

Vatican astronomer says if aliens exist, they may not need redemption

VATICAN CITY - If aliens exist, they may be a different life form that does not need Christ's redemption, the Vatican's chief astronomer said.

Jesuit Father Jose Funes, director of the Vatican Observatory, said Christians should consider alien life as an "extraterrestrial brother" and a part of God's creation.

Father Funes, an Argentine named to his position by Pope Benedict XVI in 2006, made the remarks in an interview published May 13 by the Vatican newspaper, L'Osservatore Romano.

Father Funes said it was difficult to exclude the possibility that other intelligent life exists in the universe, and he noted that one field of astronomy is now actively seeking "biomarkers" in spectrum analysis of other stars and planets.

These potential forms of life could include those that have no need of oxygen or hydrogen, he said. Just as God created multiple forms of life on earth, he said, there may be diverse forms throughout the universe.

"This is not in contrast with the faith, because we cannot place limits on the creative freedom of God," he said.

"To use St. Francis' words, if we consider earthly creatures as 'brothers' and 'sisters,' why can't we also speak of an 'extraterrestrial brother?'" he said.

Asked about implications that the discovery of alien life might pose for Christian redemption, Father Funes cited the Gospel parable of the shepherd who left his flock of 99 sheep in order to search for the one that was lost.

"We who belong to the human race could really be that lost sheep, the sinners who need a pastor," he said.

“God became man in Jesus in order to save us. So if there are also other intelligent beings, it’s not a given that they need redemption. They might have remained in full friendship with their creator,” he said.

Father Funes went on to say that Christ’s incarnation and sacrifice was a unique and unrepeatable event. But he said he was sure that, if needed, God’s mercy would be offered to aliens, as it was to humans.

On another topic, the priest said he saw no real contradiction between evolutionary science and the Christian faith, as long as evolution does not become an absolute ideology.

“As an astronomer, I can say that from the observation of stars and galaxies there emerges a clear evolutionary process,” he said.

He said that in his opinion the big-bang theory remains the best explanation of the origin of the universe from a scientific point of view. Above all, it’s a reasonable explanation, he said.

As for the biblical account of creation, Father Funes said it was wrong to expect a scientific explanation from the Bible.

“The Bible is not fundamentally a work of science,” he said. “It is a letter of love that God has written to his people, in a language that was used 2,000-3,000 years ago. Obviously, at that time a concept like the big bang was totally extraneous.”

He said he was convinced that astronomy was a science that can open people’s minds and hearts and bring them closer to God. The idea that astronomy leads to an atheistic view of the universe is a myth, he said.