



The telescope dome at the Vatican Observatory

# Discerning the Heavens

by Bro. Jonathan Stott, SJ

In Rome many buildings have Latin phrases carved on their walls. It's not every day, though, that you see an astronomical observatory with *Deum Creatorem, Venite Adoremus* ("Come, let us adore God the Creator") carved into a marble plaque on its wall. This is the motto, however, that greets you as you approach the telescope dome at the Vatican Observatory, which is where I've been working for the past summer.

The Vatican Observatory is a unique institution: it is the world's only internationally regarded scientific center funded by a religious body. The Vatican's interest in astronomy dates back to Pope Gregory XIII, who received scientific support for his reform of the Julian calendar from the Jesuit Fr. Christopher Clavius. Building on the Church's history of support for astronomical research throughout the 1700 and 1800s (including, at one time, an observatory on the roof of the Jesuit's Collegium Romanum), Pope Leo XIII founded the Vatican Observatory in 1891, and in 1906 Pope St. Pius X entrusted its operations to the Society of Jesus. The Jesuits have operated the Observatory, on behalf of the Vatican, ever since. Our current work at the Observatory is twofold: first, the Vatican Observatory is a real astronomical observatory and the Pope has asked us to do world-class scientific research. Second, because

of our unique credentials as both Jesuits and working scientists, the Observatory supports the Church by taking a leading role in the dialogue on the relationship between faith and science.



View from the Vatican Observatory

So how did I, a young Jesuit brother, come to find myself in Italy, doing astronomical research for a summer? The most important reason for visiting the observatory this summer is, truthfully, not science but rather Jesuit discernment. I will finish my philosophy studies a year from now, and after that I will be assigned, or missioned, by my provincial to work at a Jesuit institution somewhere in the world. Discernment is the process of prayer and dialogue by which the provincial (or any other Jesuit) comes to a decision. Discernment requires the man being missioned to be completely open to the provincial and himself, discussing his hopes, his fears, his strengths, his weaknesses, and most importantly, the interior consolations and desolations he finds

in his daily prayer. For his part, the provincial must listen attentively to the men he works with, and in a spirit of prayer and dialogue, decide how each man can best serve the needs of the Society of Jesus and the universal Church. Because neither of us was personally familiar with the Observatory, when I last talked with the provincial we agreed that the best way for us to make an informed discernment would be if I visited the Observatory this summer and learned about it firsthand. A few weeks from now, after I return, the provincial and I will again talk together, and I will relate to him my experiences, both interior and exterior, here at the Observatory. Out of this conversation will ultimately come my next assignment. I don't know where I will be working a year from now. What I do know is that, through our discernment together, wherever I might ultimately be missioned by the provincial, I will end up exactly where Christ wants me to be, *Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam*.



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