

THE TRIUMPH OF THE CROSS

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The triumph of the cross by Fra Girolamo Savonarola

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FRA GIROLAMO SAVONAROLA

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OF THE CROSS**

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BY

FRA GIROLAMO SAVONAROLA

Translated from the Italian

EDITED, WITH INTRODUCTION

BY THE

VERY REV. FATHER JOHN PROCTER, S.T.L.

PROVINCIAL OF THE DOMINICANS IN ENGLAND

WITH A FRONTISPIECE PORTRAIT OF THE AUTHOR

"The work . . . on THE TRIUMPH OF THE CROSS is a witness to my faith."
—*Letter of Savonarola to Pope Alexander VI.*

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Nihil obstat.

JOANNES PROCTER, O.P., S.T.L.

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INTRODUCTION.

SAVONAROLA was a speaker rather than a writer. His was the eloquent ministry of the living word, rather than the calm apostolate of the lifeless pen. He was more at home when standing in the pulpit of the Duomo in Florence, facing the panting, throbbing crowd, numbering thousands, who, with itching ears and thirsting souls, drank in his every word, as though the words were dewdrops from heaven, than when sitting at the little table—which is still preserved in his lowly cell at San Marco—holding in his emaciated hand a nerveless, passionless pen. His great master-intellect and his large sympathetic heart seemed to long to pour out their rich pent-up treasures, freely and without stint, through the channel of his eloquent tongue; whereas the hand that would perpetuate his thoughts, by stamping them upon paper, at times seemed palsied. Out of the abundance of his heart his mouth preferred to speak.

Still he wrote sometimes;—it was generally, however, under moral compulsion, being impelled to do so by circumstances which he could not control. He was accused of error by those, or to those at a distance; his advice was sought by others who were far away—defence or counsel had to be committed to paper. For a time he might not sway the masses, as he would, by the irresistible magic of his burning words; *then* we have the aposto-

late of the pen. He retired to the seclusion of his monastic cell, and wrote, as his zeal prompted, his message to his fellow-men. Many of his treatises—short ones for the most part—exist. We have his five books—we might call them chapters, they are so brief—on “The Simplicity of the Christian Life”; a treatise on “Humility”; an exposition of the “Our Father,” and another of the “Hail Mary”;¹ commentaries on some of the Psalms; an explanation of the Mass, and of the ceremonies of the Holy Sacrifice; certain rules for good Christian living (composed when he was in prison), and a number of other letters and booklets. But perhaps the most notable, as well as the most useful, of his writings are the four little “Books,” as he calls them, which these words are to introduce to the English-reading public, and which he himself styles, in the Prologue or Introduction to the First Book, a defence of “the glorious TRIUMPH OF THE CROSS” over “the profane and foolish babble of worldly-wise Philosophers”.

Of St. Philip Neri, the Apostle of Rome, who was ever staunch in his loyalty to the memory of the one who, for a time at least, was the Apostle of his own native Florence, it is said, that this was one of his favourite books. The Saint's biographer, Cardinal Capecepatro, writes: “It is well known that Philip often read the writings of Savonarola, especially THE TRIUMPH OF THE CROSS, and that he used them for the instruction of his spiritual children. There are still

¹ A translation has recently been published by the Catholic Truth Society.

preserved in the Vallicella, among the books which belonged to St. Philip, and which were given by him to the Congregation, five of Savonarola's works."¹

The history and object of THE TRIUMPH OF THE CROSS, which may be considered the most important of the works, if we may so call them, of the great Florentine Reformer, is given by Echard, the Continuator of Quetif, in his *Scriptores Ordinis Prædicatorum*.²

THE TRIUMPH OF THE CROSS is (he tells us) an accurate work, and one approved by all learned men. Savonarola undertook it for this special reason, namely, that he might clearly show what were his real feelings as regards the Catholic Faith and the Apostolic See; and that he might refute the calumnious accusation of heresy and schism, which had been laid to his charge by his adversaries. It begins thus: "The glorious triumph of the Cross over the worldly wise and over wordy sophists, etc." It is divided into four books, of which the first treats of the existence, nature, and providence of God, and proves the immortality of the soul of man. In the second the author shows, by various arguments, how the Christian faith is in accord with truth and reason. He proceeds, in the third, to point out that there is nothing, intrinsically, or extrinsically, impossible in the chief mysteries of the Christian faith, and that they are not, in any way, at variance with reason. The fourth book is mainly devoted to an exposition of the truth of the religion taught by Christ.

¹ *Life of St. Philip Neri*, translated by Father Pope, vol. i., p. 278.

² Tome i., p. 885. Edit. Paris, 1719.

It shows that the vagaries of philosophers, astrologers, idolaters, Jews, Mahometans, and heretics are absolutely opposed to reason.

This work Savonarola wrote in Latin, and it was printed at Florence in 1497 in quarto. It was reprinted there, in quarto, in 1524, and afterwards in Paris at the Ascension Press, in octavo, in the same year. Next it was published at Basle by Henrici-Pietri, in 1540, in folio. Then, more accurately, thanks to the zeal of the famous John Balesdens, by John Maire at Lyons (1633), in duodecimo. It was also reproduced at Rome by Cardinal S. Onufrius Antonius Barberini, brother of Urban VIII., at the Propaganda Press, in duodecimo, without any date. Finally, another edition was issued at Grenoble, in 1666, under the care of the famous companion of Stephen Mercy.

But since many of Savonarola's adherents were unable to obtain a copy, and were unacquainted with the Latin language, in which it was written, in accordance with their wishes he translated it into the Etruscan tongue, not indeed (as he warns his readers in his introductory letter), word for word, or line for line, but merely giving the sense and the pith of each chapter, and sometimes (to make a special point the more convincing to his readers), omitting some passages and adding others.¹ He says that he did this advisedly, lest it should be purposely, and maliciously, mis-translated by another. This was edited at Florence in the year 1497, in quarto, and to

¹ This will account for some few slight and unimportant verbal variations from the original *Latin* edition in the present English translation, which, though it has been compared with the Latin, has been made from the Italian version.