

# Pius IX - The Problem Pope

***Some say Pius IX brought the papacy into the modern world; others say he caused so much trouble that the Vatican is still trying to recover from it all. Many Catholic leaders, in the years since his death, have wished he had never been born. Oddly enough, this problem pope is now going to be canonized as a saint. Here is the story.***

Giovanni M. Mastai-Ferretti was the ninth child of a minor count who lived in the town of Senigallia, Italy. Giovanni was a devoted Catholic who, as soon as he was old enough, applied for a job as one of the pope's Noble Guards. But he was rejected because he occasionally had epileptic attacks. According to one of his biographers, because of his condition, Giovanni "could not concentrate on any subject for any length of time without having to worry about his ideas becoming terribly confused." His mental powers must have strengthened later on, for in later years he outwitted all his opponents.

It surely seemed as if Giovanni would never amount to much. But he applied for the priesthood and was ordained in the year 1819, but only on condition that another priest always be present when he celebrated mass, in case he suddenly had a seizure.

Yet Giovanni surprised everyone. In spite of his defects, the young man somehow rose above them. With a commanding personality and quickness in perception, Giovanni rapidly rose through the ranks. By 1827, at the age of 36, he was appointed Archbishop Mastai of Spoleto.

One might think that this position would grant the young archbishop the opportunity to minister widely to the spiritual needs of his people. But the realities of church and state in Italy are far different. Mastai was immediately plunged into turbulent political brinkmanship. One crisis followed another as local leaders warred and kingdoms were jostled. Throughout Europe, the old order of divinely sanctioned kingdoms was being opposed by new patterns of popular sovereignty and republicanism, inspired by the French Revolution and the newly emerged United States.

The battle was especially heated in the Italian peninsula. The Pope himself was a monarch, ruling over a territory, known as "the Papal States," which extended from Venice down to Naples. If you will look on a map of Italy, you will see that the Papal States,

the pope's kingdom, included most of the Italian peninsula.

Italy was a patchwork of duchies, grand duke, Bourbon and Savoyard kingdoms, and Austrian military outposts. In the midst of it, while Mastai was archbishop, a succession of popes (Leo XII, Pius VIII, and Gregory XVI) tried to maintain governmental control of their territory, the Papal States. They were opposed by politicians and militarists who wanted to strip the papacy of its territories and unite all of Italy in a secular nation.

Gradually, the attention of church leaders was drawn to Archbishop Mastai, who seemed to have an uncanny ability to deal effectively with the secularists and keep them at bay. His carefully brokered surrender of 4,000 Italian revolutionaries to the archconservative Austrian forces was regarded as an outstanding achievement.

This resulted, on the death of Pope Gregory XVI, of the election of Mastai to the papacy on June 16, 1846. He took the name, Pope Pius IX. The epileptic that nobody wanted to hire had risen to the highest position in the church. To Italians, he was known as "Pio Nono" ("Pius Nine"). The new pope was only 55 and in excellent health.

Austria's Prince Metternich was exalant at the news, for Mastai was regarded as a moderate, like Metternich.

Immediately, Pius set to work. He gave amnesty to political prisoners in the Papal States, gave the city of Rome a constitution and a prime minister. Pio Nono even talked about creating an Italian federation—a single nation under the Vatican control. It would be an enlargement of his Papal States. He even let some of the wealthier Jews out of the Jewish ghetto (where they had been forced to live), so they could live among the Christian population.

But in 1848, a crisis struck which changed the thinking of Pius IX. That year, as revolutions occurred all across Europe, Italian nationalists tried to enlist Pius in their plan to expel the Austrian forces and attain Italian unification. But Pius refused to cooperate. He felt that, by so doing, the unification plan would collapse, thus ensuring the safety of his own Papal States.

But the revolutionaries succeeded in their plan without him. That year they ejected the Austrian forces and founded the modern nation of Italy. Learning that they had slit the throat of his Roman Prime

Minister, Pius IX fled for his life, disguised as a priest wearing tinted spectacles. When he returned to Rome three years later, he was a changed man.

Pius IX had become opposed to everything modern. Some of his statements and decisions thereafter were so scandalous, that the Vatican in the 20th-century wished he had never been elected. But, even today, they are still stuck with those statements and decisions. Here are several principal events of Pio Nono's papacy:

The seizure of a little boy in June 1858 from his parents was to become a worldwide scandal, and it centered on Pius IX.

Edgardo Mortara, the small son of a Jewish family, became gravely ill; and, thinking he was about to die, the Catholic servant in the home secretly baptized him. But the little boy recovered.

In June 1858, it came to the attention of the papal police that a baptized Catholic was living in the home of a Jewish family! According to papal-controlled civil law, Edgardo had to be removed from that home. "The knock came at nightfall" are the opening words in Kertzer's book, *The Kidnapping of Edgardo Mortara*. The papal police broke into the home that night and took the six-year-old child from his parents. Pius may not have initiated the action, but he fully approved of it—and personally took the little boy as his own.

In a memoir, Edgardo later recalled how the pope would hide him under his great red cloak and say, "Where is the boy?" Then, opening the cloak, he would show him to all those standing nearby, "Here he is!"

But news of the abduction created an international scandal. The *New York Times* ran 20 articles on it in a month. The *New York Herald* declared there was "colossal" interest in the matter. To think that the Catholics in Rome would steal a little boy from his parents, and then the pope would raise him!

Pius IX's public response to the outcry was published worldwide. To a Jewish delegation he said, "The newspapers can write all they want. I couldn't care less about what the world thinks." And to the Jews, partly released from the Jewish Ghetto, he added this threat, "Take care. I could have made you go back into your hole."

To back up his words, he once again confined the Jews to the ghetto area of the city, and rescinded their civil rights. In 1870, Pius IX publicly declared them to be "dogs . . . there are too many of them in Rome, and we hear them howling in the streets." At these words, throughout the world anti-Catholic feeling only intensified.

As for Edgardo, when not by the pope's side, he grew up in a home funded by taxes on the Jews. He later became a Catholic priest and lectured on "the

miracle" of his conversion to Catholicism.

Yet, for all his meanness, Pio Nono was warm, friendly, and easily accessible. He was the first pope to grant audiences to commoners. When not busy, he would play billiards with the Swiss Guard. He personally attended victims, Gentile and Jewish, during a cholera epidemic.

Yet he was also excitable, oversensitive, and something of a bully. Sometimes this was expressed with a strange humor. To some Protestant clergy that visited him, he gave them this benediction: "May you be blessed by Him in whose honor you shall be burnt." More headlines went around the world.

When bishops displeased him, he ordered them to kiss his feet, or a worse humiliation would fall on them. He sustained the death sentences of two anarchists. It is well-known by those who have read papal biographies that Pius IX was given to rages and was alternately kind and cruel to subordinates.

One biographer, Martina, describes a "siege complex." Anyone who did not think as Pius IX thought was considered an enemy of the church and a personal enemy to be dealt with. He saw them as "unbelievers . . . [operating] a war machine against the church."

Pio Nono had the audacity to do things that his predecessors since the Council of Trent had feared to do. One was to proclaim, as an official dogma of the church, a teaching quietly taught to the faithful for centuries: the Immaculate Conception of Mary.

On December 8, 1854, Pius IX proclaimed that Mary, the mother of Jesus, "in the first instant of her conception [nine months before her birth] was, by a singular grace and privilege of God . . . free from all stain of original sin." According to this teaching, from conception to death, she was sinless. (It is also taught that she was always a virgin, was truly "the mother of God," and that she died in Jerusalem c. A.D. 48, and was "assumed bodily into heaven.")

One of Pius IX's two biggest blunders occurred in 1864, when his best-known encyclical, *Quanta Cura*, included the *Syllabus of Errors*. It is composed of a list of, what Pius IX considered to be, terrible evils. Eighty items were listed, and included the separation of church and state, freedom of conscience, civil rights, religious liberty, democracy. Error 80 was the possibility that "the Roman Pontiff can . . . reconcile himself to any compromise with progress, liberalism and modern civilization."

Another biographer, Garry Wills, in his book *Papal Sins*, said it simply: "The *Syllabus* dumbfounded the world." It still does. In one statement, Pius IX had characterized a remarkable number of good things as being terribly evil! The document required that good Catholics be at variance with modern West-

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ern governments. As Wills wrote: "It gave ammunition to anti-Catholics down to the time when John Kennedy was running for President and many felt no Catholic could be free—that the church was opposed to democracy."

Yet the truth is that, for long centuries, the popes and their councils had always condemned non-Catholics, and declared that they alone had a God-given right to persecute and slay any that opposed them. And, to prove their point, they did just that. Pius IX was not something new; rather he was the last openly admitting defender of the Catholicism of the Dark Ages. Since his time, the sentiments have not changed; they have only gone under cover.

Then, five years later, Pio Nono committed his second great blunder. At the time, every Catholic leader knew it was just that but, kicking and pulling, he convened Vatican I Council in 1869,—and there demanded that church leaders give formal approval to his theory of "papal infallibility." That which simple-minded church adherents believed, Pius IX made into a mandatory doctrine which, if rejected, would bring the pain of mortal sin. As an official dogma, it drove a deeper wedge between Catholicism and the rest of the world.

Like a good politician, prior to the council Pio Nono checked on the position of every archbishop and bishop. He used pressure, flattery, and deception to achieve his objective. When the Archbishop of Bologna complained that church tradition in Europe argued against infallibility, Pius roared, "I am tradition!" and immediately reassigned the archbishop to a monastery. Not wanting to spend the rest of his life as a monk washing dishes, the archbishop quickly relented.

For your information, the doctrine of papal infallibility effectively placed the pope as superior to the councils, something that had been fought over for centuries. (You will recall that, in 1414-1418, the Council of Constance declared itself above pontiffs—by firing three of them and imprisoning one. GC 106:2).

Even Cardinal John Henry Newman, the famous British Anglican priest who had converted to Catholicism in 1845, remarked, "It is not good for a pope to live 20 years. He becomes a god and has no one to contradict him."

Because of the foolishness of a man who thought he was smarter than everyone else, the Vatican has been stuck with the ridiculous dogma of papal infallibility ever since. History is replete with instances in which popes have spoken error and done vile things. Frequently, their dogmas have been reversed by later pontiffs. Any informed person knows that the whole papal system is ludicrous.

Oh, how knowledgeable Catholics wish Pio Nono had died nine years earlier! Then Vatican I would not have been convened to pass his senseless edict of "papal infallibility."

In 1870, the year after the council, King Victor Emmanuel arrived in Rome, from the Piedmont (northern Italy), and completed the unification of Italy. That event marked the end (until 1929) of the church's 1,116-year history as a temporal power, a worldly monarchy.

When he learned that Victor Emmanuel had arrived and had gained total control of the nation, Pio Nono, now 79, with his long white hair flying in the wind, climbed the Scala Santa staircase on his knees, and told his troops to show token resistance and then surrender honorably.

Thankful that a war had not embroiled the City of Rome, Victor Emmanuel thanked the pope and offered him some minor authority if he would recognize him as king of the nation.

Pius IX's response was to excommunicate the king and utter a vow to become a "prisoner of the Vatican." He never again left the grounds. Although many Catholics loved it, many Italians did not. After his death, the rabble of the city tried to grab his coffin and hurl it into the River Tiber.

Pope Pius IX was the longest-reigning pontiff in the history of the Catholic Church! For 32 years, from June 16, 1846 to February 7, 1878, he ruled the Vatican with an iron hand.

During his papal reign, he lost the Papal States, which was the Vatican's worldly kingdom. He promulgated two doctrines which the faithful had believed for generations, which no pope had dared openly put into words: his 1854 doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin and his 1869 dogma of Papal Infallibility. In another daring move, in his 1864 *Syllabus of Errors*, he publicly rejected religious liberty and a host of other worthwhile things.

On April 4, 2000, a delegation of bishops and monsignors went to Rome's *Basilica of St. Lawrence Outside the Walls*. Together they descended the staircase to the 6th-century cathedral's crypt. Inside, they were led to one of the many tombs. It was made of sculptured white marble stone. Carefully, the casket was opened. Inside rested the embalmed remains of Pope Pius IX, who had died 122 years earlier. He was dressed in beautifully embroidered red vestments. A gold mask covered his entire face. It was reported that "the body was almost perfectly conserved," a sign of physical and spiritual perfection. Roman headlines proclaimed that Pio Nono's face still exuded "striking serenity"—a sign, it was suggested, of his holy sanctity.

This April exhumation cleared the way for his beatification, which took place on Sunday, September 10, 2000. That beatification confirmed Pius' "heroic virtue," affirmed a miracle (a nun's broken kneecap healed), and encouraged the faithful to "venerate" (*i.e.*, worship) his remains. For this purpose, Pio Nono's body was transferred from the coffin into a glass coffin so the faithful could view it as they knelt and worshiped. The next step, which will occur within a few years, will be his canonization.

In the estimation of many in the Catholic Church, the unthinkable is happening: The Vatican is making a saint out of Pius IX. Why is it being done?

Church leaders wanted to canonize John XXIII, the liberal pope who called the Second Vatican Council. But, to avoid squabbles in the ranks, they decided to, at the same time, canonize another pope who was conservative. Should that second pope be Pius XII or Pius IX?

For 40 years, there has been an unabating storm of complaint that Pius XII, the pope who reigned during the Fascist and Nazi era in Europe, quietly supported Mussolini and Hitler and did nothing to oppose the Jewish holocaust. So this year, Pius IX, also a conservative pope, was substituted at the last minute. But as we have observed, in many respects, Pius IX is just as much a problem!

Elena Mortara, a professor in Rome and great-grandniece of Edgardo Mortara, who was taken from his Jewish parents as a child in 1858, said this a few months ago: "I am appalled that the Catholic Church wants to make a saint out of a pope who perpetuated . . . an act of unacceptable intolerance."

Journalist-historian Garry Wills, who revealed all the flaws about Pius IX in his current book, *Papal Sins*, wrote this recently: "He was a disaster, and his influence has been bad ever since. If you beatify him now, there will be a whitewashing of him, which will involve the church in more dishonesty."

Then we have the book, *The Kidnapping of Egardo Mortara*, by Brown University historian David Kertzer. People are buying it right now in the bookstores. The book is being adapted for Broadway, by playwright Alfred Uhry. This will only add to the widespread disgust for Pius IX.

Even Giacomo Martina, the author of the most complete biography of Pius IX (a three-volume work), does not favor the canonization of Pius IX.

In his book, *Making Saints*, Kenneth Woodward (religion editor at *Newsweek*), wrote that the first time Pius IX's cause was formally considered for sainthood, every firsthand witness criticized what he

had done during his reign.

Pio Nono's beatification was repeatedly postponed, most recently in the 1980s, when it was said to be "inopportune." His case has been twice stalled by Vatican judges who found him wanting in patience, justice, and charity toward subordinates.

But all that seems to have changed. Perhaps enough knowledgeable historians and laymen have died, and it is time now to start the process of making a saint out of the man who nearly ruined the modern papacy. But more likely it is a matter of simple politics: Someone was needed along with John XXIII, and Hitler's pope was unacceptable.

It is a fact that Pope John Paul II is an exhausted man who can hardly walk, or even think straight any more. There are those who believe he is being pressured into declaring Pius IX a saint, in order to offset the gains made in Vatican II. As soon as John Paul returned, utterly worn-out, from his trip to Israel in April, permission was coaxed from him for the beatification process to begin.

So the beatification of Pius IX has taken place. It is the last step before canonization. Many wonder how the church decides which popes are worthy of sainthood. The lives of most popes have been so notorious, that few of them have received the honor.

Of the 264 popes, beginning with (it is said) the Apostle Peter, only 81 are included among the thousands of Catholics who have been venerated as saints. But the papal figure is highly misleading, since nearly all of the sainted pontiffs were declared as such, before canonization became a formal process in 1588. Thus the list of 81 sainted popes includes 48 of the first 49 leaders of the church in Rome. All 48 died before the year A.D. 500. An additional 30 died before A.D. 1100, when recognition of saints was still by acclamation of the people.

So we find that, over the last 900 years, only four popes have been judged worthy of official beatification, and only three of these have been canonized! Now Pius IX and John XXIII will be added to the list.

In theory, a pope should be held to the same high standard as any other candidate for Catholic sainthood. But, in practice, there is a difference: (1) The writings of a pope are assumed to be perfect, and therefore not subject to criticism. (2) The fact that he became a pope is considered an act of God, and therefore his actions are automatically assumed to be perfect. In view of such a policy, all the popes should have been canonized—if they had lived half-way decent lives!

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