

Think universally, act locally

A U.S. Jesuit brother who works as a Vatican astronomer says doomsday is not coming in 2012, as portrayed in a current movie or rumored in the Mayan long-count calendar of 5,125 years.

Brother Guy Consolmagno told L'Osservatore Romano, the Vatican newspaper, "People have been predicting the end of the world since the dawn of humanity. Up until now, none of these theories have turned out to be true and there is no reason to believe (that they will come true) in 2012."

There might be asteroids and comets out in the solar system that could someday collide with the earth, but it's not likely that they will cause catastrophic damage. Most are small or land in the ocean or unpopulated areas. Considering that 75 percent of the earth is covered with water, the odds start at 3-1 that any meteorite that hits the planet won't hit land.

However, "sooner or later one of these bodies will hit an area that is more densely populated," said Brother Consolmagno, who is a planetary scientist and expert on meteorites.

Combine that with concerns about climate change, and it's no wonder that some people are worried. But the astronomer says it's not time to panic. You're far less likely to be killed by planetary Armageddon or global warming than something closer to home. Brother Consolmagno suggests stopping smoking and buckling up your car's safety belt.

This makes sense, if you think about it. Both of these can extend your life more concretely than worrying about those other things; in fact, worrying may even shorten your life.

Moreover, you may not be able to do much to prevent the other kinds of catastrophes. Say that world disaster from climate change is decades off (perhaps many decades). Each person can do a little to help, such as using less fossil fuels and recycling more. But according to the authors of "SuperFreakonomics," about 30 years ago, there was concern about a different kind of climate change - one that

seemed to indicate our planet was cooling too much.

At the time, according to Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner, “Newsweek reported that the temperature decline, while relatively small in absolute terms, ‘has taken the planet about a sixth of the way toward the Ice Age average.’ ” Today, the authors acknowledge, the thermometer is swinging the other way. But cars themselves don’t actually contribute all that much to greenhouse gasses. Trucks and trains that ship the products we buy and the farms that produce the food we eat make up a large share of the pollution we know and disdain. Carpooling won’t change that.

As for preventing a comet or meteorite from hitting earth, aside from putting the Ravens’ defensive line in space and telling them the comet is the Patriots’ offense coming at them, there’s not much we can do today to prevent planetfall.

What can you do? There’s no guarantee the world won’t end Dec. 21 or 23, 2012, as some doomsday scenarios predict. There’s also no guarantee it won’t end tomorrow, or a thousand years from now. In Mark’s Gospel, Jesus says: “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. ‘But of that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone’ ” (Mt 24:35-36, cf. Mk 13:31-32). So don’t worry about doomsday in a couple of years. Trust in God; he’s got it covered.

Be prepared for the Lord, as you always would be. Be attentive to the world, and the universe, even. Do what you can locally to make your family and your world a better place. And drive safely. The life you save may be your own.

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