FAITH & REASON
THE JOURNAL OF CHRISTENDOM COLLEGE
Summer 1977 | Vol. III No. 2

Galileo and the Magisterium: A Second Look

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The short note that follows does not purport to be an exhaustive reassessment of the Galileo case. Rather, in view of the importance of the topic for contemporary discussions involving the Magisterium, this note is presented as an editorial service.

ONE OF THE GREAT CLUBS USED TO PUNISH THE CHURCH IN THIS AGE OF PHYSICAL science has been the infamous and admittedly unfortunate 17th century Galileo case, the subject of song, story and dance since his time. It is said that the Church condemned as heretical Galileo's belief that the earth moves around the sun. We are further told that Galileo was persecuted for pursuing that truth. Catholics have generally admitted the truth of these charges, but have resisted the next charge: that if the Church erred in declaring Galileo's propositions heretical, it ought not to claim to be infallible. To this the traditional response has been two-fold, by those who believe the Magisterium of the Church pronounced against Galileo. On the one hand, it is argued that the Church has never claimed it made an infallible pronouncement in the Galileo case (the pope was not speaking infallibly). On the other, it is suggested that the Church has never claimed to be infallible in matters of science, but only in faith and morals.

Both of these Catholic counter-arguments seem to me to be unsatisfactory. The latter argument fails because, in fact, if Galileo's propositions were condemned, they were condemned precisely because they were heretical or erroneous in faith. Surely it extends to the Church's infallibility to know what is and what is not a matter of faith; otherwise, the doctrine is an absurdity. The former argument, on the other hand, is acceptable only to those with a minimalist view of infallibility, for it generally assumes that Galileo's condemnation was an act of the ordinary, but not the extraordinary, Magisterium of the Church.

But Vatican II said Catholics must give the ordinary Magisterium"a religious submission of mind and will" (*Lumen Gentium*, 25), and this teaching presents a problem. After all, the chief traditional argument for papal infallibility has been that since all Catholics are obliged to believe the pope when he teaches formally on faith or morals, the pope must be infallible, else the whole Church would fall into error, which is impossible. However, if "a religious submission of mind and will" is also due the ordinary magisterium, then we must conclude that, in matters of faith and morals at least, there is a strong case for development in the doctrine of infallibility by its application to the ordinary Magisterium of the Church. Thus if it is true that in the Galileo case the ordinary Magisterium condemned the scientist's propositions as errors in faith, the credibility of the Magisterium would appear to be affected.

All of this provides good reason for reviewing the Galileo case. In addition, since this episode is virtually the only one which is still held by outsiders as a disproof of the inerrancy of the Church's formal teaching authority, an exposition of what actually happened in the Galileo case might well lay the issue to rest (were it not for human perversity) once and for all. Actually, the evidence has been known to a few scholars right along, and it is my task here

merely to popularize the matter, hopefully for the good of the Church.

To clear the air, the peripheral issues of whether Galileo was really persecuted, and even of what was at stake in his ideas, will be dealt with briefly before going on to state precisely how the case does or does not bear on the ordinary Magisterium of the Church. First, on the matter of Galileo's trial it must be said that individuals who disliked the scientist denounced him before the Inquisition in 1632 not only for the clear violation of earlier ecclesiastical warnings against his work (1616), but also for flaws in his personal character and faith. The Inquisition, after months of patient investigation, cleared Galileo's name, finding him guilty only on the point of advancing his theory of heliocentricity, which he had earlier agreed to abandon (for a thorough treatment of the case, with documents throughout, see Giorgio de Santillana, *The Crime of Galileo*, U. of Chicago Pr., 1955). In the context of the times, then, Galileo was hardly persecuted by the Church, but rather given every consideration by the inquisitorial court, which had little choice in taking up the case. We are not concerned, of course, with the attitudes of Galileo's accusers, the opinions of the masses, or even the actions of those who apparently falsified Church records in an effort to get a conviction. This point rests on how the judges handled the case.

Second, it is important to understand what the highest Church officials really wanted of Galileo (for a concise treatment with ample documents, see James Brophy & Henry Paolucci, eds., *The Achievement of Galileo,* Twayne Pubs., N.Y., 1962, esp. pp. 41ff). In a long conversation with Cardinal Barberini (later Pope Urban VIII), Galileo was asked whether or not he could resolve the apparent contradictions between Scripture and the Pythagorean-Copernican system, which did seem to accord with the observable facts. Men were intensely interested in truth in this age; such apparent conflicts had to be considered. Barberini also pointed out that Galileo could not assert his system as true just because it accounted for all the phenomena. Rather, he would have to show that the phenomena could not be accounted for by any other system. That, of course, could not be demonstrated, and modern physicists readily admit that variations of the Ptolemeic (earth-centered) system would account for all the known phenomena at that time, but that the newer Copernican model did so more simply. Thus the possibility that the Copernican-Galilean system did not represent reality could have been admitted by competent astronomers. Unfortunately, Galileo made no qualifications of this type when he violated his 1616 agreement by publishing his *Dialogue on the Great World Systems* (1632). Moreover, apparently not caring for the faith of ordinary men and women, he made no effort to resolve the apparent contradictions with Scripture (e.g., Joshua made the sun stand still), nor to reconcile his Pythagorean notions with the prevailing Aristotelian views, things which certain other scientists and theologians were both willing and able to do.

A consideration of these factors suggests that, whatever Galileo's enemies may have been like, the judges and high officials of the Church acted respectably in the handling of his case. In fact, as regards Barberini, the representative of the Church showed considerably more respect for the nature of truth than did Galileo himself. Having cleared the air, therefore, we can turn to the decisive question. Is the authority of the ordinary Magisterium of the Church impugned by the condemnation of Galileo's theories as heretical? Other questions are merely peripheral; this alone is the crucial point; and a brief survey of the actual facts of the case solves the problem immediately.

On February 19, 1616, the following two propositions advanced by Galileo were submitted by the Inquisition to the Holy Office for advice regarding their orthodoxy (Santillana, 120):

1. "The sun is the center of the world and hence immovable of local motion."
2. "The Earth is not the center of the world, nor immovable, but moves according to the whole of itself."

On February 24th, the experts (qualifiers) of the Holy Office found the first proposition "foolish and absurd, philosophically and formally heretical, inasmuch as it expressly contradicts the doctrine of the Holy Scripture in many passages, both in their literal meaning and according to the general interpretation of the Fathers and Doctors." They declared the second "to receive the same censure in philosophy and, as regards theological truth, to be at least erroneous in faith" (121). That there were competent theologians even then who argued against the views expressed here suggests that the qualifiers could have reached a wiser conclusion. Theirs is the chief fault in the entire affair.

In any case, the next day the Pope (Paul V) was

notified of their judgment. His response was simply to direct Cardinal Bellarmine to warn Galileo to abandon his opinion; failing that, to abstain from teaching or defending or even discussing it; failing that, to be imprisoned. Galileo, according to a report of Bellarmine on March 3rd, submitted. Two days later, several works by other authors which expressed Pythagorean-Copernican ideas were placed on the Index by the appropriate officials. Thus the matter rested for sixteen years.

In 1632, Galileo was denounced to the Inquisition for publishing his Dialogue. On June 16, 1633, Pope Urban VIII ordered that he be interrogated in full assembly of the Congregation of the Holy Office, and, again, be ordered not to treat further in any way "of the mobility of the earth and the stability of the sun" (293). His Dialogue was prohibited from sale and reading. Then, on June 22, 1633, the sentence of the inquisitorial court was passed (306-310). In it the history of the case, including Galileo s own lies about the circumstances under which the Dialogue was published, was recounted. The judgment of the Holy Office was that Galileo had rendered himself "vehemently suspected of heresy." The punishment was that Galileo renounce his errors before the Inquisition in a form to be prescribed, which he immediately did.

This sentence is interesting for two reasons. First, it marks the first time that the declaration of heresy by the qualifiers of the Holy Office (of February 24, 16.16) was published, it being adduced as expert testimony in the history of Galileo's case. That it had never been promulgated on its own is of some importance. Second, the sentence itself bears the signatures of seven of the ten judges; the Pope, in other words, did not officially endorse the decision (there was, of course, no reason why he should, since the Court was simply exercising its normal powers).

The conclusions to be drawn are perhaps obvious. First, the declaration that Galileo's propositions were heretical was never published as a teaching of the Church, and it was never intended to be such. It was intended and taken as the advice of certain theological experts who worked in the Holy Office, of value in a legal case, but hardly a norm of faith for the Church as a whole. Second, as noted earlier, Pope Paul V did not endorse this theological opinion, but rather ordered in an in-house directive only that Galileo be commanded to stop holding and advancing his own opinion. This action, then, stemmed from a judgment of prudence about the promotion of ideas which could not be easily reconciled with Scripture. Even as a private document, therefore, the declaration of heresy received no formal papal approval. Third, there is no evidence that Pope Urban VIII ever endorsed any public document which included the declaration of heresy, especially the sentence at Galileo's trial. That no pope ever promulgated any condemnation of Galileo's ideas removes the Galileo case entirely from discussions on the historical character of the Church's teaching authority.

It is clear, then, that not even the ordinary Magisterium has ever taught or promulgated the idea that the propositions of Copernican-Galilean astronomy are heretical or errors in faith. Thus it can in no way be claimed that "the Church" has taught that such views are heretical. To make such a claim would require that we locate the teaching authority of the Church in those theologians who claim expertise, a mistake which many make today, but one which the Galileo case should, at long last, serve to correct.