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But 'time is ripe' for 'fresh reconsideration'

□ (ANSA) - Vatican City, January 29 - The Vatican has shelved plans to put up a statue to Galileo Galilei, the Italian astronomer famously forced to recant his discovery that the earth moves around the sun.

"The project has been shelved for the moment," the Vatican's culture chief Msgr Gianfranco Ravasi told reporters as he outlined events for World Astronomy Year.

Confirming press reports, Ravasi said a preparatory sketch for the statue had been made before it was decided not to make the statue.

He did not elaborate on the decision apart from saying that there was a sponsor who was then told to spend the money on a scientific project in Africa.

The statue to Galileo was to have stood outside the Pontifical Academy of Science, according to reports. Ravasi went on to say that the Church was ready to "further reconsider the Galileo case", 17 years after Pope John Paul II admitted it had erred in condemning him.

"The time is now ripe for a fresh reconsideration of the figure of Galileo and the whole Galileo case," he said, presenting a conference that will take place in Florence later this year.

"Galileo deserves all our appreciation and gratitude," Ravasi said.

The conference, entitled The Galileo Case, An Historical, Philosophical and Theological Re-reading, will take place at Florence's Stensen Institute on May 26-30.

Galileo (1564-1642), is regarded as the father of modern astronomy.

He created his first telescope in 1608 and discovered three of Jupiter's moons and the various phases of Venus.

The two sets of observations played a crucial role in his conclusion that the sun was at the centre of the universe, rather than the Earth, as was commonly believed at the time.

Church opposition to Galileo's sun-centred model flared up immediately in 1612 and would dog Galileo for the rest of his life.

In 1633 he was tried and convicted of heresy and a ban was imposed on the publication or reprinting of any of his works. He was then placed under house arrest, where he spent the remaining nine years of his life as the world returned to the comfortable idea of an immovable earth.

Galileo is said to have muttered the famous phrase 'Eppure si muove' ("But it does move") as he left his trial.

In 1992, after a 13-year reconsideration of the case, Pope John Paul II admitted that the Church had made a "tragic mistake" in rejecting Galileo's heliocentric views.

But he also exculpated the astronomer's chief accuser, who was later canonised, as only doing his duty.

Pope Benedict XVI, who succeeded John Paul in 2005, last year had to cancel a visit to Rome University after a protest by academics against his defence, while still a cardinal, of Galileo's trial.

Speaking in Parma in 1990, Benedict said the trial was "reasonable and just".