

Vatican evolution congress to exclude creationism, intelligent design

VATICAN CITY – Speakers invited to attend a Vatican-sponsored congress on the evolution debate will not include proponents of creationism and intelligent design, organizers said.

The Pontifical Council for Culture, Rome's Pontifical Gregorian University and the University of Notre Dame in Indiana are organizing an international conference in Rome March 3-7 as one of a series of events marking the 150th anniversary of the publication of Charles Darwin's "The Origin of Species."

Jesuit Father Marc Leclerc, a philosophy professor at the Gregorian, told Catholic News Service Sept. 16 that organizers "wanted to create a conference that was strictly scientific" and that discussed rational philosophy and theology along with the latest scientific discoveries.

He said arguments "that cannot be critically defined as being science, or philosophy or theology did not seem feasible to include in a dialogue at this level and, therefore, for this reason we did not think to invite" supporters of creationism and intelligent design.

Father Leclerc was one of several organizers speaking at a Sept. 16 Vatican press conference about the congress, part of the culture council's "Science, Technology and the Ontological Quest," or STOQ project.

Archbishop Gianfranco Ravasi, president of the Pontifical Council for Culture, said the other extreme of the evolution debate – proponents of an overly scientific conception of evolution and natural selection – also were not invited.

He reiterated that evolutionary theory "is not incompatible with the teachings of the Catholic Church or the Bible's message."

Gennaro Auletta, professor of philosophy at the Gregorian and head of the STOQ project, said organizers hope the encounter will help theologians and philosophers be “a bit more humble and learn to listen a bit more” to what science is unveiling about humanity and the world.

Mr. Auletta said Popes Pius XII, John Paul II and Benedict XVI have expressed “a fundamental interest” in the theory of biological evolution. However, the pontiffs’ hopes that Catholics would gain greater understanding of the issues has not yet materialized, he said.

Phillip Sloan, a professor at Notre Dame, told the press conference the evolution debate, “especially in the United States, has been taking place without a strong Catholic presence ... and the discourse has suffered accordingly.”

While there has been Catholic commentary on the compatibility of faith and evolutionary theories, there is no definitive written source to which people can refer to learn the church’s position, he said.

Mr. Sloan said he hoped the March conference and other initiatives planned by Notre Dame and the Vatican would foster the development of “informed Catholic thought” on the subject.