Galileo: The Case May Be Reexamined

After 335 years, the Catholic Church seems ready to rehabilitate Galileo Galilei, who was forced by the Inquisition to renounce the Copernican theory in 1633 under threat of torture. The Church's intention was disclosed in early July in Lindau, West Germany, by Franz Cardinal Koenig of Vienna at a meeting attended by more than 20 Nobel prize-winning scientists.

In the United States, the possibility of a reexamination of Galileo's case has drawn yawns from some, cheers from others. One young rebel priest in Washington, who has spent a good deal of time studying Galileo, said "I can't get terribly excited about this. The Church may be rehabilitating Galileo, but it's not doing as much with the living, which is what is really important. The way I see it, Galileo was fighting the establishment. Today, a lot of people are taking on the establishment and are relegated by the Church to the outer corners."

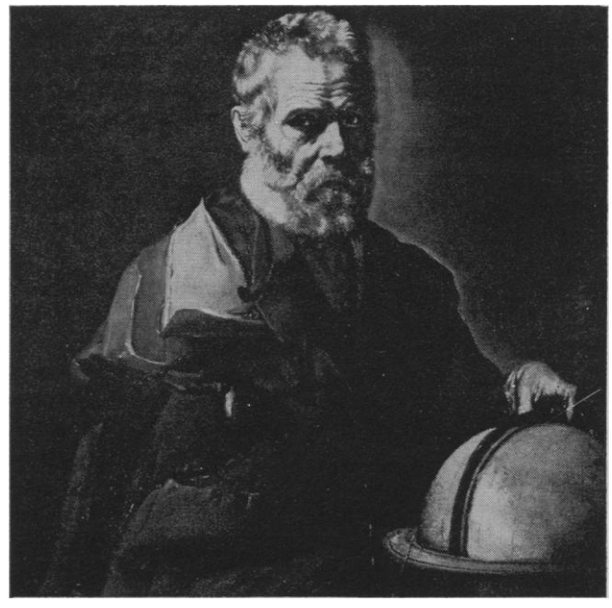
By rehabilitating Galileo, Koenig told the scientists, the Church would "heal one of the deepest wounds between science and religion." He said that an "open and honest clarification of the Galileo case appears all the more necessary today if the Church's claim to speak for truth, justice, and freedom is not to suffer in credibility."

As another churchman, Jerome Langford, wrote in a recent book on Galileo, "the question of Galileo and the Roman Catholic Church seems destined never to die out." But certainly interest in the case has fluctuated through the years. As recently as 1964, a request by a group of young Catholic intellectuals, primarily from France, to the Vatican Council asking for some kind of formal declaration of rehabilitation for Galileo was not acted upon. "There just wasn't much widespread interest in it," says Father Ernan McMullin, chairman of Notre Dame's philosophy department and editor of the massive, recently published *Galileo, Man of Science*.

But now, McMullin said in an interview with *Science*, there seem to be two reasons why the Church might begin a reexamination of Galileo's case, aside from the widespread change in attitude of the Church since the second Vatican Council. The more basic cause, he said, was the "kind of romanticism that you find among French and some German Catholic intellectuals and scientists." To them, McMullin said, Galileo represents the first great liberalizing force in the Catholic Church; they feel defensive and uneasy about the present status of the case. "Galileo is much more of a bogeyman in Europe than he is here," McMullin said.

Added to this sense of guilt, is the apparent direct cause of Koenig's announcement and the Church's newly found interest in the case. The European Physical Society, a new group to be made up of Catholic scientists and representatives of the Vatican's Pontifical Society of Sciences, which will itself try to bridge the gap between science and religion, is forming in Europe. The organization's first meeting is tentatively scheduled for next spring in Florence, the scene of most of Galileo's major work. "Many European scholars," McMullin said, "feel that it would be highly appropriate for some form of rehabilitation of Galileo to take place at that meeting."

There are several alternative courses that the Church could pursue to clear Galileo's name. Koenig implied that some sort of committee to reexamine the trial and the confusion that surrounded it would probably be set up, as many critics of the Church's role in the case have suggested. McMullin feels that this is not the best way to proceed. A retrial, he said, would be very complicated, since it would have to be conducted under the laws of the 17th century. The significance, he feels, would be lost in legal technicalities. McMullin suggested another way—what he called a "positive way"—for the Church to rehabilitate Galileo. "If people in Europe feel badly enough about Galileo—I don't myself, but many in Europe seem to—and if they really want to honor Galileo in Florence next year, they could in some sense try to bring out Galileo's relation to theology," he said. He had in mind some kind of conference or other form of Church recognition of Galileo's *Letter to the Grand Duchess Christina*, in which Galileo tried to define, as he saw it, the relation between theology and science.



"Portrait of Galileo" by Jusepe de Ribera. [Fine Arts Gallery of San Diego, California]

"It's a rather acute piece of work," McMullin said, adding that the main premises raised by Galileo—that scientific truth could never contradict the Scriptures and that science could be used to clarify points of faith and confusion—were followed fairly closely by Pope Leo XIII in 1893 in his encyclical *Providentissimus Deus*. By honoring Galileo's theological contribution, McMullin feels, the Church would be approaching the problem in a "positive and direct way."

More than 300 years after his death, Galileo Galilei remains a controversial character. But, within the next several months, the man who was forced to live in seclusion for saying that the earth revolves around the sun may finally be recognized by the Church as an important contributor to both science and theology.

—Andrew Jamison