

Pope Pius IX

Pope Pius IX, born Giovanni Maria Mastai-Ferretti, marked his contribution to the abortion debate by removing the distinction between an “animated” and “unanimated” fetus from Catholic doctrine, and established the edict that a human should be protected starting from the moment of conception onward. This proclamation made abortion at any time of gestation punishable by excommunication. Pope Pius IX’s decision became Canon Law of the Catholic Church.

Mastai-Ferretti was born on 13 May 1792 in Senigallia, Italy. He was the last of nine children born to Caterina Solazzi and Count Girolamo Mastai-Ferretti. His family was part of the local nobility, and though far from rich, they had a prominent role in the Papal States. Due to the waging wars in the Papal States, Mastai-Ferretti’s mother provided him with his early childhood education. Since his mother was devoted to Mary, the mother of Jesus, Mastai-Ferretti partook in many of his mother’s daily venerations of her. In 1803, he was sent to Saint Michael’s School in Volterra. This school was run by Scolopi Fathers and was known for instilling the veneration of Mary into its students. In October of 1809, Mastai-Ferretti’s studies at the college of Volterra ended due to several epileptic seizures. He was forced to leave his studies and returned home since the priests of St. Michael were in no position to take responsibility for his care.

To continue his higher education, Mastai-Ferretti moved to Rome to live with his uncle; continual epileptic attacks, however, ended his studies in 1812. In 1815, epileptic attacks once again prevented him from participating in society, this time in the Pope’s Noble Guard. The following year Mastai-Ferretti decided that he would join the priesthood with the support from Pope Pius VII. In September 1818 he was enlisted as a catechist for a missionary tour to Senigallia by Monsignor Carlo Odeschalchi. After returning from this mission, Odeschalchi recommended Mastai-Ferretti to the Holy Order. He became a subdeacon in December 1818 and ascended to deacon in early 1819. On 10 April 1819, Mastai-Ferretti was ordained as a priest; he celebrated his first Mass the next day in the Church of St. Anne of Carpenters at the Tata Giovanni Institution, a local orphanage where he spent his time.

After three years as a priest at the Tata Giovanni Institution, Mastai-Ferretti departed to Chile in 1823 on a mission for the Church. He returned to Rome in 1825 and in 1827 he was ordained as Archbishop of Spoleto. During his time in Spoleto he protected the region from a group of revolutionaries, using peaceful methods. In November 1832, Pope Gregory XVI transferred him to Imola. During his reign as archbishop in both these regions, he devoted himself to fulfilling the vital needs of the people and keeping peace. His work in both these regions greatly improved his reputation and gained the admiration of Pope Gregory XVI. In 1840, Mastai-Ferretti was raised to the level of cardinal. Upon the death of Gregory XVI on 1 June 1846, Mastai-Ferretti, being a politically moderate candidate, was elected Pope on 16 June 1846. He took the name Pius IX in memory of Pius VII, who had supported him in his vocation to the priesthood.

The papacy of Pope Pius IX was full of adversity and challenges that he chose to meet head-on with reform. As a moderate Pope, he tried to find a balance between liberal and conservative tendencies. He began his reign with moderate liberal policies by granting amnesty for political crimes, gave freedom to the press, and refused to wage war even when revolution loomed. He appointed many liberal individuals to high posts in the church. Pius IX also sympathized with supporters of an Italian state. However, his conservative tendencies became apparent in his first encyclical *Qui pluribus*, addressed on 9 November 1846, which condemned rationalism, indifferentism, and the theory of progressive revelation. His *Syllabus of Errors*, published in 1864, was largely based on conservative thought. In the *Syllabus*, he condemned what he thought were modern heresies such as religious

liberalism, secularization, materialism, and rationalism. Pope Pius IX was also highly involved in reforming church doctrine. His long time devotion to Mary led to the establishment of the dogma of Immaculate Conception of Mary on 8 December 1854. On 8 December 1869, Pope Pius IX opened the Vatican Council in the Basilica of St. Peter in Rome. Before the Council ended 8 July 1870, Pope Pius IX established the dogma of "papal infallibility," which states that when speaking in terms of Church doctrine, the Pope speaks the truth with certainty.

Pope Pius IX challenged the canonical tradition about the beginning of ensouled life set by Pope Gregory XIV in 1591. He believed that while it may not be known when ensoulment occurs, there was the possibility that it happens at conception. Believing it was morally safer to follow this conclusion, he thought all life should be protected from the start of conception. In 1869 he removed the labels of "aminated" fetus and "unanimated" fetus and concluded that abortions at any point of gestation were punishable by excommunication. While excommunication was used to punish those who procured abortions, it was not extended to those who used contraception.

Pope Pius IX, commonly known as Pio Nono, died on 7 February 1878. His was the longest papacy in the history of the Catholic Church, and Pope Pius IX is often considered one of the greatest popes to have ever lived. His dogma of Immaculate Conception, Vatican I, and papal infallibility were some of his most notable accomplishments. His efforts in punishing those that procured abortions at any time of gestation prevailed within the Catholic Church; excommunication for abortion became Canon Law in 1917, and later revised in 1983.

Sources

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