

# BACK TO SCHOOL: CATHOLICISM IN TEXTBOOKS

*Catalyst senior editor Christopher Iasiello analyzed textbooks from four major publishers to determine how Catholicism is covered. The following are his findings.*

A bill passed in California's state senate earlier this year would require California history textbooks to include positive coverage of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people. It's not certain the bill will become law (it must be approved by the governor), but certain provisions of the bill have since been dropped.

Nevertheless, the Catholic League has taken the opportunity to look at how the Catholic Church is being treated in textbooks. Since the law regarding sexual orientation is being proposed for California, we analyzed textbooks that the California Department of Education has approved for schools to purchase with state money. We looked at two books each from four major publishers, used in the sixth and seventh grades in California:

## Glencoe McGraw Hill

*Discovering Our Past: Ancient Civilizations*

*Discovering Our Past: Medieval and Early Modern Times*

## Prentice Hall

*Ancient Civilizations*

*Medieval and Early Modern Times*

## McDougal Littell

*World History: Ancient Civilizations*

*World History: Medieval and Early Modern Times*

## Teachers' Curriculum Institute

*History Alive!: The Ancient World*

## *History Alive!: The Medieval World and Beyond*

(We attempted to analyze two books from Harcourt, but they were not available at press time.)

The textbooks are well laid out. They all cover a wide range of Catholic subjects, including Saints Francis of Assisi, Thomas More and Thomas Aquinas. While much of what is written about the Church is accurate, the texts do contain errors. The most egregious example of this is the story of Galileo.

There is much confusion regarding Galileo's story. The astronomer is most famous for presenting as fact Nicholas Copernicus' theory that the earth, and other heavenly bodies, revolve around the sun. The belief at the time, based on Scripture, was that all heavenly bodies revolved around the earth, and the earth was the center of the universe.

Some of the popular myths about Galileo are: he was ordered by the Church to give up his scientific study, he was guilty of heresy, he was tortured and imprisoned, and he knew that the Copernican theory was correct and that the church was wrong.

The textbooks we analyzed do nothing to dispel these myths. Prentice Hall's *Discovering Our Past: Medieval and Early Modern Times* has this to say about Galileo and his teaching that all heavenly objects did not revolve around earth: "Church officials warned Galileo to give up his study of the heavens" (p. 572).

The Church did not, in fact, warn Galileo to give up his studies. Pope Urban VIII actually encouraged Galileo to continue his studies, but to present the Copernican theory of the universe as a theory, not as a fact.

McDougal Littell's *World History: Medieval and Early Modern Times* has this to say on the subject: "But Galileo knew he was right, and so did other scientists" (p. 504).

Galileo may have thought he was right, but there was in fact no scientific way at the time to prove his conclusion on the Copernican theory.

Prentice Hall's book also says: "Under threat of torture, the 70-year-old scientist denied his belief in a sun-centered universe. Galileo is said to have left his trial muttering, 'And yet, it moves'" (p. 573).

Galileo was never tortured, and the quote attributed to him was actually made up by a writer 125 year after the trial.

Books published by Prentice Hall, Glencoe McGraw Hill, and Teachers' Curriculum Institute write that Galileo was tried for heresy. The following passage is from Teachers' Curriculum Institute's *History Alive!: The Medieval World and Beyond*: "At Galileo's trial, church leaders accused him of heresy" (p. 393).

Galileo was not convicted of heresy. The astronomer was condemned for defying a papal council's 1616 edict that it may be heresy (although the 1616 council did not actually use the word "heresy") to teach that the sun was the center of the universe.

Although not contained in the texts we analyzed, another popular myth regarding Galileo is that the Church admitted only in the 1990's that Galileo was right. The Church gave Galileo's printed works its imprimatur within 100 years of the astronomer's death, well before science was capable of proving the Copernican theory. It was not until 150 years later that science was able to provide such proof. A pontifical academy's report in 1992 only stated that theologians failed to understand that the Bible's teachings on the universe were not literal.

People who wish to discredit the Church's other teachings (on abortion, female ordination, gay rights, etc.) will use the myths about Galileo as

examples of where the Church went wrong. The fact that these myths continue to appear in textbooks is cause for concern.