Pope Pius XII (1876-1958) [1]


Pope Pius XII [5] was born Eugenio Maria Giuseppi Giovanni Pacelli on 2 March 1876 in Rome, Italy, to Virginia and Filippo Pacelli. Known for his oft-disputed role in the Roman Catholic Church’s approach to the Nazis and World War II, Pope Pius XII [5] also contributed a number of important documents regarding conception [6], fertility, abortion [7], and reproductive control to the Vatican’s collection of writings and doctrine on procreation [8].

Raised in a religious family, Pacelli excelled as a student and athlete in his early years. After deciding to become a priest rather than a lawyer, as was family tradition, Pacelli entered both the Capranica Seminary and the Pontifical Gregorian University in 1894. He received a Baccalaureate and Licentiate in Theology summa cum laude in 1895. Pacelli officially joined the priesthood on 2 April 1899, and while serving his first appointment in his home church, he pursued doctorates in Canon Law, Civil Law, Philosophy, and Theology at the Papal Athenaeum of St. Apollinaris. In 1904 Pacelli became Monsignor Pacelli and began assisting the Office of the Congregation of Extraordinary Ecclesiastical Affairs. He gradually fell into diplomatic assignments for the Vatican due to his sharp memory and uncanny ability to master new languages. In 1917 Pope Benedict XV appointed him an archbishop and Nuncio to Bavaria, Germany. His work with the poor there continued even through the beginning of World War I [9] and his dedication to peace won him the vote of every cardinal in the electorate, except his own, for his appointment to the papacy, which took place on 2 March 1939.

Though much of his papacy concentrated on issues of world peace and religious tolerance, Pope Pius XII [5] also took time to address the world on issues regarding procreation [6]. He repeatedly affirmed the Catholic support of the sanctity of life, rejecting therapeutic exceptions to abortion [7] in speeches to Catholic midwives, obstetricians, and medical councils. He likewise condemned sterilization [10] and the birth control [11] pill to prevent conception [6], only approving the use of such procedures or medicines when medically necessary for other health reasons. His statements on the rhythm method [12] and the concept of a birth control [11] pill influenced the creator of the pill, John Rock, to seek a natural means of monitoring and suppressing reproduction; he and Rock simply disagreed as to what constituted a “natural” method. Rock pursued natural hormones [13] as a way to regulate fertility, whereas Pope Pius XII [5] rejected the use of pills (natural or otherwise) to interfere with a woman’s cycle for the sole purpose of preventing conception [6]. Pope Pius XII [5] was also vocal on the importance of the Immaculate Conception of Mary, a tenet of church dogma that supports the Catholic viewpoint of human life beginning at conception [6].

Though Pope Pius XII [5] was principally known for his actions during World War II, his reactions to the new birth control [11] pill, abortion [7], procedures, and sterilization [10] techniques of the mid-twentieth century helped shape Roman Catholic views on these issues. His stance on these early development and fertility topics still represents the Church’s opinion on beginning of life and fertility matters, as confirmed by each of his successors. Pope Pius XII [5] died 9 October 1958, and was succeeded by Pope John XXIII [14], who often extended, clarified, and reiterated Pope Pius XII’s statements on matters regarding procreation [8] and human life.

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