

# Catholic scientists debunk movie's depiction of science, faith clash

ST. PAUL, Minn. – A bomb. A secret sect of anti-Catholic scientists. A church straddling ancient traditions and the modern world.

Although the plot of “Angels & Demons” is a hunt for centuries-old clues that could lead to a hidden explosive set to blow apart Vatican City, a recurring theme in the movie revolves around the relationship between faith and science.

According to the movie, scheduled to open in theaters May 15, the two have been at odds since the springtime of science and today they continue to see themselves in antagonistic and sometimes irreconcilable terms.

But this perception is far from reality, according to Jesuit Brother Guy Consolmagno, an astronomer at the Vatican Observatory in Arizona and Castel Gandolfo, the papal villa outside Rome.

“Quite simply, the church has always supported science,” Brother Consolmagno told The Catholic Spirit, newspaper of the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis. Modern science was born in European Catholic universities and some of history’s best scientists were clergymen, he noted.

That’s why the books of Dan Brown – the author of “Angels & Demons” and “The Da Vinci Code” – are in the bookstore’s fiction section, where they belong, he said.

Father Tadeusz Pacholczyk, director of education at the National Catholic Bioethics Center in Philadelphia whose column appears occasionally in The Catholic Review, said misunderstandings about the compatibility of faith and science arise because of the different “languages” they use.

In actuality, science and religion have distinct yet compatible domains, he added.

Brother Consolmagno said the myth of the “war” between science and religion grew out of the Enlightenment at the end of the 19th century. In order to attract students

to the emerging German secular universities, Enlightenment supporters portrayed the church as anti-science and against progress, he said.

“It really doesn’t go back to Galileo; it goes back to the politics of what was happening in Europe and America 100 years ago,” he said.

The case of 17th-century astronomer Galileo Galilei is the often-used example of a collision between the church and science. Galileo was condemned by the church’s Holy Office for suspected heresy in 1633 for maintaining that the earth revolved around the sun but he was “rehabilitated” in 1992 by a special Vatican commission established by Pope John Paul II.

The Galileo controversy has taught the church to be careful when speaking on matters of science, Father Pacholczyk said. For example, on the topic of evolution, the church continues to engage in an ongoing discussion about the proper understanding of evolutionary science.

A person seeking to understand humankind’s place in the universe should seek to understand both faith and science, the priest said.

As Brother Consolmagno put it: “My religion tells me God created the universe. My science tells me how he did it.”

Although the church is not against science, he said it acts as a check on science’s rapidly advancing abilities. In the early 20th century, for example, the Catholic Church called for a stop to eugenics, which aims to improve the human species by selective breeding.

“Eugenics is bad science,” Brother Consolmagno added. “Even if it is good science, it still would have been wrong. That’s an example, I think, where people who treat science without religion can fall into grave error.”

Today, the church rejects technologies that devalue the dignity of the human person, such as cloning, embryonic stem-cell research and the production of weapons of mass terror.