



Pope Julius III.

Julius III (1487-1555)

by Louis Crompton

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Julius III, pope from 1550 to 1555, created one of the most notorious homosexual scandals in the history of the papacy.

He was the protégé of Julius II (pope from 1503 to 1513), himself a "sodomite covered with shameful ulcers," according to the schismatic Council of Pisa convened by his enemies, the Holy Roman Emperor and the French king, in 1511.

Julius III was born Giovanni Maria Ciocchi del Monte in 1487. He studied law in Perugia and Bologna before taking religious orders. After holding numerous offices in the Papal States, he was made a cardinal in 1536.

A skilled expert in canon law, del Monte served as governor of Rome. As cardinal-bishop of Palestrina, he was one of the three co-presidents who opened the celebrated Counter Reformation Council of Trent in 1545. He achieved the papacy five years later only because the respective candidates of France and the emperor were hopelessly deadlocked in one of the longest conclaves in papal history.

Far from being a man of the Counter Reformation, however, Julius fit the earlier pattern of a pleasure-loving Renaissance pope fond of banquets, theater, and hunting. He did, however, effect some minor reforms by limiting pluralism, and he backed the newly formed Society of Jesus in its missions to India, China, and Japan.

More notably, he supported Michelangelo as architect of St. Peter's and discovered the genius of Palestrina, whom he put in charge of the papal choir. Nevertheless, his leadership of the church was largely frustrated when political difficulties with Charles V caused him to suspend the Council of Trent indefinitely.

Julius III caused a major scandal by becoming infatuated with a fifteen-year-old beggar boy named Innocenzo whom he first saw fighting off an attack by a pet ape in 1548. He appointed this unprepossessing, rude, ill-mannered street urchin to the post of cathedral provost, which won him the soubriquet, *il provestino*.

Two years later, in 1550, when Julius became pope, he had his brother adopt Innocenzo, and over the vehement protests from other church leaders he not only named him a cardinal but gave him a responsible administrative position as his "chief diplomatic and political agent," a task for which he was entirely incompetent. Roman satire called the ill-favored boy Julius's "Ganymede," and the Venetian ambassador reported that Innocenzo shared the pope's bedroom and bed.

As may be imagined, Protestant partisans seized on this succulent scandal, which became a staple of anti-papal polemics for over a century. It was said that Julius, awaiting Innocenzo's arrival in Rome to receive his cardinal's hat, showed the impatience of a lover awaiting a mistress and that he boasted of the boy's prowess in bed. No doubt such tales gained color in the telling.

A recent biography has argued that the relation was not sexual, but the outrageous extravagance of Julius's dotage suggests otherwise: Julius bestowed benefices on Innocenzo that gave him one of the highest incomes in Europe--beyond even that of the Medicis.

After Julius's death in 1555, Innocenzo's status as a prince of the church was an extreme embarrassment to succeeding popes, who tried to curb the "voluptuous and indecent" lifestyle of the "Cardinal-Monkey." His murder of two servants--a father and the son who tried to defend him--led to his being imprisoned for several years in various monasteries. He was also tried for the rape of two women "of low estate," but on this charge he escaped punishment. He died in 1577, aged 46.

The bodies of both Julius III and Innocenzo repose in the del Monte chapel in the church of San Pietro in Montorio, Rome.

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About the Author

Louis Crompton was Professor Emeritus of English at the University of Nebraska. Co-founder of the Gay and Lesbian Caucus of the Modern Language Association, he authored the highly acclaimed *Byron and Greek Love*, and *Homosexuality and Civilization*, among numerous other works. He died on July 11, 2009.