

A Critique of Christopher Check's lecture on Galileo

By Robert Sungenis

In September 2014, Christopher Check of Catholic Answers gave a one-hour lecture to a group of Catholics in Arlington, Virginia, titled, "Galileo on Trial: Why the Church was Right." Whereas many previous years of Catholic consensus had understood the Church to be wrong on Galileo, Mr. Check represents a new tactic – declare the Church was right even though he believes it was wrong.

Although Mr. Check's delivery seemed to keep the audience in rapt attention because it contained many interesting facts concerning the Galileo affair that are not common knowledge, it was only at the end of his lecture that we find the real reason he has begun a lecture tour touting that the Church was right. Basically, Mr. Check did what a number of Galileo apologists have been doing ever since Cardinal Ratzinger suggested a new approach at his speech in Parma, Italy in 1990. The attempt is to make a bifurcation between the Church's pastoral acts and its doctrinal decrees. This allows the apologist to hold that the Church, on a pastoral basis, was right in thwarting Galileo, even though the Church was dead wrong on the theological, biblical and doctrinal issues concerning Galileo's thesis. As Mr. Check put it, "this was a pastoral decision made by Cardinal Bellarmine," as opposed to a doctrinal decision. Check later added, "everyone knew what the Church was doing," implying that, without the 17th century clerics actually saying so, everyone believed Galileo was right and thus agreed that the only thing the Church could do is put on an appearance that they were condemning Galileo when all the while they believed he was right. In essence, the Church's response to Galileo was nothing but a staged act in Mr. Check's estimation.

But perhaps this new apologetic stems as far back as Cardinal Newman who, according to Mr. Check, said it was acceptable for the Church of Galileo's day to be "tender to the popular religious sense" of the people so that they would not be disheartened to find out that the Church had wrongly interpreted Scripture for the sixteen centuries before Galileo and that the Church had not even recognized her mistake until Galileo straightened them out. Mr. Check quotes Cardinal Newman as saying, "Galileo may have been right" and the decision of the Church against him "was safe, not dishonest."

Unfortunately, this is the kind of warped apologetic Catholics are forced to wallow in when they accept modern science's claim that heliocentrism is the true system of the cosmos. The Church becomes a duplicitous institution that is only interested in saving face, and thus is forced to the "pastoral" ploy to make it appear that they are concerned about the people's souls when in reality its clerics are caving in on the Church's traditional doctrine and thus feeding poison to its flock. Surprisingly, neither

Mr. Check nor his audience seemed to have any problem with this specious and duplicitous apologetic.

Things seem to be going quite smooth for Mr. Check during his lecture and into the Q&A time. The initial questions were not penetrating at all. But that atmosphere changed quickly at the very last question asked from a man named "Robert" from, ironically, San Diego, California, the domicile of Catholic Answers for whom Mr. Check works. Since Mr. Check had been proposing all evening that the Galileo affair had nothing to do with doctrine and everything to do with the Church trying to protect the Catholic populace from being disheartened, "Robert" sent his question by email stating:

"How is this not a matter of doctrine if Galileo was vehemently suspected of heresy?"

...Robert then added that when someone is suspected of heresy it means that their position is injurious to the Faith. It was as if a bomb went off in the auditorium. Mr. Check was caught in the very dilemma he had been trying to avoid all evening. But, in another sense, I don't think Mr. Check was entirely surprised by the question. Any Galileo scholar worth his salt will inevitably struggle with this particular question at some point in his studies. It was quite apparent in his answer to "Robert" that Mr. Check had indeed struggled with it in the past, but had come to a self-satisfying answer, and this answer was the whole reason Mr. Check is giving lectures around the country claiming that "the Church was Right." Mr. Check forthrightly told Robert (although stuttering very rapidly at this point as he appeared to be fishing for the best way to wiggle out of this conundrum) the following words:

"Questions of faith and morals, which is a very limited sphere of the Magisterium that the infallibility of the Holy Father covers..."

and the Galileo affair is...

"...not a matter of doctrine because (interrupted by stuttering and laughter) it isn't doctrine how the universe is built and how bridges are built; and thanks to Newton who showed us how to build bridges...these aren't doctrinal questions."

When I heard this specious nonsense coming from Mr. Check's vocal cords, in one sense, I felt extremely sorry for the man. Galileo apologists have been struggling for centuries with how to explain that, if the Church has always been guided by the Holy Spirit, how, on the one hand, could the Holy Spirit have vacated His responsibilities, and, on the other hand, how could the Church have refused to listen to the Holy Spirit if, indeed, its doctrines will be preserved forever and the gates of hell will not prevail? Mr. Check did not address this all important question, but it stems right from Jesus' promise in John 16:14 that the Holy Spirit would lead the Church into ALL truth (not

just some truth or only some of the time). It was obvious why Mr. Check avoided it, for he implied that, although the Holy Spirit is in charge of the Church's "doctrinal" decisions, the Church's prelates have control of the "pastoral" decisions, and thus only the former are infallible. Hence, opting for the "pastoral" solution gets the Holy Spirit off the hook, as it were, and places it on the clerics of Galileo's day who, in Mr. Check's estimation, can't be faulted in any case since they were simply trying to be good pastors and keep their parishioners from becoming disheartened. From Mr. Check's clever sleight of hand, we are thus diverted from considering that these 17th century popes and cardinals actually lied to their parishioners to save face for themselves. That devious possibility was simply swept under the rug by Mr. Check, and no one in the audience seemed to be aware of his sweeping.

Let's look a little closer at Mr. Check's above words. When he says, "Questions of faith and morals, which is a very limited sphere of the Magisterium that the infallibility of the Holy Father covers" we see remnants of the old but trusty apologetic that is frequently used in Galileo apologetics, namely, since the pope didn't declare by an infallible statement the Church's opposition to Galileo and heliocentrism, then nothing that was condemned concerning Galileo has any binding relevance today. Never mind that the doctrine of papal infallibility would not even be addressed or defined until 250 years later in 1870, nor, as most Galileo scholars admit that neither Pope Paul V nor Urban VIII considered their condemnations against Galileo reformable, Catholic apologists will invariably pull out the infallibility card whenever such squeamish doctrinal pressures arise.

Be that as it may, Mr. Check also neither mentioned the Ordinary magisterium nor the consensus of the Church Fathers, or even the 1600-year tradition of the Church, all of which were solidly geocentric and, since the teaching was continued uninterrupted, are considered "infallible" not only by the traditional Church but even by Vatican II standards (see *Lumen Gentium* 12 and 25). It was almost as if Mr. Check purposely rejected the tradition and did not want the audience to be aware of it. Instead, the only Gospel Mr. Check accepted as infallible was the popular scientific consensus that heliocentrism is the only possible model of cosmology, yet he did not present even one proof for what turned out to be his foundational premise.

As it stands, Mr. Check's presumption that "questions of faith and morals is a limited sphere of the Magisterium" is quite erroneous. The Church's magisterium has been in the business of determining faith and morals since its inception. All one need do is read Denzinger's massive treatise, *Source of Catholic Dogma*, to discover a sampling of incidents in which the Church has hit almost every wrinkle of faith and morals down through the centuries. In the end, it seemed that Mr. Check would say anything he could to make it appear that the Galileo affair was not a matter of doctrine, otherwise, of course, his whole thesis, and thus his whole coast-to-coast lecture series, would come to naught.

Next, Mr. Check said that the Galileo affair is "...not a matter of doctrine because...it isn't doctrine how the universe is built and how bridges are built; and thanks to Newton who showed us how to build bridges...these aren't doctrinal questions." First, of course, Mr. Check must then skip right over the fact that since Galileo was convicted of being "vehemently suspect of heresy" then logically the Church must have issued the pronouncement of the heresy prior to Galileo's conviction of it, otherwise he would not be "suspect" of it. Although such pronouncements deal only with doctrine and not pastoral issues, nevertheless, Mr. Check had no explanation for the contradiction he was proposing.

Second, Mr. Check must skip right over the fact that Cardinal Bellarmine had already dealt with the issue of "how the universe is built" and thus clarified for Galileo that the real problem was that when Scripture gave specific information on what revolved around what, it was just as true as when Scripture said that Jacob had twelve sons or that Jesus rose from the dead. These are historical facts from Scripture, and as such, they are doctrine. Anyone who would deny these historical facts would necessarily deny the inerrancy of Scripture (or what Bellarmine called, *ex parte decentis*), which was the real and only issue between the Church and Galileo. Mr. Check never even mentions this crucial aspect of the Galileo controversy, much less educate the audience to its extreme relevance in the debate.

Third, Mr. Check's glib reference to Isaac Newton as the "bridge builder" who showed the Church why it was wrong in condemning Galileo's universe, is equally specious. Although Mr. Check told the audience his father was a "nuclear physicist," it became apparent that neither Mr. Check nor his father who tutored him in physics have ever taken Newton's equations to their logical conclusion. On the one hand, if Newton's mechanics are confined to a Sun and an Earth and we disregard all the stars and galaxies that have been discovered since the time of Edwin Hubble in the 1920s, then yes, it would appear that the Church was wrong and Galileo was right. On the other hand, just as today's astronomy believes that the Sun is governed by the gravity of the Milky Way around which it revolves at 600 mph, so we know that the small system envisioned by Newton which made the Sun and Earth independent from the rest of the universe is fallacious according to the modern cosmology. Two hundred years after Newton, physicist Ernst Mach explained that the gravity of the universe, particularly its stars and galaxies, exhibit tremendous force on our little Sun-Earth system, arguing to the extent that when someone falls off a spinning carousel it is because of the gravity of the stars. In fact, Mach admitted that if we use Newton's laws of mechanics, we could easily say that the whole universe rotates around the Earth, such that the Earth can occupy the universe's center of mass (the "center of mass" being one of Newton's most important teachings). Einstein stated the same. His 1905 Special Relativity theory made all motion relative, and his 1915 General Relativity theory said it was just as possible for the universe to rotate around a fixed Earth as it was the Earth to rotate in a fixed universe. Mr. Check was either oblivious to these scientific developments or purposely withheld them from his audience. The only scientific fact that Mr. Check

referenced in his lecture (for which I commend him) was that stellar parallax (the popular answer used even today by modern astronomers to attempt to prove heliocentrism) could not prove heliocentrism, since the Tyconic geocentric model could explain it just as well, in addition to being able to explain the phases of Venus.

If Mr. Check had only been as forthcoming about the reciprocity of Newton's system as he was of Tycho's, he would have made a landmark advancement in Catholic apologetics on the Galileo affair and he would have come to know the true reason why the "Church was right." Alas, Mr. Check couldn't follow his arguments to their logical conclusion since his higher-ups have already decided that no geocentric universe will be allowed in modern Catholicism, no matter what the evidence shows. Unfortunately, modernist Catholics have made their bed with the Big Bang scientific elite and neither group wants any geocentric crashers upsetting the slumber party.

Lastly, Mr. Check made some other errors and omissions in his lecture. He claimed that the Church used Copernicus' model of the solar system to fix the Julian calendar. But although Pope Leo called upon Copernicus to help fix the calendar (from which Copernicus believed he could do so if the Sun and Earth switched places), the reality is that Copernicus' model did nothing to fix the calendar. In fact, if the Church had used Copernicus' model, it would have made the calendar worse, since Copernicus could never get his model to work correctly. Although Mr. Check mentions twice that Galileo used perfect circular orbits for his model, he never mentions the fact that Copernicus did the same, and it was the main reason that neither Galileo's nor Copernicus' model ever worked. Mr. Check also fails to mention that in order to get his model to even come close to Ptolemy's accuracy, Copernicus had to add 48 epicycles. By the time Copernicus was done, he had more epicycles than Ptolemy!

Another instance in which Mr. Check gave an erroneous analysis was his attempt to make it appear as if the only reason Pope Urban VIII attacked Galileo for heresy was because Galileo had embarrassed the pope when he put his words in the mouth of the ignorant Simplicio on the last page of the *Dialogo*. This has been a common Catholic apologetic for many years, so I don't fault Mr. Check for inventing it. All that needs to be said here is that Galileo historians now agree that a miffed pope is not the motive. Rather, extensive search into the Galileo records reveals that Pope Urban attacked Galileo for the same reason that St. Robert Bellarmine did - Galileo's doctrine was an attack on the inerrancy of Holy Scripture, and thus a direct attack on the veracity of the Catholic Church itself. This resolve of Urban VIII is quite evident in the year-long exchange of letters he had with the Grand Duke of Tuscany, Cosimo II Medici, in 1631, two years before Galileo was convicted.

Mr. Check also stated the following: "the pope never declared geocentrism as a doctrine, but he also never made heliocentrism a doctrine." Although it is true that a pope has never declared heliocentrism a doctrine, the pope condemned, in no uncertain terms, heliocentrism as "formally heretical" and/or "erroneous in faith." After

the condemnation, Urban VIII sent official letters to all the papal nuncios and universities of Europe telling them, and demanding their allegiance, to what he had directed and approved at the 1633 Galileo trial. As such, the fact that two popes approved the recommendations of their Holy Offices to denounce heliocentrism as heretical cannot be taken lightly.

But Mr. Check, and most Catholic apologists today, want to hide or excuse the pope from any such involvement by claiming that whatever the degree of his involvement in condemning Galileo, unless it was done by a formal infallible pronouncement, is not even on the radar screen of Catholic sensibilities and therefore can be dismissed. They go to these desperate measures, of course, because they begin from the premise that the Church was wrong in condemning Galileo and heliocentrism. Since, after making that crucial decision they still must protect the pope at all costs (otherwise the Catholic Church would be destroyed in one moment if a pope was found to be officially in error), then any lesser level of authority that the pope may have issued or approved must neither be authoritative nor relevant.

Anyone who knows Catholic protocol, however, knows that such argumentation only comes back to bite those who use it. Not only does it limit Catholic doctrine to bind Catholics to only two instances in which a pope has infallibly declared a doctrine (e.g., the Assumption of Mary in 1950 and the doctrine of papal infallibility in 1870), it invariably brings into question every other papal decision which is on a lesser level of authority, in addition to ignoring the Ordinary magisterium that taught geocentrism for sixteen centuries before Galileo, as well as the consensus of the Church Fathers that spawned the Ordinary magisterium's belief and practice.

In the end, modern Galileo apologists, such as Christopher Check, strain the gnat but swallow the camel. Their very efforts to save the Church end up destroying the Church. Not only do they make the 17th century Catholic clerics liars in order to save face for themselves, they virtually destroy the authority of the papacy, as well as the Ordinary magisterium and the consensus of the Church Fathers. All this has come about because they have put their undivided trust in the popular consensus of modern science as the infallible determiner regarding how the heavens go; rather than the Church (not to mention the Holy Spirit) as the infallible determiner of the limits of natural science.

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September 24, 2014