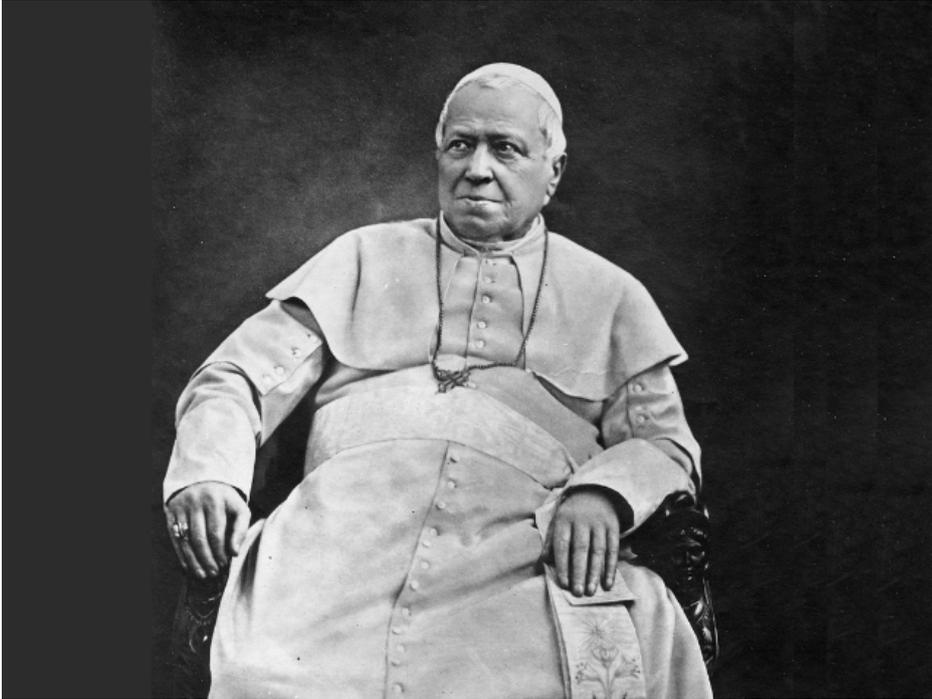




GRAND MAGISTERIUM – VATICAN
EQUESTRIAN ORDER OF
THE HOLY SEPULCHRE OF JERUSALEM

At the service of the living stones in the Holy Land

The Precious Legacy of Blessed Pius IX



We Knights and Dames owe so much to Blessed Pius IX. It was he who, following an agreement with the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire, reconstituted the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem in 1847 and established the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem as a supporting entity. Pius IX also took great interest in widely promoting the reconstitution of the Order, which he did through encouraging its international growth. On the occasion of the liturgical commemoration of Blessed Pius IX, Cardinal Fernando Filoni, the Grand Master of the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre, was invited on February 8 to celebrate Mass at the Basilica of San Salvatore in Lauro, which owes much to that Pontiff. Here follows Cardinal Fernando Filoni's homily.

"S(ervus) D(ei) mortuus est Romae die 7 februarii 1878 (anno millesimo octingentesimo septuagesimo octavo), quae fuit feria quinta, in Vaticanis Aedibus, hora quinta eum tribus quadrantibus post meridiem" (The Servant of God passed from this life on February 7, 1878, at the Ave Maria of the evening, that is, around 5:45 PM). The account of his pious death states that Pius IX was comforted in his final moments by the Sacraments of the Church, which he had requested (*Positio super virtutibus*, II, 743).

According to the news report at the time, the Pope remained conscious and, before losing the ability to speak, expressed that he was dying peacefully, saying, "*Laetantes ibimus*" (we go with a joyful heart). The piety and composure of the Pope's passing astonished those present, who were deeply moved. Even "*the famous great bell was rung at the Capitoline Hill*" (*ibid.*), despite the fact that Blessed Pius IX's death occurred at the height of the '*Roman Question*'.

It is good—indeed, I would say it is supremely good—that the liturgical as well as historical memory is preserved within both the ecclesial and civil community, especially among those who cherish these figures and human events. Thus, commemorating Blessed Pius IX on the 137th anniversary of his pious passing is a rightful tribute to the Blessed Pontiff—an ecclesiastic not only of great humanity, as highlighted in the sources of his canonization process, but also of unwavering priestly fidelity.

Today, we honor the memory of Blessed Pius IX in this Basilica of San Salvatore in Lauro, which owes so much to the zeal of that Pontiff, who in 1862 dedicated this restored church to Our Lady of Loreto.

We have countless reasons to recall today, in these calmer and less turbulent times, the blessed memory of Pius IX—beyond the *damnatio* that certain partisan politicians and historians sought to impose on the future. History does not stand still, and Pius IX was more than aware of this. Cardinal Francesco Della Volpe (1844–1916), who was then Camerlengo of the Holy Roman Church, stated in his testimony during the canonization process of the Pontiff that what struck him most about Pius IX's character was ***“the patience he demonstrated in the loss of temporal power and in the persecution of the Church”*** (ibid., 319).

From a theological perspective, here I would like to highlight what I consider the doctrinal pinnacle of his long pontificate, namely **the proclamation of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception**. This **proclamation** entered so forcefully, it was as if an immense light had been shone onto the Church's profession of faith. Moreover, it penetrated the dark recesses of that rationalist and scientific world that at the time believed itself to be the solution to the world's problems and future.

While in exile in Gaeta (November 24, 1848), Pius IX wrote to the entire episcopate throughout the world to seek their opinion on defining the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. This doctrine was later declared a dogma of faith through the bull *Ineffabilis Deus*. Mary, as the Mother of God, was preserved from original sin from the moment of her conception and from all sin by virtue of the merits of Christ. Witnesses in the Pope's beatification process reported that *“For the first time, on December 8, 1854, the Pope, with a dogmatic definition, ended the long-debated controversy regarding the Immaculate Conception of the Mother of God...in the presence of two hundred bishops, who had joyfully gathered from all parts of the world”* (ibid., 253). They also testified that the initiative for the proclamation came from the Pope himself, who always nurtured a special devotion to the Most Holy Mary, Mother of God (cf. *ib.*, 278 ff.).

When King Ferdinand of Naples accompanied Pius IX back to the borders of the Papal States in April 1850 after his exile. The King was aware of the Pope's financial difficulties, so he provided monetary support to assist him, and offered a special donation, which the Pope used to erect the famous column with the statue of the Immaculate Conception in Piazza di Spagna. Pius IX was a Pope of profound Marian devotion—and I find it fitting to recall this here today. It is said that he loved Loreto and made a vow to Mary that he would visit the shrine if the proclamation of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception was successfully achieved. He remained true to his promise and actually traveled to Loreto, where he stayed for several days. Regarding Pius IX's devotion to the Immaculate Virgin, a remarkable episode was recounted by witnesses in his beatification process: one day, the Pope was found in his chapel, deep in prayer before the sacred image, lifted off the ground in ecstasy. When he realized he was being observed, he forbade anyone from speaking about it.

The dogma of the Immaculate Conception was the response that Blessed Pius IX gave to a modernity that was perceived as being devoid of God. This modern era proclaimed: evil has a social origin, salvation belonged to the 'proletarian class', scientific development would provide the basis for a new life, and the elimination of all familial, political, and religious authority would bring peace to the world. With the proclamation of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, Pius IX reaffirmed, according to the Gospel, evil originates in the corrupted heart of man. *“For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice,*

deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and defile a person". (Mark 7:21-23). In this, he emphasized that the purpose of history is the glory of God and that human progress is connected to a vision integrated with divine revelation.

Pius IX opened a new chapter in the life of the Church, and with the loss of the territories of the Papal States, the Pope fully embraced the exercise of his high spiritual and moral universal mission.

Let me conclude these thoughts with a brief reference to today's Gospel. Jesus asks Simon Peter to get into his boat and set off once again, despite having just returned from an unfruitful fishing trip. He then asks him to cast the nets again. Peter trusted Him, saying, *"At your word, I will let down the nets", and the catch was so abundantly extraordinary that it filled two boats. In response, Peter fell at Jesus' knees, saying, "Lord, depart from me, for I am a sinful man" ... Jesus answered, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men"*. This response involves not only Peter, but all his successors as well. In the 1970s, a well-known French thinker insightfully wrote that when Jesus, by the Lake of Galilee, chose the first Pope, Peter, He also foresaw and chose his successors. Beyond the humanity of each individual, Christ entrusted to them a mission that, however, remains primarily His.

Truly, Blessed Pius IX was a fisher of men, a ***pontifex***, a bridge, a ferryman in times of immense cultural and political change and of equally great religious unrest and contrasts. No one can deny that, and not by chance, Christ chose him as the 255th Bishop of Rome and Successor of Peter. He was a man of extraordinary virtues.

Pius IX, Giovanni Maria Mastai-Ferretti, was intimately scrutinized by Jesus—***"intuitus eum"***—and was loved with a special gaze by the Lord. The Church declared him Blessed (in 2000, by Pope John Paul II) for his highest virtues of faith and priesthood.

Fernando Cardinal Filoni

(February 8, 2025)