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Sex: a Cardinal's Sin.
Punished by Syphilis in Renaissance Rome

Loes L. Raimond-Waarts and Catrien Santing

As the French army approached Naples at the end of February 1495, King Alfonso abdicated the throne and fled fearfully to Sicily. The French king Charles VIII (1483-1498) entered the city to rapturous applause. One commentator noted 'within a few weeks the French conquered, as by a miracle, a whole kingdom, almost without striking a blow'.[1] The blow came soon enough and affected the population of Naples as well as the invaders in the guise of an illness. This complaint was so horrible that it was experienced as a calamity. It revealed itself either in the form of the ugliest boils which became incurable ulcers, or very intense pains at the joints and nerves all over the body.[2] Upon the retreat of the French army the disease spread swiftly. Within a few years it was known all over Europe. In the beginning the ailment was called *Mal de Napoli* after the place where it surfaced. Soon, in keeping within the habit of blaming ill fortune on the enemy, the contagious disease was named *Morbus Gallicus*, *Mal Francese* or *French Pox* by the Italians and English, *Mal de Naples* by the French or *Spaanse Pocken* by the Dutch.[3] The name syphilis became prevalent much later at the end of the eighteenth century. It was an invention of the papal physician Girolamo Fracastoro (1478-1553), whose life and works will come up for discussion later in this article.

At first the medical doctors were at a loss about the development of the disease and perused ancient medical treatises on parallel cases of *lues* or *pestis*. Secular and clerical authorities alike immediately started to blame the people's pernicious behaviour, a judgment that, as we will explain, backfired to their own loose morals. Man's godless and immoral behaviour had caused this catastrophe. The emperor Maximilian of Habsburg, for instance, issued a decree entitled *Gottesläster*e*redict* to stimulate the inhabitants of his

[1] C. Hibbert, *The Borgias and their enemies 1431-1510* (Orlando etc. 2008) 76.

[2] F. Guicciardini, *The History of Italy (1561)*, S. Alexander trans. (Princeton 1984) 108-109.

[3] On the outbreak and development of syphilis see: J. Arrizabalaga, J. Henderson and R. French, *The Great Pox. The French Disease in Renaissance Europe* (New Haven 1997). When not indicated else, the information on syphilis stems from this rich study. See also: C. Quetel, *History of Syphilis* (Cambridge 1990).

lands to adopt impeccable moral standards.[4] A similar link between the new illness and the desire for moral purification was to be found at the Renaissance court of Ferrara. There a medical debate on the illness took place, probably because the princes had caught the disease themselves. Nevertheless, or because of that, Duke Ercole d'Este launched an extensive program of social reform to safeguard his lands from the pestilences produced by a wrathful God.[5]

Most doctors stressed the novelty of the malady, although there was some dispute about similar ailments in Antiquity. Learned physicians dated the coming into being of the illness back to 1484 when a fatal conjunction of the planets Jupiter and Saturn took place. Soon, however, the connection between the new malady and sexual behaviour was taken further and most physicians understood that sexual intercourse caused the contagion. Many men and women must have become affected, although in the sources we mainly hear about the men, apart from the fact that promiscuous women and prostitutes were held responsible. It was claimed that sex in the context of official marriage could not result in syphilis. The illness caused its sufferers much shame because of its origin, but also for the fact that it produced extremely visible marks in the face.

On the basis of some characteristic syphilitic cardinals and their physicians this article discusses the apparent shame for the consequences of sexual activity and explains this in terms of fear for social disgrace. We will exemplify the fear for social ignominy and, in relation to that, the diverse therapies for syphilis will be examined by concentrating on the life of the cardinals Cesare Borgia (1475-1507) and Giuliano della Rovere (1443-1513). As Pope Julius II (1503-1513), the latter built a bathroom for therapeutic reasons. Renaissance Rome saw a sudden increase of bathrooms built for popes, cardinals and prelates. In the late Middle Ages the combination of bathing and sexual activity was not uncommon. Many bathes were public, at the same time functioning as whorehouses. The Roman baths under discussion were certainly not built to receive women and enjoy them in the bathtub. The idea was that the patient withdrew completely to a place where nobody could catch a glimpse of his disfigurements. The bathrooms were meant as therapy in which alleviation was sought from a stressful life in a

[4] K. Sudhoff, *Aus der Frühgeschichte der Syphilis; Handschriften- und Inkunabelstudien* (Leipzig 1912) 4-7.
[5] Arrizabalaga, Henderson and French, *The Great Pox*, 44-50.

period of upheaval in the church. At the same time they created the possibility to bath the by syphilis afflicted areas or finding relief in medicinal steam. Several bathrooms included 'sauna' facilities.[6]

Mal de Naples

In the mild spring of 1495 life on the Bay of Naples was enjoyed by the French king and his courtiers as being in 'an earthly paradise'. Charles VIII found plenty of opportunity to indulge his 'fondness for copulation' and for 'changing his dishes' so that 'once he had had a woman, he cared no more about her, taking his pleasure with fresh ones.'[7] Most of his soldiers and some of his courtiers also celebrated the easy victory indulging in wine, women and debauchery. The Neapolitans complained:

> They were constantly after women. When they entered the house of a Neapolitan they took the best rooms and sent the master of the house to sleep or worse. They stole wine and grain, they raped the women and robbed them of their jewellery. (…) Even so, they spent much time in church praying.[8]

Soon the feeling of happiness changed dramatically as more and more French military were taken ill by a contagious disease. The population of Naples became hostile and planned to oust the occupiers. Despite the disease, the ill discipline of his mercenary troops, and the necessity to return to France, Charles VIII was reluctantly obliged to turn his back on the pleasures of Naples. The long march north started by the end of the third week of May 1495 and the king made his first extended stop in Rome to pay his respects to the Pope. On their way back to France local people became infected wherever they stopped.

The powerful senior cardinal Giuliano della Rovere, who was part of the king's entourage, must have caught the illness during the military expedition to Naples. He was not the only one. Just two months after their stop in Rome it became apparent that the disease was so virulent in the

[6] Research results in forthcoming dissertation *Renaissance Bathrooms in Rome* by Loes Raimond-Waarts. Information on this: http://www.hum.leidenuniv.nl/icd
[7] Hibbert, *The Borgias*, 78.
[8] Ibidem, 79.

summer heat of 1495 that seventeen members of the papal family, prelates and courtiers were infected, including the young cardinal Cesare Borgia, one of the Pope's ten children.[9] The papal secretary commented in his diary 'no remedies, no ointments, nor other drugs of physicians have any effect on the French disease.'[10]

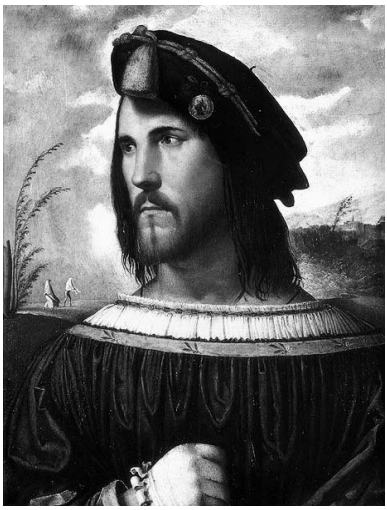

Fig. 1: *Portrait of Gentleman*, geschilderd omstreeks 1500 door Altobelle Melone (1490-1543). Bron: http://commons.wikimedia.org

The appearance of a new disease

The mere fact that the term syphilis only found general acceptance centuries later shows that retrospective diagnosis of illnesses is extremely difficult. Such endeavours usually lead to historical anachronisms. Thus, here it seems better to avoid elaborations on the exact clinical picture of the illness and concentrate on its quiddity that arose from the context of the time around 1500. Present day syphilis is caused by the *treponema pallidum* bacteria, as was demonstrated for the first time in 1905 by the Wassermann-

[9] Hibbert, *The Borgias*, 79-80, 122-123. On September 23, 1493 Cesare received the cardinal's hat.
[10] Arrizabalaga, Henderson and French, *The Great Pox*, 28.

reaction.[11] Before that it was impossible to distinguish the several venereal and skin diseases from each other. More interesting for us is that from 1495 onwards a virulent disease scourged Europe, America and Asia, which in no time became linked to (forbidden) sexual intercourse. Whether syphilis was brought to Europe from America, as is suggested in the course of the sixteenth century, is still debated by medical historians. Skeletal evidence shows that a non-venereal form of syphilis was prevalent in America. Something like that might also have existed in Southern Europe in an endemic, non-venereal form. Medical historians have suggested that the ailment at stake was yaws or *framboesia*, nowadays a tropical infection of the skin, bones and joints caused by the spirochete bacteria, being related to the treponema of venereal syphilis. These non-venereal diseases possibly mutated into a sexually transmitted disease that, in the beginning, was very aggressive and virulent because of its novelty.

Contemporary discussions were summarized by Girolamo Fracastoro in his *Syphilidis, sive Morbi Gallici, Libri tres.* This book was published in 1530, but circulated for years at the papal court, being a cult text one should have read. Its reputation rests both on its medical content, putting in perspective ancient medical literature, and on its elegant style and literary content.[12] Fracastoro was praised as an equal of Virgil, Ovid and Dante and considered to be the greatest Latin poet of his age. He was trained as a physician at the University of Padua; in those days the best place to study medicine. Next to his literary work he published genuine medical treatises on fevers and on contagion, adapting the atomic theory of Lucretius.[13] In 1546 he was installed as the official physician of the Council of Trent and started working for Pope Paul III. The poem was dedicated to a good friend, the Venetian scholar Pietro Bembo (1470-1547), himself an accomplished Latinist and notorious ladies men, who in his *Historia Veneta* (1496) recorded the outbreak of the new illness. While sojourning in Ferrara in 1502 and 1503 he had an affair with the daughter of Pope Alexander VI,

[11] I. Löwy, 'Testing for a sexually transmissiblie disease, 1907-1970. The history of the Wassermann reaction' in: V. Berridge and Ph. Strong ed., *AIDS and contemporary history* (Cambridge 1993) 74-92.

[12] G. Eatough, *Fracastoro's Syphilis. Introduction, Text, Translation and Notes with a computer-generated Word Index* (Liverpool 1984).

[13] E. Peruzzi, *Fracastoro, Girolamo di*, in: *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, http://www.treccani.it.

Lucrezia Borgia, resulting in a series of passionate love letters and poems.[14] This illicit relation in combination with his living openly with another mistress withheld his cardinalate until 1537. It was probably Bembo who brought Fracastoro in contact with the Papal court. This induced the poet to dedicate the second book of his epos to Pope Leo X (1513-1521), who succeeded Julius II.

In the first volume the doctor states that the pox also happened in Antiquity and did not originate in America, although he admits that it was even more frequent there than in the Old World. Because of the moral and cultural decay since the Golden Ages of Antiquity, the people's ability to recognize the disease had faded into oblivion. Its horrors are painted in piercing lines such as:

> For when the contagion had passed through all the veins and had polluted even the humours and what was meant to feed the body, Nature whose wont is to reject what is harmful attempted to expel the infected part from the whole body towards the surface. But because this matter with its dense substance was slow and by reason of its sluggishness tenacious, much of it clung, during the passage, to the nerves and muscles. Then as it spread it caused intolerable pains in the joints (...). Immediately unsightly sores broke out all over the body and made the face horrifying ugly, and disfigured the breast by their foul presence: the disease took on a new aspect: pustules with the shape of an acorn-cup and rotten with thick slime, which soon afterwards gaped wide open and flowed with discharge like mucous and putrid blood. Moreover the disease gnawed deep and burrowed into the inmost parts, feeding on its victims' bodies with pitiable results (...) limbs stripped of their flesh and the bones rough with scales, and mouths eaten away yawn open in a hideous gape while the throat produced feeble sounds. (I 340-360)[15]

The second book is devoted to cures and preventions, and ends with a mythical tale of cause and cure. Here Fracastoro talks about *semina* [seeds] spreading the disease, as according to him only by such means its rapid spread was to be explained. The last book renders the story of Christopher Columbus's journey to the West Indies where the disease was also well-

[14] H. Shankland ed. and trans., *The Prettiest Love Letters in the World: Letters between Lucrezia Borgia & Pietro Bembo 1503-1519* (Boston 1987).
[15] Eatough, *Fracastoro's Syphilis*, I 340-360.

known. The Indians are portrayed as descendants of the lost city Atlantis. The gods plagued the city with the dreaded infection because of the wickedness of its inhabitants - a theme of cultural and moral decay causing the scourge described earlier. Luckily enough Columbus discovered 'the holy guaiacum tree'. Extractions of its wood would cure the disease, as was propagated widely in the 1520s. Many sufferers tried the new, extremely costly miracle drug, but of course to no avail. In the poem the tree was provided by Apollo and Juno to heal a shepherd named Siphilo. He had insulted the Sun God and therefore had been punished with the disease by the Gods.

Terms such as 'Mal de Naples' or 'Morbus Gallicus' should be interpreted as catch-all labels to denote a wide collection of symptoms. Descriptions differ, but the majority of sources talk about ghastly pains in the joints and fevers such as described above by Fracastoro. Next to that the skins of many patients were covered with sores. These rashes often became swollen like the *buboni* of plague. As the sickness insidiously spread all over the body it began to destroy it. The patients' flesh rotted away causing stinking putrefaction. This process developed quite rapidly and could end within a few years in complete unsightliness or even death, although there were periods of remission. Contemporary debate was about the curable or incurable character of the disease. [16] That the illness increasingly caused serious problems emerges from the founding of hospices for terminal patients. Pope Leo X in 1515 issued a bull in which he ordered the change of use of the San Giacomo Hospital into an *Ospedale degli Incurabili*, meaning an institution specialized in syphilis sufferers doomed to die. Soon nearly every Italian town had such an institution.[17]

Two syphilitic cardinals

As a cardinal, Giuliano della Rovere had had several mistresses. They presented him not only with children, but one of them must have infected him with syphilis.[18] Although discreet in his behaviour, Felice della Rovere

[16] The story of the appearance of syphilis is best told in: Arrizabalaga, Henderson and French, *The Great Pox*, esp. ch. vi and vii. Also: Quetel, *History of Syphilis*.
[17] Arrizabalaga, Henderson and French, *The Great Pox*, ch. vi and vii.
[18] Hibbert, *The Borgias,* 265. Thereafter cardinal Della Rovere showed no interest in women, concentrating his sensual appetites on food and drink.

(1482/3-1536) was known to be his, but he had in fact fathered three daughters.[19] Having returned to France, cardinal Della Rovere spent the winter of 1495 in his diocese of Avignon. In the following years he was very circumspect about his physical condition and often claimed to be indisposed with fever, which could be a cover-up for a more serious affliction. In October 1497 it was reported that he was 'dangerously ill', but in the following April he was said to have colic brought on by anxiety. Soon after, his malady was reported to be 'the bad sort of French pox', bringing sores on his face and pains in his bones.[20] His violent temper grew to be notorious and, after ascending the papal throne, would earn him the nickname *il Papa terribile*. It could be an effect the disease had on his temperament.

Cardinal Cesare Borgia was much younger and stronger than the elderly Della Rovere, but he suffered just as much. At certain times, when the attacks of pain and the exposed sores were particularly bad, Cesare managed to disappear for a few weeks. By the end of 1497 Cesare was ill again and the widespread gossip was quick to identify his complaint as syphilis. Both cardinals could afford to pay for the most up-to-date remedies and the services of the best physicians, but an effective cure had yet to be found. As the effects of the disease were horribly visible and could not always be hidden the dignity of the prelates was at stake. In August 1498 Cesare Borgia put off the purple '(…) with the least possible scandal (…) and with the most decorous pretext'. His Holiness gave him a dispensation so that he might be permitted to return to the secular state and concentrate on his more 'warlike undertakings'. After the death of his eldest brother Juan there was also the matter of contracting matrimony to secure offspring for the Borgia dynasty.[21]

On April 7, 1498, King Charles VII died very suddenly after striking his head on a door lintel at the castle of Amboise. His successor, Louis XII (1498-1515) needed the Pope's support to realize his claim on Milan, whilst the Pope hoped to be on better terms with the French king in order to prevent another invasion and claim on Naples, and to realize his ambition

[19] C. P. Murphy, *The Pope's Daughter, The extraordinary Life of Felice della Rovere* (Oxford 2005) 11, 309.
[20] C. Shaw, *Julius II. The Warrior Pope* (Cambridge, MA 1996) 100-101.
[21] J. Turmel ed. and trans., *Le Journal de Jean Burchard, Évêque et Cérémoniaire au Vatican* (Paris 1932) II, 329.

for better positions for his children.[22] The king appointed Cesare as Duke of Valence, which earned him the nickname 'Valentino', and invited him to visit his court. In October, Cesare entered the international political scene when he left Rome as papal legate to pay the new king the papal respects. His departure was a public demonstration of Borgia power and splendour. He rode magnificent horses shod with silver and even took with him a princely travelling privy 'covered with gold brocade without and scarlet within, with silver vessels within the urinals'.[23] His condition was so precarious that the papal physician Gaspare Torella had been instructed to always be near at hand. It was his task to empty the urinals discreetly after having studied its contents in order to monitor the progress of Cesare's disease.

Arriving at the port of Marseille the Duke of Valence first travelled to Avignon where he and his entourage were the guests of the Popes' legate to France, cardinal Giuliano delle Rovere. Outwardly they were on amicable terms and the Pope was relying on the cardinal to assist with negotiations on behalf of Cesare in search of a suitable bride.[24] The cardinal had ridden two miles out of Avignon to meet Cesare and escort him into the city. Whilst festivities were put on Cesare was in no mood to celebrate as once again he was suffering from a recurrence of the pox. He felt embarrassed by the blotches under his skin, associated with the second stage of syphilis.[25] Giuliano della Rovere had also fallen sick again with 'that illness of his: now the flowers [as the syphilitic rashes were euphemistically known] are starting to bloom again', wrote an informant to Duke Ludovico Sforza in Milan.[26] Cesare and the cardinal were in a discontented frame of mind and Gaspare Torella treated them both in the best possible way. In 1501 Cesare was ill again with his old complaint.[27] Some of his physicians thought that his mind as well as his body was affected. Nevertheless he forced himself to take part

[22] Guicciardini, *The History of Italy*, 127.
[23] S. Bradford, *Lucrezia Borgia, Life, Love and Death in Renaissance Italy* (New York 2004) 77.
[24] Turmel, *Le Journal de Jean Burchard*, II, 332. A marriage was arranged with Charlotte d'Albret de Navarre, which took place in May 1499 and was consummated immediately: Cesare 'giving eight times proof of his virility'. Their daughter Louise was born in 1500.
[25] Bradford, *Lucrezia Borgia*, 77.
[26] Hibbert, *The Borgias*, 129.
[27] Ibidem, 192.

in dances and entertainments when the occasion demanded, but his servants reported that they discovered him exhausted and sometimes in pain lying on a bed. In the summer of 1503 Cesare's health had caused great anxiety. He was 'much irritated by the skin on his face in the lower part, which falls apart like rotten leaves and results in a pus that he is much concerted to hide with his mask.'[28] A week later he was so ill with fever that he had been severely bled before being plunged into a bath of ice-cold water, from which he emerged with the skin peeling from his back. Cesare sent for his doctors and would not let them leave. He was 'insistent that his condition must not generally be known'. As his father died in the room below his own, he was still desperately ill and very weak, but Cesare recovered.[29] Once again his fate was linked with Cardinal Della Rovere, who managed to be elected as the next pope and would reign as Julius II.[30]

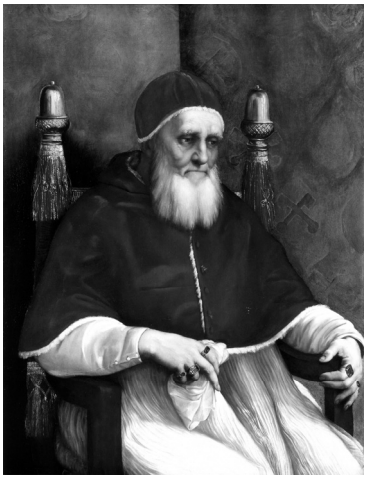

Fig. 2: *Pope Julius II*, geschilderd in 1511 door Raffaello Sanzio.
Bron: http://commons.wikimedia.org.

[28] Hibbert, *The Borgias*, 245.
[29] Ibidem, 245-247, 273. Pope Alexander VI died suddenly on August 18, 1503. When Cardinal Giuliano della Rovere was elected pope Cesare was taken prisoner and sent to Spain. He died March 1507.
[30] Pope Pius III was chosen after the death of Alexander VI, but he died within one month in October 1503.

The bathroom of Pope Julius II

Although within the medical profession many admitted the intractability of syphilis and were therefore unable to apply an effective remedy, the papal learned physician Gaspare Torelli and the more practical surgeon Pere Pintor competed with each other in finding the right cure as soon as possible. Torella became known as a 'pox doctor', due to his experience in treating Cesare Borgia and his writing a treatise on the disease which was published in 1500. Both remained papal physicians and survived the purge of the Borgia *famiglia* instituted by pope Julius II.[31]

In the year 1498 the treatment of the many syphilitic members of the papal court consisted of medicines and blood-letting, then the doctors anointed the patient for the pains and for the boils with ointments and kept him in bed for six days. On the seventh day the patient was washed with a bath of wine and many herbs, such as *amaro,* rue, mint *trasmerino*, sage and other herbs. Shortly afterwards the patient could leave the house, but the complaints of a 'very bad mouth' would last another thirty-six days.[32] This prevented the patient from eating bread and other food that had to be chewed. After about four months the symptoms would start all over again. The torments were not continuous, but when they occurred the pain was so intense that patients 'screamed day and night without respite, envying the dead themselves'. [33] It was not uncommon that they would throw themselves of a bridge to drown in the Tiber.

Torrella's treatment of the pox consisted of the adaptation of the standard regimen, based on manipulating environmental influences and diet, considering the individuality of the patient, with the intent on digesting and evacuating the peccant matter. His attention was especially focused on the 'accidents or qualities of the soul' and the effects thereof on the body, which main purpose was to instil confidence in the patient. Next there was standard pharmaceutical practise in giving medicine to the patient in order to ultimately remove the morbific matter from the body. This could be done by bloodletting, purging and sweating by fumigation baths and especially the dry stove, a device big enough to contain the patient wholly. Ultimately the skin lesions had to be removed, for which ointments were

[31] Arrizabalaga, Henderson and French, *The Great Pox*, ch VI.
[32] Ibidem, 27.
[33] Ibidem, 25-27.

used. Just like any other physician at the time, he too used a range of corrosive and abrasive substances, the most important ingredient being mercury. These must have been extremely painful and even dangerous.[34]

The use of heat in treating the pox was based on the humoral pathology. As one of the four elementary qualities (along with cold, wet and dry) warmth would be effective with an illness that showed a deficiency of innate heat in the body. The use of a dry stove was a very popular method. Torella used it from 1497 and claimed it to be one of the best therapies he had tried in treating the pains and sores of the pox to make the patient sweat into a hot furnace, or at least a stove, for five days without breakfast. In 1500 he described a purpose-built dry stove:

> The base was a wine-barrel big enough for the patient to sit in. Heated stones were placed on a bed of sand at the bottom of the vessel and a large, perforated seat was provided for the patient. The whole was perforated and enclosed within a framework carrying a cloth. The purpose was to provide an enclosed space that could be heated so that the patient sweated copiously. Any small space would do.[35]

Pintor said that a *stupha* was simply a walled space, the air and walls of which were heated either by fire or by water. The use of a hot bath was another way to induce transpiration and evacuation of morbid matter through the pores of the skin. However, doctors advised not to go to a public bathhouse for a treatment like this, but to use a movable tub in the bedroom or some space neighbouring a kitchen. It was better not to use the same bathwater, or oil and wine mixture, with another person. This was one of the reasons that in the residences of popes and prelates some private bathrooms appeared as a novelty.

Pope Julius II had always been keen on bathing. In his castle in Ostia, *Rocca di Ostia,* he had a private bathroom installed around 1483, which was one of the first in the Roman region. Shortly after his election the pope decided not to use the private apartment of his predecessor Alexander VI, but to renovate the former summer apartment of his uncle, Pope Sixtus IV (1471-1484), situated on the third level of the Vatican palace. To ensure complete privacy in undergoing treatment for 'that illness of his' he had a

[34] Arrizabalaga, Henderson and French, *The Great Pox*, 133-135.
[35] Ibidem, 137.

bathroom installed in the tower adjoining his bedroom, for which a thick wall had to be removed to create a small passage which gave direct access to the bathroom. Adjacent to the bathroom was also a privy.

In 1506 this very first proper private bathroom in the Vatican palace was completed and the pope could undergo the treatment as prescribed by his physicians. Another novelty was the decoration of the walls and ceiling, which was meant to contribute to a feeling of relaxation and wellness in order to free his soul of anxiety and sadness and bring pleasure and joy. Most of the wall paintings have since disappeared, but remnants of lively decorations are to be seen on the ceiling. They are painted in fresco and based on the Roman decorative style, called grotesques, which had recently been found in subterranean remnants of former bathhouses. They consisted of capricious elements like winged griffins with tails of acanthus leaves, masks, sphinxes and elegant arabesques, all placed against a golden background. The slightly bent ceiling of the bathroom shows an intricate geometrical composition with an octagonal plane in the middle containing the surprising scene of the 'Judgement of Paris'. Was the pope, in choosing this subject, intent on reclaiming his good looks, or filled with nostalgia for the womanizing in his youth, or was he fearful of a last judgement? Nevertheless, he reached the respectable age of seventy.

Loss of face

Dread for the exposure of their love life, including sexual intercourse, seems to have been quite imminent for higher church officials in a period that cried out for reform of the institute of the Catholic Church. It is not accidental that Martin Luther in the autumn of 1511 when visiting Rome described the capital city of the Church as the Babylonian whore. In his *Tischreden* the then Pope Julius II is scorned as a 'shameless harlot and stain of infamy.' The Pope was supposed to be no better than a Turk, a nation traditionally notorious for sexual excesses. The cardinals, Luther states, were often homosexual and thus extremely depraved, indulging in sodomy. Even the form of pederasty they practiced was far more malicious than the type he knew from Saxony.[36] This scorn demonstrates that, despite their clerical status, many cardinals and popes had sex with women and men, although

[36] R. Marius, *Martin Luther: the Christian between God and Death* (Harvard 1999) 82-83.

from the late fourth century onwards council decrees had promulgated the celibacy of the clergy. The many repetitions of this demand show that its adherence was fairly impossible.[37] The major part of the clergy was not intending to go 'celibately'. As a matter of fact, the production of children was crucial for building up their own famiglia - without the help of faithful supporters one could not succeed in a church career. Besides, it showed masculinity and belied incriminations of homosexuality, which was not uncommon.

This does not imply that the results of sex such as children and syphilis could be brought in the open. On the contrary, after the impudence of popes Innocence VIII and Alexander VI, who tried to found genuine dynasties, it became problematic to live openly with your children in the Vatican palace. The visibility of an unsightly appearance springing from promiscuity, however, was far worse than the cherishing of off-spring. It had to be avoided under all circumstances. Next to that the concomitant infirmities had to be cured as soon and as effective as possible. This was not only because the patient suffered heavily as we have shown, but also out of fear for diminished status since a publicly known bad health weakened a prelate's position. Pretenders were already starting to take over so to speak and any form of unrest needed to be avoided.[38] Last but not least the visual effects of syphilis were considered to be extremely dangerous. For taking an active part in Renaissance culture the display of *sprezzatura* was conditional, to borrow the famous expression of Baldassare Castiglione. This 'nonchalance, so as to conceal all art and make whatever one does or says appear to be without effort and almost without any thought about it', of course, does not go together with syphilis.[39] Especially the deformations caused by the illness ruined the required elegance and physical beauty at court. In this respect the story about Cesare Borgia in later life being forced to conceal his ravaged face behind a mask is telling. This syphilitic papal scion and former cardinal had become unfit to be seen in gentile society. Loss of face signified social as well as real death.

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[37] H. C. Lea, *History of Sacerdotal Celibacy in the Christian Church* (London 1932); G. Denzler, *Das Papsttum und der Amtszölibat. Erster Teil: Die Zeit bis zur Reformation; Zweiter Teil: Von der Reformation bis in die Gegenwart* (1973).

[38] R. Palmer, 'Medicine at the Papal Court in the 16th century' in: V. Nutton ed., *Medicine at the Courts of Europe 1500-1837* (London 1990) 49-78.

[39] B. Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, D. Javitch ed. (New York 2002) 32.