

Science, astronomy can foster appreciation for creation, pope says

VATICAN CITY – The discoveries of science and astronomy can help people better appreciate the wonders of God’s creation, Pope Benedict XVI said.

Before reciting the Angelus with the faithful in St. Peter’s Square Dec. 21, the pope said that since the day marked the winter solstice it was the perfect time to greet all those who would take part in next year’s celebration of the International Year of Astronomy and the 400th anniversary of Galileo Galilei’s first use of the telescope to observe the cosmos.

Just as the psalmist sang “the heavens declare the glory of God; the sky proclaims its builder’s craft,” he said, scientific discoveries and the laws of nature “are a great stimulus to contemplate the works of the Lord with gratitude.”

The pope praised some of his predecessors who embraced scientific inquiry: 10th-century Pope Sylvester II, who was a scientist; 16th-century Pope Gregory XIII, who reformed the calendar with the help of a Jesuit astronomer; and 19th-century Pope St. Pius X, who designed sundials.

The obelisk in the center of St. Peter’s Square is also a sundial, the pope said, and the shadow it casts along the pavement is the longest on this shortest day of the year.

He said astronomy was used to help mark out the rhythm of daily prayers.

“The Angelus, for example, is recited in the morning, at noon and in the evening, and clocks were adjusted according to the sundial, which was used in ancient times to recognize ‘true noon,’” he said.

In the 17th century, the Roman Inquisition found Galileo guilty of “vehement suspicion of heresy” for asserting that the earth revolved around the sun. In 1992, Pope John Paul II said the church had erred in condemning the scientist.

Pope Benedict has praised Galileo as being as man of faith “who saw nature as a book written by God.”