



The Holy See

***ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO PARTICIPANTS IN THE COLLOQUIUM
SPONSORED BY THE VATICAN OBSERVATORY
ON THE OCCASION OF THE INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF ASTRONOMY***

*Clementine Hall
Friday, 30 October 2009*

*Your Eminence,
Ladies and Gentlemen,*

I am pleased to greet this assembly of distinguished astronomers from throughout the world meeting in the Vatican for the celebration of the International Year of Astronomy, and I thank Cardinal Giovanni Lajolo for his kind words of introduction. This celebration, which marks the four hundredth anniversary of Galileo Galilei's first observations of the heavens by telescope, invites us to consider the immense progress of scientific knowledge in the modern age and, in a particular way, to turn our gaze anew to the heavens in a spirit of wonder, contemplation and commitment to the pursuit of truth, wherever it is to be found.

Your meeting also coincides with the inauguration of the new facilities of the Vatican Observatory in Castel Gandolfo. As you know, the history of the Observatory is in a very real way linked to the figure of Galileo, the controversies which surrounded his research, and the Church's attempt to attain a correct and fruitful understanding of the relationship between science and religion. I take this occasion to express my gratitude not only for the careful studies which have clarified the precise historical context of Galileo's condemnation, but also for the efforts of all those committed to ongoing dialogue and reflection on the complementarity of faith and reason in the service of an integral understanding of man and his place in the universe. I am particularly grateful to the staff of the Observatory, and to the friends and benefactors of the Vatican Observatory Foundation, for their efforts to promote research, educational opportunities and dialogue between the Church and the world of science.

The International Year of Astronomy is meant not least to recapture for people throughout our world the extraordinary wonder and amazement which characterized the great age of discovery in the sixteenth century. I think, for example, of the exultation felt by the scientists of the Roman College who just a few steps from here carried out the observations and calculations which led to the worldwide adoption of the Gregorian calendar. Our own age, poised at the edge of perhaps even greater and more far-ranging scientific discoveries, would benefit from that same sense of awe and the desire to attain a truly humanistic synthesis of knowledge which inspired the fathers of modern science. Who can deny that responsibility for the future of humanity, and indeed respect for nature and the world around us, demand – today as much as ever – the careful observation, critical judgement, patience and discipline which are essential to the modern scientific method? At the same time, the great scientists of the age of discovery remind us also that true knowledge is always directed to wisdom, and, rather than restricting the eyes of the mind, it invites us to lift our gaze to the higher realm of the spirit.

Knowledge, in a word, must be understood and pursued in all its liberating breadth. It can certainly be reduced to calculation and experiment, yet if it aspires to be wisdom, capable of directing man in the light of his first beginnings and his final ends, it must be committed to the pursuit of that ultimate truth which, while ever beyond our complete grasp, is nonetheless the key to our authentic happiness and freedom (cf. Jn 8:32), the measure of our true humanity, and the criterion for a just relationship with the physical world and with our brothers and sisters in the great human family.

Dear friends, modern cosmology has shown us that neither we, nor the earth we stand on, is the centre of our universe, composed of billions of galaxies, each of them with myriads of stars and planets. Yet, as we seek to respond to the challenge of this Year – to lift up our eyes to the heavens in order to rediscover our place in the universe – how can we not be caught up in the marvel expressed by the Psalmist so long ago? Contemplating the starry sky, he cried out with wonder to the Lord: “When I see your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars which you set in place, what is man that you should be mindful of him, or the son of man, that you should care for him?” (Ps 8:4-5). It is my hope that the wonder and exaltation which are meant to be the fruits of this International Year of Astronomy will lead beyond the contemplation of the marvels of creation to the contemplation of the Creator, and of that Love which is the underlying motive of his creation – the Love which, in the words of Dante Alighieri, “moves the sun and the other stars” (*Paradiso* XXXIII, 145). Revelation tells us that, in the fullness of time, the Word through whom all things were made came to dwell among us. In Christ, the new Adam, we acknowledge the true centre of the universe and all history, and in him, the incarnate Logos, we see the fullest measure of our grandeur as human beings, endowed with reason and called to an eternal destiny.

With these reflections, dear friends, I greet all of you with respect and esteem, and I offer prayerful good wishes for your research and teaching. Upon you, your families and dear ones I cordially

invoke Almighty God's blessings of wisdom, joy, and peace.

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