News
EarthBeat
Pope Francis meets with cosmologists, theoretical physicists and scientists taking part in a co

Pope Francis meets with cosmologists, theoretical physicists and scientists taking part in a conference about black holes and gravitational waves during a private audience at the Vatican June 20, 2024. (CNS/Vatican Media)

Carol Glatz

View Author Profile

Catholic News Service

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Vatican City — June 20, 2024
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Faith and science can go hand in hand as long as science is put at the service of humanity and not used to hurt or extinguish human life, Pope Francis said.

Science and faith are two distinct and parallel paths that can be complementary, he said, and for people of faith, "science and faith are grounded alike in the absolute truth of God."

"Faith and science can be united in charity, provided that science is put at the service of the men and women of our time and not misused to harm or even destroy them," he said.

The pope's remarks came during an audience at the Vatican June 20 with cosmologists, theoretical physicists, astronomers and other experts who were attending a conference organized by the Vatican Observatory. Nobel Laureates Adam Riess and Roger Penrose were among the invited participants.

The June 16–21 conference was dedicated to the latest questions, theories and research being done regarding black holes, gravitational waves and space-time singularities. While about 40 people attended the talks at the observatory headquarters in Castel Gandolfo outside of Rome, dozens of others also participated online from all over the world.

Following one held in 2017, the conference was the observatory's second gathering, celebrating the scientific legacy of Msgr. Georges Lemaître, who was the first to theorize the universe is expanding, going against Albert Einstein's theory of a stationary universe. The monsignor also proposed that the expanding universe could be traced to an origin point, which became known as the "Big Bang theory."

"His scientific legacy is vast, including many fundamental contributions to our understanding of the universe," Jesuit Fr. Gabriele Gionti, a cosmologist and the conference organizer, told reporters at a Vatican news conference June 11.

The pope told conference participants attending the Vatican audience that "Georges Lemaître was an exemplary priest and scientist. His human and spiritual journey offers a model of life from which all of us can learn."

Advertisement

Born in Belgium in 1894, the priest was also a theoretical physicist, a mathematician, an astronomer and a professor of physics at the Catholic University of Louvain.

"At first, he tended towards 'concordism,' namely the belief that veiled references to scientific truths are present in Sacred Scripture," the pope said.

"Greater experience and spiritual maturity led him to realize that science and faith are two distinct and parallel paths, which are not in conflict. Indeed, the two paths prove complementary, inasmuch as, for the believer, science and faith are grounded alike in the absolute truth of God," he said.

"Lemaître's journey of faith led him to the awareness that 'creation' and 'the Big Bang' are two different realities, and that the God, in whom he believed, can never be reduced to an object neatly cataloged by human reason," he said.

The pope encouraged the scientists "to continue to investigate, with sincerity and humility, the important topics that you are presently discussing," adding that he hoped they may continue to "advance in your various fields toward that truth which is surely a reflection of God's eternal love."

Jesuit Br. Guy Consolmagno, who is a planetary scientist and director of the Vatican Observatory, told reporters at the June 11 news conference that he was a scientist for 20 years before he entered the Jesuits.

"The most common reaction I had from my fellow scientists was not horror that I had become part of the church, but rather a freedom that they now felt they could tell me about the churches they belonged to," he said.

Scientists, especially in the field of cosmology, he said, are very aware "of how much we do not know that there is a great openness to the need to accept a way of addressing the fundamental question from Leibniz, why is there something instead of nothing?"

St. John Paul II provided an image "that faith and reason are the two wings that bring us to the truth," Consolmagno said.

"And that image reminds us that faith is not the goal, reason is not the goal, the church is not the goal, science is not the goal, truth is the goal," he said.