

## Response to the SSPX Press Release on Geocentrism

By Robert Sungenis

I would like to say that the current position of the SSPX as it now accepts the possibility and allowance for geocentrism to be held by its members is very encouraging. It seems that the SSPX has taken a more neutral stance as compared to some of the past positions taken by its various outlets (e.g., Angelqueen blogsite, the Angelus). I commend them for doing so. I hope that the outlets will now be more accommodating to geocentric cosmology.

I would like to point out, however, that in getting to this more neutral position the SSPX has made some statements that need to be qualified, otherwise they could breed some confusion and misunderstanding.

With that introduction, I will now make intermittent comments on the SSPX press release:

[http://ssp.org/district\\_news/ssp\\_and\\_the\\_solar\\_system\\_8-30-2011.htm](http://ssp.org/district_news/ssp_and_the_solar_system_8-30-2011.htm)

**SSPX:** As declared by Pope Leo XIII in *Providentissimus Deus*, science cannot contradict the Faith:

There can never... be any real discrepancy between the theologian and the physicist, as long as each confines himself within his own lines, and both are careful, as St. Augustine warns us, "*not to make rash assertions, or to assert what is not known as known.*"

**R. Sungenis:** This is certainly true – science cannot contradict the faith. And it is also true that St. Augustine warns us not to make rash assertions about science. But the SSPX must also realize that geocentrism is not a rash assertion, either biblically or scientifically. St. Augustine himself was an ardent geocentrist, and he took that position against the Greek heliocentrists. Obviously, then, Augustine would not suggest that geocentrism was a rash assertion, and neither would any of the other Fathers of the Church who were in absolute consensus that Scripture teaches geocentrism. So strong were the Fathers on geocentrism that St. Robert Bellarmine, backed by Pope Paul V and Urban VIII, told Galileo that he could not teach heliocentrism because the Council of Trent taught that we are bound to whatever the Fathers taught in consensus.

Second, in debates about faith and science, those Catholics who tend toward accepting or accommodating evolution, relativity, the Big Bang, etc., are quite fond of quoting from Augustine's warning for a Christian not to make "rash assertions" about science. Unfortunately, they invariably miss two things when they do so. First, if there ever was a perfect example of a "rash assertion," evolution is at the top of the list, since it is one of the most untested and presumptuous theories in all of science. Those Catholics who tout evolution as a fact of science

have not the slightest proof to their claims. Hence, I see nothing but “rashness” in their approach. Along the same lines, we are now finding out that heliocentrism and relativity are not as scientifically grounded as they were once thought to be, a fact which was even admitted in the speech Pope John Paul gave to the Pontifical Academy of Science in 1992 when he addressed the subject of Galileo. Consequently, we can safely say that, scientifically speaking, it is “rash” for anyone to reject out of hand that the Earth cannot be stationary.

Second, what people often ignore is the corollary to St. Augustine’s warning about “rash” statements on science. As it stands, Augustine was just as adamant against Catholics who look upon the Bible as having nothing authoritative to say about science. He chastises those who place the unproven and popular theories of science above what the Bible has to say about those very topics. In fact, he says it is “more dangerous” not to give the Bible its due when it speaks on science. Here are his words:

“But more dangerous is the error of certain weak brethren who faint away when they hear these irreligious critics learnedly and eloquently discoursing on the theories of astronomy or on any of the questions relating to the elements of this universe. With a sigh, they esteem these teachers as superior to themselves, looking upon them as great men; and they return with disdain to the books which were written for the good of their souls; and, although they ought to drink from these books with relish, they can scarcely bear to take them up.” (*The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, Book 1, Chapter 20, Para. 41, Ancient Christian Writers, *ibid.*, p. 44).

Using Augustine as our model we would have to conclude that it is not “rash” to assert geocentrism as supported by both faith and science. If we consider the centuries old Catholic Church’s teaching on geocentrism; along with Scripture’s plethora of passages that say the Earth does not move; in addition to the huge amount of scientific evidence showing that geocentrism is a perfectly viable explanation of all that has been discovered in the cosmos in the last hundred years, it would be quite “rash” for anyone to deny these truths and claim that geocentrism is merely a relic of the past.

**SSPX:** Even today, many commonly-held tenets of natural science are merely theories, not certainties. This is not the case with the Catholic Faith, which is a certainty.

The Church’s magisterium authoritatively teaches on the correct interpretation of Sacred Scripture. As Pope Pius XII taught in [\*Divino Afflatu Spiritu\*](#):

*“The Holy Ghost, Who spoke by them [the sacred writers], did not intend to teach men these things—that is the essential nature of the things of the universe...”; which principle “will apply to cognate sciences...”*

**R. Sungenis:** Yes, Pius XII taught that the Holy Spirit did not intend to teach men “the essential

nature of the things in the universe,” but the “essential nature” of things refers to their inner workings (e.g., atoms, forces, etc.) and apparently not to the general movements of the cosmos since it is clear both in Scripture and Church tradition that the Holy Spirit did, indeed, teach that the Earth does not move and the sun does. I don’t think the SSPX wants to be in the position of saying that Pius XII contradicted what his previous papal predecessors allowed, especially since Pius XII makes no mention of either those predecessors or of cosmology.

**SSPX:** *Providentissimus Deus* also states that Scripture does not give scientific explanations and many of its texts use “*figurative language*” or expressions “*commonly used at the time*”, still used today “even by the most eminent men of science” (like the word “sunrise”). Such expressions are not scientific teachings about the cosmic world.

**R. Sungenis:** *Providentissimus Deus* is often misunderstood and as a result it is mistakenly used to support the idea that the Fathers’ teaching on geocentrism can be ignored. Let’s look more closely at what Pope Leo XIII actually said:

19. The unshrinking defense of the Holy Scripture, however, does not require that we should equally uphold all the opinions which each of the Fathers or the more recent interpreters have put forth in explaining it; for it may be that, in commenting on passages where physical matters occur, they have sometimes expressed the ideas of their own times, and thus made statements which in these days have been abandoned as incorrect. Hence, in their interpretations, we must carefully note what they lay down as belonging to faith, or as intimately connected with faith – what they are unanimous in. For “in those things which do not come under the obligation of faith, the Saints were at liberty to hold divergent opinions, just as we ourselves are,” according to the saying of St. Thomas. And in another place he says most admirably: “When philosophers are agreed upon a point, and it is not contrary to our faith, it is safer, in my opinion, neither to lay down such a point as a dogma of faith, even though it is perhaps so presented by the philosophers, nor to reject it as against faith, lest we thus give to the wise of this world an occasion of despising our faith.” The Catholic interpreter, although he should show that those facts of natural science which investigators affirm to be now quite certain are not contrary to the Scripture rightly explained, must nevertheless always bear in mind, that much which has been held and proved as certain has afterwards been called in question and rejected. And if writers on physics travel outside the boundaries of their own branch, and carry their erroneous teaching into the domain of philosophy, let them be handed over to philosophers for refutation.

Although Leo XIII says that the Fathers sometimes expressed things in the ideas of their own times, he does not give any specific examples, and thus there is no direct support from him for interpreting Earth-sun passages in a non-literal fashion. Leo could have been talking about a number of other statements in the Bible (e.g., Nm 11:7; 1Sm 28:14; Ez 1:5; 8:2; Dn 8:15; 10:6; Jl

2:4; Am 5:8; Mt 16:3; 28:3; Mk 8:24; Lk 12:56; Ap 4:1; 15:2). In fact, it goes without saying that the Fathers would speak from their own culture and use their idiomatic vocabulary since none of them would have known the culture or the idioms of the future. In addition, Leo's remarks about "things belonging to the faith...what they are unanimous in," would technically discount the heliocentric/geocentric debate from the discussion. First, Cardinal Bellarmine, backed by both Paul V and Urban VIII, argued that the Earth's centrality and immobility were a "matter of faith," if not so much in the explicit sense, then simply because of the fact that God is the author of Scripture, as even Leo states later in this encyclical (e.g., ¶21: "and that God, speaking by the sacred writers, could not set down anything but what was true"). Second, it is a fact that the Fathers were unanimous in their belief in geocentrism. There was not one dissenting voice. It is perhaps the strongest unanimity the Fathers ever held on a particular topic. Hence, on both counts, faith and patristic unanimity, history shows that geocentrism is not to be included in Leo XIII's category of things to be "figuratively" interpreted or things that the Fathers expressed only "in the ideas of their times."

Scientists and modern biblical exegetes claim that when Scripture employs language such as "the sun rises" or "the sun sets," it is merely attempting to express the motions of the heavenly bodies in figurative or phenomenal language since a rising or setting of the sun is the view that a person standing on Earth would observe, but it is not the true reality. The astronomer will argue that even though he sees the sun rise over the horizon, he, being a knowledgeable scientist, knows that in reality it is the Earth rotating on its axis that makes it appear as if the sun is rising. Likewise, the biblical exegete will often point to figurative language employed hundreds of times in Scripture (e.g., Psalm 98:8: "Let the floods clap their hands: let the hills be joyful together") and insist that the sun's "rising" is of the same linguistic genre and thus it need not be interpreted literally.

But the truth is, Scripture's phenomenal language (e.g., the "sun rises" or the "sun sets") also applies to the geocentric system. In the geocentric system the sun does not actually "rise" or "set"; rather, it revolves around the Earth. When the geocentrist sees a sunset he does not say: "Oh, what a beautiful revolution of the sun," just as a heliocentrist does not say: "Oh, what a beautiful rotation of the Earth." The geocentrist and the heliocentrist know that the sun "rises" or "sets" only with respect to the Earth's horizon, and therefore, reference to a "rising sun" in Scripture is just as phenomenal in the geocentric system as it is in the heliocentric. On that basis alone neither Leo XIII's nor Pius XII's above directives can be commandeered to support heliocentrism, especially in light of the fact that three previous pontiffs, based on stricter criteria, denied heliocentrism and endorsed geocentrism, as the historical records show quite clearly.

We must also add that Pius XII's above quotation from the words of the "Angelic Doctor," Thomas Aquinas, namely, "In Scripture divine things are presented to us in the manner which is in common use amongst men," cannot be interpreted as Pius' attempt to promote heliocentrism since it is a fact of history that Aquinas was an avowed geocentrist who never entertained the possibility of heliocentrism. Obviously, then, Thomas could not have intended his insights on biblical interpretation to be used either to deny geocentrism or promote heliocentrism. These

insights were merely his general teaching on the various modes of speech employed by the authors of Scripture, which can be applied to many and varied phenomena in nature and everyday life, but certainly not celestial orbits.

Although it is safe to say that phrases such as “the sun rises” or “the sun sets” are to be considered phenomenal from both the heliocentric and geocentric perspectives, this does not mean that Scripture always limits itself to phenomenal language when it addresses the movement of the heavenly bodies. The language of appearance only applies to expressions when appearance is the intended feature. One can easily surmise from language such as “the sun rises” or “the sun sets” that although Scripture may express the appearance of the movement from the perspective of the observer on Earth, nevertheless, Scripture confidently affirms the scientific fact that, of the two bodies, one of them moves and the other does not. In that particular scientific category, Scripture is adamant that it is the sun that moves, not the Earth. Hence, it is the sun that is the circling body that causes the appearance of the sun rising or setting over the horizon, not the Earth rotating. As we will see, there are many other passages of Scripture that are much more specific concerning the movement of the sun and the immobility of the Earth.

I would also call attention to Leo XIII’s comment about the mistakes in science and the overturning of scientific ideas, especially that of physics. He states:

The Catholic interpreter... must nevertheless always bear in mind, that much which has been held and proved as certain has afterwards been called in question and rejected. And if writers on physics travel outside the boundaries of their own branch, and carry their erroneous teaching into the domain of philosophy, let them be handed over to philosophers for refutation.

This statement has, more or less, been our clarion call. If there is anything of which Catholic theologians and scientists should avail themselves, it is the scientific evidence showing that heliocentrism is at best an unproven theory. These same theologians and scientists should avail themselves to an honest study into the history of science, which starkly reveals that almost every scientific theory proposed as true has been replaced by another theory that falsifies it; and the next theory awaits to be replaced by yet another. In light of the new scientific evidence available, we can easily see that heliocentrism is one of those canons of physics that “has been held and proved as certain has afterwards been called in question and rejected.”

**SSPX:** So Catholics should not use the Bible to assert explanations about natural science, but may in good conscience hold to any particular cosmic theory. Being faithful to the Church’s magisterium, the Society of St. Pius X holds fast to these principles: no more and no less.

**R. Sungenis:** Although I appreciate the fact that the SSPX is now neutral as opposed to their previous stance which rejected geocentrism, the above statement contains some problematic assertions. First, we’ve already seen above that the Fathers and the Church tradition stated quite clearly that the Bible does, indeed, teach geocentrism, but that the Bible does not get into the

“essential nature of things” or make specific “explanations about natural science” (e.g., atoms, forces, etc.). The SSPX is failing to make this crucial distinction. The Bible does, indeed, touch upon macro science but not micro science. If that were not the case, then the Fathers were wrong in seeing geocentrism taught in Scripture, and so were the medievals, the saints, the doctors, the 1566 Tridentine Catechism and the Catholic magisterium of 1616, 1633, 1741, 1757. I don’t think the SSPX wants to be in the position of indicting these high levels of authority in the Catholic Church of seeing something in Scripture that wasn’t there. Moreover, the Catholic magisterium that the SSPX says it follows has not made any official teaching that overturns what the previous Catholic magisterium has decreed on geocentrism. So, if the SSPX wants to be “faithful to the Church’s magisterium,” it must acknowledge both that the Church’s magisterium has officially taught geocentrism and that no official statement of the modern magisterium has denied or rejected any of it, no more and no less.