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Pope names NIH director to Vatican think tank

by Francis X. Rocca by Religion News Service

VATICAN CITY -- Pope Benedict XVI has appointed Francis Collins, director of the National Institutes of Health, to the Vatican's Pontifical Academy of Sciences.

Collins, 59, is the geneticist who led the Human Genome Project, the international research project that mapped out the body's complete genetic code in 2003. Among his other accomplishments, he was part of the team that in 1989 identified the gene causing cystic fibrosis.

An evangelical Christian, Collins is also prominent for his efforts to reconcile scientific knowledge with religious faith.

His best-selling book, *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief* (2006), argued for the compatibility of Darwin's theory of natural selection with the existence of a creator God. Rejecting both creationism and intelligent design, Collins espoused "theistic evolution" as an explanation for the existence of the universe and life.

Collins' well-known religious views reportedly aroused criticism from some fellow scientists after President Obama chose him to head the NIH in July.

Collins is a supporter of embryonic stem cell research, which the Catholic Church forbids.

The Pontifical Academy of Sciences was founded in 1603 and claims to have been the "first exclusively scientific academy in the world." Its 80 members, who include many Nobel laureates and other luminaries including the physicist Stephen Hawking, meet for a plenary session at the Vatican every two years.

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