

Heaven gazers seek the answers hidden in the stars

When asking the big questions and being open to the mysteries of the universe, there may be none better than children or astronomers.

Both Father José Gabriel Funes, director of the Vatican Observatory, and Dr. Neil Comins, astrophysicist and author of fourteen books, began their lifelong interest in the stars as youth.

For Funes, his passion began through watching the astronauts land on the moon and then he had the gift of parents who encouraged him to continue studying.

For Comins, it began with a sense of dissatisfaction at seeing his teachers put equations on the board: “I wasn’t going to put up with it anymore, just being told what rather than why.”



Fr. Jose Funés, of the Vatican Observatory, says the Church was always interested in science. Alessia Giuliani, Catholic Press Photo

Funes and Comins will be featured speakers at events in Camrose and Edmonton in mid-November.

Comins’ dissatisfaction to a key aspect of his teaching and research – asking what he calls “what if” questions.

SCIENCE IN PROCESS

“Essentially nothing in science is gospel truth. . . . Some of the things we believe today are wrong and they will be corrected as time goes by. . . . Science is a process. In science we take nothing on faith.”

While the scientist takes nothing on faith, but is continually asking why, this

need not lead to a false split between science and faith.

Funes explains, "It's part of the history of the Church that was always interested in science." The Vatican Observatory traces its beginnings to calendar reform back in the 16th century, and from that point forward has existed as one of the oldest astronomical institutes in the world.

FOREST OBSERVATORY

Jesuit astronomer Buenaventura Suárez had an observatory in South America in the 1700s. "Imagine that" Funes exclaims, "an observatory in the middle of the forest in the 1700s!"

"The Church is interested in science, in culture, in everything that is human," explains Funes. The Vatican Observatory sees itself as a "small bridge – not the only bridge – but it is a bridge between the Catholic Church and the world of sciences."

In some ways the observatory is a kind of frontier, "the universe – the last frontier," Funes said.

"People are sometimes surprised to see that there are believers who are able to do good science with research and at the same time to believe in God. . . . Unfortunately, the image today is that the scientist is an atheist; that's not true."

Exploring the mysteries of the universe has led both men to wonder about the possibility of life on other planets.

Funes says, "We live in a universe of a hundred billion galaxies each with a hundred billion stars; maybe those stars have planets like our sun has a system, so maybe there is life out there."

Likewise, Comins explains that asking "what if" questions leads him to ask "what is the likelihood that there is other advanced, meaning self-aware, life in the universe and why don't we know about them yet?"

"I most definitely would take the view that there possibly is." What this might mean if life were discovered on other planets is one more mystery that remains on this last frontier of the stars.

SPEAKING IN ALBERTA

Both Funes and Comins will speak in Alberta this November, co-sponsored by the Ronning Centre for the Study of Religion and Public Life (www.augustana.ualberta.ca/ronning) and the Festival of Ideas event (www.festivalofideas.ca).

Funes will speak on "Why Science and Faith Matter to Each Other" on Nov. 19 at 10 a.m. in the chapel at Augustana Campus of the University of Alberta in

Camrose. This event is free and open to the public.

Both men will speak on "Astrobiology: Are We Alone in the Universe?" at the Telus of World of Science in Edmonton (11211-142 St.) on Nov. 19 at 8 p.m. (Tickets are available at: www.tixonthesquare.ca/event/detail/2413/)