

Pope's Views on Science Invoke Spirited Debate

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As the pope celebrated his 81st birthday this week amid a warm welcome in Washington, D.C., there was no doubt that believers have embraced his religious conviction. (Watch video of the pope's D.C. mass.)

But his scientific positions have both believers and non-believers scratching their heads.

Even before Joseph Ratzinger became Pope Benedict XVI in 2005, he came under fire for what some say are his anti-science views.

He has been criticized for comments about the 17th-century astronomer Galileo, stem cell research, and evolution.

Most recently, the pontiff made headlines when he decided to relocate the Vatican Observatory currently housed at the papal summer residence near Rome. Some media outlets painted the move as an eviction of sorts, and therefore a sign of Pope Benedict's dismissive approach to science.

But scientists who are also Catholics say the pope is not knocking scientific progress—instead he's trying to push a dialog between science and faith that was also important to his predecessor, Pope John Paul II.

In a speech written earlier this year, the pope put his views about science into an analogy: "The tree of knowledge is fed through spiritual roots," he wrote, "and without those it will wither and die."

Observatory on the Move

That's not to say faith should stand without the pursuit of knowledge, said Father Christopher Corbally, vice director at the Vatican Observatory.

"He's an excellent theologian," Corbally said of Pope Benedict. "What theologians need to do is pay attention to the best science of the time."

The Catholic Church has pursued scientific research as far back as the 1500s, when it used astronomy to reconcile the calendar created by Julius Caesar after it became out of step with the seasons.