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The man who rehabilitated Galileo

John L. Allen Jr. | Jun. 23, 2006 All Things Catholic
Arguably, no one was more instrumental than Dominican Fr. Enrico di Rovasenda in the Vatican's decision to reevaluate the case of Galileo Galilei, which over the centuries had become the leading symbol of a supposed clash between religion and science, between rigid dogmatism and the free spirit of scientific inquiry.

Still going strong, di Rovasenda celebrated his 100th birthday in Genoa on June 17. Cardinals Tarcisio Bertone of Genoa, the next Secretary of State, and George Cottier, the Dominican who served John Paul II as theologian of the papal household, were present for the festivities.

In summary form, in 1616 the Vatican's Congregation of the Index declared the Copernican theory of heliocentrism to be "false and altogether contrary to Scripture." In 1633, Galileo was found guilty by a Roman tribunal of failing to observe the 1616 decree, and was forced to publicly abjure his position. (Legend has it that afterwards he muttered *eppur si mouve*, "and yet it moves.")

When the Vatican acknowledged in 1992 that many in the church had been "incapable of disassociating the faith from an age-old cosmology," it was greeted as a revolution in Catholicism's attitude towards science.

Rare for a cleric of his generation, di Rovasenda entered the Dominicans as a late vocation at the age of 23, after having graduated university with a secular degree in engineering. He moved in circles connected to Fuci, an association for Catholic university students, whose ecclesiastical patron was then-Fr. Giovanni Battista Montini, who would later become Pope Paul VI. In that era, di Rovasenda took part in struggles for freedom of speech against youth movements linked to the Italian fascists.

Later, Paul VI asked di Rovasenda to help draft his memorable speech to the United Nations in 1965, intended as a statement of universal human values. Paul VI, according to di Rovasenda, once said with pride that in the U.N. speech he had quoted St. Paul, but placed him on the same level with Socrates.

Paul VI appointed di Rovasenda as chancellor of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences in 1974, a position he held until 1986.

In 1979, shortly after his election as pope, John Paul expressed his wish for a re-examination of the Galileo case. In February 1981, he asked di Rovasenda for a proposal as to how to go about it. On March 11, 1981, di Rovasenda responded, suggesting the creation of a commission with French Cardinal Gabriel-Marie Garrone as chair. John Paul took up the suggestion, and in October 1981 the commission met for the first time. The commission worked off and on until mid-1983, meeting seven times until Garrone fell ill. The body's activity was effectively suspended until 1990. In May of that year, French Cardinal Paul Poupard was asked to bring the commission's work to a close.

In summing up that work, Popupard said on Oct. 31, 1992:

> *Certain theologians ? failed to grasp the profound, non-literal meaning of the Scriptures when they described the physical structure of the created universe. This led them unduly to transpose a question of factual observation into the realm of faith.*
>
> It is in that historical and cultural framework, far removed from our own times, that Galileo's judges, unable to dissociate faith from an age-old cosmology, believed quite wrongly that the adoption of the Copernican revolution, in fact not yet definitively proven, was such as to undermine Catholic tradition, and that it was their duty to forbid its being taught. This subjective error of judgment, so clear to us today, led them to a disciplinary measure from which Galileo had much to suffer.

Looking back, di Rovasenda insists that what John Paul did was not a "rehabilitation" of Galileo or a "revision" of the church's original judgment, so much as a vindication for a more open point of view that has existed within Catholicism since the 17th century.

"There has always been within the church an opinion and a judgment that can be reconciled with Galileo's discoveries," di Rovasenda wrote. "Those who dissented from it were bound to ancient traditions and beliefs. It's only a matter of analyzing and rewriting something that was written in different times."

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