him.¹⁷⁹

In effect, it was as bad as Politi had feared. The same day on which the Balìa met to enjoin Zenobio Pieri to conform to the pontifical breve by December 8, Pieri was responding point by point to the argument advanced by Politi in his letter to Michelozzi.¹⁸⁰ His conclusion left no room for negotiation:

To repeat, keep in mind not to celebrate the Conception, but rather leave the convent in peace and come to Florence. This is my will, often restated, as above. And if you should act counter to my will I will be forced to remove all the friars and thus leave the convent empty, gratefully restoring it to those who gave it to us.¹⁸¹

Disobeying the vicar's explicit ban, Politi chose to remain faithful to the instructions of the magistrates of his native city, thus ensuring participation of the Convent of Santo Spirito (of which he had become prior)¹⁸² in the local celebrations of the Immaculate Conception.¹⁸³ The serious dispute that followed increasingly took the form of a battle between the Dominican order on one side and on the other the government of Siena and Politi. Facing a choice between his order and his Sienese roots, between religious and political loyalties, Politi did not hesitate. He felt even more legitimized by the breve issued by the Holy See. In the course of this dispute, at its most critical moment, after Pieri had tried to remove him as prior of Santo Spirito,¹⁸⁴ he appealed to the highest

ecclesiastical authority.¹⁸⁵ The establishment of the Florentine republic in 1527 had weakened the power of Clement VII, already seriously threatened by the violent trauma of the Sack of Rome, and Politi probably sensed that Rome favored an anti-Florentine alliance with Siena.

When he arrived in Rome in 1530, however, Clement VII was ill and unable to receive him. The pope's poor health was not the only reason for Politi's lack of success: the opposition of Cardinal De Vio (Cajetan) once again proved decisive.¹⁸⁶ Thus, instead of the triumphal welcome he expected, the Roman sojourn stretched to five months,¹⁸⁷ as the vicar general of the order, Paolo Botticella, together with Politi, patiently awaited definite word that was supposed to come from Cajetan on the whole question.

Cajetan's verdict was in many respects predictable. To the insistent voices that circulated in the mid-1520s concerning Politi's manifest hostility toward Cajetan's *Ientacula*, which certainly did not predispose him to benevolence toward Politi, was added the circumstance that Cajetan was a convinced opponent of the Immaculate Conception. Pieri and Michelozzi, accused of heresy by Politi, were completely exonerated.¹⁸⁸ Nor was this all. While Politi was forced to accept his own removal as prior, on October 27, 1530, his adversary was promoted provincial prior of the new "reformed Roman province," the result of the fusion of the Florentine Congregation of San Marco and the Convents of Minerva and Perugia.¹⁸⁹

As clearly emerged from this long and painful contest, Politi did not have a strong sense of belonging to the order. His loyalty, his life choice, as he himself frequently noted, had been made with regard to a man, the prophet Savonarola, much earlier than his adhesion to a doctrinal and religious tradition. Without taking full account of this fact it is very difficult to comprehend the individual and theological freedom with which he moved within the order. The Sienese polemicist often showed himself, as in the circumstances reconstructed here, more sensitive to the traditions he had absorbed in the formative years of his youth than to the rules he learned during his brief Dominican novitiate. Moreover, as a theologian he dedicated his life to the search for "truth" rather than to the observance of a tradition. Initially, he thought he had found this truth in the works of Savonarola (which,

however, he either did not know very well or did not follow to the letter).¹⁹⁰ Once his long journey to emancipation was completed, he would from time to time return to the search with absolute originality and freedom.

For Politi nothing remained but to return to his studies and to dispel in his writings the anger provoked by this stinging defeat. In that same year, 1530, Cajetan had published a new edition of *Ientacula novi Testamenti* in Paris and gave to the press in Venice his *In quattuor Acta apostolorum* and *Liber Psalmorum ad verbum ex hebreo versorum*.¹⁹¹ In 1532 he published in Paris the *Epistolae Pauli et aliorum apostolorum ad graecam veritatem castigate*. Finally, in Rome in the same year he published *Opera omnia quotquot in sacrae Scripturae expositionem reperiuntur*.¹⁹²

What better occasion for returning to his work than his deep theological reservations regarding the exegetical work of Cajetan, now reinforced by personal rancor toward Cajetan for his most recent denial of the Immaculate Conception. Politi, returning to his desk with something less than peaceful intentions, wrote, "After reading his most recent volumes I confess before the entire Church, I am nauseated by the radical and deviant opinions, especially those Erasmus teaches, that [Cajetan] has taken from these new dogmatists."¹⁹³ Datable sometime between 1531 and 1532 is a first unpublished draft of the *Annotationes* against Cajetan's writings (a work he was to publish at Paris in 1535) titled *Pro receptis veritatibus circa libros Scripturae sanctae quae negantur aut dubium vertuntur disputatio*.¹⁹⁴ Dedicated to Clement VII, the book represented only the first stage of a more comprehensive work of opposition to Cajetan's scriptural interpretation. Politi warned of the dangerous assonance with Erasmus of Rotterdam's revolutionary exegetical method. This despite the fact that Politi had been formally warned against publishing anything against the learned Cajetan.

Consequently, he attacked Cajetan in "privatim," that is, in manuscript; "publicly" he would dedicate himself, a little later, to reconstructing the lengthy polemic in which he was seen as protagonist and, among other things, to taking pleasure in some small victory. In the span of a few months, in fact, the situation changed noticeably. Zenobio Pieri died on October 11, 1531, and was succeeded as Roman provincial by Angelo Cattani da Diacceto.¹⁹⁵ The fire that broke out

between December 4 and 5, the eve of the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, in the church of San Domenico in Siena seriously damaged the relics of the Blessed Ambrogio Sansedoni and the sacred cranium of Saint Catherine. This revived the old arguments and induced the Sienese magistrates to resume their pressure on the leaders of the Dominican order to press their Sienese members into celebrating the Immaculate Conception along with the rest of the city. This time they found respondents who were much more flexible and better disposed than their forerunners. Both Diacceto and Fenario, now vicar general, pronounced themselves open to reconsidering their predecessors' rigid refusal, even showing their intention to extend permission to the entire order to celebrate the Immaculate Conception.¹⁹⁶

In this markedly relaxed climate Politi wrote his *Disputatio pro veritate Immaculatae Conceptionis beatae Virginis ad patres ac fratres ordinis praedicatorum eiusdemque expositio controversiae inter ipsum et quosdam de patribus eiusdem ordinis exortae*.¹⁹⁷ This was a historical-doctrinal work delineating the theological foundations of the Marian privilege, sweeping away the objections of its adversaries as well as negating the suspicions against him that had accumulated in the course of the dispute with his Florentine superiors.¹⁹⁸ To do this he carefully reconstructed the matter. First, after defending the Marian privilege against the objections of its adversaries, Politi offered a preliminary sketch of his noted "theory of the pact" and a preliminary reflection on the nature of justice and of original sin.¹⁹⁹

These were doctrines that he would have numerous occasions to develop in the early 1540s, but in this case they seemed to be solely aimed at excluding Mary from the transmission of original sin. They enable us to date his Scotist readings to the early 1530s and to establish for the first time that Politi read Duns Scotus in relation to the Marian question. In other words, as already suggested, it was this search for a theological basis for solid devotion to the patroness and protector of Siena that led him out of the confines of Thomist tradition, and also nourished his career as theologian and polemicist.

On May 19 the Dominican chapter general met in the Roman Convent of the Minerva to elect a new general. This was just eight days after Politi had submitted his *Disputatio pro veritate Immaculatae*

Conceptionis to the press in violation of the order's warning against publication.²⁰⁰ Although it cannot be documented, Politi may have been reassured by the general *in pectore* that he could avoid the order's sanctions. He and the general may even have agreed that publication of the book might actually support the new feelings in favor of the Immaculate Conception appearing in the order. As foreseen, Giovanni Fenario was unanimously elected.²⁰¹ His election was accompanied by the firm proposal to extend to the entire order the instruction given to Raffaele Risaliti, prior of Santo Spirito, namely, that he coordinate with other religious communities of Siena in carrying out the stipulations accompanying the vote of 1526. Once again, however, Politi's hopes were dashed. The failure to extend to the entire order the instruction to honor the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, despite Fenario's promises in this respect, together with his simultaneous confirmation of the personal prohibition of Politi's publication against Cajetan²⁰² were a sign to Politi that the situation was not destined to improve and that, notwithstanding Fenario's favorable predisposition toward him, resistance within the order would continue to be very strong.

We know little about Politi's movements in the months that followed. He departed Siena for Lyon, but we are unable to date precisely when he left Italy.²⁰³ The first certain testimony that he was in France is the document of his formal assignment to Notre Dame de Confort in Lyon by a decree from Rome on March 6, 1534.²⁰⁴ The document suggests that although his request for a transfer to France had been made sometime earlier, it was only granted in that year.²⁰⁵

PARISIAN SOJOURN

Whether Politi had decided to spend the months in Siena following the conclusion of the Immaculatist *querelle* is difficult to say, given our lack of sources. Despite Fenario's renewed confidence in him, the climate there was now less comfortable. Perhaps it was the news arriving from France that induced him to leave his city immediately for more welcoming shores.²⁰⁶ Certainly he knew that in France the work of Cajetan was not well received, although the first attempts at an

explicit condemnation by the Paris Faculty of Theology had not gone well. Already in 1512–13 and again in 1516 the Faculty had argued with Cajetan about the doctrine of the pope's supremacy over councils,²⁰⁷ and soon after, on June 8, 1532, following the lead of Noël Beda,²⁰⁸ the Sorbonne had appointed five *magistri* to examine Cajetan's errors in his writings "on the psalter and the New Testament" and present a detailed report to the Faculty.²⁰⁹ For his part, Clement VII, informed of what had happened by Aleandro, intervened immediately, charging Cardinal Gabriel de Gramont, his legate in France, to order the Paris doctors to wait for the permission of the Holy See before forming any judgment.²¹⁰ Actually it was Cardinal Antoine Du Prat, legate *a latere* and chancellor of France, who then advised Beda and the other members of the Faculty of the pope's order. The Faculty accepted his mediation, although procedural difficulties delayed resolution of the matter until April 1, 1533, when the text of censure drawn up by the *magistri* against Cajetan was ready. Dr. Jean de Gaigny offered to accompany the text with letters from the pope and Cajetan.²¹¹ Despite Beda's strenuous efforts,²¹² papal intervention succeeded, at least for the moment, in blocking the Sorbonne. The question was put aside in the months that followed. It is easy to imagine the apprehension and disappointment with which Politi followed the development of the matter in Paris, even though we do not know when he decided to profit from the more favorable cultural climate for him that was developing in France.

Already at Lyon, as Politi himself was to recall, he received instruction from the vicar of the Dominican order that rekindled his hopes.²¹³ According to what Politi later said, Clement VII granted him the right to publish his work against Cajetan on condition that he receive approval from any authority of the Paris Faculty of Theology.²¹⁴ Politi chose to interpret the pope's words as the sign he had long been waiting for. Thus, in the spring of 1534, at Fenario's suggestion, he left Lyon for Paris.²¹⁵ He was greeted by the principal spokesmen of the order, Thomas Laurent, Jean Benoist, and Étienne Paris d' Orleans. These three Dominicans, among the most influential theologians of the Paris Faculty, were his main contacts there. The first had been secretary of Valentin Levin, inquisitor general of France and briefly his successor before he was replaced by Matthieu Ory.²¹⁶ The second was, with

Laurent, author of the *Expositio in Exodum iuxta quadruplicem sacrae Scripturae sensum*²¹⁷ of 1534 and, a few years later, of the *Introductiones dialecticae* dedicated in 1538 to Giovanni Fenario.²¹⁸ The third, Étienne Paris, was elected the provincial of the French Dominicans in 1539.²¹⁹ Politi sought them out in the Dominican Convent of Saint Jacques where he took lodging. Together with Matthieu Ory, the convent prior,²²⁰ Benoist and Laurent gave courses on Thomist doctrine there. Among those who attended were Ignatius Loyola and his first Spanish companions.²²¹ These learned Dominicans lost no time reading and appreciating Politi's *Annotationes*. In fact, they had been among the protagonists of the censorship action recently directed against Cajetan's *Commentarii*, interrupted by the pope's decisive intervention. The French Dominicans therefore advised Politi to turn to the Sorbonne immediately for permission to publish.²²² For the Faculty as well, this would be an opportunity to return, albeit indirectly, to the decision taken to circumvent the papal injunction. The suggestion of the three Dominicans prevailed. On February 1, 1535, "having heard the report of our magistrates, de Gouvea, Mailart, Laurence, Benedict, through the voice of our honorable master Jacques Berthelemy about the book entitled *Annotationes fratris Ambrosii Catharini Politi de ordine fratrum predicatorum adversus quedam reverendissimi domini Cajetani cardinalis San Sixtus dogmata* [Annotations of Frater Ambrosius Caterinus Politi of the order of Friars Preachers against Certain Teachings of the Most Reverend Master Cajetan Cardinal of San Sisto]" permission was granted "that the said book be published."²²³ At last, after long years of waiting and frustration, Politi was able to give his work to the press; it saw the light in April, barely two months later, under the title *Annotationes in excerpta quaedam de commentariis reverendissimi cardinalis Caetani Santi Sixti dogmata*.²²⁴ The Faculty of Theology had offered him its authoritative endorsement and some of the most important members of the French Dominican order had supported him. For its part, the Sorbonne gained a small victory over the Holy See and prepared to reengage in the quarrel over the prohibition of Cajetan's works with the drafting in 1544 of the first official Index²²⁵ and in 1547 discussions about the second.²²⁶ In the cases of both indexes, however, Rome's judgments were destined to prevail. In the case of the first index

of 1544, pressures from the Dominican order pushed for the ratification of a list of errors approved by the Sorbonne that could be inserted into Cajetan's works without banning them altogether.²²⁷ In the second case, the Index of 1547 and the discussions that preceded its approval, decisive intervention by Cardinal Tournon, at the explicit request of the nuncio, succeeded in shipwrecking the efforts of the Sorbonne.²²⁸ The publication of Politi's work against Cajetan was thus destined to remain the limit beyond which the contest between Rome and the Paris Faculty over Cajetan's work could not go.

In the very months that Politi spent in the Convent of San Jacques waiting for permission from the Sorbonne to publish his work against Cajetan, the French capital and the whole country were unexpectedly awakened to the danger of Protestantism. During the night between October 17 and 18, 1534, hundreds of placards were posted on every corner of the capital and in many other cities. At Orléans, Amboise, Blois, Tours, Noyon, and Rouen the squares, walls, and houses were covered with placards printed with Gothic characters under the explicit title, "True Articles on the Horrible, Great and Unbearable Abuse of the Papist Mass Aimed Directly Against the Holy Supper of Our Lord, Sole Mediator and Savior Jesus Christ." Copies were found even in the chamber of Francis I, evidence that the Calvinist heresy had now reached the court itself. This was not the first time that Calvinist and Lutheran doctrines had been diffused in French territory,²²⁹ or that repressive measures had been taken by the Sorbonne and the French civil authorities. However, *l'affaire des placards* marked a new level of awareness of that diffusion, and of the troubles that could result from it, *in primis* for the monarchy. Above all, the event was a signal for a severe tightening of the inquisitorial grip.²³⁰ All evidence indicates that Politi had witnessed these events before he finally left Paris in 1535 and that they contributed to his resumption of antiheretical polemic.

In June of that year, moreover, as he was returning to the Convent of Notre Dame de Confort in Lyon, the irresistible call of the old youthful polemical passions heard during his French legal studies detained him in Toulouse for a time. It was occasioned by the attack on him by the noted humanist and jurist Jean de Boyssoné, teacher of Étienne Dolet,²³¹ who while dealing with the question of hereditary

substitution had attacked one of his old writings, recently republished in Lyon.²³² It was but a brief parenthesis, just enough time for a duel on a point of law with this new adversary. As usual, Politi's rhetorical abilities were to earn the favor of the public, if what he himself wrote is true: that he had to leave the city in order to avoid accepting the honors that Jacques de Minut, first president of the Toulouse Parliament, wanted to bestow.²³³ Lyon awaited him.

LYON

At Lyon, as in the French capital, *l'affaire des placards* had unleashed a violent wave of suppression. Until that incident the king's attitude had been ambivalent, guided more by the political considerations of the moment than by a clear strategy of control. The first intimations of the reform went back at least fifteen years, to the beginning of the 1520s. At that time the inquisitor Valentin Levin had presented himself at the Hôtel commun, armed with letters patent of Francis I to fight "scoundrels and heretics," and a few years later, in 1524, the king had launched another attack, ordering (to the annoyance of Charles V) the arrest of a group of Spanish and German merchants suspected of heresy. Then came the arrival at Lyon of Marguerite d'Alençon, sister of the king, whose noted evangelical sympathies softened Francis I's attitude and allowed reformed doctrines to make headway in Lyon. Four years later there was another change of course, this time directed by the provincial council. On March 21, 1528, the council, with Claude de Longvie, bishop of Mâcon, presiding, issued no fewer than four repressive decrees that initiated a spiral of arrests and condemnations. These reached an apex in the months immediately following *l'affaire des placards*. Nevertheless, due to its commercial, banking, and publishing activity, as well as its strategic geographic location, Lyon remained a place of ceaseless exchange and circulation of ideas, a free zone that the inquisitorial authorities found difficult to control. Repressive action was limited by the high standing of Lyon's humanist printers; their activity was essential for the economic prosperity and cultural prestige of the city. From the beginning of the 1530s the city had become

home to a lively humanist circle around the publisher Sébastien Gryphe.²³⁴ In 1532 Rabelais arrived from Montpellier and published his *Pantagruel* the same year, the *Gargantua* in 1534.²³⁵ On August 1, 1534, Étienne Dolet arrived from Toulouse,²³⁶ closely followed by Ortensio Lando²³⁷ and Cornelius Agrippa in 1535.²³⁸ All were hired as correctors and editors at the Gryphe press where they were also to publish some of their own most important works. The Italian contingent of this lively humanist circle included illustrious names. Aonio Paleario published his first work, *De animorum immortalitate libri III*,²³⁹ in 1536. Iacopo Sadoletto, who had been exiled at Carpentras since 1537 and between 1533 and 1541 stayed periodically in Lyon, published fifteen volumes with Gryphe, including the noted *Epistola ad Senatum populumque genevensem, qua in obedientiam romani pontificis eos reducere conatur* of 1539.²⁴⁰ Agostino Steuco, the Piedmontese humanist, had already published with Gryphe in 1531 his *Veteris Testamenti ad veritatem hebraicam recognitio*, reprinted two years later, and in 1533 the *In Psalmum XVIII et CXXXVIII interpretatio*, containing, among other things, an epistolary exchange with Erasmus; and in 1535 he would publish his *Cosmopoeia vel de mundano opificio*.²⁴¹ Hebrew culture found its mentor in Sante Pagnini of Lucca who had been settled in Lyon since 1527. Sante Pagnini was very close to Sadolet and Jean Du Bellay, to whom in 1536 he dedicated his monumental *Isagogae ad sacras litteras*,²⁴² and was the translator of the Hebrew Old and New Testaments published in Lyon in 1527, as well as the author of a monumental Hebrew dictionary dedicated, significantly, to another Lyonnais exile, the future cardinal Federico Fregoso, who died in 1541 under suspicion of heresy.²⁴³ Using the Lucchese Sante Pagnini's meticulous work of biblical translation, the Florentine Antonio Brucioli, who had probably met Sante Pagnini during one of his lengthy sojourns in Lyon between 1522 and 1526, was entrusted with the preparation of the entire Italian edition of the sacred text. It was published in Venice by Lucantonio Giunta in 1532. Years later the translation was seen by the Roman censors as containing many heterodox elements.²⁴⁴ During his sojourn in Lyon Politi may have become aware of the biblical translation Brucioli had sent to the press at Venice in 1532 and already begun to nurture suspicions of it. In fact it was Politi himself who in his *Compendio d'errori et inganni*

luterani of 1544 denounced the unorthodox content of Brucioli's *Commento al Nuovo Testamento* shortly after it was published in 1543–44. He emphasized that “this author had diligently read the Latin books of those German heresiarchs,” “especially Bucer’s, because he, Politi, recognized that he had translated word for word long passages of that wretched heretic.”²⁴⁵ He suggested that Brucioli’s *opera omnia* be included in the 1545 Lucca list of forbidden books, in a successive Florentine edition of March 28, 1552, and in the Index of Milan of 1554.²⁴⁶

To imagine the remarkable cultural climate in which Politi found himself in Lyon in the 1530s it is enough to know that Bucer, the very “heresiarch” he referred to in his denunciation of Brucioli, was instrumental in opening a line of credit for Jacopo Sadoletto, who had recently published *In Pauli epistolam ad romanos commentariorum libri III*. The work, sent by Sadoletto to the theologians of the Paris Faculty, had been censured by them as semi-Pelagian.²⁴⁷ After a careful reading, Bucer had formulated a series of criticisms, concluding his analysis, however, with the surprising declaration of doctrinal affinity and points of contact that connected him with Sadoletto, especially on the theme of justification by faith alone. Bucer’s efforts at a dialogue with Sadoletto, however, should be ascribed to the politics of conciliation favored in those same months by Francis I, who, after the fervor of suppressions following *l’affaire des placards*, had once again turned to searching for an interconfessional dialogue. Those attempts were not to end well. Sadoletto himself, while recognizing the king’s intent, continued even in those years to maintain a confrontational stance toward the Protestant faction,²⁴⁸ and kept his distance from his interlocutor. Among other things he took part in a meeting at Lyon with the bishop of Geneva in 1536 organized by Cardinal Tournon to devise a plan for the restoration of Catholicism in that Swiss city. We can well imagine how attentively Politi followed those events. In Lyon he was a privileged observer, having already had the opportunity to press his strong ties of friendship with Sadoletto, as we shall see.²⁴⁹

As a bare list of names can tell us, the cultural ambience in Lyon was not completely homogeneous but had a common denominator in the passionate study of letters, usually accompanied by an openness to new religious doctrines. To understand which way the wind

was blowing in the city of Lyon we can consider the successive positions taken on the matter of justification: the unorthodox doctrines of Aonio Paleario, prosecuted at Siena in the early 1540s; the unequivocally heretical opinions of Ortensio Lando; the spiritual propensities of Cardinal Fregoso; the reforming positions of Rabelais himself.

Alongside this lively and variegated universe of humanists and literati was the world of the Florentine exiles, a dynamic community of anti-Mediceans who after leaving Florence cultivated a rich cultural identity in French soil. The memory of Savonarola, the antityrannical plots, and Lutheran contamination formed unexpected combinations. Since the second half of the fifteenth century Lyon had been the preferred destination of Florentine merchants. From the first decades of the sixteenth century changing political events in Tuscany had given a strong political coloration to that migratory stream. The Florentine nation taking shape in Lyon in the first half of the sixteenth century had close ties with the local Dominican Convent of Notre Dame de Confort, where Politi had lived since 1534. At Lyon he might have encountered Luigi Alamanni, an anti-Medici exile who had long frequented the Rucellai Gardens, where he nourished his republican faith alongside Niccolò Machiavelli (who dedicated to him his *Life of Castuccio Castracani*). Alamanni had been one of the organizers of the plot of 1522 against Cardinal Giulio de' Medici, future Pope Clement VII.²⁵⁰ Since then, except for the republican interval of 1527–30, he had been in exile at Lyon in France where at the house of Gryphe he edited his edition of his *Opere Toscane* (1532–33) dedicated to Francis I. Here he began to engage in strong anticurial polemic,²⁵¹ which at the end of the thirties he was to share with his friend Pier Paolo Vergerio, the future apostate.²⁵² Together with his companions in flight, Zanobi Buondelmonti and Giovan Battista Della Palla, Alamanni had rediscovered in foreign lands the lost ideals of liberty, gathering with his fellow citizens around the charismatic figures of the three Florentine cardinals, Ridolfi, Salviati, and Gaddi.

The memory of Savonarola still pulsed in the consciousness of the Florentine community at Lyon and in various ways wove itself into the Florentines' political creed. For some exiles the memory was still fresh and easily revived, especially in the spiritual ambience of Lyon. With

this radical spiritual creed the merchant Della Palla had hoped in the 1520s to tempt the refined palate of Marguerite of Navarre.²⁵³ Moreover, in the first half of the 1530s the recollection of Savonarola was nourished by a miscellaneous collection of writings frequently reprinted by Sébastien Gryphe after the first, 1530 edition: in 1533 and 1534 and, with Politi's stay in Lyon, twice, in 1536 and 1537. Among several anonymous works, this collection included three of Savonarola's writings: commentaries on Psalms LI, *Miserere*; LXX, *In te Domine speravi*; and LXXIX, *Qui regis Israele intende*. The reader was also offered *Domini-cae praecationis pia admodum et erudita explanatio*, which opened the miscellany and gave it its title, as well as the *Exegesis paraphrastica symboli apostolici*, texts with obvious echoes of Lutheran doctrine. This work recalls the 1523 edition by Luther of Savonarola's commentary on the *Miserere*. Luther's edition was published at Wittenberg with a major preface,²⁵⁴ apparently trying to legitimize a line of continuity between Savonarola's prophetic antipapal criticism and Luther's doctrinal work. As discussed later, it was owing to Politi's tireless polemical ardor that the nexus Savonarola-Luther gained momentum in curial circles and among Catholic controversialists of the 1550s and soon led to a careful examination of Savonarola's works by the censors.²⁵⁵ It is possible that Politi's reading of this work led to the first elaboration, or at least the first germ of a reflection, that he would pursue more completely around the mid-1540s. In any case, during his sojourn in Lyon as in the years immediately following, he made no mention of this text, much less indicate publicly that he was reflecting on it.

At Lyon Politi made contact with the three Florentine cardinals, Giovanni Salviati, Niccolò Gaddi, and Niccolò Ridolfi. After the death of Clement VII (and up to the battle of Montemurlo in 1537) they had become the points of reference for the Florentine anti-Medici community in exile.²⁵⁶ In Rome they had made common cause with Filippo Strozzi and the other Florentine exiles, investing their hopes in Cardinal Ippolito de' Medici as successor to Duke Alessandro. After Ippolito's death in 1535 they had continued to develop their anti-Medici projects with the support of the king of France. When news of the tyrannicide of Alessandro by Lorenzino in 1537 reached Lyon the three cardinals negotiated with Cardinal Tournon, with the mediation of Bartolomeo

Cavalcanti, the possibility of French intervention in Florence. The lieutenant of Francis I sponsored the Florentine cause with the king, alluding to the enormous advantages France would receive from influence in that city. However, events took a different turn: Cosimo succeeded in keeping the rudder of government solidly in Medici hands, so that the efforts of Cavalcanti and Tournon did not attain their planned objective.²⁵⁷ The disastrous battle of Montemurlo would finally extinguish the Florentine exiles' dreams of glory.²⁵⁸

Through the agency of the three Florentine cardinals Politi entered into contact with Cardinal Tournon. (He may, however, have already met Tournon through Ory and been introduced by him to the cardinals.) Tournon was to exercise a decisive influence on Politi, contributing to the resumption of his antiheretical polemics. In an environment such as that of Lyon, deeply marked by heterodox activity, Politi recognized in Tournon a dependable guide.²⁵⁹ Influenced by the French cardinal's clear antiheretical position, Politi rededicated himself to the battlefield. Although Tournon had long cultivated a reputation as a humanist and man of letters and although he had given no sign of hostility to the reformers of the Meaux circle during the 1520s and early 1530s, he had ranged himself faithfully on the side of the sovereign at the time of the severe crackdown ordered by the French king after the *placards* affair. Within a few months he became one of the fiercest enemies of the reform heresy, steadfastly maintaining this position even when Francis I was trying to find space for a political dialogue with the Protestant side.²⁶⁰ For instance, he opposed a visit to France by Melanchthon in the spring of 1535, although it was favored by Francis I himself,²⁶¹ with the strong support of Cardinal Tournon, and by his friend Matthieu Ory, a member of the Sorbonne commission appointed to study the possibility of a colloquy with Melanchthon himself. This was the same Ory who the following year was recommended by Tournon to Chancellor du Bourg for appointment as inquisitor general of the realm.²⁶²

In 1536 Francis I decided to transfer the royal court to Lyon, better to follow the course of the war in Piedmont. Tournon was named his lieutenant general. Between 1536 and 1537 the cardinal resided at Lyon where, although his principal duty was to direct military operations

against the imperial forces, he concerned himself with maintaining order in the city, steadily expending his energies against the reform heresy. Nor did he limit his actions to the confines of the realm; he quickly set his sights on unifying the forces of Christianity against the dangers that threatened it. From this perspective he participated in a colloquy with Cardinal Sadoletto and the bishop of Geneva, Pierre la Baume, for the project of restitution of Catholicism in Geneva, city of Calvin and Farel. Thus Tournon's collaboration with Ory remained constant, so that we can assume he approved and supported all the repressive measures of the French inquisitor.

Politi, who had probably come to know Ory in Paris during his stay in the Convent of Saint Jacques where the future Dominican inquisitor was the prior, must have immediately felt an understanding with Tournon. In 1537, as a seal of that understanding, Politi dedicated his *Oratio de officio et dignitate sacerdotum christianique gregis pastorum* to Tournon.²⁶³ This was the official oration delivered to the diocesan synod, which had recently met at Lyon.²⁶⁴ To the oration Politi added, with an explicit indication of his support for Tournon's antiheretical activity, a *Brevis dissertatio pro auctoritate ac potestae pastorum adversus hereticos*.²⁶⁵ With the very first lines of his dedication to Tournon, Politi aimed his polemic at the scourge of heresy, that "unhappy calamity," the "sad and horrendous spectacle" that roused the divine ire against them all.²⁶⁶ Priests, according to Politi, in virtue of their regal and divine quality, had been called to deal with that deplorable situation: "You are the elect people royal priests, holy race, the people to whom it has been given."²⁶⁷ They were the elect destined by God to announce his word to the people.²⁶⁸ And yet the details of the matter were not simple. Before the "genus electum" might apply remedies to the spread of heretics, schismatics, and hypocrites so that the divine anger might not be unleashed against mankind, it was necessary that they conduct themselves truly without reproach. "It is necessary that the episcopacy be irreproachable, a single word, but it says it all."²⁶⁹ This was completely contrary to what took place in reality, where the vice and corruption of the clergy were in full view: avarice and the love of money,²⁷⁰ personal ambition that aspired more to individual than to divine glory,²⁷¹ sensuality and the search for carnal pleasure,²⁷² the

disdain for and neglect of “the divine mysteries,”²⁷³ and the ignorance and violation of sacred teachings,²⁷⁴ all of which made it impossible for priests to carry out the mission to which they had been called.²⁷⁵

Only after this long introduction did Politi at last arrive at the central point of his argument. Clerical corruption and the deterioration of society’s moral fabric were the best weapons that the Catholic Church could put into the hands of its enemies.²⁷⁶ It followed that the only way to blunt the arms that Catholics themselves had handed over to the heretics was to emend their own lives with the “*apprehensio disciplinae*” and the “*zelus . . . et cura vigil pastorum*.”²⁷⁷ The theme Politi chose was most timely. Echoes of his Savonarolan indoctrination—manifest, for example, in his invocation of divine wrath upon the corrupt church—joined with reverberations from the reform project, which in those same months was advanced by a commission of cardinals Paul III had impulsively summoned and charged with penning the famous *Consilium de emendanda Ecclesiae*.²⁷⁸ His friendship with Cardinal Sadoletto, a leading member of that commission, probably made it possible for Politi to follow events in Rome closely and to harmonize with the mood in the Curia.

The authority and power of priestly and episcopal pastors, understood to be the last bastion of defense of Catholic truth, was also the theme he chose for the second part of his work, the *Dissertatio pro auctoritate ac potestate pastorum, adversus hereticos*, which Politi wanted to add to the text of the oration he delivered during the diocesan synod in Lyon. However, the matter that received most attention was how to unmask the distorted use of sacred scripture by the enemies of Rome. Taking up the same theme of his anti-Lutheran writings of the now-distant early 1520s, Politi demonstrated how the heretics’ principal stratagem was to bend the sense of the Bible to make it harmonize with the new dogmas and paradoxes they had invented while treating them as the most faithful and truthful interpretations of the sacred text.²⁷⁹ Ambition and cupidity were the mainsprings of their actions,²⁸⁰ and these innovators were the authors of an operation of falsification of the sacred text that Politi considered truly contemptible.²⁸¹

Politi wrote that the heretics used the words of the prophet Isaiah, “the people honor me with their mouths but their hearts are far

from me, teaching human doctrines and mandates,” to claim that “no one ought to submit to Scripture without first submitting to God himself.”²⁸² Politi, perhaps thinking of the Anabaptists or of the theological reflections of Wycliffe and Hus, described the most radical among the heretics as declaring that human laws are to be condemned: “These radical heretics have insistently preached that even the laws made by those in positions of command are contemptible.” Others, speaking more mildly, and thus more capable of deceiving, taught that human laws were not to be condemned or disdained, but only to be subordinate to divine law, for human laws, unlike divine law, were in no way determinative for salvation.²⁸³ According to Politi both these dogmatists²⁸⁴ were far from the truth.

The arguments Politi proposed for confuting his adversaries were confused and not very incisive. Often he seemed to operate on different, overlapping levels of reflection, for example, with a series of biblical passages that might demonstrate how the term “human” had always been used in negative terms when contraposed to “divine,” but then without interruption introducing a reflection on the corruption of human nature before the discovery of divine grace, following Saint James. The reader was thus induced to follow the first rudimentary train of thought that would in the early forties arrive at the formulation of the well-known theory of double justification but which in this text remained irremediably isolated and detached from the general context.²⁸⁵

One point alone emerges clearly at the end of these confusing reflections: heretics, according to Politi, identified human law with the whole of episcopal law without distinguishing those laws that are contrary to divine law from those that are not.²⁸⁶ They erred grievously when they maintained “that the Lord has taught that the mandates of prelates whether they are good or evil, superstitious or not,”²⁸⁷ are to be condemned. In his opinion only the teachings and the laws contrary to the laws of God, those that are “evil and superstitious,” ought to have been condemned.²⁸⁸ All other “dogmata” and “decreta” protected by “the apostles and priests or bishops” should be observed and followed by the faithful. In fact, only solid restoration of the episcopal hierarchy could guarantee the maintenance of religious orthodoxy.²⁸⁹

These are frequently disjointed pages in which Politi seemed to piece together unevenly the radical arguments of his opponents drawn from evangelical passages, pages in which he indicated thematic connections of great depth only to abandon them soon afterward. In them can be seen indications of still vague and incoherent doctrinal reflections that Politi was to develop more systematically in the years to come. In other words, these were pages in which, notwithstanding the relevance of the theme introduced initially, the only message that emerged forcefully and clearly was the need to obey the episcopal hierarchy as the principal remedy for the proliferation of heresy. However, with the dedication to Cardinal Tournon, we can say that Politi was taking the first step of his return to anticlerical controversy, the activity that would quickly become his main commitment when he returned to Italy. As if he had intuited the direction of the wind that blew from Rome, Politi chose to cross the Alps together with one of the most tenacious defenders of Roman orthodoxy, the future inquisitor of the Holy Office, Rodolfo Pio da Carpi, bishop of Faenza, papal emissary in France in the second half of 1530 and again in May 1533, and papal nuncio from January 1535 to July 1537 and from December 1537 to April 1538. Pio da Carpi had been named cardinal by Pope Paul III in 1536 together with Giampietro Carafa, Giovanni Maria Del Monte, Reginald Pole, and Iacopo Sadoletto.²⁹⁰ Politi may have been attracted to da Carpi's powerful personality, which reminded him of the work of the cardinal's father, Alberto Pio, a humanist even before he became a diplomat, whose learned anti-Erasmian invective Politi must have shared.²⁹¹ Politi attached himself closely to the new Cardinal Rodolfo, deciding to return with him to Italy in the summer of 1537.