

From 'Cardinal Nephew' to Pope of Villa Giulia

Giovanni Maria Ciocchi Del Monte was born in Rome in 1487, to Vincenzo Ciocchi from Monte San Savino and the noblewoman Cristofora Saracini from Siena. Although he was the son of a consistorial advocate, his fortunes were owed to his paternal uncle, Antonio, an archbishop, who persuaded him to pursue an ecclesiastical career after graduating in law from Siena. As soon as he was elevated to the cardinalate, Antonio passed on the archdiocese of Manfredonia to Giovanni Maria Del Monte. Shortly thereafter, Giovanni Maria participated in the Fifth Lateran Council, delivering the prologue of the fifth session in February 1513. In 1521, he was elected bishop of Pavia, a city he would never visit.

In June 1527, following the sack of Rome, of which he circulated narratives, Del Monte was handed over as a hostage to guarantee the payment of the 400 thousand ducats demanded by the Landsknechts, risking execution due to the delay in payment. He managed to escape to Narni and reach Clement VII in Orvieto. In 1528, he was sent to Venice to expedite the restitution of Ravenna and Cervia but achieved no concrete results. The failure did not seem to compromise his relationship with the Pope (who had designated him his domestic prelate). He exercised the functions of the governor of Rome and later obtained the presidency of Romagna. Here, Del Monte dedicated himself to the conquest of Rimini, which had been taken by Sigismondo Malatesta in 1527, worked on pacifying the factions of Cesena and Forlì, and entertained the idea of forcefully reclaiming the two Romagnole cities still held by the Venetians. Recalled to the papal court in 1529, he served as the governor of Rome until 1532. Having ceded the Pavia diocese to Giangirolamo de' Rossi, he received in return a position as a cleric of the Apostolic Chamber.

At the beginning of the pontificate of Paul III, Del Monte acquired, for approximately 10 thousand scudi, the position of general auditor of the tribunal of the Apostolic Chamber and was confirmed as a domestic prelate. In December 1534, he was appointed to govern Bologna and Romagna. Two years later, Paul III created him a cardinal with the title of San Vitale (later changed to Santa Prassede and, again, to Palestrina). He reorganized the institutional structure of Parma and Piacenza, paying particular attention to the administration of justice. After the end of his term, he returned to Rome and, due to his legal expertise and loyalty to the Farnese, became involved in the cautious reform plans of Paul III. He joined the commission for super reformation, overseeing the tribunal of the Rota, and participated in the preparation of the council, navigating the conflict between Charles V and Henry II, which also reverberated in the conclave of 1549, blocked by the opposition between pro-French and pro-imperial cardinals. However, after a series of failed candidacies and irregularities (such as the non-observance of seclusion), an agreement was reached on Del Monte. He took the name Julius III, as a gesture of gratitude regarding Julius II, who had elevated his uncle Antonio to the cardinalate, the election of Julius III was considered a success by the French diplomats, despite their judgment of Giovanni Maria as untrustworthy and fickle. In reality, the new pope surrounded himself with personnel already employed in the previous pontificate and managed to maintain the balanced policy of Paul III, although he was not exempt from excessive benevolence towards relatives. For example, he appointed his great-nephew from Montepulciano, Roberto de' Nobili, as cardinal deacon.

Julius III reigned for five years marked by conflicts and a council that he would not live to see the end of. The troubles included the defense of Vatican borders, which had to be secured (he occupied the Duchy of Castro of the Farnese); the Holy Office, founded a few years earlier (1542) and presided over by Gian Pietro Carafa (future Pope Paul IV); the Protestant heresy, spreading even in Spain, France, and Italy. Another issue was the revolt of Siena (at the end of July 1552), leading to the expulsion of the Spanish. Julius III participated in the initial peace negotiations and guaranteed the agreement reached in early August 1552, which affirmed the independence of the city. He tried to prevent the Republic from relying militarily on the French: first, he offered the presence of a papal garrison, then he sent a legate to Siena, Cardinal Fabio Mignanelli, in vain.

In the fall of 1552, the pope, along with a cardinal commission, tried to reach an understanding with the Republic of Venice and Cosimo de' Medici to ensure the neutrality of the Republic of Siena.

From the end of 1552, Julius III seemed to support the reasons of Charles V, advising the Sienese to submit. As the plan to make Siena part of a neutral zone in central Italy did not seem feasible, he considered a swift execution of the imperial plan against the city as the least ruinous alternative. However, he did not intend to tilt too much in favor of the emperor, to the extent that the French representatives requested and obtained demonstrations of the Holy See's neutrality and equidistance.

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