

# Syllabus of Errors

The ***Syllabus of Errors*** (Latin: ***Syllabus Errorum***) is a document issued by the Holy See under Pope Pius IX on December 8, 1864, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, as an annex to the *Quanta cura* encyclical.<sup>[1]</sup> It condemns a total of 80 errors or heresies, and through that promulgated Catholic Church teaching on a number of philosophical and political questions, and referred to documents issued previously.

Reaction amongst Catholics was mixed, while that coming from Protestants was uniformly negative. It remains a controversial document, and has been cited on numerous occasions by both Catholic traditionalists seeking to uphold traditional Catholic values and anti-Catholics seeking to criticize the church's positions.

The purpose of the syllabus was not to explain in depth the errors themselves, but only provide a list of them with a short paraphrasing of the error and references to the corresponding papal documents. The actual encyclicals listed reveal what it is about the error that is incorrect, and in which situations or nuances or emphasis. In order to understand the Pope's argument against each error, one must read not only the error itself, but the document it points to.



Pope Pius IX

## Contents

### History

### Format

Selected example statements

### Reactions

Non-Catholics

Catholics

### Sources cited

### Examples

### Subsequent history

### Footnotes

### Further reading

### External links

## History

On December 8, 1864, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception the Holy See under Pope Pius IX issued the *Syllabus of Errors*, which is a compilation of what the church believed were heresies in the philosophical and political realm. It listed them, and referred to older Catholic Church documents on these matters issued previously.

## Format

The Syllabus is made up of phrases and paraphrases from earlier papal documents, along with index references to them, and presents them as a list of "condemned propositions". For instance, in condemning proposition 14, "Philosophy is to be treated without taking any account of supernatural revelation", the Syllabus asserts the truth of the contrary proposition—that philosophy should take account of supernatural revelation. The Syllabus does not explain why each particular proposition is wrong, but cites earlier documents for similar or identical statements. Except for some propositions drawn from Pius' encyclical *Qui pluribus* of November 9, 1846, most were based on documents after the Revolutions of 1848 shocked the Pope and the papacy. (see Italian unification).

The Syllabus is divided into ten sections which condemn as false various statements about the following topics: "Errors about...

1. pantheism, naturalism, and absolute rationalism, Propositions 1–7;
2. moderate rationalism, Propositions 8–14;
3. indifferentism and latitudinarianism, Propositions 15–18;
4. socialism, communism, secret societies, Bible societies, and liberal clerical societies, a general condemnation, unnumbered;
5. the Catholic Church and her rights, Propositions 19–38 (defending temporal power in the Papal States, which were overthrown six years later);
6. civil society and its relationship to the church, Propositions 39–55;
7. natural and Christian ethics, Propositions 56–64;

8. Christian marriage, Propositions 65–74;
9. the civil power of the sovereign Pontiff in the Papal States, Propositions 75–76 and
10. liberalism in every political form, Propositions 77–80.

## Selected example statements

Statements the encyclical condemn as false include the following examples:

- "Human reason, without any reference whatsoever to God, is the sole arbiter of truth and falsehood, and of good and evil." (No. 3, rationalism)
- "All the truths of religion proceed from the innate strength of human reason; hence reason is the ultimate standard by which man can and ought to arrive at the knowledge of all truths of every kind." (No. 4, rationalism)
- "Protestantism is nothing more than another form of the same true Christian religion, in which form it is given to please God equally as in the Catholic Church." (No. 18).
- "The Church ought to be separated from the State, and the State from the Church." (No. 55, separation of church and state)
- "In the present day it is no longer expedient that the Catholic religion should be held as the only religion of the State, to the exclusion of all other forms of worship." (No. 77)
- "Every man is free to embrace and profess that religion which, guided by the light of reason, he shall consider true." (No. 15) and that "It has been wisely decided by law, in some Catholic countries, that persons coming to reside therein shall enjoy the public exercise of their own peculiar worship." (No. 78, freedom of religion)
- "The Roman Pontiff can, and ought to, reconcile himself, and come to terms with, progress, liberalism and modern civilization." (No. 80, cf. Jamdudum cernimus)

## Reactions

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### Non-Catholics

Within the Protestant world, reactions were uniformly negative. In 1874 the British Leader of the Opposition William Ewart Gladstone published a tract entitled *The Vatican Decrees in their bearing on Civil Allegiance: A Political Expostulation*, in which he said that after the Syllabus:

. . . no one can now become (Rome's) convert without renouncing his moral and mental freedom, and placing his civil loyalty and duty at the mercy of another.

The government of France briefly tried to suppress the circulation of the encyclical and the *Syllabus* within its borders; it forbade priests to explain the Syllabus from the pulpit, though newspapers were allowed to discuss it from a secular point of view.

### Catholics

The document met with a mixed reception among Catholics; many accepted it wholeheartedly, others wanted a clarification of some points, and still others were as shocked as their Protestant neighbors by the apparent broad scope of the condemnations.

Catholic apologists such as Félix Dupanloup and John Henry Newman said that the *Syllabus* was widely misinterpreted by readers who did not have access to or did not bother to check the original documents of which it was a summary. The propositions listed had been condemned as erroneous opinions *in the sense and context in which they originally occurred*; without the original context, the document appeared to condemn a larger range of ideas than it actually did. Thus it was asserted that no critical response to the *Syllabus* which did not take the cited documents and their context into account could be valid. Newman writes:

The Syllabus then has no dogmatic force; it addresses us, not in its separate portions, but as a whole, and is to be received from the Pope by an act of obedience, not of faith, that obedience being shown by having recourse to the original and authoritative documents, (Allocutions and the like,) to which the Syllabus pointedly refers. Moreover, when we turn to those documents, which are authoritative, we find the Syllabus cannot even be called an echo of the Apostolic Voice; for, in matters in which wording is so important, it is not an exact transcript of the words of the Pope, in its account of the errors condemned, just as would be natural in what is an index for reference.<sup>[2]</sup>

In the wake of the controversy following the document's release, Pius IX referred to it as "raw meat needing to be cooked." However, others within the church who supported the syllabus disagreed that there was any misinterpretation of the condemnations. The syllabus was an attack on liberalism, modernism, moral relativism, secularization, and the political emancipation of Europe from the tradition of Catholic Monarchies.<sup>[3]</sup>

## Sources cited

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The Syllabus cites a number of previous documents that had been written during Pius's papacy. These include : *Qui pluribus*, *Maxima quidem*, *Singulari quadam*, *Tuas libenter*, *Multiplices inter*, *Quanto conficiamur*, *Noscitis*, *Nostis et nobiscum*, *Meminit unusquisque*, *Ad Apostolicae*, *Nunquam fore*, *Incredibili*, *Acerbissimum*, *Singularis nobisque*, *Multis gravibusque*, *Quibus quantisque*, *Quibus luctuosissimis*, *In consistoriali*, *Cum non sine*, *Cum*

*saepe, Quanto conficiamur, Jamdudum cernimus, Novos et ante, Quibusque vestrum* and *Cum catholica*.

## Examples

The English Catholic historian E. E. Y. Hales argued, "[T]he Pope is not concerned with a universal principle, but with the position in a particular state at a particular date. He is expressing his "wonder and distress" (no more) that in a Catholic country (Spain) it should be proposed to disestablish the Church and to place any and every religion upon a precisely equal footing. ... Disestablishment and toleration were far from the normal practice of the day, whether in Protestant or in Catholic states."<sup>[4]</sup> Newman points out that this particular item (#77) refers to the July 26, 1855 allocation *Nemo vestrum*. Relations between Spain and the Holy See were governed by a Concordat negotiated in 1851 (although not implemented until 1855),<sup>[5]</sup> which treaty Spain was then violating.<sup>[6]</sup>

## Subsequent history

In the 21 November 1873 encyclical, *Etsi multa* ("On the Church in Italy, Germany, and Switzerland"), which is often appended to the *Syllabus*. Pius expresses further thoughts in the same vein condemning contemporary liberalizing anti-clerical legislation in *South America* as "a ferocious war on the Church."

In 1907, *Lamentabili sane exitu* was promulgated, a "Syllabus condemning the errors of the Modernists", being a list of errors that might be made by scholars engaged in *biblical criticism*.<sup>[7]</sup>

## Footnotes

- Pius PP. IX. *Quanta cura*. Romae, 1864. [link \(https://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-ix/la/documents/encyclica-quanta-cura-8-decembri-1864.html\)](https://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-ix/la/documents/encyclica-quanta-cura-8-decembri-1864.html).
- Francis A. Sullivan, *Creative Fidelity*, ISBN 0-8091-3644-9, p. 143.
- "The Syllabus of Pius IX" (<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14368b.htm>). *New Advent*. Kevin Knight, dedicated to the Immaculate Heart of Mary. Retrieved December 19, 2016.
- Hales, E.E.Y. (1958). *THE CATHOLIC CHURCH in the MODERN WORLD: A Survey from the French Revolution to the Present*. Doubleday.
- Kelly, Leo, and Benedetto Ojetti. "Concordat." *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/04196a.htm>) Vol. 4. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1908. 10 January 2019. <sup>Ⓢ</sup> *This article incorporates text from this source, which is in the public domain.*
- Shaw, Russell. "Syllabus of Errors still relevant 150 years later", *OSV Weekly*, November 25, 2014 (<https://www.osv.com/OSVNewsweekly/Article/TaBld/535/ArtMID/13567/ArticleID/16503/Syllabus-of-Errors-still-relevant-150-years-later.aspx>)
- Lamentabili Sane* text 1907 (<http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Pius10/p10lamen.htm>)

## Further reading

- Pio Nono: A Study in European Politics and Religion in the Nineteenth Century*, by E.E.Y. Hales (P.J. Kenedy, 1954)
- The Catholic Church in the Modern World* by E.E.Y. Hales (Doubleday, 1958)
- Utt, Walter C. (1960). "Quanta Cura and the Syllabus of Errors" ([http://www.adventistarchives.org/docs/LibM/LibM19600601-V55-06\\_C.pdf#view=fit](http://www.adventistarchives.org/docs/LibM/LibM19600601-V55-06_C.pdf#view=fit)) (PDF). *Liberty*. Washington, D. C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association. **55** (6, November–December): 12, 13, 32–34. Retrieved June 24, 2011.

## External links

- The Syllabus of Errors (<http://www.ewtn.com/library/PAPALDOC/P9SYLL.HTM>) ewtn.com online text
- A. Haag, "Syllabus" (<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14368b.htm>) in the Catholic Encyclopedia (1912) newadvent.org
- John Henry Newman's discussion of the Syllabus in *Difficulties of Anglicans* (<http://www.newmanreader.org/works/anglicans/volume2/gladstone/section7.html>) volume 2 (1874) newmanreader.org
- Excerpt from Gladstone's *The Vatican Decrees in Their Bearing on Civil Allegiance: a Political Expostulation* ([http://www.victorianweb.org/religion/Gladstone\\_\\_Vatican.html](http://www.victorianweb.org/religion/Gladstone__Vatican.html)) at Victorian Web
- Explains how "apparent contradictions" between the Syllabus and Vatican should be reconciled. ([http://www.seattlecatholic.com/article\\_20030103\\_Differing\\_from\\_Other\\_Councils.html](http://www.seattlecatholic.com/article_20030103_Differing_from_Other_Councils.html)) seattlecatholic.com
- The Syllabus, the Controversy, and the Context (<http://www.catholic.com/magazine/articles/the-syllabus-the-controversy-and-the-context>) In This Rock Magazine, January 2009

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