

Modern History Sourcebook:

Robert Bellarmine: Letter on Galileo's Theories, 1615

Galileo's letter of 1614 to the Grand Duchess Christina Duchess of Tuscany was not widely known, and was ignored by Church authorities. When a year later the Carmelite provincial Paolo Foscarini supported Galileo publicly by attempting to prove that the new theory was not opposed to Scripture, Cardinal Robert Bellarmine, as "Master of Controversial Questions," responded.

On April 12, 1615 the saint wrote to Foscarini:

"I have gladly read the letter in Italian and the treatise which Your Reverence sent me, and I thank you for both. And I confess that both are filled with ingenuity and learning, and since you ask for my opinion, I will give it to you very briefly, as you have little time for reading and I for writing:

"First. I say that it seems to me that Your Reverence and Galileo did prudently to content yourself with speaking hypothetically, and not absolutely, as I have always believed that Copernicus spoke. For to say that, assuming the earth moves and the sun stands still, all the appearances are saved better than with eccentrics and epicycles, is to speak well; there is no danger in this, and it is sufficient for mathematicians. But to want to affirm that the sun really is fixed in the center of the heavens and only revolves around itself (i. e., turns upon its axis) without traveling from east to west, and that the earth is situated in the third sphere and revolves with great speed around the sun, is a very dangerous thing, not only by irritating all the philosophers and scholastic theologians, but also by injuring our holy faith and rendering the Holy Scriptures false. For Your Reverence has demonstrated many ways of explaining Holy Scripture, but you have not applied them in particular, and without a doubt you would have found it most difficult if you had attempted to explain all the passages which you yourself have cited.

"Second. I say that, as you know, the Council [of Trent] prohibits expounding the Scriptures contrary to the common agreement of the holy Fathers. And if Your Reverence would read not only the Fathers but also the commentaries of modern writers on Genesis, Psalms, Ecclesiastes and Josue, you would find that all agree in explaining literally (ad litteram) that the sun is in the heavens and moves swiftly around the earth, and that the earth is far from the heavens and stands immobile in the center of the universe. Now consider whether in all prudence the Church could encourage giving to Scripture a sense contrary to the holy Fathers and all the Latin and Greek commentators. Nor may it be answered that this is not a matter of faith, for if it is not a matter of faith from the point of view of the subject matter, it is on the part of the ones who have spoken. It would be just as heretical to deny that Abraham had two sons and Jacob twelve, as it would be to deny the virgin birth of Christ, for both are declared by the Holy Ghost through the mouths of the prophets and apostles.

"Third. I say that if there were a true demonstration that the sun was in the center of the universe and the earth in the third sphere, and that the sun did not travel around the earth but the earth circled the sun, then it would be necessary to proceed with great caution in explaining the passages of Scripture which seemed contrary, and we would rather have to say that we did not understand them than to say that something was false which has been demonstrated. But I do not believe that there is any such demonstration; none has been shown to me. It is not the same thing to show that the appearances are saved by assuming that the sun really is in the center and the earth in the heavens. I believe that the first demonstration might exist, but I have grave doubts about the second, and in a case of doubt, one may not depart from the Scriptures as explained by the holy Fathers. I add that the words ' the sun also riseth and the sun goeth down, and hasteneth to the place where he ariseth, etc.' were those of Solomon, who not only spoke by divine inspiration but was a man wise above all others and most learned in human sciences and in the knowledge of all created things, and his wisdom was from God. Thus it is not too likely that he would affirm something which was contrary to a truth either already demonstrated, or likely to be demonstrated. And if you tell me that Solomon spoke only according to the appearances, and that it seems to us that the sun goes around when actually it is the earth which moves, as it seems to one on a ship that the beach moves away from the ship, I shall answer that one who departs from the beach, though it looks to him as though the beach moves away, he knows that he is in error and corrects it, seeing clearly that the ship moves and not the beach. But with regard to the

sun and the earth, no wise man is needed to correct the error, since he clearly experiences that the earth stands still and that his eye is not deceived when it judges that the moon and stars move. And that is enough for the present. I salute Your Reverence and ask God to grant you every happiness."

Notes:

Solange Hertz makes the problem clear in her commentary on this letter (in an article which contends that the earth is indeed the center of the Universe):

"There are many such passages in the Bible, outstanding among them being, of course, the one relating how Joshua commanded, "Move not, O sun, toward Gabaon, nor thou, O moon, toward the valley of Ajalon," whereupon, "the sun and the moon stood still, till the people revenged themselves of their enemies" (Jos.10:12-13). And again, as St. Robert Bellarmine pointed out, the Preacher says, "The sun riseth and goeth down and returneth to his place: and there rising again, maketh his round by the south and turneth again to the north" (Eccles. 1:5-6)

"Scripture also specifies that the Earth is immovable in the face of these solar and lunar peregrinations, Psalm 92 stating flatly that God "hath established the world which shall not be moved." Psalm 103 says He has "founded the earth upon its own bases ; it shall not be moved forever and ever," Psalm 95 telling us God has "corrected the world, which shall not be moved." Again, in I Paralipomenon 16:30, "He hath founded the earth immovable," and according to Job 26:7, God by His power "stretched out the north over the empty space and hangeth the earth upon nothing." No less an authority than the Catechism of the Council of Trent, in its commentary on the Creed, states furthermore, "The earth also God commanded to stand in the midst of the world, rooted in its own foundation."

Action by the Congregation of the Index

In 1616 the Congregation of the Index -- founded by St. Pius V in 1571 and now headed by Cardinal Bellarmine acting in the name of Paul V -- was forced to take action, based on the findings of consultors to the Holy Office. Without naming Galileo, it banned all writings which treated of Copernicanism as anything but an unproven hypothesis,

"because it has come to the attention of this Congregation that the Pythagorean doctrine which is false and contrary to Holy Scripture, which teaches the motion of the earth and the immobility of the sun, and which is taught by Nicholas Copernicus in *De Revolutionibus Orbium Caelestium* and by Diego de Zuniga's *On Job*, is now being spread and accepted by many - as may be seen from a letter of a Carmelite Father entitled 'Letter of the Rev. Father Paolo Antonio Foscarini, Carmelite, on the Opinion of the Pythagoreans and of Copernicus concerning the Motion of the Earth and the Stability of the Sun, and the New Pythagorean System of the World,' printed in Naples by Lazzaro Scoriggio in 1615: in which the said Father tries to show that the doctrine of the immobility of the sun in the center of the world, and that of the earth's motion, is consonant with truth and is not opposed to Holy Scripture.

"Therefore, so that this opinion may not spread any further to the prejudice of Catholic truth, it (the Sacred Congregation) decrees that the said Nicholas Copernicus' *De Revolutionibus Orbium*, and Diego de Zuniga's *On Job*, be suspended until corrected; but that the book of the Carmelite Father, Paolo Foscarini, be prohibited and condemned, and that all other books likewise, in which the same is taught, be prohibited."

Continuing Condemnation: 1664

Taking her information from *The Pontifical Decrees against the Doctrine of the Earth's Movement and the Ultramontane Defense of Them*, compiled in 1870 by the English Catholic priest William W. Roberts, the Catholic creationist writer Paula Haigh has pointed out that a generation after Galileo's death:

"In 1664 the Church went to further lengths to extirpate his error: The Index for that year was prefixed by a Bull. Entitled *Speculatores Domus Israel*, it was signed by Pope Alexander VII, who declared, 'We, having taken the advice of our Cardinals, confirm and approve with Apostolic authority by the tenor of these presents, and command and enjoin all persons everywhere to yield to this Index a constant and complete obedience.'

"The importance of this document cannot be minimized, for it included and re-affirmed not only previous formal condemnations, but 'all the relevant decrees up to the present time, that have been issued since the Index of our

predecessor Clement" Miss Haigh therefore rightly concludes, "The evidence for papal infallibility in the Galileo case rests then upon the Bull of Alexander VII in 1664."

She discerns a twofold basis for its authority: "1) The decrees of the Index and the Inquisition which were based on the truth of the Church's tradition, especially as in this case it rested upon the unanimity of the Fathers and the constant position of the Church; and 2) the infallibility of the Pope speaking in his own official capacity as Head of the Church and therefore ex cathedra, even though not defining any new dogma but simply affirming tradition.

"The modern theologians have never addressed the problem posed by this Bull of Alexander VII. If they had, they would need to admit its direct papal authority and search for some subsequent document by a subsequent pope that formally and specifically abrogated, i.e., nullified the 1664 Bull. But no such document has ever been found or produced.

Source:

Texts extracted from

Solange Strong Hertz: "Galileo Recanted" in Beyond Politics: A Meta-Political View of History.
www.geocities.com/Athens/Ithaca/3251/

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