

# Commentary on some allegations that the Church's 1616 decree against Heliocentrism is not binding

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Consider the following excerpt:

In 1616 the Holy Office condemned the following propositions and explained why they are false:

1. The sun is the center of the world and completely immovable by local motion.
2. The Earth is not the center of the world, nor immovable, but moves according to the whole of itself, and also with a diurnal motion.

The first proposition was declared unanimously to be foolish and absurd in philosophy and formally heretical, inasmuch as it expressly contradicts the doctrine of Holy Scripture in many passages, both in their literal meaning and according to the general interpretation of the Fathers and Doctors.

With regard to the second proposition, all were agreed that this proposition merits the same censure in philosophy, and that, from a theological standpoint, it is at least erroneous in the Faith. (Information taken from Jerome Langford, O.P., *Galileo, Science and the Church*. Foreword by Stillman Drake, New York: Desclee Co., 1966. pp 89-90.)

In this same source, pp60-61, there is the letter of **Cardinal Bellarmine to the Carmelite Friar, Paolo Antonio Foscarini**, which contains, among others, these important words:

“... The Council of Trent prohibits expounding the Scriptures contrary to the common agreement of the holy Fathers. ... Now consider whether the Church could encourage giving to Scripture a sense contrary to the holy Fathers and all the Latin and Greek commentators... Nor may it be answered that this is not a matter of faith, for if it is not a matter of faith from the point of view of the subject matter, it is on the part of the ones who have spoken. It would be just as heretical to deny that Abraham had two sons, and Jacob twelve, as it would be to deny the Virgin Birth of Christ, for both are declared by the Holy Ghost through the mouths of the prophets and apostles. ...”

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Therefore, this matter is *de fide*.

It has been falsely alleged that Bellarmine made the concession to Foscarini that

Heliocentrism may be possible, thereby making it impossible that Heliocentrism could be heresy, since a true heresy cannot at some later date cease to be an heresy. This allegation has been solely based on the following from the Bellarmine-Foscarini letter:

... Third, I say that **if there were** a true demonstratoin that the sun was in the center of the universe and the earth in the third sphere and that the sun did not travel around the earth, but the earth circled around the sun, **then** it would be necessary to proceed with great caution in explaining the pasages of Scritpure which seemed contrary, and we would rather have to say that we did not understand them, than to say that something was false which has been demonstrated.

But I do not believe that there is any such demonstration; none has been shown to me. (Emphases added)

It is certainly not the same thing to present the hypothesis, “If there were...” as it is to say “It is possible that...” **Bellarmino does not say “It is possible that...”**

Those who make this allegation are not only desperate in their efforts as Heliocentrism apologists, but they do Bellarmine a great injustice when, for example, they compare him to the position of Pope Pius XII who allowed for study of evolution of the human body in his encyclical, *Humani Generis* (1950).

Heliocentrism apologists also point to Galileo’s distinction between the spiritual and the physical meanings in Scripture, claiming that the spiritual could be true and the physical false or irrelevant, without affecting the integral inerrancy of God’s Word. However, these apologists are without Church support on such an allegation, as emphasized in definitive Church teaching, which is summed up by Pope Leo XIII in *Providentissimum Deus* (1893), paragraph numbers 124-127 (*The Sources of Catholic Dogma*, Roy Deferrari. B. Herder, 1957):

It may also happen that the sense of a passage remains ambiguous, and in this case good hermeneutical methods will greatly assist in clearing up the obscurity. But it is absolutely **wrong and forbidden** either to narrow inspiration to certain parts only of Holy Scripture or to admit that the sacred author has erred. As to **the system** of those who, in order to rid themselves of these difficulties, do not hesitate to concede that divine inspiration regards the **things of faith and morals, and nothing beyond**, because (as they wrongly think,) in a question of the truth or falsehood of a passage we should consider not so much what God has said as the reason and purpose which He had in mind in saying it – **this system cannot be tolerated.**

For all the books which the Church receives as sacred and canonical are written **wholly and entirely, with all their parts, at the dictation of the Holy Spirit**; and so far is it from being possible that any error can coexist with inspiration, that inspiration not only is essentially incompatible with error, but excludes and rejects it as absolutely and necessarily as it is impossible that

God Himself, the supreme Truth, can utter that which is not true. **This is the ancient and unchanging faith of the Church**, solemnly defined in the Councils of Florence and of Trent, and finally confirmed and more expressly formulated by the Council of the Vatican. These are the words of the last:

The books of the Old and New Testament, whole and entire, with all their parts, ... are to be received as sacred and canonical. And the Church holds them as sacred and canonical **not because**, having been composed by human industry, they were afterwards approved by her authority; not only because they contain revelation without errors, but because, having been written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, **they have God for their Author.** (Emphases added)

Hence, the fact that it was men whom the Holy Spirit took up as His instruments for writing **does not mean** that it was these inspired instruments – but not the primary author – who might have made an error. For, by supernatural power, **He so moved and impelled them to write** – He so assisted them when writing – that the things which He ordered, and those only, they, first, **rightly understood**, then willed faithfully to write down, and finally expressed in apt words and with **infallible truth**. Otherwise, it could not be said that He was the Author of the entire Scripture. Such has always been the persuasion of the Fathers. “Therefore,” says St. Augustine, “since they wrote the things which He showed and uttered to them, it cannot be pretended that He is not the writer; for His members executed, **what their head dictated.**” And St. Gregory the Great thus pronounces: “Most superfluous it is to inquire who wrote these things – we loyally believe the Holy Spirit to be the author of the book. He wrote it who **dictated it for writing**; He wrote it who inspired its execution.”

It follows that those who maintain that an error is possible in any genuine passage of the sacred writings either **pervert the Catholic notion** of inspiration or make God the author of such error. And so emphatically were all the Fathers and Doctors agreed that the divine writings, as left by the hagiographers, are free from all error, that they labored earnestly, with no less skill than perseverance, to reconcile with each other those numerous passages **which seem** at variance – the very passages which in **great measure have** been taken up by the “higher criticism”; for they were unanimous in laying it down that those writings, **in their entirety and in all their parts**, were equally from the afflatus of Almighty God, and that God, speaking by the sacred writers, could not set down anything but what was true.