

BECOMING A GALILEIST



A few years ago, I read a book* that made me fall in love with Galileo. I don't just mean I learned to admire him; I mean I learned that if he had lived down the street at any time in my life, I would have wanted to be there every day to hear his latest thoughts and aspirations and what poetry he was reading, and to hear him read it. He had the true renaissance mind, curious about everything, and full of love for words — right and clear and musical words. He not only looked at the Moon, but turned his eyepiece over and looked at a moth, finding it quite lovely. And he outdid his opponents in argument because his arguments were full of common sense, easy to follow, full of good humor and the delight of his vision of the world.

And he loved the Church devoutly. Never in all his deep troubles with various Church officials did he ever criticize the Church or express dissatisfaction with our Faith, or wish he was Protestant. He recognized with clarity the true Catholicism of his supporters in the clergy, including some of the most prominent cardinals of his time in history; and he knew the simple human sinfulness of his detractors. When he was ready to publish his last work and found that he was forbidden to be published by Catholics no matter what the topic, he went about arranging for publication exactly in the way my teenage sons went about speeding without being caught. They did not doubt the importance of safe driving, only the wisdom of the politically motivated postings; and Galileo did not doubt his faith or cease to love the Church. He recognized the injustice of his political penalty and simply moved around it.

In my heart, Galileo is my friend and hero and I expect to meet him one day with Niels Stenson and Georges LeMaitre and my own father. As in his day, his followers were called Galileists, I will call myself a Galileist, and invite anyone with similar opinions to join this fellowship. To make my meaning clear, let me spell it out:

Who is a Galileist?

Being a Galileist is not about agreeing with Copernicus, because those people are called Copernicans. It doesn't mean believing the Sun is in the center of the universe, for it is not, and the Galileists were never committed to anything false.

It means believing with Galileo:

- 1) That purely scientific matters should be separated from matters of faith so that their discussion may be based on observation, experience, experiment, and careful measurement, along with the logical and reasonable implications of these essentially physical encounters.
- 2) That we ought to take seriously St. Augustine's warning from his essay *On the literal meaning of Genesis*, to wit:
 - Usually, even a non-Christian knows something about the earth, the heavens, and the other elements of this world, about the motion and orbit of the stars and even their size and relative positions... Now, it is a disgraceful and dangerous thing for an infidel to hear a Christian, presumably giving the meaning of Holy Scripture, talking nonsense on these topics; and we should take all means to prevent such an embarrassing situation...

I am aware that St. Augustine followed this warning with an effort to bring Christian cosmology up to date, his date, and that this effort, now vastly out of date, is quoted by unscientific moderns as evidence that Augustine supports them in their backwardness. The Galileist position is that Augustine's warning takes precedence over his outdated effort to show himself heeding it.
- 3) In union with the early Christian fathers, we should refrain from linking Christian faith with mat-

ters that are irrelevant to salvation, whether they can be measured or not.

Two words from One God

In sum, the Word of Scripture must not be set against the Word of Creation, both coming from the same source in the Trinity.

And as I am a Galileist, I shall call my opponents in these opinions by the name given to Galileo's opponents in his day. Being led by one Coulombe, which, in Italian, means "pigeon", they were called (by the Galileists) "the pigeon assembly".

*The book I read was Stillman Drake's Galileo, A Very Short Introduction.