## 1796 – FLORENCE: CLERGY AND PLAYING CARDS AT COCOMERO

by Franco Pratesi – 03.11.2013

# INTRODUCTION

This note comes between others, which deal with the same milieu of the Florentine Stanze in a quantitative way, taking the local consumption of playing cards into account. This report has instead nothing of quantitative: it only deals with a peculiar aspect of visiting players – unexpectedly, to me at least, belonging to the clergy.

## Clergy

A renowned Italian saying is “L’abito non fa il monaco”, which I am finding translated as “You can’t judge by appearances”, or even “You can’t judge a book by its cover”. These translations may be useful in order to understand the ultimate meaning of the saying. However, I would better translate here the saying verbatim: “The cloth doesn’t make the monk”, or “It is not the cloth that makes the monk.” Having any person taking the habit is not the same as changing him into a monk – he may be an actor, or anybody disguised, or just dressed up.

The basic reason for this saying is that clergymen are, or should be, serious persons, independent of what they are actually wearing. They are superior personages, and cannot be imitated by simply adopting their typical habits. A layman dressed up as a monk remains a layman, while a monk remains a monk even without his habit – at least he is expected to remain.

In my already long life, I have seen many people dressed up as priests and monks, and usually they were not disguised. The situation has remarkably changed in the last decades. Most churches of Florence and the surrounding area, which were open and busy when I was a kid, are now kept closed and it is hard to see their interior, because they are at most open for an hour on Sunday for few church-goers attending the mass.

Now, a priest arrives, as a tourist, visiting a church after another to that aim in the same morning. (On the other hand, during the mass, genuine tourists cannot enter the church.) Moreover, this itinerant priest has often arrived to his present-day Florentine destination from the remotest countries of Asia, Africa, or Latin-America.

In my youth there were several priests and friars for any church, now there are many empty churches and convents. It is rather hard for me to reconstruct, starting from the present situation, even that of my early days. It is obviously much harder to go further backwards into the past centuries, when the children of a poor family were so many that discovering a candidate for a seminary or a convent was much easier than nowadays.

Let us be satisfied with the fact that in the past centuries we had here a greater number of friars, monks, and priests, with their own hierarchies. Each order of clergymen had its typical habit, which not only changed colour for different orders, but also for the various degrees within each order. The habits of the secular clergy were often just black, but going up in the hierarchy it was easy to find red, violet, or purple clothes.

But it was usually during the functions that many colours appeared, changing more times in the course of a canonical year. One can rather easily understand this coloured situation, which continues today and can be found in other religions as well.

## Priests, brothers, and games

Before entering the particular subject of this note, I have to remind the traditional position of the clergy about games and pastimes. I have in mind pope Leo X, dei Medici of course, who was first of all known for his passion for chess.

However, it is not necessary to reach the top of the Roman Catholic hierarchy. Any churchman had to know some Latin, and his education was somewhat higher than average; in a village, he often was the only educated person.

Now, there are games of skill, and chess is just one of the best examples, which were enjoyed by students, who used them as a pastime, in which they could show their value. Sometimes this could represent a kind of pacific analogy to the bravery of showing one’s courage in actual battles and wars.

It is thus not surprising that we often find churchmen involved in playing games of skill. There are countless stories about them in the literature. There are even rumours that precisely a clergyman should have been Chitarrella, the author of the most famous guidebook on card playing ever written in Italy.

The premise above is necessary for a reasonable balance with the other side of the coin: the usual approach of churchmen against any form of gambling and playing. Should we search for sermons preached against games, many findings are guaranteed to be discovered in a minute.

I suppose that it was even possible that the same person could preach in the morning from his pulpit against playing, and seat for hours at the card table in the afternoon and evening of the same day.

This controversial situation is not very surprising after all; one can even rather easily envisage worse aspects and fields for contrasts between sermons and customs. It remains nevertheless difficult to reconstruct, in its everyday aspects, how this matter was really occurring centuries ago.

As mentioned above, the only point, which can be assumed without hesitation for past centuries is that the clergy in and around Florence was present in much larger numbers. Alongside of the secular clergy, various kinds of friars and monks, with their own hierarchies, and their coloured habits, were present, and only a few of them lived segregated in their monasteries.

## Clergy at Cocomero

Now, I am studying the Stanze associated with Teatro del Cocomero in Florence, and have not been surprised to find churchmen absorbed in playing there. A little more surprised I would have been in finding them absorbed there in the recurrent dances, even if in principle such an occurrence could not be excluded either.

I must admit however that the relevant document that I found in the records of the Stanze exceeds the limits of my imagination. Something of this kind I could have expected if compiled by an anonymous anti-establishment writer, accustomed to attack the clergy.

Here we are instead in the presence of an official act, discussed and approved by a council, elected among the members of the academy with the task to supervise the management of the Stanze. It is impossible that they could sanction some flights of fancy.

In other words, what we read in the text copied below must be a true report of a factual situation. Involved is document No. 49, in the folder TN 95 of the ASCFI, which can be found, verbatim copied, in the appendix below.

The council has to establish a new rule, in order to avoid some excesses. What had happened there? Almost every evening the rooms were full of clergy. In principle, this could not be a problem, as far as they belonged to the visitors authorised.

On this point, a comment may be useful. How could the permission be refused to a priest to visit the Stanze? Actually, it was required that any candidate did not belong to the working class or subordinate professions, and was known as a person with moral integrity; now, both qualities were such that any clergyman could have been proud to possess, by definition.

Therefore, it was practically impossible to refuse the admission to the Stanze to any churchman. Now, we have seen that we had in and around Florence a lot of clergy at the time. As a consequence, the council could have expected, with more or less probability, that the Stanze were full of clergy in the evenings.

What had provoked a scandal in the Stanze was thus neither the profession nor the multitude of the clergy attending. The scandal had simply been caused, because they were not – as if to say − in full dress.

Commonly the gentlemen were smartly dressed and this was needed as a class distinction – peasant and workers unpretentiously dressed were of course never admitted to the Stanze. The clergymen however wore in the evenings the same dresses of the day, suitable for the country, or the open air.

It was not enough that churchmen freely displayed their ordinary dresses. Further points were criticised: their dresses were coloured, and often ripped. As for the colour, I am not able to imagine it in the way of Harlequin; black is hardly a colour to be noticed; I would rather think of various tones of ordinary brown habits.

As a matter of fact, coloured habits of the clergy are commonly considered with the contrary meaning of a visible improvement: priests wear coloured and showy vestments for special functions, instead of their usual habit.

As for the quality of these dresses, there are only a few further attributes that I can imagine, even if unrecorded by the council in their document: the dresses of the clergy were plausibly dirty and stinking as well. Even without taking my malicious additional hypothesis into account, what has been recorded in the document is already enough, to the point not to require any further comment.

Actually, there is something that I am feeling as sadly missing here: one or more pictures assisting readers to catch a glimpse of the Florentine rooms, full of clergy absorbed in conversation and in playing card games. Of course, I cannot insert one of my photos of Florence here. Unfortunately, I could not find a suitable image, nor an artist willing to produce one − better if a caricature − on the basis of this document.

Let me just add a schematic drawing, which may assist readers in using their own imagination to reach a plausible outlook, if they reckon it is worth the effort.

## CONCLUSION

A document of 1 May 1796 is copied and discussed. It contains a resolution by the council of managers of the Stanze, associated with Teatro del Cocomero. The essential point is that nobody will be admitted to the Stanze in the future if unsuitably dressed.

Curiously enough, the scandal that triggered such a decision, was not coming from the class of common workers, who were obviously not admitted to the Stanze. Folks usually entering the Stanze so badly dressed as to provoke a scandal in that environment had been the clergymen, visiting the rooms in large numbers.

The new sanction allows the clergy to enter the rooms with ordinary habits only in case of foreign churchmen passing through Florence.

# APPENDIX

A dì Primo Maggio 1796

Adunati gli Ill.mi Sig.ri Deputati eletti dall’Accademia del Regio Teatro del Cocomero per presedere al buon ordine e regolamento della Loro Conversazione Accademica ordinarono quanto appresso.

All’oggetto di rimuovere l’intollerabile abuso ed indecente maniera che si è introdotta, quale risulta dal vedere quasi tutte le sere ripiena la Conversazione Accademica stabilita nelle Stanze annesse al Regio teatro del Cocomero di Sacerdoti ammessi alla medesima sempre vestiti da campagna di colore, e con abiti alle volte assai laceri e di altre Persone equalmente ammesse malamente accappate fu proposto ed approvato dalla Deputazione di prescrivere sopra di ciò il seguente Regolamento.

Per ordine della Deputazione destinata ad invigilare alla decenza e al buon regolamento della Conversazione Accademica del Regio Teatro del Cocomero resta vietato in avvenire ai Sigg. Sacerdoti, che godono dell’Ammissione a detta Conversazione di presentarsi nella sera alla medesima vestiti di colore e da campagna esclusi solamente i Sigg. Ecclesiastici forestieri di passaggio. Ed inoltre resta sicuramente vietato l’accesso alla predetta Conversazione a tutte quelle Persone ammesse di qualunque Rango le quali si presenteranno la sera poco decentemente vestite.

Cav. Gio. Lessi console mano propria

Cav. Bettino Ricasoli Mano propria

Cav. Jacopo Seravalle mano propria

Cav. Alessandro Romualdo Scurtz Procuratore mano propria

Cav. Giovanni Vinci d’Ispezione mano propria.



Christian ceremonial clothing (From Wikimedia Commons.)