

"Effraenatam" (1588), by Pope Sixtus V ^[1]

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"Effraenatam", the brain-child of [Pope Sixtus V](#) ^[7], was released as a papal bull in the year 1588. Papal bulls are formal declarations issued by the pope of the [Roman Catholic Church](#) ^[8] and are named for their authenticating leaden seals (*bullas*). This particular document became famous for its official forbiddance of all procured abortions. "Effraenatam," meaning "without restraint," is often regarded as a specific response to increasing rates of prostitution and procured abortions in the Papal States, though this is not discussed in the actual document. Delivered by [Pope Sixtus V](#) ^[7] on Mount Quirinal in Rome on 29 November, the document drops the previous distinction between animated and unanimated fetuses, assigning the punishment of excommunication and the legal sentences for homicide for any intentional [abortion](#) ^[9].

Previously in Church doctrine [abortion](#) ^[9] had been punishable with different degrees of severity depending on the level of development of the [fetus](#) ^[10], though any type of procured [abortion](#) ^[9] was considered sinful. In fact, only abortions that were sought out and completed after the first sign of quickening or animation of the [fetus](#) ^[10] had been punished with excommunication and imprisonment at that time, so many citizens and even Church officials found the declaration overzealous. The document does, however, reserve varying degrees of punishment for varying degrees of involvement in the attempt to procure an [abortion](#) ^[9], as well as specific punishments for participants of particular vocations (such as clerics, pharmacists, and employers).

"Effraenatam" is also useful for providing an idea of what types of abortifacients were used at this point in time. The document lists "blows, poisons, medicines, potions, weights, burdens, work and labor imposed on a pregnant woman, and even other unknown and extremely researched means" as methods of procuring abortions that were apparently in practice. Additionally, it is apparent that contraceptives and [sterilization](#) ^[11] procedures were also in use, as the document condemns the use, design, or recommendation of medicines and potions intended to prevent [conception](#) ^[12], to which [Pope Sixtus V](#) ^[7] assigned the same punishments as for abortions.

Almost immediately upon assuming the papacy, [Pope Gregory XIV](#) ^[13] revoked the decisions of "Effraenatam" and reinstated the original punishment of excommunication for procured [abortion](#) ^[9] only after the animation or [ensoulment](#) ^[14] of the [fetus](#) ^[10]. Additionally, he rescinded the legal classification of [abortion](#) ^[9] as homicide (presumably because of the overwhelming number of cases the decision generated). In 1869, however, [Pope Pius IX](#) ^[15] restored the gravity of excommunication as punishment for any procured [abortion](#) ^[9], once again dropping the distinction between the animated and unanimated [fetus](#) ^[10] in his publication *Apostolicae Sedis Moderationi*. The Roman Catholic Church's modern position on [abortion](#) ^[9] also acknowledges no variation in the value of life in the [womb](#) ^[16] from the moment of [conception](#) ^[12] onwards, and thus views a procured [abortion](#) ^[9] at any stage in [pregnancy](#) ^[17] as a serious sin meriting immediate excommunication.

In each available translation of "Effraenatam," paragraphs eight, ten, and eleven are absent. The original Latin document is located in the Vatican Secret Archives and is unavailable for viewing except by special personal admission to the Archives for academic research.