

THE CARDINAL AS A CHILD

Roberto de' Nobili Ascetic and penitent, friend of the Jesuits, librarian. He died at just 17 years old.

In 1550, Pope Julius III called to his Court his great-nephew Roberto de Nobili (Montepulciano, 1541), son of Vincenzo and Maddalena of the Counts of Montauto, subsequently appointing him cardinal on December 22, 1553. The title of Santa Maria in Domnica was bestowed upon him in 1555. Still a child, after a meticulous humanistic education (his teacher among others being the renowned Giulio Pogiani), de Nobili was thrust into the heart of Catholicism. By his side, probably appointed by Julius III, stood Ottavio Pantagato of the Servite order, acting as his preceptor.

Rome, as Michel de Montaigne would write a few decades later (1580-81) in his *Journey to Italy*, was "the city with the most cosmopolitan character in the world, where one pays the least attention to whether someone is a foreigner or of a different nation"; from Rome, the Pope projected his authority over all of Christendom. However, the latter had been severely tested by the spread of confessional reforms that, within a few decades, had seen large parts of Europe withdraw from papal authority. The scenario for the Church of Rome was one of total occupation, engaged on the internal reform front within the Council of Trent (1545-1563) and, on the Roman front, striving to restore order, authority, and faith through the disciplining and use of inquisitorial repression, with different commitments during the three pontificates that accompanied the life of Cardinal Roberto de Nobili.

Indeed, Julius III died in March 1555; on April 9th, the conclave elected Marcello II, Marcello Cervini, who died after only a few days (May 1st); the new Pontiff, Gian Pietro Carafa, under the name Paul IV (1555-1559), would bring about a turning point in the life of the Church, abandoning the moderate attitudes of his predecessors and finding in the intransigence of the great inquisitor Michele Ghislieri, later Pius V, an executor. A place of fierce internal struggles within the curia, of public burnings in the squares, of unstable international alliances; perhaps it was also this context that gave rise to an early ascetic calling in the very young Roberto de Nobili who, as his biographers of the past write, considered the opportunity to free himself from the cardinalate, to renounce the archpriesthood he held in Montepulciano; an aspiration for ascetic and penitential life, an excess of penitential practices, hair shirts, and moral rigor of which, say today's historians, we are not always certain since biography and hagiography are intertwined too closely.

Starting from 1555, Rome became his stable residence. His penitential and ascetic practices intensified, and with them grew his reputation for sanctity, his disinterest in the world, in Curia life, and in ecclesiastical benefices.

On May 25, 1555, De' Nobili was elected librarian of the Vatican, which housed within its rooms codes upon codes, fragments of antiquity alongside exotic books. It was a task that, although carried out diligently, did not distract him from his desire to relinquish the title, the pension, and the two abbeys he deemed (Spineto and Val di Tolle); a desire hindered by Paul IV to avoid any form of scandal and commotion around his cardinals. He found refuge and comfort in his penitent life among the Jesuits of Rome. In 1556, Ignatius of Loyola had passed away, but his fellow brethren were well established in the eternal city and in the curial environment. The new general, the Spaniard Laínez, welcomed him as "our friend"; the Jesuit Juan de Polanco became his confessor and directed him in spiritual exercises and penitential practices. His devotion to the Society of Jesus led him in September of 1557 to contribute to the foundation of a Jesuit college in Montepulciano, for which he also provided rooms in his palace for six months. He was, as Bernardino Nara wrote in the *Vita* of the venerable de' Nobili (1738), a man "exemplary in such perfect virtue that he made himself admirable to men and beloved by the most loving God," and for many decades, the youngest cardinal in the Church. At the age of 17, he died in Rome on January 18, 1559.

Bibliografia

Pietro Messina, De Nobili Roberto, in Dizionario biografico degli italiani, Roma, Istituto della Enciclopedia italiana, vol. 38, 1990, pp. 759-762.