

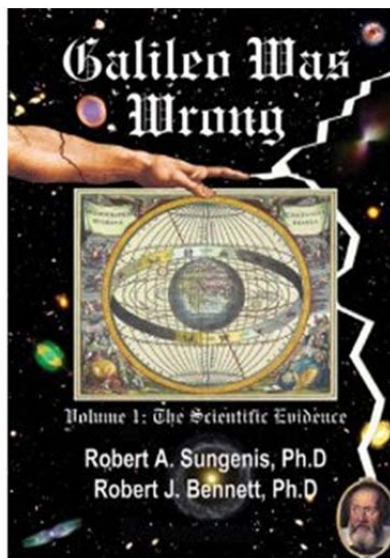
# Did Galileo ...

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In the 700 page book *Galileo Was Wrong: The Church Was Right* (2010), published by CAI (Catholics Apologetics International), the authors Robert Sungenis and Robert Bennett quote words from Galileo that “seem” to indicate that before he died, he denounced the Copernican system as false.

The quote is from a letter written by Galileo to Francesco Rinuccini, 29 March 1641. It is from a reliable source; i.e., Stillman Drake, *Galileo At Work: His Scientific Biography*, (Chicago, London, The University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 417. Here it is:

## Recant of Copernicanism Before He Died?



*“The falsity of the Copernican system should not in any way be called into question, above all, not by Catholics, since we have the unshakeable authority of the Sacred Scripture, interpreted by the most erudite theologians, whose consensus gives us certainty regarding the stability of the Earth, situated in the center, and the motion of the sun around the Earth. The conjectures employed by Copernicus and his followers in maintaining the contrary thesis are all sufficiently rebutted by that most solid argument deriving from the omnipotence of God. He is able to bring about in different ways, indeed, in an infinite number of ways, things that, according to our opinion and observation, appear to happen in one particular way. We should not seek to shorten the hand of God and boldly insist on something beyond the limits of our competence ....”*

According to the reasoning of Sungenis, since Galileo had a “death-bed” conversion, then Geocentrism, as a cosmology, is true. That is, Galileo’s confession is another nail in the coffin of Copernicanism (RIP). Remember the buzz in the 1990s that Charles Darwin purportedly recanted of his theory of evolution before he died? Scholarship has shown that this “report” was just a story (invented by Lady Hope in 1915). To me, it was interesting to see how Christians jumped on this and used it as “evidence” to prove evolution wrong. Their reasoning? If the author of a theory recants of that theory on his death bed, the theory must be wrong. This is the reasoning of Sungenis; he is using this Galileo “confession” to justify his belief that Geocentrism is true and, by consequence, Heliocentrism is false.

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What Sungenis is doing is a classic example of forcing a quote support a thesis without considering the context. Many authors do this and I'm sure I have been guilty of the same. This is easy to do if you have an "axe to grind." Since Sungenis believes the truth of Geocentrism, he will "go looking" for support of his belief anywhere and this "Galileo find" is to him a "magic trump card."

What questions should one ask of this quote?

1. When was it written? 1641.
2. From #1, how old was Galileo when it was written? 76 years of age (he died at age 77). He was blind by 1638 so he was not able to read the document. Good questions for follow up are:

"Did he really write it or did someone else?"

"If he did write it, he had to dictate it. Did he do the dictation?"

"Was the dictation accurate or was it rewritten with a specific motive in mind?"

3. What is the context of these words?

The ramifications of Question 2 are very important if they can be answered. Let's assume Galileo truly dictated these words and focus on Question 3, the context, for Sungenis ignores it. The Latin source is *Commercio epistolare di Galileo Galilei*, Volume 2 (p. 361) and Google Books has it online. The English translation above follows the Latin. To find the context, all one has to do is look above to note that this letter has a subtitle. Here it is in Latin:

*"Scherzosamente da principio, quindi con altissimo ragionamento risolve una dubitazione insorta nell'animo del Rinuccini contro il Sistema Copernicano : e cio' in risposta alla precedente del 23 Marzo."*

Translated into English: "Jokingly at first, than with high reasoning resolves a doubt of Rinuccini about the Copernican system, as an answer of previous letter of March 23."

This puts another spin on the matter, doesn't it? It would be reasonable to conclude that this is the same literary device used in the "Dialogo" (i.e., *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems: Ptolemaic and Copernican*, 1632); that is:

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*Geocentricity:* The earth, unmovable and stationary, is the center of the universe and all other celestial objects go around it.

*Heliocentricity:* The earth and its associated planets orbit the Sun which is the center of our local solar system, a system that possesses galactic rotational dynamics.

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*Grant, as a context for one's argument, what the other side says is true. Then, pick it to pieces.*

Later this letter says “E come che io stimi insufficienti le osservazioni e conietture Copernicane, altrettanto reputo piu' fallaci ed erronee quelle di Tolomeo, di Aristotele e de'loro seguaci.” In English, “As I consider insufficient the observation and conjectures of Copernicus as well I maintain more wrong those by Tolomeus, Aristotle and their followers.” Hence, Copernicus is “insufficient,” as at the time, in effect, it was (Kepler and Newton polished and refined it). But Tolomeus, et. al., are, according to Galileo, *wrong*.

Lesson learned? Be careful how quotes are used and interpreted (i.e., context, context, context!). In the case of Sungeis, he ignores the page from which he pulled the quote (or, did he merely quote a secondary source, i.e., Drake, and not go to the source himself?). If he did go to the source, his omission is telling, *telling on him*. Hence, what else is he fudging? Can we truly trust anything else he is saying?

I'll leave the answer to this question to the discerning reader.