

Response to Jason Winschel on Geocentrism.

In 2003, the traditionalist group, The Society of St. Pius X, published an article by Jason Winschel in the Society's monthly magazine, *The Angelus*. When Mr. Winshel's article was published, we asked the editor if he would allow us to publish a short rebuttal. He refused, even after we had asked a second time. This was disappointing, especially since Mr. Winshel made reference to my work regarding the scientific support for geocentrism, which he respected and did not refute. Hence, it was our decision to respond to Mr. Winshel's ecclesiastical assertions in our book without further ado.

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Obviously, questions concerning the infallibility of the 1616, 1633 and 1664 decrees against heliocentrism invariably surface because society has assumed that heliocentrism is a proven scientific fact, which then leads to the conclusion that the ecclesiastical decrees condemning it were in error. Additionally, since the Church has admitted that it is theoretically possible for her to make errors in her "non-infallible" teachings, Catholics of the past one hundred years have concluded that the proper apologetic concerning the Galileo affair is to communicate to the world that the popes and cardinals of the 17th century, although faithful to their calling as pastors, were, to put it politely, a little overbearing and misdirected in their dedication to Scripture and Catholic tradition. Added to this apologetic is the rationale that such errors are permissible within the confines of Catholic protocol because only when the pope speaks *ex cathedra* and fulfills the four criteria stipulated at Vatican Council I is his teaching infallible. Such is the tack taken, for example, by one of the more popular Catholic traditionalist magazines:

Firstly, in terms of apologetics, if the Church indeed pronounced solemnly that the earth does not revolve around the sun, then she almost certainly would have erred. Naturally, this situation would have eliminated her claim of infallibility, which would in turn destroy her claim of Divine institution.¹

Later Winschel writes: "And yet, the earth moves!" and "Galileo was right about heliocentrism," and "Galileo seems to have won out

¹ Jason Winschel, "Galileo, Victim or Villain," *The Angelus*, October 2003, p. 10. A few months after the article was published, we approached the editor of *The Angelus* and asked if he would allow us to write a rebuttal for the sake of fairness. He declined, even after an appeal.

both on theological as well as scientific grounds.”² Here we have a child of the Enlightenment; one who has accepted the *status quo* of modern science without reservation and is willing to put it all on the line, as it were, that everything can be answered on that basis. The absolute fact upon which he bases his conclusions is that science has proven the Earth revolves around the sun; yet, ironically, he provides no such proof in his article. Although it might appear that he gives himself at least some escape clause in the words: “then she *almost certainly would have erred*,” he is not so equivocal toward the end of his article:

Had the Inquisition made a mistake in declaring heliocentrism heretical? Yes. Did the Church err? Absolutely not. In fact, where the Holy Ghost played a role was in seeing to it precisely that the Church did not at this time make the error of stamping the decision of the Holy Office with her infallible approval.³

Here we see, perhaps, an additional apologetic. The goal is not merely to protect the doctrine of papal infallibility but to minimize the role of the popes and make it appear as if they had little to do with the whole affair. The same type of evasion was employed in the 1992 papal speech prepared mainly by Cardinal Poupard. It spoke of the “error of the theologians” but laid no blame on the popes and cardinals who, everyone knows, played a much larger role than what the speech admitted. We can understand the dilemma of these apologists. Since they are convinced that a gross “error” occurred in the years 1616 to 1664, there is little choice but to deflect as much blame from off the hierarchy as possible, for image is just as important as substance in such cases. Even though these authors know that the historical record shows quite clearly that over the course of fifty years Paul V, Urban VIII and Alexander VII facilitated, interrogated, presided, endorsed, commanded, demanded abjurations, sent signed notices to papal nuncios, and signed papal bulls endorsing the condemnation of heliocentrism, respectively, the whole burden of the supposed mishap is placed on the shoulders of the “Inquisition,” perhaps because that infamous institution has always been the favorite boogeyman employed to epitomize the primitive and uneducated medievals of yesteryear who were just a bit too zealous for their Christian faith and who are thus caricatured as having not the slightest wit about things scientific. The title of the apologist’s article could just as well be worded: *The Popes: Victims or Villains?* and probably get his point across much better. As such, it would be his contention that the popes involved in the Galileo affair are not to be considered “villains” who besmirched the Church’s

² *Ibid.*, pp. 36, 38.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

reputation by promoting error; rather, they are “victims” of an Inquisition gone awry, a runaway train that the pontiffs were helpless to stop. This is the type of murky quicksand that Catholic apologists are forced to adopt once they elevate the premise of heliocentrism to an established scientific fact. They find themselves inadvertently implying that the Church at large could be: (a) led wholesale down the primrose path of error; (b) be virtually ignored by the Holy Spirit because He apparently doesn’t deal in things stated “non-infallibly”; (c) led to maintain a specious allegiance to the consensus of the Church Fathers; (d) led to erroneously uphold the traditional belief in inerrancy and literal interpretation of Scripture, and (e) forever embarrassed in front of a gapping world of critics, all for the sole purpose of “saving the doctrine of papal infallibility” a doctrine which, ironically, was neither employed nor defined until the late nineteenth century.

On the other hand, this type of apologetic forces the bearer to speculate in the negative about the motivations of the popes. Toward the end of his article, Winschel, driven by his belief that “Galileo was right about heliocentrism,” finally faces the pope and, as we would expect him to do, puts the blame on the pontiff instead of Galileo:

In Galileo’s defense, one could argue that certain Churchman acted disreputably during this affair. Motivated by wounded pride, Pope Urban VIII certainly exaggerated when he referred to the whole thing as the worst scandal in the History of the Church. This in the midst of the Thirty Years’ War and hot on the heels of the Protestant Revolution, the Western Schism and the abuses of the Renaissance Era?!⁴

The first thing Winschel’s approach verifies for us is the very reason that *Galileo Was Wrong: The Church Was Right* was written as it is – with strong emphasis on the scientific side of the debate. Being a product of his intellectual culture (*e.g.*, the Enlightenment, modern science, historical criticism, *etc.*), a whole generation of Catholics have been reared and educated in the school of heliocentric hegemony. One such example is the school of Teilhardianism, the teachings of the wayward Catholic theologian from France, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, whose corrupting influence began in the early 1900s and found its way into many of the minds of the prelates who sat at Vatican II. Earlier we cited his strange “omega-searching” evolutionary ideas, but Teilhard was also pushing for the connection between the demise of geocentrism and the rise of evolutionary thought, as well as his desire to rid the world of the traditional notion of Original Sin. In the book published in 1969 (fourteen years after his death), *Christianity and Evolution*, he writes:

⁴ *Ibid.*, p 38.



It is not only, in fact, a few palaeontological discoveries which are forcing the Church to lose no time in modifying her ideas about the historical evidence of human origins. The whole new physiognomy of the universe, as disclosed to us for some centuries now, is introducing an intrinsic imbalance into the very core of the dogma; and we cannot escape from this except through an extensive metamorphosis of the notion of original sin.

As a result of the collapse of geocentrism, which she has come to accept, the Church is now caught between her historico-dogmatic representation of the world's origin, on the one hand, and the requirements of one of her most fundamental dogmas on the other – so that she cannot retain the former without to some degree sacrificing the latter.

In earlier times, until Galileo, there was perfect compatibility between historical representations of the Fall and dogma of universal redemption – and all the more easily, too, in that each was modeled on the other. So long as people believed as St. Paul himself did, in one week of creation and a past of 4000 years – so long as people thought the stars were satellites of the earth, and that animals were there to serve man – there was no difficulty in believing that a single man could have ruined everything, and that another man had saved everything. Today we know, with absolute physical certainty, that the stellar universe is not centered on the earth, and that terrestrial life is not centered on mankind.... With the end of geocentrism, what was emerging was the evolutionist point of view. All that Galileo's judges could distinctly see as menaced was the miracle of Joshua. The fact was that in consequence the seeds of decomposition had been introduced into the whole of the Genesis theory of the fall:

and we are only today beginning to appreciate the depth of the changes which at that time were already potentially completed [in Galileo's day].⁵

The "collapse of geocentrism" was leading many Catholics, who were already predisposed to liberal theology and liberal hermeneutics, down the primrose path of accepting evolution as a fact. Another example is George Mivart, a convert to Catholicism in the late 1800s. As Finocchiaro describes it:

Mivart...argued for the compatibility of Christianity and evolution....that Galileo's trial showed that the Church was fallible in scientific matters, and so modern Catholics had complete freedom in scientific inquiry; but he argued that the Church's error on Copernicanism was a providential one..."⁶

Suffice it to say, there is no proof for Mivart's accusation that "the Church was fallible in scientific matters" or Teilhard's wish that we possess "absolute physical certainty that the stellar universe is not centered on the earth." Yet Winschel and many other 20th century Catholics grew up with Mivart's and Teilhard's self-satisfied assurance about science. Winschel is the typical example of the modern Catholic who comes to the theological debate having already been primed and molded by the biased scientific education he received from childhood. Having been reared with the idea in either public, private or parochial schools that the Earth revolves around the sun at such an impressionable age, it is unfathomable for most of them, now adults, to contemplate that the *status quo* of modern science could possibly have gotten it wrong. So ingrained has the notion of heliocentrism been wired into the consciousness of this generation that otherwise good Catholics think nothing of impugning ulterior motives onto the very popes that God gave to protect them from the false ideas and irreligious prejudices of the world. In short, once the true pontiffs are eliminated from the discussion because they didn't speak "infallibly," a new and different ecclesiastical leader arrives on the landscape, yet his fallibility is not even questioned. His name is Galileo, pope of the church of Scientism, who, being so powerful, even speaks from the grave, as his ideas on scriptural interpretation, Winschel pleads, are even enshrined in "several papal encyclicals":

...Galileo was right about heliocentrism. Moreover, some of his theological wanderings eventually found themselves

⁵ Teilhard de Chardin, "Fall, Redemption and Geocentrism," *Christianity and Evolution*, 1969, 1971, William Collins Co., Harcourt, pp. 37-38.

⁶ *Retrying Galileo*, pp. 260-261.

mirrored in several papal encyclicals of the last two centuries. *Providentissimus Deus* by Leo XIII and *Humani Generis* by Pius XII, for instance, both have pieces that could have been extracted from Galileo's *Letter to the Grand Duchess*.⁷

As much as he appeals to the encyclicals for support for heliocentrism, unfortunately Winschel has already demoted their authoritative value since his article inadvertently consigns all non-infallible papal statements to the ambiguous category of "it could be true, but then again, it could be false," due to his hasty and scientifically biased conclusion about Pope Urban VIII and his "wounded pride." As we saw in Pope Urban's dialogue with the ambassador to Archduke Cosimo Medici, Francesco Niccolini, the only "pride" Urban had was for the word of God, the very word he consistently accused Galileo of violating. Contrary to Winschel's claim, there is not a shred of evidence that Urban's personal pride was at stake. Moreover, as we have already noted, the encyclicals of Leo XIII and Pius XII say nothing supporting heliocentrism. They are merely exhortations on the proper interpretation of Scripture that the tradition of the Church had been preaching and practicing since the time of the Church Fathers, and which can be applied to a number of literary situations in Scripture (personifications, irony, metaphors, hyperbole, anthropomorphisms, *etc.*) without once involving the 17th century cosmological controversies. It is only modern Catholics who consistently eisegete these encyclicals into supporting their previously made-up minds about the merits of heliocentrism and the demerits of the 17th century Church.

As much as Winschel bases his apologetic on the "disreputable" acts, "wounded pride," and "exaggerations" of Urban VIII,⁸ perhaps he did not investigate to any satisfactory depth the personal life of Galileo before he wrote his article. As we noted in Chapter 11, Galileo was the epitome of a selfish, immoral and prideful man who trampled over anyone and anything to get what he wanted. This was par for the course for the world's pioneering heliocentrists (*e.g.*, Copernicus, Galileo, Kepler, Newton, Einstein). As we also noted in Chapter 11, their personal lives are a sordid tale of malfeasance and deception. But Urban VIII, Robert Bellarmine, and the whole employ under Paul V and Alexander VII led exemplary lives that were far and away superior to the scurrilous life of Galileo and his contemporaries. As it stands, Urban VIII was precisely on target in calling Galileo's onslaught "the worst scandal in the history of the Church." The troubles stemming from Winschel's "Western Schism," the "Protestant Revolution," the "Thirty Years War" and the

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ An accusation against Urban VIII that, as we cited earlier in Finocchiaro's analysis, is most likely a myth since there is no credible documentation.

“Renaissance Era” were based on one main issue: the Church’s sole and lofty role as the final authority on the interpretation of Scripture, the authority contested by each of the aforementioned epochs of history. The “filioque” issue that divided East from West was based on the interpretation of Scripture.⁹ The Protestant Revolution was based on the interpretation of Scripture.¹⁰ The Thirty Years War was between Catholics and Protestants and stemmed directly from religious disputes about Scripture, even though later it digressed into the desire to wrest control from the Hapsburg dynasty. The Galileo affair is the key to understanding each of these historical controversies, since the main contention between the Church and Galileo was not whether there was proof of heliocentrism, for everyone knew that none existed, but over who had the final say on the interpretation of Holy Scripture.

As we can see, Winschel’s apologetic has a severe set of problems. Instead of viewing papal infallibility as merely the highest expression of a given truth, this Catholic apologist has created an unbridgeable chasm between doctrines that are infallible over against those that are authoritative, but which, as far as he sees it, contain the ticking time bomb of damnable error. As such, this defeatist apologetic invariably leads the Catholic faithful to doubt the truth and veracity of magisterial statements that are not disseminated infallibly. If the people are taught that previous popes were in error simply because they did not couch their teachings in infallible terminology, what would stop the Catholic faithful from becoming just as wary about the possibility of papal error coming from all other venues of Catholic teaching?

It is certainly true that these questions may be somewhat diffused by appeal to: (1) the tradition of the Church, (2) the analogy of faith, (3) the consensus of the Fathers, (4) previous magisterial statements that set an authoritative precedent, (5) the teachings of Scripture, and which often give the needed authoritative backing to non-infallible teachings. But the main problem for those seeking to eliminate the Church’s condemnations of heliocentrism from the category of the infallible is that each of the five above authoritative sources unequivocally supports geocentric doctrine. It is an undeniable fact of Catholic history that Scripture, Tradition and the Magisterium have all given their undivided endorsement of geocentric cosmology. Hence, denials of the infallibility of geocentric teachings that then reduce those same teachings to the Church’s non-infallible level of authority provide no escape for those advocating

⁹ “Filioque” concerned whether the Holy Spirit proceeded from the Father only or from the Father and the Son. The East sided with the former, the West, under the Roman Pontiff, sided with the latter. The issue of contention was the interpretation of Jn 15:26: “But when the Paraclete cometh, whom I will send you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceedeth from the Father, he shall give testimony of me,” as opposed to Rm 8:4: “the Spirit of Christ.”

¹⁰ Romans 3:28, James 2:24; 5:14; Matthew 16:18-19; 19:9; John 3:5; John 20:23; 2 Timothy 3:16 and many more.

heliocentric cosmology. In fact, there is no Scripture, no Tradition and no Magisterial statement in all of the past two thousand years that either denies geocentric cosmology or promotes heliocentric cosmology.

As we have seen, at no time has the Church ever formally and officially reversed the 17th century decrees against heliocentrism. Although it is perhaps true from a procedural standpoint that the removal of Copernicus and Galileo from the 1835 *Index* of Gregory XIV may give a polite pass to the two scientists even though the removal was made under false pretenses, the fact remains that the 1633 *doctrinal decision* that heliocentrism was “formally heretical” and “erroneous in faith” has never been rescinded. It was under the aegis of a canonical trial, a trial that, according to the Congregation of the Index’s answer to Joseph LaLande in 1765, must be officially rescinded before any lifting of the condemnation against either heliocentrism or Galileo could possibly occur. Moreover, since the doctrinal decision was determined and came *prior to* what actually appears in the *Index* itself, which is proven by the fact that Urban VIII had these words read to Galileo:

Invoking, then, the most holy Name of our Lord Jesus Christ, and that of His most glorious Mother Mary ever Virgin, by this our definitive sentence we say, pronounce, judge, and declare, that you, the said Galileo.... having believed and held a doctrine which is false and contrary to the sacred and divine Scriptures – to wit, that the sun is in the center of the world, and that it does not move from east to west, and that the earth moves, and is not the center of the universe; and that an opinion can be held and defended as probable **after** it has been declared and defined to be contrary to Holy Scripture.¹¹

...this means that the Catholic Church is left with official papal teachings and/or approvals classifying heliocentrism as “formally heretical” and “erroneous in faith” that cannot be dismissed by a mere maneuvering of the 1835 Index. Indexes can revise Indexes but they cannot reverse or revise canonical trials. Additionally, if it is claimed that the 1633 decision was erroneous, it can also be asserted that the 1835 Index was erroneous. There simply is no escape from this logic.

¹¹ The sentence of 1633 against Galileo, approved by Pope Urban VIII, and sent out to all the papal nuncios and their underlings in Europe.