

Father's day

GUY CONSOLMAGNO

THE STUDENTS of the Vatican Observatory's biennial summer school (this year's topic, "Stellar Variability in the Era of Large Surveys") were received by Pope Francis in a private audience on 14 June. Introducing them, I mentioned to the Pope that along with four weeks of heavy astrophysics our school is also including special lectures to reflect on not only what we are studying, but why we study it.

"Why does the Vatican have an Observatory?" That common question begs the bigger one, "Why does anyone study astronomy?" Contrary to what our culture preaches is most desirable, astronomy doesn't make you rich, powerful or sexy. (Maybe that's why the Jesuit vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience felt so natural to me.) What astronomy does do, however, is give you the space to contemplate questions bigger than "What's for lunch?"

Doing science is a way of becoming intimate with creation, and thus with the Creator. The urge to know the truth above all else is common to all scientists, even those who don't recognise that their devotion to truth is a devotion to God. To me it is an act of prayer.

But there's a deeper level to the question. Why does any individual person choose to become an astronomer? Interviewing each of our 25 summer school students, I found that no matter what culture or country they come from, one common theme they



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each share is the decisive role their family played in their vocation.

Certainly in my case, it was not so much "Our Father" as *my* father. My dad would describe his childhood lying on the roof of the garage behind his home in suburban Boston, watching the stars and waiting to see if one would "fall". Seeing Zeppelins flying overhead, he dreamt of being a pilot. Instead, his bad eyesight and good maths skills earned him a spot as a navigator in the US Army Air Corps... where they taught him the stars for navigation.

He guided a squadron of B-17s to Hawaii to look for the Japanese fleet before the Battle of Midway, and then as part of the 306th Bomb Group he was

among the first American flyers to come to Britain in late 1942. By April 1943 he'd been shot down over Belgium and sent to Stalag Luft III. There, his agile mind was set not to solve astronomical problems but to write letters home that courted a certain sweet Irish-American girl in New York while simultaneously containing coded messages passing on military intelligence.

After the war Dad's writing skills landed him a job as a journalist. From him I learned writing and storytelling... and the names of the brightest stars. Meanwhile, his job paid for my education in planetary sciences at MIT. Years later, writing these science columns for *The Tablet* I'd always email him my latest work for his comments before submitting it. (He got his first home computer in the late 1970s and was an early user of the internet.) Once, when asked for a review for a book he'd bought online, he replied: "I am delighted to oblige, because it's a great book; and because it's edited by my son. It cost me \$26 from Amazon. And Guy's tuition at MIT."

He'd bought it before I could send him a copy. He explained: "When I passed ninety, I stopped waiting for things."

At our audience on 14 June, Pope Francis spoke to me privately. He offered me his personal condolences... my father, Joseph Edwin Consolmagno, had died on 11 June. He was 100 years old.

Guy Consolmagno SJ is director of the Vatican Observatory.

Glimpses of Eden

JONATHAN TULLOCH

AN INSECT WAS perched on top of the log pile. Black and yellow, I knew immediately that it was a common wasp. I took a closer look. No, not a common wasp, but some species of wasp I hadn't seen before. Grappling with my phone for an insect identification website, I found out that I was - wrong! This was actually a wasp beetle. Wasp beetles are confidence tricksters. They pass themselves off as aggressive wasps with stings, so that when potential predators glimpse the black and yellow colouring, they'll steer clear.



Actually, they don't have a sting at all, and are otherwise defenceless. Suddenly, the wasp beetle flew up and began buzzing: exactly like a wasp. Wasp beetles are such

consummate fraudsters that they've even developed a wasp-like buzz for extra protection. This defence strategy of adopting the appearance and behaviour of a dangerous animal is called Batesian mimicry. I backed off, the buzzing ceased. As it flew away, the wasp beetle's colouring looked even more wasp-like. Its flight style too was that of the wasp, a heavy helicoptering as its antennae read the air purposefully. Hats off to the wasp beetle, impressionist extraordinaire, gentle hoodwinker in a dangerous world.

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