

'God Created the Heavens and the Earth'

The Catholic Church Bridges Faith and Science

by Marge Fenelon

Being a Catholic and a professional in any field can be a challenge. It can be especially challenging in science-related fields, in which the focus is on logical thinking, information bytes and equations. Because of this, there's a growing movement to separate God from his own creation, sending faith and reason down opposite, and sometimes conflicting, paths. But Catholics in science know that the two are not incompatible. "Science was not founded in opposition to religion, as many people think," said Stephen Barr, professor of theoretical particle physics at the University of Delaware and author of *Modern Physics and Ancient Faith*. "Most of its great founders saw science as uncovering the laws by which God governed the universe." Barr uses 17th-century German mathematician Johannes Kepler as an example of the general attitude among scientists until recent times. Kepler once wrote, "I thank you, Lord God our Creator, that you have allowed me to see the beauty in your work of creation."

Barr also noted that German astronomer and mathematician Nicolaus Copernicus was a canon of the Frauenberg Cathedral, Italian physicist and astronomer Galileo attended daily Mass until his death, French physicist Blaise Pascal was a religious mystic, French philosopher Rene Descartes formulated philosophical arguments for the existence of God and the soul, English chemist Robert Boyle left a large sum of money to endow a public lecture series intended to counteract "notorious" atheists, and English physicist and alchemist Isaac Newton spent more time on theological studies than on physics.

Throughout history, the Church has been a driving force behind science, contributing both directly and indirectly to its advancement. Lawrence Principe of Johns Hopkins University has written that "it is clear from the historical record that the Catholic Church has been probably the largest single and longest-term patron of science in history." Since medieval times, the Church has given the world a stable institutional basis in the universities founded under its auspices and with its patronage.

With the rapid pace at which science is moving ahead, it's easy to overlook the significant number of major scientific discoveries made by Catholics, especially priests. For example, Gregor Mendel founded genetics, and Blessed Niels Stensen founded the field of modern geology. Marin Mersenne founded acoustics, Francesco Grimaldi discovered the diffraction of light, Angelo Secchi helped to found astrophysics, and Georges Lemaitre was the main architect of the big bang theory of cosmology. These disciplines are studied in universities all over the world, but with little attention to their Catholic roots.

Not only has the Church's contribution to science been overlooked, but also it has been sadly twisted. "The Catholic Church has, in the public eye, a reputation for being reluctant to support new innovations in science," said University of Notre Dame theology professor Celia Deane-Drummond, who is on staff at Notre Dame's John J. Reilly Center for Science, Technology and Values. "Its support is for the development of science in a certain direction, according to certain values; in particular, the value of the human [being], rather than opposition."

Its global network and influence worldwide has a special relevance to complicated issues that lend themselves to scientific analysis: Environmental issues, or sustainability and development, for example, require a local and a global response that the kind of solidarity possible through religious belief is able to generate. While sometimes controversial in the public sphere, the role of the Church can be tuned to the public good that puts the needs of the most vulnerable members of the human community in a key position by giving priority to their needs.

Maintaining the relationship between faith and reason is essential for the coming generations. While the Church supports science, science also supports the Church, so to speak. "It provides a rationale for our faith," said Jesuit Father Robert Spitzer, founder and president of the Magis Institute. Magis is the parent organization of a family of ministries dedicated to exploring the frontier of reason and faith. "It helps people see how intelligible God is. In science, we find tremendous evidence for the existence of God. Many working in science today, including some of the most prominent scientists, try to negate God's existence and prove he has nothing to do with science. They're guilty of culpable omission, and it just keeps getting worse."

In a recent effort to repair the breach between faith and reason, the Church has created a new foundation. On Jan. 19, Pope Benedict XVI launched the Science and Faith Foundation to become the philosophical bridge between theology and science. The foundation will be headquartered at the Holy See and builds on the work of the Science, Theology and the Ontological Quest (STOQ) project, which was created by Pope John Paul II in 2003. The foundation is under the direction of Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi, president of the Pontifical Council for Culture.

This effort is important because scientists like Elizabeth Sigmund are seeing firsthand what is happening now when science and faith are separated in the workplace. "Expectations are usually set very high in high-tech workplaces, and when you don't meet them, it can be very discouraging," said the pregnant mother and electrical engineer who works for a medical equipment company in Waukesha, Wis. "And I had that occur, after I had worked as hard as I thought I possibly could, and it still wasn't good enough for them. I felt like I was gaining confidence in my work, and performing well. Then I was told that I wasn't exceeding expectations."

After prayer and reflection, Sigmund realized that an important factor was missing in the equation. "I realized that I need to not depend on my co-workers or superiors for judgment, but I need to depend on God and my own consciousness, what I feel God is calling me to do," she said. "I need to rely on God and continue to remember that he doesn't just look at my work life; he looks at my life as a whole."

When science changes its view towards God, curricula and educational institutions do too, explained Father Spitzer. What's left is an educational system at all levels that teaches the next generation that they have no reason to believe in God. That's having an adverse effect on young people. "This is one of the main causes for young adults leaving the Church," he said. "From a pedagogical education point of view, this is a crisis. Young people will hemorrhage out of the Church. There's a tremendous amount at stake."

While it's true that there are brief periods in the Church's history of which she is not proud, those times are isolated and do not speak for the entire Church throughout the centuries. "We can't focus only on those times," said Father Spitzer. "We can't forget the Church's vital role in health care, education, institutions of higher learning and social welfare, among others. Yes, those things are terrible, but we can't leave out all the good that's been done."

Father Spitzer suggests a two-step plan of action to undo the harm that has been done to the relationship between faith and reason. First, priests, consecrated persons, religious orders and religious communities need to become further involved in the sciences. Second, they must teach young people the proof of God's existence as found in the sciences in addition to theology. "The current data being presented is misleading," said Father Spitzer, in the sciences because it is being intentionally skewed in order to disprove God's existence. "That's what our kids are up against. They're not being given the truth, and we have to present them with the truth, or we'll lose them. We have to be vigilant, vigilant, vigilant!"

The Vatican is looking forward to engaging the culture about faith and science. "The question for us is how to offer a coherent vision of society, culture and the human being to people who would like to understand where to put these dimensions — the spiritual and religious and the scientific," the Science and Faith Foundation's executive director, Father Tomasz Trafny, said when the Vatican announced the new project to focus on "the possibility of being believers at the dawn of the Third Millennium without renouncing scientific progress. This is an important step," he continued, "because we are moving from being a simple project to merge learning between the pontifical universities in Rome to being a new entity recognized by the Holy Father as a reference point for all dialogue involving science and faith."

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INFORMATION

John J. Reilly Center for Science,
Theology and Values, Reilly.nd.edu
Magis Institute, Magis.us

Vatican's Science, Theology and the Ontological Quest

Go to: "Evidence for God From Contemporary Physics" on YouTube to hear Father Spitzer's lecture.

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