

Pope Pius IX (Blessed)

Pope Pius IX (Giovanni Maria Mastai-Ferretti) was 54 when elected in 1846. Before his election he had been a Vatican representative to Chile, a handsome diplomat, able to dialogue with the liberals of his time.

In 1831, as Archbishop of Spoleto, when 4000 Italian revolutionaries fled before the Austrian army and threatened to invade Spoleto, he persuaded them to surrender and disband. Eventually they returned home. One of his first acts as pope was to grant general amnesty to 2000 political prisoners in the Papal States. Under duress he encouraged lay men to fill important posts for the first time, including that of prime minister. Railroads were introduced into the Papal States during his reign.

However, the events of the turbulent nineteenth century affected him and his attitudes. He refused to go to war against Austria; in the tumult that followed his prime minister was assassinated. His secretary was also shot and Pope Pius IX was forced to flee Rome in disguise. He asked for help from Catholic nations and France helped restore order in Rome. Eventually the Pope returned and placed temporal government in the hands of three stern cardinals.

His years as Pope, the longest Papacy in history, (1846-1878) were fraught with political unrest as Italians sought unification and national identity. His recent beatification (2003) also raised issues around his alleged anti-Semitism. However, he is known today as Blessed.