

POPE PIUS IX

By Robert P. Lockwood

Pope Pius IX served as pope from 1846 to 1878, the longest and one of the most difficult pontificates in history. The modern caricature of his papacy surrounds his resistance to modern thinking as seen in the *Syllabus of Errors* that appeared to set the Church squarely against democratic ideals; and the “kidnapping” of Edgardo Mortara, a Jewish child taken from his family by authorities after his Christian baptism was discovered.

The future Pope Pius IX was born Giovanni Maria Mastai-Ferretti in Senigallia in the Papal States in 1792. Before he was ordained a priest in 1819, two popes had been imprisoned and the Church in Europe nearly destroyed by the movements, war and nationalist fervor that swept out of revolutionary France and under Napoleon.

A new world was emerging in the 19th century. National identity – rather than identity with ancient royal houses – would become a driving force in both politics and how people thought of themselves. It was an era when racial identity, and racism, became a growing and dangerous part of “modern” thinking. This new “racialism” would underlie many of the tragedies that would be faced by Pius IX.

Pope Pius IX was elected in 1846. Two years later, revolutions swept Europe. Mob violence exploded in Rome. When a revolutionary government was forced on the Pope, he decided to flee Rome. Though the new government attempted to restrain the mobs, priests were killed and churches desecrated. Five bishops were arrested and the government took over Church property. The French deemed it wise to invade Rome and restore order, rather than see the Austrians occupy the city. Nine months later, on April 12, 1850, the Pope returned. But when

war broke out in the peninsula in 1859, Piedmont annexed a large section of the Papal States. This was simple aggrandizement. The Papal States virtually ceased to exist, leaving only Rome and a small strip of western Italy under papal control. In 1870 at the onset of the Franco-Prussian War, the French troops were withdrawn from Rome and Victor Emmanuel sent his soldiers to secure the city.

We tend to forget that the “liberalism” of the growing nation states of Europe was not how we define liberalism today. The nation states developing in Europe – fiercely anti-Catholic and highly nationalistic – were the forerunners of the totalitarian states of the 20th century. Otto Von Bismarck’s Prussia and the new Italian State would become Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. The seeds of this horrific development were planted in racialism, nationalism and communism that grew directly from the philosophy of liberalism of 19th century Europe. From that perspective, the political policies of Pius IX make much greater sense than merely a reactionary bigotry most often portrayed. It also helps to frame at least an understanding of the vehemence of his *Syllabus of Errors* and the concerns that were behind it.

The *Syllabus of Errors* was issued as an attachment to an 1864 encyclical of Pius IX, *Quanta Cura*. Within the Church, particularly from the Italian perspective, the so-called “free states” of Europe meant confiscated Church property, nuns and priests driven from their Religious Orders, bishops arrested and executed, the Church drummed out of any role in education or the public arena, heated anti-Catholic rhetoric in newspapers and legislatures, and the confiscation of the Papal States by armed force. To their minds, modern civilization meant slums, crime, political chaos, hatred, racism, war, agnosticism and atheism.

The encyclical with the *Syllabus* was released in 1864 and was in many ways a fair statement against a host of 19th century thought that remain worthy of condemnation today –

indifferentism, atheism, rationalism. The *Syllabus* contained 80 condemned propositions, such as denying the existence of God and the truth of Scripture, the equation of human reason with Divine Revelation, the all-inclusive authority of the State.

Other areas provided more difficulty, particularly if read in the context of today's understanding of the ideas involved. The condemnation of separation of Church and State seems archaic. What must not be forgotten is how such separation was defined at the time. It certainly meant in many countries, such as Bismarck's Prussia, that the Church was absolutely subservient to the State and must be divorced entirely from civil life. Also, when the encyclical condemned freedom of the press, it was being drafted at the time of a viciously anti-Catholic press and a journalism that had no norms of objectivity or balance.

Eamon Duffy, writing in his book, *Saints and Sinners*, notes: "The *Syllabus* was in fact a far less devastating document than it appeared at first sight. Its 80 propositions were extracted from earlier papal documents, and Pio Nono repeatedly said that the true meaning of the *Syllabus* could be discovered only by referring to the original context. So, the offensive proposition 80 came from the brief *Iamdudum Cernimus* of 1861. Its apparently wholesale condemnation of 'progress, liberalism and modern civilization' in fact referred quite specifically to the Piedmontese government's closure of the monasteries and Church schools." This gives vital historical context to the *Syllabus* as well as a clear frame of reference. It roots the *Syllabus* in its specific point in time, and gives it a greater understanding than when read with contemporary eyes.

In recent years, no event more surprised Catholics than the story of a young Jewish boy taken from the home of his parents during the papacy of Pius IX to be raised as a Catholic. Though it caused an international furor in its time, the story had been generally forgotten until resurrected in David

Kertzer's, "The Kidnapping of Edgardo Mortara" published in 1997.

Kertzer makes the argument that the Mortara affair was a sign of the roots of racial anti-Semitism that would emerge in Italian Fascism, and as such the Church played a role in establishing the framework for the Italian racial laws of 1938. This misunderstands the motivations involved in the Mortara affair at the time, and forgets that it was the Church that protested vehemently the 1938 laws and was the single greatest protector of Italian Jews during the war years.

In June 1858, Bologna was still part of the Papal States and the Mortara family had settled there. Edgardo, age six, was one of eight children of Marianna and Momolo Mortara. The Mortaras had employed a Christian servant to help in raising the children. It had come to the light of Church authorities in Bologna, specifically the Dominican head of the local Inquisition, that the servant girl had baptized young Edgardo as an infant when she thought he was in danger of dying. (This was one of the very clear reasons why Christians were not supposed to be employed in Jewish households. It was against the law for Jews to be baptized without consent and fear of just such cases was at the heart of the legislation.)

The law in the matter was clear: a baptized Christian could not be raised in a Jewish home. To do so at that time would be seen as being a party to apostasy, a denial of the validity of Baptism, and endanger the soul of the baptized. Edgardo was taken from his parent's home and transported to Rome, where he would be raised a Catholic.

The difficulty for the Church, and Pius as he became aware of the affair, was that it was left with little choice at the time. It was simply considered impossible for a baptized child to remain in a home where he would not be raised Christian. Such experiences were commonplace even decades later in America. As late as the early 20th century, it was common for

Irish Catholic children to be plucked off the streets of New York and transported to the West to be raised by solid Protestant families.

Edgardo would eventually study for the priesthood and be ordained. He remained a monk and died in 1940 at the age of 88 at a Belgian abbey where he lived and studied for many years.

The Mortara affair supplied the enemies of Pius IX with a strong propaganda weapon at a point when the Papal States were about to collapse. The extent of the vitriol aimed at Pius was enormous and worldwide. Adopting the anti-Catholic rhetoric of the Know Nothings, Jewish groups in the United States saw it as a Jesuit-inspired conspiracy of "soul-less lackeys," compared Pius to the "Prince of Darkness" and reminded their Protestant audience of the "history of these incarnate fiends, written in the blood of millions of victims."

Was Pius XI's refusal to return Edgardo Mortara an act of pure anti-Semitism? In the context of the times, it clearly was not. This did not involve racial prejudice. The Church in Rome had a long history of defending Jewish converts to the faith and accepting them completely after such a conversion, as was done in the case of Edgardo Mortara. In his actions, Pius reflected both the generally accepted norms of the time concerning families of mixed religion.

During the long pontificate of Pius IX, the Church was transformed in every aspect of its life. Religious orders experienced a growth unimaginable a generation earlier. In 1815, the Church as an institution in continental Europe had nearly been destroyed. When Pius IX died on February 7, 1878, after a 32-year reign, the Church had been reborn.