"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.


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.