

Marcello II Cervini

Learned and upright, Pope for 21 days

Opposed to nepotism, he wanted "to signify to the world that he was not made another for the dignity received."

Originating from Montepulciano, the Cervini family significantly enriched themselves towards the end of the 15th century, thanks to the career of Ricciardo Cervini (1454-1534). Sent to Siena to study law, Ricciardo came into contact with Ambrogio Spannocchi, a member of an important city family. In 1487, they opened a bank in Rome, and, with the favor of Pope Alexander VI, became treasurers of the Apostolic Chamber in place of the Medici. In addition to managing the Spannocchi's assets, Ricciardo Cervini took care of the education of his sons Antonio and Giulio, who were left orphaned at an early age. Thanks to his connection with Ambrogio's widow, Cassandra, in 1485, he obtained the position of writer of the Apostolic Penitentiary and two years later that of writer of apostolic letters.

The esteem and protection granted by the Spannocchi allowed Ricciardo to become part of the nobility of Siena in 1493, with the right to add their surname and display their coat of arms. Around the end of the 15th century, he obtained the contract for taxes in the Marche. During this stay, in the locality of Montefano near Macerata, on May 6, 1501, his wife Cassandra Benci gave birth to Marcello, the firstborn son after Pera and Camilla. After Cassandra's death in 1509, Ricciardo entered into a second marriage with Leonora Egidi, a descendant on the maternal line of the Cacciaconti family of Siena. This marriage resulted in two sons (Alessandro and Romolo) and five daughters (Celia, Elisabetta, Giulia, Cinzia - mother of Roberto Bellarmino - and Silvia).

The position of tax contractor allowed Ricciardo to accumulate a decent fortune, enabling him to acquire extensive plots of land in the Sienese, in Petroio, Montepulciano, and Castiglione d'Orcia, where he established his residence (Villa "Il Vivo," still owned by the Cervini descendants). Some properties were also not far from the papal capital, near the Farnese family's properties.

In February 1520, the young Marcello was sent by his father to Siena, armed with a letter of recommendation addressed to Cardinal Giovanni Piccolomini, to complete the course of studies begun under paternal guidance. The rich correspondence, preserved in the State Archives of Florence, consisting of 72 volumes, allows us to reconstruct Marcello's friendships and connections during his years of study, especially with the humanist Giovanni Battista Politi, an enthusiastic scholar of classical languages and astronomy like his father Ricciardo. This association introduced the young man to the circle of Giovanni Battista's brother, the Dominican Lancelotto Politi, better known as Ambrogio Catarino. Already in the spring of 1520, Ambrogio addressed a lengthy letter to Cervini, inviting him to join his order to turn "to the treasure of the purity and innocence of the soul and to the tranquility and peace that is acquired in holy religion." Marcello did not follow Politi's advice for the time being, but he maintained excellent relations with him throughout his life. During these years, he had to manage the family estate on behalf of his father and younger siblings.

In the winter of 1525, at the end of his first stay in Siena, Marcello was sent by his family to Rome to pay homage to Pope Clement VII, probably hoping he could obtain some position within the papal Curia. As a guest of the Spannocchi family, the young man met some prominent prelates and intellectuals, such as the Augustinian Egidio da Viterbo, Miguel de Silva, the cultured and renowned ambassador of the King of Portugal dedicated to the Courtier, the Bishop of Ravenna Benedetto Accolti, Cardinal Lorenzo Pucci, and Lattanzio Tolomei. Correspondence from this period between father and son reveals the latter's desire to comfortably pursue humanistic studies by serving one of these figures. The tumultuous political events that culminated in the tragedy of the sack of Rome in May 1527 caught Marcello at the family residence in Castiglione d'Orcia. From 1528 to 1531, he stayed again in Siena, perhaps to complete his legal education. The letters from these years also hint at his attendance at the Sienese Academy, where the young man came into contact with some

well-known humanists and literati of the time, from Claudio and Lattanzio Tolomei to Aonio Paleario, from Lattanzio Ragnoni and Ludovico Castelvetro to Bartolomeo Carli Piccolomini. It is worth noting that with Aonio Paleario, the future pope would maintain enduring friendships, as evidenced by some letters preserved in the State Archives of Parma (an unspecified number was removed from the Cervini corpus at the time of the donation of documents to the newly established State Archives of Florence). Paleario, during his first heresy trial in 1542, turned to Cardinal Cervini seeking to plead his innocence. It is not known whether and to what extent Cervini intervened on behalf of his youth friend, destined to suffer the rigors of inquisitorial repression until his execution in 1570. What is certain is that the future pope, now well on his way to a brilliant curial career in the 1540s, became convinced, first during his mission in Germany and later as a legate to the Council of Trent, of the impossibility of seeking mediation with the Protestants. Paleario soon realized that the space for dialogue with his former friend no longer existed.

In early December 1531, Cervini returned to Rome in the service of Bishop Felice Trono of Chieti. After the death of his patron, he decided to secure an income by acquiring a curial office, a decision made possible by a loan provided by the Spannocchi family.

With the election of Pope Paul III to the papal throne, Marcello Cervini's career underwent a decisive turn. In the name of the ancient friendship with his father Ricciardo, which originated during the stay in the March of Ancona where Alessandro Farnese was stationed, the pope invited the young man to move to the apostolic palaces to attend to the "custody of the cardinalets," the two nephews Alessandro and Guido Ascanio, not yet twenty but newly appointed cardinals. In 1535, Cervini decided to embrace the ecclesiastical state, perhaps encouraged by the awareness that this would allow him to access benefice incomes. In 1538, he became a personal counselor to Cardinal Alessandro, heading the papal secretariat, thus assuming a prominent role within the Curia, allowing him to deal with the most urgent issues of European politics. Important recognitions from Paul III followed the prestigious assignment to the cardinal Farnese: writer of apostolic letters, secretary of Latin letters, and finally apostolic protonotary "de numero participantium" were the titles conferred on Cervini between 1536 and 1539. On December 19, 1539, he was finally created Cardinal of Nicastro. The favor shown by Paul III to Cervini never waned, as Girolamo Garimberti ironically commented, the future Marcello II "became the secretary of Pope Paul III, from whom, in a very short time, he was made bishop and cardinal, and almost his successor in the papacy in terms of the reputation received from him."

Numerous intellectuals and humanists gathered in the Rome of Pope Farnese, with whom Cervini came into contact and formed friendships: for example, Angelo Colocci, Bernardino Maffei, Carlo Gualteruzzi, Giovanni Della Casa, Francesco Molza, Sebastiano Delio. He also corresponded with Benedetto Varchi, Piero Vettori, Pietro Bembo; probably through the Florentine Giovanni Gaddi, he met Donato Giannotti, Ludovico Martelli, Benvenuto Cellini, Annibal Caro, and Jacopo Sansovino. Equally significant was the intellectual fellowship born under the auspices of Claudio Tolomei, which included figures such as Trifone and Francesco Benci, Marcantonio Flaminio, Francesco Molza, Luca Contile, and Giovan Francesco Bini, all figures present in the Cervini correspondence. During the 1530s, he initiated a long and fruitful collaboration with the printer Antonio Blado, which lasted until the pontiff's death in 1555. Beyond the humanistic tradition of knowledge confined to the narrow circles of academies and courts, Cervini developed an innovative cultural policy directed not only towards editions and translations of classics but also, as will be seen, towards the printing and dissemination of theological and controversial works, especially during the 1540s of the sixteenth century.

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