Vatican



In this image from the Hubble Space Telescope, a bluish nebula of glowing hydrogen expands out into the remains of a molecular cloud that collapsed to form massive stars. (CNS/NASA, ESA,and the Hubble Heritage Team)

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More than 2 million people RSVP'd to a recent social media invitation to "storm" Area 51 in Nevada, in the hope of discovering whether alien life or spacecraft may be secretly stored at this U.S. Air Force base.

Though the proposed raid was a spoof, it has morphed into a real, more peaceful encounter. Now dubbed, "Alienstock," the Sept. 20-22 festival aims to be a place "where believers gather" to discuss and celebrate confidence in the existence of alien life and the wonders of the unknown, according to its website, alienstockfestival.com.

But another brand of believers – a "Men in Black" of a spiritual kind – are the pope's own Jesuit astronomers; they have long been active in discussions about extraterrestrial life, the ethics of space exploration and the religious significance of a universe that could be teeming with life.

The huge amount of interest the general public has shown in life existing elsewhere in the universe is part of the age-old question, "Are we alone?" said Jesuit Fr. Jose Funes, former director of the Vatican Observatory and an expert in galaxies and extragalactic astronomy.

The fascination with seeking extraterrestrial life or intelligence "reflects very deep human issues that are important for us" and makes people think about "who we are," he told Catholic News Service in late August.

"We have to become alien somehow" and step outside oneself "in order to understand better who human beings are," said the priest, who holds the chair in science, religion and education at the Catholic University of Cordoba, Argentina. The chair and the think tank initiative, "OTHER," he directs are instrumental for educating the general public, teachers and students about the dialogue between science and religion, he said.

Funes' multidisciplinary expertise in astronomy, philosophy and theology has now earned him a unique place in ET research – serving on the advisory council of METI International.

METI, or Messaging Extraterrestrial Intelligence, takes the next step in the search for extraterrestrial intelligence, or SETI.

The SETI project, which started in 1959, represents a major coordinated effort in scanning the sky for unusual radio and laser signals from sources that may indicate signs of alien technology. METI looks at what and how to communicate in a vast mysterious universe.

Part of the METI mission, according to its website, METI.org, is to conduct high-level scientific and multidisciplinary research, discuss the importance of searching for life beyond Earth and study the impact searching for, detecting or messaging ETI would have on the world.

More than 80 experts from a huge array of fields – including ethics, linguistics and theology – make up METI's advisory council, and it was just last year that the group's president and founder, Douglas Vakoch, asked Funes to join the team.

"It's natural for METI to be in dialogue with Jesuit astronomers because they understand the science behind our search, giving us common ground, while also having expertise in theology, providing a new perspective for our scientists," Vakoch told CNS in an email response to questions.

The search for life in the cosmos is a scientific quest that follows standard scientific practices and utilizes sophisticated technical equipment.

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Even though religion does not offer the tools required for scientific proof that extraterrestrial life exists, Vakoch said, "if we find life out there some day, many people will look to their religious leaders to help understand what it means to all of us down here on planet Earth."

Vakoch is an astrobiologist and psychologist who spent 16 years at the SETI Institute, where he was director of Interstellar Message Composition. He has done extensive research on ways religious belief may influence assumptions or opinions about extraterrestrial life.

"One of the great misconceptions of the general public is that discovering life beyond Earth will threaten people's religious beliefs," he said. Research has shown that people who hold no religious belief are often the ones who assume people of faith would be the most shaken by alien life, he said.

"But time and again, across the centuries, we have seen that religions adapt to scientific discoveries. The same will be true if someday we discover we're not alone in the universe," he said.

Catholic theologians and priests "have been among the most engaged in such discussions" about "whether extraterrestrials are likely to exist, and if they do, what they're like," Vakoch said.

Funes has been furthering that tradition and said he introduced "something new or at least original" for SETI research to consider – the search for spiritual signs or signatures in the universe.

If one assumes the universe is intelligence-friendly, then another question should be whether it is a spiritual-friendly universe, too.

"We ask the question if spirituality or spiritual beings are part of our evolutionary process or is it something that just happened by chance?" he said.

Vakoch said one of the biggest culprits in generating fear or negative reactions to potential alien life is not religion but science fiction and "Hollywood portrayals of marauding aliens, coming to Earth to annihilate us."

There are some "hopeful depictions of first contact," he added, especially when they are "modern-day retellings of religious myths. Steven Spielberger's 'E.T. The Extraterrestrial' told of a visitor who came to Earth, transforming lives and overcoming death through love. The same for 'Starman,' starring Jeff Bridges in the title role that was a thinly veiled reference to Christ."

Funes said the Catholic Church is optimistic in its faith because God looked at his creation and saw it was good, "so we believe creation is good, because we trust in God."

"There are risks, risks everywhere, but it is wonderful to try" after careful discussion when it comes to space exploration and messaging potential intelligent life, he said.

Vakoch said: "Some worry that learning about the existence of extraterrestrials will make humanity less unique. I suspect just the opposite will happen."

Discovering intelligence on a distant exoplanet will show "there will never be a duplicate of Homo sapiens," he said. "There may be beings out there who are more wise or powerful than we are, but they will never be more human."