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Glimpses of God

A Catechist Ponders A Few Questions Posed In light of Cosmology

Anne Walsh (Newfoundland)

“For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.” As I ponder 1 Corinthians 13:12, it reminds me of the Hubble Telescope, which has given us such wonderful images of the universe. But all that beauty and insight was once in threat. When first light was received in 1990, scientists discovered that a mistake in measurement had resulted in the telescope having blurry vision. “Corrective lenses” were then fabricated, and in 1993 Hubble began transmitting its amazing images. Hubble’s newly-opened eyes opened our eyes, and our hearts.

This is the key insight for me as a catechist—that open eyes are not enough, and our vision can be blurry. My ministry is to open hearts as well. There are countless questions that rise up within us as we ponder the relationship between cosmology and faith development, and how the knowledge gleaned through science affects our belief in, and relationship with, God. Here, we’ll dwell on just three of these questions.

Can God be known and, if so, how can God be known?

Karl Rahner once claimed, with great insight and foresight: “The Christian of the future will be a mystic or will not exist at all.” Rahner may not have had cosmology on his mind, but his words ring true. David Wilkinson, theologian and astrophysicist, asks “How can a finite mind ever understand an infinite God?” Wilkinson goes further, and asks, “From M-theory to an accelerating universe, do we see an absence of God or pointers to a deeper story?”

https://www.iscast.org/resources/faith_hope_and_quarks

Every day, I walk with people who ask, “*Can God be known and, if so, how can God be known?*” The Christian insight leads us beyond question-and-answer formulations and into the realm of mystery and mysticism. God can indeed be known, but never fully, for God is both intimately know-able and infinitely Other. And God, who *is* Love, has chosen to reveal God’s Self in and through Creation and, in a very particular way, in and through Jesus Christ.

Read in the light of faith, the story unfolding for us through the new cosmology calls us either away from belief or to an encounter with a God who is *more than*—a God who is infinitely more than we could have imagined, beyond all knowing and yet begging to be known, constantly revealing God’s self, constantly creating.

Is “the Big Bang” a denial of the existence of God?

A popular TV show title reinforces the notion that “the Big Bang” is a *theory* of how the universe came into being. On the contrary, the “Big Bang” is not a *theory*, but rather a *model*. Paul Sutter, in an article in *America* in July, 2019, put it very clearly: “The Big Bang is not a *theory* of the origins of the universe. In fact, we have no scientific theory of the origins of the universe. The Big Bang is a *model* of the early history of the universe based on abundant observations.” This model posits, and gives evidence for, a universe that is expanding, with the distances between galaxies becoming ever greater. We can infer from this that, in the far distant past, galaxies and celestial bodies were closer together. The further back we go in time, according to this model, the closer things were together.

<https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2019/07/12/why-big-bang-isnt-what-you-think-it?>

Scientific models neither prove nor disprove the existence of God, for they are not theological or catechetical in nature. One of the challenges posed to catechists is to help people to see this distinction. In this time of ready availability of and access to an overwhelming body of scientific knowledge, as a catechist, I am called to assist people in the process of meaning-making. The perspective of the seeker must be this: that God “is not something one arrives to at the end of scientific research, but rather its starting point. In that way, “we then can see the hand of God in how we observe the universe.” (Guy Consolmagno, SJ, quoted in

<https://catholicherald.co.uk/news/2017/05/08/vatican-hosts-cosmology-conference-to-dispel-faith-science-conflict/>)

Did Creation happen just once, or...?

Many of us received a religious formation that included a literal interpretation the Book of Genesis. If we were fortunate enough to have encountered a catechist who was not a literalist, we probably learned that God’s work of creation took far longer than seven days. Msgr. Georges Lemaître, who posited the Big Bang, added a dimension to this insight that catechists today would do well to mine for its richness. Lemaître’s insight, re-framed by Guy Consolmagno, SJ, is that God’s creation of the universe wasn’t just a one-time occurrence but an event “that occurs continually.” God did not just light the match that got the whole thing going. God continues to create. God’s ongoing work of creating goes on in the wider universe, in the changing world in which we live, and in persons. God is still at work, still creating.

<https://catholicherald.co.uk/news/2017/05/08/vatican-hosts-cosmology-conference-to-dispel-faith-science-conflict/>)

This truth, once scientific, theological and mystical is, I think, captured best in a poem/prayer by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, SJ (1881-1955).

Above all, trust in the slow work of God.

We are quite naturally impatient in everything
to reach the end without delay.

We should like to skip the intermediate stages.

We are impatient of being on the way
to something unknown, something new.

Yet it is the law of all progress that is made
by passing through some stages of instability
and that may take a very long time.

And so I think it is with you.
Your ideas mature gradually. Let them grow.
Let them shape themselves without undue haste.
Do not try to force them on
as though you could be today what time
-- that is to say, grace --
and circumstances
-- acting on your own good will --
will make you tomorrow.
Only God could say what this new Spirit
gradually forming in you will be.

Give our Lord the benefit of believing
that his hand is leading you,
and accept the anxiety of feeling yourself
in suspense and incomplete.
Above all, trust in the slow work of God,
our loving vine-dresser. Amen.

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Conclusion

Walking with people of faith seeking understanding and meaning today as a catechist, I share in the creative work of God, leading people out of darkness into light, out of the slavery of literalism into the freedom of the daughters and sons of God, out of fear into wonder and awe. Glory be to God, whose power “at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine.” (*Ephesians 3:20-21*)

