

Perhaps he would have done well to have stopped his work there and leave as soon as he had discovered the truth, a few days earlier, but he had decided that the sad events of which he had been unwillingly involved should in no way influence his career. He did not leave a job commissioned by a pope – and especially by that pope, halfway completed unless he wanted to throw away his brushes forever... or his head. And then, a hasty escape, apparently without any reason would have drawn too much attention to himself.

He decided that the shadows on the pontiff's face needed accentuating to give him greater charisma and greater depth. The face, it was said, was certainly similar, but it did not communicate the Alexander's personality as powerfully as the two versions he had painted in the apartments of the Apostolic Palace, that of the group of the Madonna with the blessed child, with Alexander depicted kneeling in the

act of touching the foot of Jesus, placed in the pontiff's cubicle, and, kneeling again, in the resurrection of Christ, painted on the lunette of one of the reception rooms.

He had been accused of focusing too much on the figure of the French king Charles, depicted paying tribute to the vicar of the Lord. Respecting the wishes of his client, he had placed him below his interlocutor, kneeling, with a humble and resigned attitude. It hadn't really happened that way but the Pope had managed to escape the most serious threat that he had experienced during his term, and that was what counted. He had also made great efforts to accentuate as much as possible the many physical defects of that deformed and disturbing sovereign. The pontiff had wanted him barefoot and wearing a penitent's robe, not only to highlight his alleged submission, but also to show his principal malformation, the six toes on each foot, then his face, to which

already a long and hooked nose prevented him from being handsome, was marked by deep dark rings under the eyes, but above all by the pustules on his cheeks and on his forehead, a legacy of the malady which had struck the sovereign and a large part of his army during the retreat from Italy.

That point, in particular, had created a slight friction between client and artist during the project. Bernardino feared he would attract the fury of the French supporters in Rome, by painting the transalpine sovereign in those miserable conditions. Already the penitential attitude, as if Henry IV had been an act of contrition before Pope Gregory VII four hundred years earlier, was an obvious historical falsehood. The king had left the eternal city after being satisfied that a good part of his demands had been carried out and he had been carefully guarded against humiliation, although he had been obliged to pay, very unwillingly, a

tribute to the pontiff. However, when he had been in Rome and met the pope, Charles had not yet caught what had been called the ‘French disease’ – otherwise known as syphilis. To depict it in that way therefore meant making him look doubly ridiculous, and Bernardino was certain that the painting would provoke a host of problems.

But his holiness had been adamant. In part it was he who felt mortified by the French pressure and by the occupation of his city by troops thirsty for looting that the king had barely managed to prevent and he had wanted to take his revenge, showing all the people coming to the castle that the Lord had inflicted a just punishment on the impertinent sovereign.

He concluded that not even the proportions were satisfactory. Alexander had wanted to dominate the king in all senses, and the artist had been forced to portray Charles as a tiny man, almost a hunchback, frail and very

unrepresentative of the prestigious lineage and the important role he represented. The result was an unequal comparison between the two characters, not at all realistic, with the imposing and majestic Pope facing an insignificant individual, who seemed to have been depicted on a different scale, almost relegated to the background.

Overall, he was not at all satisfied with the final rendering of the painting. With the other five, perhaps, but not of this one, the only one in which the Pope and the king were painted one in front of the other. And the beauty was that in depicting the king so miserably, he had had to use a subject he would have preferred not to have used.

Himself.

*Pacis cultori...* Looking at the effigy of the bull on the pedestal that surmounted the arch of the painting in front of him, Alexander shook his head and grimaced. If only he was like that