

Pius IX

Encyclopædia Britannica Article

Introduction

original name Giovanni Maria Mastai-Ferretti

born May 13, 1792, Senigallia, Papal States

died February 7, 1878, Rome; beatified September 3, 2000; feast day February 7



Pius IX.

Italian head of the Roman Catholic church whose pontificate (1846–78) was the longest in history and was marked by a transition from moderate political liberalism to conservatism. Notable events of his reign included the declaration of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception (1854), the *Syllabus of Errors* (1864), and the sessions of the First Vatican Council (1869–70), during which the doctrine of papal infallibility was authoritatively defined.

Prepontifical life and early reign

Pius IX was the fourth son of Girolamo Mastai-Ferretti, gonfalonier of Senigallia, and the countess Caterina Solazzi. He first came into prominence as archbishop of Spoleto from 1827 to 1832, a time of revolutionary disturbance. He was made bishop of the important diocese of Imola in 1832, but it was not until 1840 that he received the hat, as cardinal priest of Saints Piero e Marcellino. He was not, in 1846, the most prominent liberal candidate likely to succeed Gregory XVI; but it took the conclave only two days to determine his election and so prevent that of the conservative Luigi Lambruschini. He took the name of Pius in deference to the memory of Pius VII, who had been his friend and who had, like him, been bishop of Imola. The choice was in some sense prophetic, for “Pio Nono,” as his predecessor had done, began his career as a supporter of liberal ideas only to learn from bitter experience that liberals often tended to be anticlerical. In 1846, however, all this lay in the future and Europe was agog at the unusual spectacle of a liberal pope.

The new pope was confronted by a difficult situation. All Europe, save perhaps Metternich of Austria, considered the Papal States in urgent need of reform. A memorandum of 1831 by the French, English, Austrian, Russian, and Prussian ambassadors in Rome had suggested that councils should be elected to assist in local government, that a central body, composed partly of elected representatives, control finance, and that the dominant position held by the clergy in the administration and in the judicial system be terminated. Liberal opinion clung to these measures as absolutely essential throughout the pontificate of Gregory XVI. In addition, the papacy was constantly under attack by Italian nationalists as one of the instruments through which Austria maintained its domination over the peninsula.

The Revolutions of 1848

The year of revolutions began in Sicily; soon all Europe was ablaze and Pius was faced with demands, both liberal and nationalist, much beyond what he had been prepared to grant (see *Revolutions of 1848*). On March 14 he was compelled to grant a constitution establishing a two-chamber parliament with full legislative and fiscal powers subject only to the pope's personal veto. On March 23 Charles Albert of Sardinia declared war on Austria. For a time Pius continued to endeavour to steer a middle course, claiming in his address to the cardinals of April 29 that he was a disinterested spectator of the revolutionary activities sweeping Italy and that his program of reform was merely the fulfillment of the program long pressed upon the papacy by the powers. In the atmosphere of the time such sentiments were judged as displaying absolute hostility to the national cause, and the papacy was never again able to appear in Italy as anything other than a bulwark of reaction.

To prevent revolution from breaking out in Rome itself, Pius consented to the appointment of popular ministries, but none of the appointees was able to control the situation. A steadily deteriorating situation culminated in the assassination of one of them on November 15. A radical ministry was appointed; when the Swiss guards were disbanded the pope was a virtual prisoner. On November 24–25, with the aid of the French and Bavarian ambassadors, he fled to Gaeta in the kingdom of Naples. In his absence, elections were held for a constituent assembly; this, on February 9, 1849, declared the temporal power at an end and a democratic republic to be established. The papacy thereupon issued a formal appeal to the rulers of France, Austria, Spain, and Naples for assistance. Although it was generally considered that the pope's restoration could take place only with some sort of undertaking to maintain constitutional government in the Papal States, and although Louis-Napoléon, the newly elected president of France, was in favour of such a policy, Pius held out against any concessions and asserted his determination to exercise his temporal power without any restrictions whatsoever. The upshot of a period of military and diplomatic maneuvers on the part of France and Austria was the unconditional restoration of papal rule, and Pius returned to his capital on April 12, 1850.

The Roman question

It has often been asserted that Pius returned to Rome a changed man, that the former liberal had become a narrow reactionary. That his policy had changed there is no doubt, but his fundamental attitude remained the same. The interests of the church had always been his first concern. He had been prepared to countenance both nationalism and liberalism while they left the church intact, but experience had taught him that both led to revolution, which he had never been prepared to countenance. Furthermore, political concessions on his part had led to attacks on his spiritual power, and he considered that it could be protected only by his continued exercise of a temporal authority. Once these two aspects of his dominion had become indissolubly linked, it is easy to see why Pius considered himself obliged to oppose any alteration of his position as a temporal ruler.

In 1846 Pius had considered that a new departure was necessary to meet the legitimate demands for reform within the Papal States and perhaps also those for a change in the Italian system of states. Most of the administrative reforms carried out immediately after Pius's accession remained, and the papal territories benefited from the general increase in European prosperity after 1850. But constitutional government was never restored; the amnesty granted on the pope's return was riddled with exceptions; and to all expressions of national sentiment the papacy proved hostile. It

was not that papal government was tyrannical but that it formed an absolute barrier in the way of Italian unification upon which politically minded Italians were set.

On September 20, 1870, Italian troops occupied Rome, and in October a plebiscite was held in which an overwhelming majority of the votes cast were for the incorporation of Rome in the kingdom of Italy. Pius remained for the rest of his days a prisoner, as he regarded himself, in the Vatican. He refused any intercourse with the Italian government, so that their relations rested upon a law passed by the Italian parliament in November. The sovereignty of the pope was declared to be untouched by the loss of his dominion in compensation for which he was to receive an annual sum of money. He was to be entitled to conduct his own diplomatic relations with other powers and to have exclusive authority within the Vatican itself and a small district around it. In the rest of Italy, church and state were to be separated. So, though the papacy did not formally recognize the fact until the concordat of 1929, the Roman question had been settled.

Ultramontanism

Important as the events just described were for the papacy, the doctrinal developments of Pius's pontificate, which spring directly out of these political disasters, constitute its most significant contribution. Ultramontanism began with Joseph de Maistre, as a reaction against Gallicanism and against Josephinism, seeking to free the church from the chains of secular control by binding it more closely with the papacy. Félicité Lamennais developed it by suggesting that the church would benefit from a general increase in political freedom. Gregory XVI condemned Lamennais's teaching because he saw that freedom might mean freedom to deny religion altogether. Pius IX decided in 1846 to experiment with liberalism but later became convinced that Gregory XVI had rightly suspected it. Nevertheless, if Italy taught Pius one lesson, developments in France, where the church prospered more under the liberal regime of Louis-Philippe than it had under the clerical Charles X, suggested quite the opposite conclusions to the liberal Catholics there, whose spokesman was Charles de Montalembert. On the other hand, the coming of the Second Empire stimulated the party led by Louis Veillot, whose Ultramontanism was of the older sort, completely divorced from liberalism and seeking freedom for the church in an authoritarian state that would guard it against revolution.

For a period after 1850, Pius's policy took little heed of either brand of Ultramontanism. Cardinal Giacomo Antonelli, the papal secretary of state, followed the paths of Ercole Consalvi, Pius VII's secretary of state, in seeking to procure more favourable concordats with Catholic rulers. Such agreements might be politically valuable but were no defense against intellectual anticlericalism, and Pius became increasingly convinced that the real danger to the church lay in the modern secular ideas that the liberal Catholics were endeavouring to incorporate into its doctrines. The events of 1860 finally convinced him that the notion of a "free church in a free state" was a snare. The encyclical *Jamdudum Cernimus* (1861) denounced not only Piedmontese aggression but all modern political doctrines. The Risorgimento not only convinced Pius that liberalism in the church must be destroyed but also placed the liberal Catholics in the difficult position of appearing to support those who had caused him so much distress. The alternative to Montalembert's doctrine was no longer an unconditional attachment to the principles of the ancien régime but a new kind of Ultramontanism, asserting the need for concentrating church authority in the pope's hands. The ground was being prepared for the First Vatican Council and the

doctrine of papal infallibility.

But first the strong liberal party in the Catholic church had to be defeated. In 1863 Montalembert was invited to address a large Catholic congress at Malines, and he took the opportunity to defend the concept of a free church in a free state and to condemn intolerance in principle. Pius was content in reply to point out that on these two points he was running counter to authoritative pronouncements of Pius VI and Gregory XVI. This was sufficient to deter Montalembert from accepting a second invitation to Malines in 1864, but his supporter Félix-Antoine-Philibert Dupanloup proved an able substitute. Meanwhile, at a congress at Munich in 1863, Johann Joseph Ignaz von Döllinger had pleaded for the right of a scholar to pursue independent inquiry. It was clear to everyone that the church stood in need of authoritative pronouncements about its relations with the state and with modern society, and discussion began about the possibility of calling an ecumenical council for this purpose. But once again the Roman question intervened decisively in the struggle.

On September 15, 1864, the French and Italian governments came to an agreement whereby the French garrison was to be withdrawn from Rome within two years. The garrison did leave, but it returned following Garibaldi's incursion into what remained of the Papal States (1867) and was not permanently withdrawn until the Franco-Prussian War (1870). The conclusion of the September convention was sufficient to make Pius decide to take immediate action against liberalism. On December 8, 1864, he issued the encyclical *Quanta Cura* with, attached to it, the famous *Syllabus* listing 80 of the "principal errors of our times." As the errors listed had already been condemned in allocutions, encyclicals, and other apostolic letters, the *Syllabus* said nothing new and so could not be contested. Its importance lay in the fact that it published to the world what had previously been preached in the main only to the bishops, and that it made general what had been previously specific denunciations concerned with particular events. Thus perhaps the most famous article, the 80th, stigmatizing as an error the view that "the Roman Pontiff can and should reconcile himself to and agree with progress, liberalism, and modern civilization," sought its authority in the pope's refusal, in *Jamdudum Cernimus*, to have any dealings with the new Italian kingdom. On both scores, the *Syllabus* undermined the liberal Catholics' position, for it destroyed their following among intellectuals and placed their program out of court.

Though Dupanloup tried to explain away the *Syllabus* by insisting upon its context and by stressing its purely negative aspect, the *Syllabus* nevertheless dealt a mortal blow at liberal Catholicism, which ceased after 1864 to be the main issue taxing Catholic controversialists. While some of Louis Veuillot's followers hoped that at the forthcoming council a positive statement of the orthodox doctrine of the position of the church in society would replace the negative denunciations of the *Syllabus*, the majority looked upon that battle as won and so turned to the question of defining the pope's infallibility, the keystone of the neo-Ultramontane program of centralizing the authority of the church in Rome so as to escape from the control of the secular state.

First Vatican Council

In the doctrine of papal infallibility itself there was nothing new. It had been employed to define, on December 8, 1854, the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, which asserted that the freeing of the Virgin Mary from all taint of original sin had occurred at the moment of her conception. The pope had previously made extensive inquiries among the bishops and other divines and there was little opposition to such

an exercise of his undoubted prerogative. When, however, at a gathering of bishops and other dignitaries of the church in Rome in 1862 and again at another in 1867 it had been suggested that the doctrine of infallibility should be authoritatively defined, Dupanloup had led a successful opposition to the project. It was objected that such a definition was inopportune, tending to widen the breach between the church and modern society, and that it would present a one-sided view of the source of authority in the church; for while the pope possessed powers issuing directly from God, so too did the bishops, for instance, whose ordinary jurisdiction arose, not out of their nomination or institution but equally from divine origin; so that the pope's powers ought not to be defined without reference to other aspects of the nature of the church. The criticism that must attach to Pius is that he allowed the council to put aside discussion on the wider issue, which was its original program, in favour of the narrower definition. This was, of course, precisely what the Ultramontane party desired. The Ultramontanes, indeed, undoubtedly possessed the backing of by far the greater part of the church, partly because of the reaction engendered by the political misfortunes of the last decade, partly because of the immense prestige enjoyed by Pius as a result of his long and tragic pontificate, but to a larger extent because of the contemporary movement away from intellectualism and in favour of devotional religion.

The First Vatican Council opened on December 8, 1869. The opposition, consisting of the German, French, and U.S. bishops, was strong enough to prevent a definition of the doctrines and nature of the church on the lines suggested by the *Syllabus*; but the Ultramontane party brought forward the question of infallibility, upon which their position was much stronger. Pius intervened decisively to alter the procedure of the council on February 20, 1870, and again on April 29. The outcome was to postpone all deliberation except that upon infallibility. The decisive vote came on July 13 when 451 voted for it, 88 against it, and 62 in favour of some amendment. Thereupon the minority left Rome and the final definition was carried on July 18 by 533 votes to 2. Infallibility was confined to those occasions upon which the pope made pronouncements *ex cathedra*.

Pius reigned for another eight years, during which he became further estranged from the Italian government and witnessed a general outbreak of anticlericalism in western Europe. In Germany this culminated in Bismarck's *Kulturkampf*, which Pius condemned in the encyclical *Quod Nunquam* of February 5, 1875, leaving the solution of the problem to his successor. Pius died three years later, having seen in his long pontificate the creation of the modern papacy.

Assessment

The exact responsibility of Pius for the events of his pontificate is still a matter of controversy, but it may be said that Pius IX took the first steps toward the modern papacy. Church and state were increasingly separated, authority in the church was centralized in Rome, and the church was ranged in opposition to some of the dominant movements of the modern age, including liberal capitalism, communism, extreme nationalism, and the racism that culminated in Nazism. Under the direction of Pius IX the papacy abandoned the political preoccupations and responsibilities imposed by the temporal power it once possessed and concentrated on spiritual and religious issues.

In 2000 Pius IX was beatified by Pope John Paul II.

Ivor F. Burton
Douglas Woodruff
Ed.

Additional Reading

E. E. Y. HALES, *Pio Nono: A Study in European Politics and Religion in the Nineteenth Century* (1954, reissued 1962), was written avowedly to explain events from the viewpoint of Pius IX. FRANK J. COPPA, *Pope Pius IX* (1979), is a sympathetic biography, as is his *Cardinal Giacomo Antonelli and Papal Politics in European Affairs* (1990). A less favourable view is presented in Noel Blakiston (ed.), *The Roman Question: Extracts from the Despatches of Odo Russell from Rome, 1858-1870* (1962, reprinted 1980). Cuthbert Butler (Edward Cuthbert Butler), *The Vatican Council*, 2 vol. (1930, reissued in 1 vol., 1962), based on correspondence with the English bishop Ullathorne, gives a good account of Pius' activity at the council. August Bernhard Hasler, *How the Pope Became Infallible: Pius IX and the Politics of Persuasion* (1981) presents a very hostile picture of Pius IX's role during the Vatican Council.

To cite this page:

MLA Style: "Pius IX." Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica Ultimate Reference Suite. Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, 2015.

APA Style: Pius IX. (2015). Encyclopædia Britannica. *Encyclopædia Britannica Ultimate Reference Suite*. Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica.