Pope Gregory XIV (1535-1591) [1]


Pope Gregory XIV [6], born Nicolo Sfondrati, reversed the bull of Pope Sixtus V [7], Effraenatum, under which an abortion [8] at any time of gestation [9] can be punished by excommunication. He supported the Aristotelian distinction between an “animated” and “unanimated” fetus [10], making abortion [8] of an unanimated fetus [10] punishable by lesser means. This decision contributed to the historical debates within the Roman Catholic Church [11] on when a fetus [10] has a soul, and when abortion [8] was punishable by excommunication.

Nicolo Sfondrati was born into a noble family in Cremona, Italy, on 11 February 1535. His mother, Anna Visconti, died during childbirth after a Caesarean birth. His father, Francesco Sfondrati, was a Milanese senator who was raised to cardinal status in 1544 by Pope Paul III [12]. Sfondrati attended and successfully completed his studies at the University of Padua [13] and University of Perugia [13] and made Sfondrati Bishop of Cremona, against his will, and he was sent to attend the Council of Trent from 1561 to 1563. At the Council, he contributed to the decree that prohibited the plurality of benefices. On 12 December 1583, Pope Gregory XIII [14], content with Sfondrati’s work, raised him to the position of Cardinal-Priest of Santa Cecilia. Sfondrati was elected pope on 5 December 1590, after the passing of Pope Urban VII. He was given the name of Gregory XIV. He held no desire to be pope and responded to the cardinals upon greeting him as the Holy Father, “God forgive you! What have you done?”

Contrary to Pope Sixtus V [7], Pope Gregory XIV [6] made the punishment for early abortion [8] less severe. He believed that Sixtus V had made punishment for abortion [8] too harsh and was even contradictory to the penitential thought and theological view of ensoulment [17]. In his Sedes Apostolicae [18] in 1591, he claimed that only homicide or the abortion [8] of an animated fetus [10] was punishable by excommunication, implementing the Aristotelian distinction between an “animated” and “unanimated” fetus [10]. He also employed the “quickening” test, which equated the beginning of life with the time of first fetal movement. To Pope Gregory XIV [6] quickening determined when a fetus [10] was considered animated. Despite his leniency on punishment for abortion [8], the new pope still considered the procuring of an abortion [8] in the early stages of gestation [8] as a grave sin.

Pope Gregory XIV [6] died in Rome on 15 October 1591. Though his papacy was short, his encyclical Sedes Apostolicae [18] made significant changes to the Catholic doctrines of life and abortion [8]. This doctrine remained in place until Pope Pius IX [19] reversed it in 1869.

Sources

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