

Vatican honors Galileo

The Vatican has joined a commemoration of the 400th anniversary of Galileo Galilei's demonstration of his telescope on a Roman hilltop.

Heliographs, astrolabes and other antique astrological instruments that belong to the Vatican Observatory stood alongside contemporary art inspired by Galileo and his science: rows of intensely hot, blindingly bright floodlights simulating the sun; a performance by a Tibetan musician playing a telescope-like horn, Canadian Press reports.

The event took place Thursday night at the American Academy in Rome, a research centre for the arts and humanities whose gardens lie on the exact spot where, on the night of April 14, 1611, Galileo showed off his telescope for the first time to the most important scholars of his time.

Galileo made the first complete astronomical telescope and used it to gather evidence that the Earth revolved around the sun. Church teaching at the time had placed Earth at the centre of the universe.

"It's not a simple 'The church was against science,'" said Brother Guy Consolmagno, a Jesuit astronomer at the Vatican's Observatory. "The church never speaks with one voice on these things."

Galileo's demonstration 400 years ago Thursday, to Jesuit scientists and Federico Cesi, who founded an important early academy of sciences, was one of the key events in 1611 that helped propel him into top scientific circles two years after he made his first celestial observations.

"In some ways this is the high-water mark for Galileo: He is accepted by the Jesuits at the Roman College, who are the authorities in science in the church. He's accepted by Prince Cesi, who is the authority among the nobility," Consolmagno said. "Both were at this demonstration. And with those people behind him, I'm sure he felt confident he could withstand any attacks."