Medieval Sourcebook:

Lorenzo De Medici:

Paternal Advice To A Cardinal (C. 1491)

*Lorenzo de Medici (1449-1492) was the unofficial ruler of Florence from 1469 until his death. He was a humanist, arts patron - and a skillful politician. In 1489 he manages to have his son Giovanni made a cardinal, at the age of 14. Giovanni later ruled as Pope Leo X (reigned 1513-1521) and was also a patron of the arts.*

You, and all of us who are interested in your welfare… many honors and benefits bestowed upon our house… the greatest dignity we have ever enjoyed…The first that I would therefore suggest to you is that you ought to be grateful to God, and continually to recollect that it is not through your merits, your prudence, or your solicitude, that this event has taken place, but through his favor, which you can only repay by a pious, chaste and exemplary life; ... It would indeed be highly disgraceful… if, at a time when others display a greater share of reason and adopt a better mode of life, you should forget the precepts of your youth,. … note the importance of perseverance in those studies which are suitable to your profession. It gave me great satisfaction to learn, that, in the course of the past year, you had frequently, of your own accord, gone to communion and confession.

I well know, that as you are now to reside in Rome, that sink of all iniquity, the difficulty of conducting yourself by these admonitions will be increased. … you will probably meet with those who will particularly endeavor to corrupt and incite you to vice; because, as you may yourself perceive, your early attainment to so great a dignity is not observed without envy, and those who could not prevent your receiving that honor will secretly endeavor to diminish it, by inducing you to forfeit the good estimation of the public; thereby precipitating you into that gulf into which they had themselves fallen; in which attempt, the consideration of your youth will give them a confidence of success.

I acknowledge indeed that several of them are good and learned men, whose lives are exemplary, and whom I would recommend to you as patterns of your conduct. Avoid, however, as you would Scylla or Charybdis, the imputation of hypocrisy; guard against all ostentation, either in your conduct or your discourse; nor ever appear too serious. This advice you will, I hope, in time understand and practice better than I can express it.

Yet you are not unacquainted with the great importance of the character which you have to sustain, …

your language be unassuming and respectful, … your conversation is without intentional offense… it will be more advisable for you to listen to others than to speak much yourself.

You are now devoted to God and the church … You are not only the youngest cardinal in the college, but the youngest person that ever was raised to that rank; and you ought, therefore, to be the most vigilant and unassuming

Silk and jewels are not suitable for persons in your station… Your taste will be better shown the collecting of handsome books. Invite others to your house oftener than you receive invitations. Let your own food be plain, and take sufficient exercise.

Be attentive to your conduct, and confide in others too little rather than too much. Rise early in the morning … and deliberate every evening on what you may have to perform the following day, that you may not be unprepared.

… let all be done with that modesty and humility. Farewell.

trans. by Merrick Whitcomb, Source-Book of the Italian Renaissance, revised ed. (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1903), 82-86.