

The Church and science

The Church teaches all her children to love nature because of its beauty, in which she sees the vestiges of the Almighty. Catholic theologians are not afraid of scientific research; they welcome it and keep abreast of it. Science and religion come from the one source, God, eternal Truth; therefore there can be no real antagonism between them. That is why the Catholic Church, largely through its priesthood, has always been and always will be science's greatest friend.

The following are but a few of the more outstanding names of famous scientists numbered among the priests and Religious of the Catholic Church:

Turning to the world of science, St. Albert the Great was far in advance of his time as a student of natural science and even compiled an encyclopedia.

Roger Bacon, a Franciscan Monk of the thirteenth century, is rightly called the Father of Experimental Science.

Jose Algue (born 1856), a Jesuit, who invented the barocyclonometer, used to detect the approach of cyclones;

Bartholomeus Anglicus (13th cent.), a Franciscan who wrote the first great medieval encyclopedia of science;

Joseph Bayma (d. 1892), an Italian Jesuit, author of Molecular Mechanics,

Ruggiero Boscovich (d. 1787), a Jesuit astronomer, famous engineer and inventor of a micrometer which required no artificial illumination of the field of the telescope. He was a Fellow of the Royal Society of London;

Louis Bourgeois (d. 1878), one of the first to present and develop the problem of the eoliths [chipped flints];

Paul Camboue (d. 1929), a Jesuit missionary and geologist, made valuable investigations on the large spiders of Madagascar, discovered the silk thread spun by them, and advanced the art of spinning and weaving;

George Camel (d. 1706), a Jesuit botanist, after whom the evergreen shrub Camellia is named, made valuable investigation of the plants and natural history of the Philippines;

Jean Baptiste Carnoy (d. 1899), founder of the science of cytology [development of cells];

Bonaventure Cavaliere (d. 1647), popularized the use of logarithms in Italy and was renowned for his "Method of Indivisibles," a forerunner of integral calculus;

Christopher Clavius (d. 1612), a Jesuit, the "Euclid of the 16th century," Vernier's precursor and architect of the Gregorian Calendar reform;

Nicolaus Copernicus (d. 1543), a Canon of Frauenburg, certainly a cleric and a member of the Third Order of St. Dominic, founder of modern astronomy;

Procopius Divisch (d. 1765), made instruments necessary for his outstanding experiments in hydraulics and electricity; one of the first to apply electricity to the cure of disease; erected a lightning conductor before Franklin's suggestions were known;

Joseph Eckhel (d. 1798), founder of the scientific study of the coins of classical antiquity;

Charles Michel de l'Epee (d. 1789), inventor of the sign alphabet for the deaf and dumb;

Pierre Gassendi (d. 1655), the “Bacon of France,” first to observe the transit of Mercury across the sun’s disc;

Andrew Gordon (d. 1751), first used a cylinder of glass to produce frictional electricity; invented electrical chimes;

Francesco Grimaldi (d. 1663), discovered the diffraction, interference and dispersion of light passing through a prism;

Rene Just Hauy (d. 1822), pioneer in pyro-electricity and father of crystallography;

Lawrence Hengler (d. 1858), invented the horizontal pendulum used in seismographs;

Pierre Heude (d. 1902), zoologist, author of the standard work on the land molluscs of China;

Athanasius Kircher (d. 1680), inventor of the magic lantern; authority on volcanoes; deciphered hieroglyphics; perfected the speaking tube and the aeolian harp; first definitely stated the germ theory of disease;

Thomas Linacre (d. 1524), founder of the Royal College of Physicians, London;

Edme Mariotte (d. 1684), established the law of gases that bears his name;

Gregory Mendel (d. 1884), author of Mendel’s Law of Heredity;

Giuseppe Piazzi (d. 1826), discovered the first planetoid, Ceres, January 1st, 1801;

Jean Picard (d. 1682), first accurately measured a degree of the meridian;

Jean Pitra (d . 1889), Cardinal, archeologist, discovered the “Inscription of Autun”;

Giovanni Battista Riccioli (d. 1671), introduced the lunar nomenclature still in use;

Bernardino de Sahagun (d. 1590), Aztec archeologist, compiled Aztec history, grammar and dictionary;

Christopher Scheiner (d. 1650), invented the pantograph and a telescope which made possible the first systematic investigation of sun spots;

Berthold Schwarz (13th century), inventor of firearms;

Angelo Secchi (d. 1878), inventor of the meteorograph, laid foundations of the unique “Sun Records,” discovered the “flash spectrum,” discovered the five Secchi types of stars;

Lazzaro Spallanzani (d. 1799), first to explain correctly the nature of the spermatazoa and the physiologic process of digestion. Proved regeneration of matter and the falsity of spontaneous generation;

Niels Steensen (d. 1686), bishop, “father of geology,” discovered the excretory duct of the parotid glands;

Basil Valentine (14th century), founder of analytical chemistry, “the last alchemist and the first chemist;”

Francesco de Vico (d. 1848), discovered six comets.

For the first geographical chart or map, we are indebted to Fra Mauro of Venice (d. 1459);

The father of comparative philology is Hervas y Panduro (d. 1809);

The first Sanskrit grammar was written by Paolino di san Bartolomeo in 1790.

Cardinal Baronius (1538-1607) and other Catholic scholars are the founders of historical criticism.

It was, indeed, Catholic bishops and priests who laid the basis of the science of national economy and so enabled the economic life of nations to be placed on a scientific foundation.

To say that the Church is the enemy of progress, culture or civilization is a most wicked calumny.

The Catholic priesthood is the greatest civilizing agency in the history of mankind.

In the sphere of art, one can trace the influence of the Catholic priesthood from the days of the Catacombs to Fra Angelico and to the Beuron school of the present day.

Agriculture, mining and the handicrafts owe an enormous debt to the priesthood.

In regard to strictly social work, it was the Catholic priesthood— from St. Paul to Cardinal Lavigerie, who died in 1892— that was principally responsible for the abolition of slavery and the slave-trade.

The first medical faculty in Europe, the famous School of Salerno, was, like all the great Universities, established by Catholic priests. In 1340, for example, the University of Oxford had about 30,000 students. It was due “entirely to the clergy of the Church of Rome” wrote Hume, that the precious literature of antiquity was preserved from extinction. The idea of scientific progress is of purely Catholic origin, while the slogan “Education for All” was first uttered by a Pope— Innocent III in the thirteenth century. Long before any university was founded, cathedral schools and other renowned scientific institutions, directed by Catholic priests, worked in the interests of secular knowledge. Wherever there was an elementary school, it was conducted by priests.

Immediately after the invention of printing, it was the demand and taste of the clergy that created a market for books. Erasmus complained: “The booksellers declare that before the outbreak of the Reform they disposed of 3,000 volumes more quickly than they now sell 600.”

Early Humanism was supported by famous clerics like Erasmus and Petrarch; the greatest Spanish writers of the seventeenth century were priests: Cervantes (author of Don Quixote), Lope de Vega (who dominated the Golden Age of drama), Calderon (writer of The Purgatory of St. Patrick) and others.

It was the Catholic priesthood which from the end of the fourth century converted the German hordes and so made possible the great work of Charlemagne in founding the Holy Roman Empire four hundred years later. When Europe was largely Christian, it was the Catholic priesthood which carried the Gospel to pagan lands. China was covered with missionary stations even in the fourteenth century. From that day to this, the work of preaching the Gospel has gone on all over the world. The famous Reductions of Paraguay— the communal mission villages for the Indians established in the 17th century— were but one example of the beneficial results of an activity that is as universal as it is untiring in its efforts, even for the material well-being of men. Bancroft, an American historian, declared that in the French colonies in America, no notable city was founded, no river explored, no cape circumnavigated, without a Jesuit showing the way.

The few names mentioned above are some little indication of the scope and work of the clergy in every branch of human achievement. But add to that list the names of all those who have been taught by the Catholic priesthood and you will have a majority of the great names of the Christian era.

As the Bible is the writing of God’s Holy Spirit, so Nature is the work of His hands; they cannot contradict one another. But, rightly, the theologians ask for facts, and not mere theories. The latter are proved false if they contradict what is known to be God’s truth. Too much modern scientific theory is accepted as fact, especially by those who are always ready to decry religion.

Ripley, Rev. Canon Francis (1999-12-01). This is the Faith