

Pope Benedict XVI Says Vatican II Was Initiated Because of the “Error in the Case of Galileo”

By Robert Sungenis, Ph.D.

Perhaps instead of writing a “tell-all” book as he departs the Vatican, the Pope is giving hints here and there about the miserable state of the Church and from whence the trouble comes. One of the blockbuster revelations came last Thursday, February 14, in a farewell speech to priests at the Vatican. Before we get to that, a little backdrop would be beneficial.

On a trip to Scotland a few years ago, Pope Benedict XVI was confronted by a mural on a city wall depicting a woman dressed as



a priest and flanked on either side by Galileo and Copernicus with the word “oops!” at the bottom of each picture. The message was clear: as the Church is presumed to have made a mistake in condemning heliocentrism, she is also presumed to have made a mistake in barring women from the priesthood. In fact, everything from homosexuality, divorce, remarriage, contraception, abortion, genetic engineering to cloning,

the Catholic Church has been relentlessly stigmatized as a primitive and out-of-touch institution in the modern age, beginning with her mistake concerning Galileo, which she now carries over into every other area of life. The complaint is often heard: ‘How can the Catholic Church claim to be infallible when, in fact, she put the weight of the magisterium behind her traditional interpretation of Scripture in order to condemn Galileo and his heliocentric system, yet we now know she was totally wrong?’ This seems to be a legitimate question. If the Catholic Church was wrong about what she not only claimed to be right, but also claimed that she had sole authority to judge the matter, how could we ever trust her to handle even more complex issues?

Of course, it doesn't help the Church to dispel these secular taunts when its own vicar of Christ reveals that one of the main reasons for the initiation of Vatican Council II was because of "the error of the Church in the case of Galileo Galilei," which "error" then led Vatican II's prelates to believe they needed to "correct this wrong beginning and find the union between the Church and the best forces in the world in order to open up the future of humanity, to open true progress." The context of Pope Benedict's words are as follows:

So we went to the Council not only with joy, but with enthusiasm. There was an incredible anticipation. We hoped that everything would be renewed, that a new Pentecost would truly come, a new era of the Church – because at that time, the Church was still strong enough: Sunday practice still good, the vocations to the priesthood and to religious life were already a bit reduced but still sufficient. Nonetheless, we felt that the Church was not advancing, it was diminishing, and it seemed rather a reality of the past and not the bringer of the future. And in that moment, we hoped that this relationship would be renewed, that it would change; that the Church would once again be a force of tomorrow and a force of today. And we knew that the relationship between the Church and the modern period was a bit in conflict, beginning with the error of the Church in the case of Galileo Galilei; we thought we could correct this wrong beginning and find the union between the Church and the best forces in the world in order to open up the future of humanity, to open true progress. So we were full of hope, of enthusiasm, and of the will to do our part for this thing.¹

¹ Pope Benedict's farewell address to priests at the Vatican, as reported by *L'Osservatore Romano*, February 14, 2013, page 4, paragraph #5 in the article "Al concilio pieno di entusiasmo e speranza." The fifth paragraph in the original Italian is: "Allora, noi siamo andati al Concilio non olo con gioia, ma con entusiasmo. C'eras un'aspettativa incredibile. Speravamo che tutto si rinnovasse, che venisse veramente una nuova Pentecoste, una nuova era della Chiesa, perché la Chiesa era ancora abbastanza robusta in quel tempo, la prassi domenicale ancora buona, le vocazioni al sacerdozio e alla vita religiosa erano già un po'ridotte, ma ancora sufficienti. Tuttavia, si sentiva che la Chiesa non andava avanti, si riduceva, che sembrava piuttosto una realtà del passato e non la portatrice del futuro. E in quel momento, speravamo che questa relazione si rinnovasse, cambiasse; che la Chiesa fosse di nuovo forza del domani e forza dell'oggi. E sapevamo che la relazione tra la Chiesa e il periodo moderno, fin dall'inizio, era un po'contrastante, cominciando con l'errore della Chiesa nel caso di Galileo Galilei; si pensava di correggere questo inizio sbagliato e di trovare di nuovo l'unione tra la Chiesa e le forze migliori del mondo, per aprire il futuro dell'umanità, per aprire il vero progresso. Così, eravamo pieni di



Interestingly enough, the day this speech was reported to the world, February 15, it began the 450th anniversary of Galileo's birth, followed four days later with the 540th anniversary of Copernicus' birth. February 15 was also the day the asteroid that has been heading toward Earth for some years now came to its closest approach, 17,000 miles; as well as the day that a large meteor, with the force of multiple atomic bombs, struck a

Russian city; both events, perhaps, reminding us that Heaven is watching and can bring the heavens down upon us very quickly for our immorality and faithlessness.

Whatever the implications of these current events, the most important thing to realize is that we now we have it from the horse's mouth, so to speak, that Vatican II was implemented for the express purpose of correcting the so-called "errors" of the traditional Church, and the first and foremost "error"—the only error that receives mention—was the Church's decision against Galileo. Since Father Joseph Ratzinger was at the Council in 1962 and personally knew many of its major participants, his inside knowledge of what we can now call the "Galileo mentality" of Vatican II, must be taken as a reliable testimony. Due to his testimony, it may be safe to conclude that if the Church of 1962 had not concluded that the Church of 1616 made an "error" in the Galileo case, Vatican Council II may never have happened. In the end, either the 1616 Church was in error or the reason for initiating Vatican II was in error.

But perhaps there is a different light in which we can view the Pope's words concerning Galileo. In 1990, the then Cardinal Ratzinger said these contrasting conclusions about the Galileo affair:

Today, things have changed. According to Bloch, the heliocentric system—just like the geocentric—is based upon presuppositions that can't be empirically

speranza, di entusiasmo, e anche di volontà di fare la nostra parte per questa cosa."

demonstrated. Among these, an important role is played by the affirmation of the existence of an absolute space; that's an opinion that, in any event, has been cancelled by the Theory of Relativity. Bloch writes, in his own words: "From the moment that, with the abolition of the presupposition of an empty and immobile space, movement is no longer produced towards something, but there's only a relative movement of bodies among themselves, and therefore the measurement of that [movement] depends to a great extent on the choice of a body to serve as a point of reference, in this case is it not merely the complexity of calculations that renders the [geocentric] hypothesis impractical? Then as now, one can suppose the earth to be fixed and the sun as mobile."

We might also add this statement he made, quoting Feyerabend, in the same speech:

At the time of Galileo the Church remained much more faithful to reason than Galileo himself. The process against Galileo was reasonable and just.²

Perhaps, then, we should be more open to the idea that the Cardinal's views of cosmology, particularly the geocentric universe, changed from negative in 1962 (the opening of Vatican Council II) to more positive in 1990. If true, then it also means his 2013 recounting of the pro-Galileo mentality of 1962 is not for the purpose of siding with it but of indicating to us that the Vatican II prelatore made hasty and unwarranted presumptions about the past, many of which led to the spiritual disaster the Church experienced soon after Vatican II's doors were closed in 1965 when the

² From a speech given in Parma, Italy, March 15, 1990, titled: "The Crisis of Faith in Science," partly reported in *Il Sabato*, March 31, 1990, pp. 80ff, and in the *Corriere della Sera*, March 30, 1990, and cited in *30 Days*, January 1993, p. 34, and referenced also by Atila S. Guimaraes in "The Swan Song of Galileo's Myth," published by *Tradition in Action*, nd. Paul Feyerabend notes: "Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, who holds a position similar to that once held by Bellarmine, formulated the problem in a way that would make a revision of the judgement [against Galileo] anachronistic and pointless. Cf. his talk in Parma of 15 March 1990....As witnesses the Cardinal quoted Ernst Bloch ('being merely a matter of convenience the scientific choice between geocentrism and heliocentrism cannot overrule the practical and religious centrality of the earth'), C. F. von Weizsäcker ('Galileo leads directly to the atom bomb') and myself (the chapter heading of the present chapter)" (*Against Method*, 3rd edition, Verso, London, New York, 1975, 1996, p. 134). Feyerabend's "chapter heading" states: "The Church at the time of Galileo not only kept closer to reason as defined then and, in part, even now; it also considered the ethical and social consequences of Galileo's views. Its indictment of Galileo was rational and only opportunism and a lack of perspective can demand a revision" (*ibid.*, p. 125).

numbers of churches, priests, seminarians, nuns and Catholic schools began to decline very rapidly and social upheaval in the Church and the world was unprecedented. We can only conclude that the very Council called in 1962 to correct the “errors” of the past was itself in error for accusing the past. Obviously, there is no way out of such a negative scenario for Vatican II’s prelatore, since if they reserve the right to put the Church of the past in error then there is nothing to make themselves immune from a similar or even bigger error. As the old saying goes, ‘what goes around comes around,’ or, better, ‘what is good for the goose is also good for the gander.’

The sad fact is, the Galileo-incited “Church of the past was in error” mentality of Vatican II’s prelatore eventually forced them to question many other beliefs and practices of the Church’s past; and this ecclesiastical introspection led them to the presumptuous conclusion that, in addition to the Galileo case, many other past decisions were “in error” as well. As I’ve been saying for many years now, the Galileo case is the crux of the matter. It is the watershed for all the problems the Church is having now, and it will not go away until it is fixed. Vatican II’s pro-Galileo mentality led to a complete revamping of how the Catholic Church understood herself and her scriptural foundation, which began in the mid-1800s right after Gregory XVI had taken Galileo’s book off the Index in 1835. The new view of Church and Scripture was officially endorsed in Pius XII’s 1943 encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, and ended with Vatican II’s *Dei Verbum* 11 which, as the modern prelatore desired to understand it, taught the unprecedented idea that Scripture is only inerrant when it speaks on things concerning salvation, not history or science.

Consequently, because of the “Galileo mentality,” it is safe to say that the presumed “error” of the 1616 Church caused the whole tidal wave of historical criticism of the Bible that became prevalent first in the Protestant churches and eventually seeped into the Catholic Church with great force. Along with those new “critical” interpretations of Scripture came a whole new set of mores and practices (including sex, sexual roles, marriage, reproduction, other religions, miracles, politics, *etc.*). Just about any traditional belief or practice could be brought into question based on the idea that past theologians simply misinterpreted the Bible and/or mistakenly believed the Bible had the authority to determine an issue that was outside the strict bounds of salvation.

Be that as it may, we cannot fail to realize that although the desire to correct “errors” may have been in the mind of many of the Vatican II prelatore (including Father Joseph Ratzinger), quite ironically, in the end Vatican II said nothing about Galileo, even though attempts were made by various liberal factions to have the

Council exonerate Galileo. The closest Vatican II came to even alluding to the Galileo case was the statement in *Gaudium et spes* saying that the Church should allow science free reign to do science. Yet, even this statement was innocuous, since the Church was never against allowing science to do science. Science collects data. It has invented many sophisticated instruments to do so. It makes wonderful machines to benefit our lives. The Church has only said, as was the case with Galileo, if and when science's *interpretation* of the data conflicts with the settled doctrines of Christianity, then the interpretation needs to be modified or replaced. Scientific data is plentiful and very useful. But *interpretation* of scientific data is as fraught with misunderstanding and error as the interpretation of the data in Holy Scripture. There are so many biases and philosophies that influence interpretation it is a wonder we ever arrive at the correct one. It is the very reason for the split of the eastern from the western Church in 1054 and the Protestant Reformation in 1520, among many other splits.

The Pope's admission to the role of the Galileo case in the initiating and carrying out of Vatican II should be a sufficient answer to why we are in the mess we are in today. Instead of siding with its 1900-year tradition, the prelature coming out of Vatican II couldn't work fast enough to divest themselves of presumed "errors" of the past so as to make friends with the world as quickly and as firmly as possible. After all, Science was a most formidable foe. It is the Goliath of the modern age. As all the Israelites were afraid to face Goliath, so all the Catholic clerics have been afraid to face Scientism.

But now we know that true science, not the popular science of Carl Sagan and Albert Einstein, supports the Church and her decision against Galileo. Lo and behold, we now find out that it was Vatican II's "Galileo-incited" mentality that was wrong and the Church of 1616 that was right. We now need Vatican III to clean up the mess that was caused by the faithless clerics that operated in the aftermath of Vatican II. Perhaps our new pope, whoever he will be, is the one to do that fine work, perhaps after he consecrates Russia to the Immaculate Heart of Mary – something which all the 20th century "Galileo-influenced" popes of the 20th century failed to do.