



A Life of Pope Pius IX

John R G Hassard, Brother Hermenegild TOSF

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BEING more anxious to show the spirit of the late pontificate than to write a full catalogue of its achievements, I have passed lightly over all but the greater incidents in this history of a quarter of a century of battles. Perhaps a rapid story may be acceptable to many Catholic readers who find fuller biographies too long and too costly. NEVER since the days of Hildebrand has the Church seen so remarkable a pontificate as that which has just closed. The long reign of Pius IX., far exceeding in duration that of any of his predecessors, and surpassing even the traditional "years of Peter" which a popular prediction declared that no pope should ever see, was crowded with momentous political events, involving the most important changes in the condition of a large part of the civilized world, and in nearly all these changes the Sovereign Pontiff was the central figure. Ideas which were just beginning to ripen into action at the time of his birth became the ruling force of Europe before the close of his career. The ancient society of Christian nations was broken up. Christendom as a political entity ceased to exist. A new order of civilization, founded on new principles, took its place. In all these vicissitudes the Roman See was the one institution which suffered no change. Time and time again has it seemed to be the pivot around which moved the revolutions of a world. And the part of Pius IX. in this turmoil of transformation was no less strange than eventful. The early years of his pontificate showed that there was no reasonable liberty of which the Church might not be the protector, and for a few weeks the whole world sang hymns of praise to the Pope who had proved the compatibility of the authority of Rome with political freedom, and her sympathy with all noble and patriotic aspirations. Yet the World and the Church were soon in conflict, though the Pope never changed. Empires and republics rose and fell. Princes turned democrats. Democrats assumed the crown. Kingdoms were blotted off the map. Nations sprang into life. The Church was stripped of all her temporal possessions. Governments which had been her staunchest supporters suddenly become her foes. And in the midst of this hurry of revolutions-political, social, and religious-the Papacy alone retained its stability. The world beat against it, and beat in vain. When it was deemed friendless it was strongest. When it had no help except the unseen hand of Heaven, it was most formidable in the unity of its episcopate, the affection of its children scattered far and wide over the earth, the clearness of its teachings, and the quick and full assent which all Catholics yielded to the authoritative voice that spoke to them from the Vatican. "There is, perhaps, hardly any pontiff," says Cardinal Manning, "who has governed the Church with more frequent exercises of supreme authority than Pius IX."

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