

Pope Gregory XIV

Pope Gregory XIV, born Nicolo Sfondrati, reversed the bull of Pope Sixtus V, *Effraenatum*, under which an abortion at any time of gestation can be punished by excommunication. He supported the Aristotelian distinction between an “animated” and “unanimated” fetus, making abortion of an unanimated fetus punishable by lesser means. This decision contributed to the historical debates within the Roman Catholic Church on when a fetus has a soul, and when abortion was punishable by excommunication.

Nicolo Sfondrati was born into a noble family in Cremona, Italy, on 11 February 1535. His mother, Anna Visconti, died during childbirth after a Caesarean birth. His father, Francesco Sfondrati, was a Milanese senator who was raised to cardinal status in 1544 by Pope Paul III. Sfondrati attended and successfully completed his studies at the University of Perugia and University of Padua, leading to his ordination as a priest. On 12 March 1560, Pope Pius IV made Sfondrati Bishop of Cremona, against his will, and he was sent to attend the Council of Trent from 1561 to 1563. At the Council, he contributed to the decree that prohibited the plurality of benefices. On 12 December 1583, Pope Gregory XIII, content with Sfondrati’s work, raised him to the position of Cardinal-Priest of Santa Cecilia. Sfondrati was elected pope on 5 December 1590, after the passing of Pope Urban VII. He was given the name of Gregory XIV. He held no desire to be pope and responded to the cardinals upon greeting him as the Holy Father, “God forgive you! What have you done?”

Pope Gregory XIV began his papacy by heavily supporting the French League in its efforts to remove Henry of Navarre from the French throne. He did this because Henry had failed to keep his promise to convert to Catholicism and uphold the Catholic faith in France. Phillip II of Spain even encouraged Pope Gregory XIV in this endeavor. In his first bull, *Cogit nos*, published on 21 March 1591, he threatened all those betting on papal elections, the length of the papacy, and the establishment of cardinals, with excommunication. In another decree, on 18 April 1591, he ordered the release of all native Indian slaves in the Philippines, under the consequence of excommunication, and provided the slaves reparations for the injustices that they had endured.

Contrary to Pope Sixtus V, Pope Gregory XIV made the punishment for early abortion less severe. He believed that Sixtus V had made punishment for abortion too harsh and was even contradictory to the penitential thought and theological view of ensoulment. In his *Sedes Apostolicae* in 1591, he claimed that only homicide or the abortion of an animated fetus was punishable by excommunication, implementing the Aristotelian distinction between an “animated” and “unanimated” fetus. He also employed the “quickenings” test, which equated the beginning of life with the time of first fetal movement. To Pope Gregory XIV quickening determined when a fetus was considered animated. Despite his leniency on punishment for abortion, the new pope still considered the procuring of an abortion in the early stages of gestation as a grave sin.

Pope Gregory XIV died in Rome on 15 October 1591. Though his papacy was short, his encyclical *Sedes Apostolicae* made significant changes to the Catholic doctrines of life and abortion. This doctrine remained in place until Pope Pius IX reversed it in 1869.

Sources

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