



Chapter III

THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY

From the rebirth of Monte Senario (1404) to the death of Fra Antonio Alabanti (1495)

A century of many facets. The rebirth of Monte Senario. The Servite Congregation of the Observance. Liveliness and vigour of the Order in the mid-fifteenth century. The generalate of Fra Antonio Alabanti of Bologna (1485-1495) and the papal bull known as *Mare magnum*. The Order at the close of the fifteenth century.

A century of many facets

The Week of Servite History and Spirituality held at Monte Senario in August 1981 dealt specifically with the life of the Order in the fifteenth century. The general title given the entire period was: "The Age of Reforms." First of all, in the fifteenth century the whole Order was involved in the material and spiritual rebuilding of Monte Senario. Then, in 1430, the movement usually known as the "Observance" began; it led eventually to the birth of independent Servite priories, distinguished from the traditional houses, not juridically, but by their style of religious life.

This phenomenon, the Observance, was not exclusive to the Servites; it occurred in other religious orders, and in some cases led to the establishment of new orders completely separate from those that had given them birth.

Shortly after the middle of the century, other attempts at reform were made in the Order alongside the Observance, which, however, continued until well after the Council of Trent. It was finally suppressed and its members reabsorbed into the mainstream of the Order in 1570.

It is therefore correct to speak of the fifteenth century as an age of "reforms" for the Servite Order. It was, however, a particularly rich and complex period in the Order's history, and it is difficult to sum it up under one, superficial title. This is also true because "the loss of archival material and the difficulty of undertaking the necessary detailed local research prevent us from drawing up a really exact picture of the Order, even in its bare outlines" (Fr. Davide M. Montagna OSM).

The Servite Order was by now widely spread in northern and central Italy and well established in Germany. It too felt the impact of social, religious and cultural changes in this period.

As regards economic and social life, the fifteenth century was an age of expansion: there was a big increase in the amount of land under cultivation; there was a growth of large and small urban centres; the arts made them more beautiful and also assisted the social advancement of more and more sections of the community. In the field of religion, the century opened with the Western Schism, with popes and antipopes until the pontificate of Martin V (1417). The effects of the Schism were felt even until, and after, the Council of Basel, Ferrara, Florence and Rome (1431-1445). In culture, the fifteenth century was the age of literary humanism and the renaissance of the arts, which implied a reversal of, or at least a marked improvement upon, medieval concepts. The political life of Italy during this period is divided into two parts by the Peace of Lodi (1454), which marked a gradual end to the exhausting struggles of the first fifty years of the century and the start of a period of relative peace, which was to survive until the invasion of Charles VIII in 1494.

As will be seen, Servites took an active part in the social and religious life of the times, and played a part in politics and culture. Attempts to define the life of the Order in a few words would

not do adequate justice to all the aspects of the picture, It is better to follow closely what happened in the Order and emphasize the salient points which illustrate its situation in the context of events in the Church and society at large. Attention will also be given to the intellectual and spiritual achievements, which made this century a particularly rich one in the history of the Order.

A few words about the size of the Order at the beginning of the century: When the Order celebrated its general chapter in Ferrara in 1404 in order to decide, as shall be seen shortly, the future of Monte Senario, there were six provinces, with about seventy priories in all. It is not easy to calculate the exact number of friars, but it must have been still far short of a thousand. There were enough, however, for the Order to have a greater impact in Church affairs; the first Servite bishops date from this period, although it is impossible to list them all with precision.

The rebirth of Monte Senario

The priory at Monte Senario, which had been the headquarters of the nascent Order of "the Servants of the Virgin Mary" in the years 1249 to 1256, disappeared almost entirely from the pages of history after 1257, when the prior general established his residence in the priory outside the walls of Florence.

This account of the subsequent history of Monte Senario is based on F.A. Dal Pino's article *Monte Senario*, in the *Dizionario degli Istituti di Perfezione* (Dictionary of Institutes of Perfection).

The writer of the final version of the *Legenda de origins*, in all probability Fra Peter of Todi, noted that, at the time of writing (1317-1318), Monte Senario was a strong reminder of the origins of the Order yet was in a state of abandonment and neglect. At that time, "hermits" or "little brothers" lived there; their common name, *fraticelli*, and one of Boccaccio's stories attest to the poverty of their way of life, conducted with "fasts and prayers."

It was not until 1404, however, that other significant information is found about the ancient priory. In that year, which was during the Western Schism and in the generalate of Fra Antonio of Bologna, the general chapter held in Ferrara planned the spiritual and material restoration of Monte Senario. This was done at the suggestion of the prior from Florence, Fra Pietro Silvestri. The same year, Fra Antonio of Siena and an unnamed hermit, who perhaps was already living there, took up residence. In the two following years, a further six friars, and possibly two more as well, all from Tuscany, went to Monte Senario.

The life of the community was based explicitly on the exact observance of the Rule of St. Augustine. In 1405, perpetual abstinence from meat was added. In 1412, the first novices were received. Restoration work on the priory had progressed well, thanks to generous donations from the noble family of Della Stufa, who had their family coat of arms placed over the door of the church. The church, however, was not consecrated until a later date.

In the general chapter held in Pisa in 1413, when Fra Stefano of Sansepolcro was prior general and the Order gave allegiance to the Pisan pope, John XXIII, the friars at Monte Senario obtained their own special statutes, designed to allow the priory to proceed without outside interference in its particular way of life. The priory was placed under the immediate jurisdiction of the prior general; the Tuscan provincial was permitted to make canonical visitation there, but could not assign or remove friars from the community. Because of its poverty, the community was dispensed from the regular taxes of the Order and the Tuscan province for the time being. The prior was to be elected every two years by the community itself and confirmed in office by the prior general, who would also determine the limits of the prior's powers.

Although they encountered difficulties later, these privileges were confirmed by the general chapter of Cesena (1434), at the request of the "vicar general" and prior, Fra Bartolomeo of Florence, and in 1436, by Pope Eugene IV, a staunch supporter of Observance movements; he also extended them to the dependent foundations of the priory. The prior general of the time, Fra Niccolò of Perugia, was in fact overseeing the foundation of the first "observant" priories in the north of Italy.

The Servite Congregation of the Observance



Perhaps a word of clarification is in order here about the different reform movements in the history of the Order: first of all, there is the first rebirth of Monte Senario, begun in 1404; then there is the story of the Congregation of the Observance, which lasts from 1430 to 1570; there is also a Congregation of Hermits of Monte Senario, with a history spanning two centuries (1593-1778); lastly, there is the Germanic Observance, begun in 1613 and lasting until 1909.

Since friars from Monte Senario were instrumental in the foundation of both the Congregation of the Observance and the Germanic Observance, some confusion, especially terminological, is inevitable. The Congregation of the Observance is also sometimes referred to as the Lombard-Veneto Observance, or even, occasionally, the Mantuan Observance.

Fra Niccolò of Perugia served longer than any other prior general of the Order up to the present day. He held office from 1427 to 1461. The rise and expansion of the Congregation of the Observance is closely connected to this general's first actions in office. The reforming spirit, which accompanied the material and spiritual restoration on Monte Senario grew stronger in the Order during the first three years of his term as prior general, and recent historians ascribe the idea of the Observance directly to him.

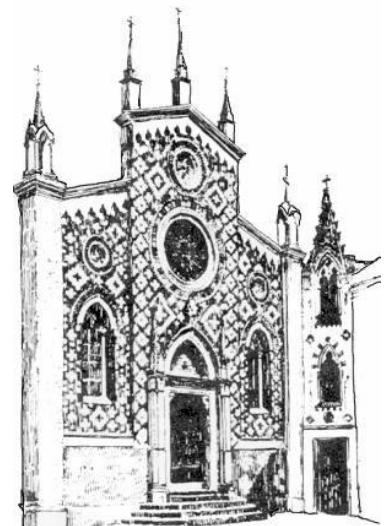
No information is available as to the motives or circumstances, which prompted the prior general to send friars to found a priory in Brescia in 1430. It is possible that their arrival was connected to the renewal of religious life in the city; this had become more vigorous after the Republic of Venice annexed Brescia in 1426.

In June 1430 the prior general sent some friars to take up residence in the priory of Sant'Alessandro in Brescia; this priory was at the time in the care of the sole surviving member of the community of Canons Regular of St. Augustine. The names of at least two members of this founding group of the Observance are known: Fra Francesco of Florence and Fra Antonio of the Kingdom of Naples or of Bitetto. It is certain that the first came from the Monte Senario community. The Brescia priory was to be the first foundation of the Observance, to be followed by Santa Maria di Monte Berico in the city of Vicenza (1435) and San Cataldo in Cremona (1439).

By 1435 the prior general had already named a vicar general for the "observant" priories. Pope Eugene IV issued a bull, *Viris sanctae religionis*, on 27 June 1440, which crowned the progress made in the preceding decade and gave free and irreversible rein to the new body of the Observance.

The outstanding character who came to the forefront as the movement concluded its initial phase was Fra Antonio of Bitetto; he continued to play a leading role until the middle of the century.

The bull mentioned above exempted the friars "of the regular observance" in Brescia, Monte Berico and Cremona from all authorities in the Order except the prior general, who alone could exercise the right of visitation in their priories. It also allowed them to elect their own vicar of the prior general, to be confirmed in office by the general himself. The prior general could not assign other friars to their houses or move any of them without the consent of the vicar and the communities. This was an extension of the exemptions already granted by the Order to the priory of Monte Senario in 1413



and confirmed by the same pope in 1436.

In the period immediately following this bull, the cardinal protector of the Order, Giuliano Cesarini, a leading figure at the ecumenical council of Florence (1439-1442), appeared to press for the subjection of the whole Order, by force if necessary, to the Observance, thus uniting the two movements. The cardinal was influential with Eugene IV and obtained a letter from him, dated 10 August 1441, ordering the most important house of the Order, the priory in Florence, to be handed over to the Observance by 12 August of the same year. The reason given was the laxity of the religious life of the priory. Fra Antonio of Bitetto was appointed prior there and friars reluctant to fall into line were replaced by others. The Observance held its first annual general chapters in Florence, perhaps in 1441 but certainly in the two following years. Fra Antonio of Bitetto himself was elected vicar general. In 1442 Monte Senario was added to the Congregation against the wishes of the community there.

After the deaths of Cardinal Cesarini (1444) and Eugene IV (1447), the priory in Florence, aided by the civil and ecclesiastical authorities of the city, was permitted to return to the Order on 30 June 1447. Monte Senario, on the other hand, given the similarities between its lifestyle and that of the Observance in Brescia, had to wait until 1473 to regain its independence.

The main area of growth of the Observance was north of the Apennines, in Emilia-Romagna, Lombardy and Veneto. Important priories of the Order were sometimes incorporated into it: in 1463, the priory of Forli, containing the remains of St. Peregrine Laziosi; in 1476, with the support of the doge, Santa Maria dei Servi in Venice.

The Observance also reached Rome, obtaining the churches of San Nicola in Arcione (1461-147,8) and Santa Maria in Via (1512), both of which were also parishes.

By 1493, twenty-six priories were listed as belonging to the movement; in 1506 there were about fifty. By the time of its suppression in 1570 there were just over sixty. There were also about fifteen convents of sisters connected with the Observance.

Among the saintly figures of the Order in the fifteenth century, Blessed Elizabeth Picenardi of Mantua (ca. 1428-1468) was in contact with the nearby Observant church of San Barnaba, and Blessed Bonaventure of Forli (d. 1491), an austere preacher of penance, was made vicar of the Congregation in 1488.

As regards the legislative texts, that is, the Constitutions of the Observance, Fr. Davide M. Montagna OSM states, "Until the time of the Council of Trent, the Observance kept to the line of the earliest legislative traditions of the Order, the *Constitutiones antiquae* (drawn up in the period 1295-1304), plus a few *Constitutiones novae* promulgated by Servite general chapters in the fourteenth century. It may legitimately be supposed that the friars of the Observance were faithful to the texts as they appeared in the copies then being made for circulation in the priories of the Order at the start of the fifteenth century and during the long generalate of Fra Niccolò of Perugia (1427-1461). In some cases these were used in community liturgies (professions, chapter readings, at table) just as they were, without being transcribed elsewhere ... This fidelity to the *Constitutiones antiquae* of the Order did not stop them from adding other articles (*Constitutiones novae*) during their annual general chapters ... The first version to appear with modifications of the *Constitutiones antiquae* was printed in Venice in 1516... By this legislation of 1515/1516, the Congregation of the Observance established its pretridentine legislative text far earlier than the rest of the Order, and moreover, in a great number of identical copies."



In the last decades of the fifteenth century, a long period of crisis began for the Congregation of the Observance, only partially resolved by attempts at a revival in the early years

of the following century. Opposition between the Observance and the Order increased, as the latter founded its own priories of "primitive observance" in Italy and Germany and encouraged attempts at eremitical and contemplative life. The Order and the Observance thus grew less dissimilar, thereby creating the basis for the reunification of the Order, which came about in 1570.



The Observance presented, especially in the first decades of its existence, a reminder for the whole Order to be faithful to its origins. It might indeed be said that for an Order founded by a group rather than one individual, the priority of unity, even of structures, should have been evident. Unlike other religious orders whose "observant" movements broke away to form separate institutes, the Servite Observance remained with the Order.

A pictorial representation of this is the fresco of Our Lady of Mercy (*Mater misericordiae*) that was discovered in the priory of Santissima Annunziata in Florence in 1964. Painted in the second half of the fifteenth century, it shows the Blessed Virgin gathering two groups of Servite friars under her mantle, seven on her right and six on her left. The symbolism reveals the date of its origin: the two groups represent the "conventuals," tracing their origin back to the Seven

Founders of the Order, and the friars of the Observance who, according to Fra Paolo Attavanti, a Florentine writer, originated from a group of six.

Liveliness and vigour of the Order in the mid-fifteenth century

After the long generalate of Fra Niccolò of Perugia (1427-1461), there was another one also of considerable length. The general chapter held in Treviso in 1461, with some four hundred capitulars present, elected Fra Cristoforo of Giustinopoli (or Capodistria) to the office of prior general, and he governed until 1485.

Fra Cristoforo was held in respect by the friars of the Observance as well as the Order, and his name is connected with a series of reforms that the general chapters of 1461 and 1473 initiated, as well as with the expansion of the Order and its involvement in the world of culture and of the Church at large.

A certain continuity between Fra Cristoforo and his predecessor would appear to be one of the reasons behind the liveliness of the Order in this period; together they held office for almost sixty years. Signs of this vigour are the growth of movements of Servite women, the sanctity of the friars and their participation in the affairs of the Church and the world of culture.

Some of the more important aspects of these three fields are given here.

Fr. Davide M. Montagna OSM, who has studied in detail the origins of various movements of Servite women, comments: "Neither the earliest lives of Servite saints ... nor the oldest lists of the Order's saints and blessed give a prominent place to women connected with Servite churches or priories. It is only in the mid-fifteenth century (shortly after the bull of Martin V in 1424 concerning the organization of the Third Order) that names of women blessed begin to appear. The earliest listing would appear to date from the generalates of Niccolò of Perugia and Cristoforo of Giustinopoli." Included are Joanna of Cremona, Elizabeth Picenardi of Mantua, Maria of Genoa, another Elizabeth (Recordati) of Mantua, Bionda of Verucchio, etc.

The enclosed convents of Santa Maria delle Povere in Perugia, Santa Caterina in Portaria near Acquasparta, Sant'Eufemia in Rimini, Santa Maria delle Grazie in Sant'Angelo in Vado, San Concordio (later Santissima Trinità) in Spoleto, Santa Maria della Pace in Brescia and Santa Maria della Misericordia in Mantua all date from this period.

Mention must also be made of the vernacular rule for groups of women in the Veneto region; this had been translated and adapted by the noted Servite theologian and preacher, Fra Ambrogio Spiera of Treviso (d. 1455).

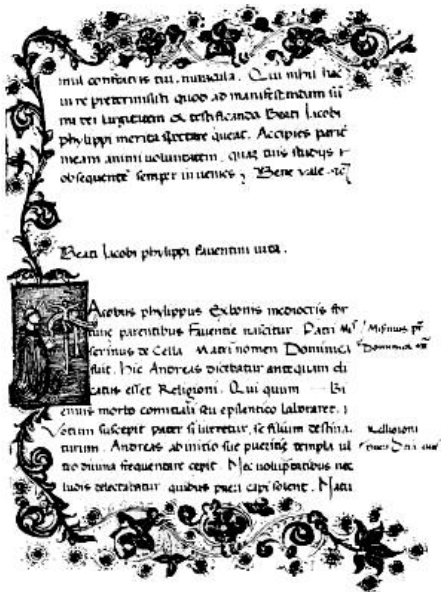


As regards saintly figures in the fifteenth century, the Order's liturgy celebrates a number of blessed: Benincasa of Montepulciano, who died in 1426; Elizabeth Picenardi of Mantua (d. 1468); Jerome of Sant'Angelo in Vado, who died around the same time; and James Philip Bertoni of Faenza, who died in 1483 at the age of twenty-nine. After a short period of time, there were Blessed Bonaventure of Forlì (d. 1491) and Blessed John Angelo Porro of Milan who died in 1505.

A characteristic common to all these, possibly the dominant one, was an austere and solitary life, lived either in their own home (Blessed Elizabeth), the priory (Blessed Jerome and Blessed James Philip Bertoni) or a hermitage. In 1483, while Blessed Bonaventure of Forlì was prior at San Marcello in Rome, he obtained permission from Pope Sixtus IV to retire to a place apart, along with six companions, so as to lead a life of solitude in a place belonging to the Order and under the direct jurisdiction of the prior general.

This type of life did not prevent them from holding offices or carrying on active apostolates. This was case of Blessed Jerome, and even more so of Blessed Bonaventure of Forlì and Blessed John Angelo Porro. Porro died at the start of the sixteenth century, having become distinguished during the latter half of the fifteenth century for his pioneering apostolic activities in Milan, especially in the field of the religious instruction of children; he also organized and led a rigorous form of religious life at Monte Senario and was a hermit for a time in the house in the Chianti valley which was founded during this period. He attempted reform within the Order without going over to the Observance.

Blessed Jerome of Sant'Angelo in Vado, probably a member of the Ranuzzi (or Ranucci) family, was a priest; he held a bachelor's degree. He was vicar of the Roman province, then known as the province of the Patrimony of St. Peter, and the founder of a group of enclosed nuns (perhaps, at the beginning, a group of ternaries) of whom the enclosed Servite nuns at Sant'Angelo in Vado are the direct descendants. Duke Federico III of Urbino made him one of his councillors. CLIOS, the International Servite Liturgical Commission, published a biography of him in 1982 with historical notes by Rosella Barbieri ossm.



Blessed Elizabeth died on 19 February 1468; she had not yet reached the age of forty. Half of her short life was spent within her own home, vested in the habit of a Servite "mantellate." After the deaths of first her mother and then her father, she spent her last three years at the house of her sister, who had married into a wealthy Mantuan family. She prayed in the nearby Servite church of San Barnaba, where she frequently, even daily, went to confession and received communion. She also recited the Divine Office that the friars chanted in choir. After her death, she was found to be wearing instruments of penance. Her father had been a Cremonese nobleman in the service of the Gonzagas of Mantua. Elizabeth was therefore a "mantellate" sister living in the world, and a Servite tertiary.

Alongside the various saintly Servites who have

received official recognition by the Church in the liturgy, many others could be cited, men and women, all outstanding for the holiness of their lives. The tradition of sixty-four Servites martyred in Prague in 1420, however, is without solid historical foundation.

The participation of Servite friars in the life of the Church and of society in the fifteenth century is attested by the number of them appointed to bishoprics. For Italy these included: Fra Alberto Boncristiani of Florence, bishop of Forlì (1413) and later of Comacchio (1418), Fra Matteo and Fra Mariano of Florence, both bishops of Cortona (in 1426 and 1455 respectively) and Fra Deodato of Genoa, bishop of Ajaccio in Corsica (1457).

Interesting too are the appointments of Servites to dioceses in the Near and Far East, where the Order had no established communities. In the second half of the fourteenth century, three Servites had been appointed bishops of Cardica in Greece, Sebaste of the Armenians in Turkey and Zaitum, or Ch'uan-Chou, a suffragan see of Peking in China. In the fifteenth century, there were: Fra Gioacchino Torcelli of Genoa, bishop of Famagusta on the island of Cyprus (1414), Fra Stefano Birello, archbishop of Durazzo in Albania (1458) and Fra Francesco of Siena, archbishop of Ragusa (Dubrovnik) in Yugoslavia (1460).

By this time, some of the Order's churches were true parishes. Servite preachers were active in their own churches and also in cities where there were no Servite priories: But the Order followed other religious institutes into the missionary lands only at a much later date.

Few studies have thus far examined the Order's involvement in the fields of culture and politics in this period. More attention given to learning and the presence of the Order in the principal cities of Italy are signs, however, of a high level of culture in some priories.

In the fifteenth century, the important centres of learning in Italy were Florence, Bologna, Padua, Pisa, Rome and Naples. Priories such as Santissima Annunziata in Florence or Santa Maria dei Servi di Bologna became important centres of study for the Order, and many friars did studies on the university level. Some became well known outside the circle of the Order as well. The golden era for Servites was the sixteenth century and later, but already in this period there were signs of what was to become general later on. One indicator of this is the number of works by Servite authors that were printed immediately after the invention of the printing press. In the period before 1485, there were Fra Paolo Attavanti of Florence, who had twelve editions of seven different books; Fra Galvano of Padua and Fra Iacopo Soldi of Florence, each of whom published a book; and Fra Ambrogio Spiera of Treviso, whose *Quadragesimale* (Lenten sermons) printed in Venice in 1476, the first incunabulum of the Order, saw two other editions in 1481 and 1485.

Fra Antonio Alabanti of Bologna, who succeeded Fra Cristoforo of Giustinopoli as prior general in 1485, about whom more will be said shortly, was another outstanding friar in the world of culture.

As is well known, Pico della Mirandola (1463-1495) went to Rome in 1486 to organize a great "disputation" of nine hundred theses; it was to be held in the period after Epiphany of the following year. It never took place, however, because Pope Innocent VIII stopped it and appointed an investigatory commission of sixteen members. One of these was Fra Antonio Alabanti, the Servite prior general. The commission finished its work on 13 March 1487; some members, including Alabanti, refused to sign its final report condemning the famous humanist. It is not known if his friendship with the Medici family was the reason for this, but it is interesting to see him involved in the world of learning of this period.

The generalate of Fra Antonio Alabanti of Bologna (1485-1495) and the papal bull known as Mare magnum (1487)

The ten years that Fra Antonio Alabanti was prior general of the Order was a period of intense work on his part for the good of the Order on all levels.

As soon as he was elected, Fra Antonio Alabanti of Bologna went to work on the implementation of one of the decisions of the general chapter of 1485, which had been held at

Vetralla in the residence of the cardinal protector of the Order. That decision was to encourage the return to the priories of the considerable number of friars who were living outside the cloister for a variety of reasons. For this purpose Fra Antonio employed respected men of experience, such as Fra Paolo Attavanti, the well known writer and preacher, Blessed Bonaventure of Forli and Blessed John Angelo Porro of Milan.

One of Alabanti's other long-term plans was the expansion of the Order beyond the frontiers of Italy. He started work on the recovery of the priories that the Order had lost in France and Spain during the Western Schism, but his work remained without much success.

In 1486, the prior general decided to go in person to all the provincial chapters. He also tried to attend the annual general chapter of the Observance in Brescia, but was refused admittance. This unfortunate incident served to increase tension between the "observants" and the "conventuals" (as Servites not belonging to the Observance were then known). Alabanti was also the first prior general, it would seem, to visit the Servite priories in Germany, that is, unless the tradition about St.

Philip's journey to Germany is accepted as true. He presided at the 1486 provincial chapter in Germany, at which strict decrees for the reform of religious life were introduced. Before returning to Italy, Alabanti set up a sort of "observance" in three priories that dated back to the thirteenth century; these were placed under the jurisdiction of his vicar general in Germany.

Appl. 1486
 Jo. frater generalis angelo de milano. o. r. vicario gen.
 + questo di un detto capitolo. Litt. d. d. d.
 per uno infirmo. L. 10

Among the important achievements of Alabanti was the concession of the so-called *Mare magnum*, that is the bull *Apostolicae sedis intuitus*, on the part of Innocent VIII on 27 May 1487. This is sometimes called the *Mare magnum omnium privilegiorum* (a collection of all the privileges) since it was "the renewal and extended official declaration of the many privileges obtained by the Order from the popes up to that time." There are sixteen documents confirmed and written out in their entirety in the bull, including the one from Martin V, *Sedis apostolicae providentia* (1424) which is the foundation document of the Servite Third Order, whose Rule is also attached.

At the end of this intense period of three years, a general chapter was held in Bologna in 1488. This was to become the most famous in the history of the Order for size and grandeur. Over nine hundred friars attended and, given Alabanti's concern for communities of Servite women, about a hundred tertiary sisters from different Italian towns also participated. Local chroniclers recorded the event; the *Diario Bolognese* of Gaspare Nadi (1418-1505) mentions the presence of 1,302 friars. There were processions through the streets of the city, songs, music, disputations and sermons. The vicar general of the Observance, Blessed Bonaventure of Forli, also attended.

One of the most significant decisions taken at the chapter was the reopening of the cause for canonization of Philip Benizi. A new province of the Order, that of Genoa, was erected; it comprised the regions of Piedmont and Liguria. The whole Order was to work for the return of the Servites to the Iberian peninsula, and to pay for the printing of books by outstanding Servite authors, such as the sermons of Fra Ambrogio Spiera and Fra Paolo Attavanti's Lenten sermons.

The next general chapter was held at Verona in 1491. It was the first whose entire acts have come down to us, in a version containing a detailed account of each day's business.

As Fr. Davide M. Montagna OSM has noted: "The chapters of 1488 and 1491 were two exceptional events, organized surely by Alabanti in person. Afterwards, in the wake of Charles VIII's invasion of Italy (1494) and the precarious political situation throughout the whole of the next century, the institution of the general chapter underwent a gradual reformation, in conformity with Innocent VIII's brief of April 1491."

In this bull, the pope, citing the bull *Regimini universalis ecclesiae* promulgated by Clement VI in 1346, limited participation at general and provincial chapters to "capitulars," that is, superiors

(including local ones) and representatives (called "discreti") from the priories, plus professors of theology in the Order. The numbers present at the Verona general chapter (1494) thus went down to three hundred friars.

From June 1494 to the end of 1495, Alabanti seems never to have ventured outside the city of Bologna, which was not involved in the political events of the times. As a friend of the Medici in Florence, in his latter years he was closely involved with Piero, son of Lorenzo the Magnificent, who succeeded his father in 1492 and maintained contact with him even after the expulsion of the Medici from Florence on 9 November 1494. It is also said that it was Alabanti who saved Piero's two children, Lorenzo and Clarice. It is known that he received envoys from the Signoria of Florence at the priory in Bologna in June 1494.

The priory became a meeting place for political discussion at the highest level. Alabanti also served as an informant of Ludovico il Moro, Duke of Milan, with whom he soon entered into direct contact. At the beginning of December 1495 he left Bologna for an unknown destination and for unknown reasons. On 8 December he unexpectedly died at Vigevano in the province of Milan, where Ludovico was also present. The story that he was poisoned by enemies of the Medici would not appear to have any serious basis in fact.

Fra Arcangelo Giani, a Servite annalist who wrote at the beginning of the seventeenth century, stated that towards the end of his life, Alabanti was seriously considering sending Servite friars to take part in the evangelization of the New World recently discovered by Christopher Columbus.

The Order at the close of the fifteenth century

The following picture of the size and geographical extension of the Order at the end of the fifteenth century is based on the reliable information contained in the acts of the general chapters of 1491 and 1494.

All the sources available are unanimous about the first six provinces, which are always named in the same order: Tuscany, the Patrimony of St. Peter, Romagna, Lombardy (or the Province of Milan, which seems to be the title current at that time), Genoa (established in 1488 by hiving off a dozen priories, some of them quite old, from the Province of Lombardy) and the March of Treviso (a title which had supplanted the previous title of Province of Venice). During the generalate of Alabanti, their growth seems to have been quiet but steady. In seventh place was the relatively young Province of Istria, which had been created in 1482.



The 1494 general chapter put the Province of Germany in eighth place (see map). At the close of the century it consisted of eighteen priories, sixteen in what is now called Germany and one each in modern Switzerland and Czechoslovakia, and some 250 friars. It was the biggest foundation outside Italy.

A new province, named for the first time by the 1491 general chapter was that of the March of Ancona, set up either that same year or shortly before. It included the priories of the Order in the Marches, the oldest of which were at Pergola and Fabbriano, formerly under the Province of the Patrimony.

Information about the provinces of Spain, Greece, the Naples area and Corsica is less clear. Given the small number of friars in these regions, they were probably indicated as provinces more to stimulate interest in making new foundations there than as a recognition of an established reality.

The Congregation of the Observance seems to have made considerable progress towards the end of the fifteenth century and the start of the sixteenth. As we have already seen, it comprised twenty-six priories in 1493; in an official list of 1506, some fifty priories are mentioned.

We do not know precisely how many priories belonged to the Order in this period; nor do we know exactly the number of friars. A fair estimate would be to say that in 1495 there were about 170 priories and roughly 1,200 friars.

The end of the generalate of Alabanti marks the close of a well-delineated period in the Order's history. The following decades open a new phase with very different characteristics.

Dates to Remember

- 1404 General chapter of Ferrara in which the material and spiritual restoration of Monte Senario is decided.
- 1410-1424 Generalate of Fra Stefano of Sansepolcro.
- 1413 General chapter at Pisa; special juridical norms for Monte Senario.
- 1414-1418 The Order participates in a general council of the Church for the first time, as the prior general attends
- 1417 Election of Pope Martin V and the end of the Western Schism.
- 1424 *Bull Sedis apostolicae providentia* of Martin V approves the Rule of the Servite Third Order.
- 1426 Death of Blessed Benincasa of Montepulciano.
- 1427-1461 Generalate of Fra Niccolò of Perugia.
- 1430 The prior general, Fra Niccolò of Perugia, sends a group of friars to make a foundation in Brescia. Thus is born the Servite Observance, whose first priories are Brescia,(1435), Monte Berico in Vicenza (1435) and Cremona (1439).
- 1440 Bull *Viris sanctae religionis* of Eugene IV gives full approval to the Congregation of the Observance.
- 1441-1447 The priory of Santissima Annunziata in Florence is part of the Congregation of the Observance.
- 1442-1473 Monte Senario belongs to the Congregation of the Observance.
- 1453-1462 Foundation of a convent for nuns at Sant'Angelo in Vado, the oldest of those which still exist today.
- 1461-1485 Generalate of Fra Cristoforo of Giustinopoli.
- 1468 Death of Blessed Elizabeth Picenardi.
- 1468 ca. Death of Blessed Jerome of Sant'Angelo in Vado.
- 1476 *The Quadragesimale* of Fra Ambrogio Spiera of Treviso (d. 1455) is printed, the first printed book in the Order.
- 1479 Foundation of the first priory in Corsica, in the north of the island at Centuri.
- 1480 Foundation of the priory at Sieti (Salerno), the first of the future province of Naples.
- 1483 Death of Blessed James Philip Bertoni of Faenza. Foundation of the priory of Moustiers-Sainte-Marie in France, the first of the future province of Provence (or Narbonne).
- 1485-1495 Generalate of Fra Antonio Alabanti of Bologna.
- 1487 The papal bull called *Mare magnum*.
- 1488 General chapter of Bologna, the largest in Servite history. Erection of the province of Genoa.
- 1489 ca. Foundation of the convent of enclosed Servite nuns at Sagunto (formerly Murviedro) in Spain.
- 1491 Death of Blessed Bonaventure of Forli in Udine.
- 1497 Foundation of the priory at Las -Cuevas (Aragon)