

Vatican should learn from Galileo mess, prelate says

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By Philip Pullella

VATICAN CITY (Reuters) - The Catholic Church should not fear scientific progress and possibly repeat the mistake it made when it condemned astronomer Galileo in the 17th century, a Vatican official said on Thursday in a rare self-criticism.

Galileo, who lived from 1564 to 1642, was condemned by the Inquisition in 1633 for asserting that the earth revolved around the sun.

Known as the father of astronomy, he wasn't fully rehabilitated by the Vatican until 1992, nearly 360 years later.

At a news conference presenting a new volume of documents on the Galileo case, Monsignor Sergio Pagano, head of the Vatican's secret archives, said today's Church and Vatican officials can learn from past mistakes and shed their diffidence toward science.

"Can this teach us something today? I certainly think so," he said, in a rare display of self-criticism for the Vatican.

"We should be careful, when we read the [Sacred Scriptures](#) and have to deal with scientific questions, to not make the same mistake now that was made then," he said.

"I am thinking of stem cells, I am thinking of eugenics, I am thinking of scientific research in these fields. Sometimes I have the impression that they are condemned with the same preconceptions that were used back then for the Copernican theory," he said.

The Inquisition, which sought out heresies, condemned Galileo for backing a theory of astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus because it clashed with the Bible which said: "God fixed the Earth upon its foundation, not to be moved forever."

Pagano said it was necessary for today's Church leaders and Vatican officials "to study more, to be more prudent, evaluate things" when dealing with scientific advances.

He said that while scientists should not presume they can teach the Church about faith, the Church should not be afraid to approach scientific issues with "much humility and circumspection."

The Catholic Church, other religious groups and anti-abortion advocates oppose embryonic stem cell research -- which scientists hope can lead to cures for diseases such as Alzheimer's and Parkinson's -- because it involves the destruction of embryos.

But the Church supports adult stem cell research, which has made advances in recent years.

The relationship between religion and science has been tense and tricky for centuries.

For example, Christian Churches were long hostile to the evolutionist theories of Charles Darwin because they conflicted with the literal biblical account of God creating the world in six days.

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