

Vatican searches for extra-terrestrial life

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This picture taken from a terrace in Rome on October 19, 2009 shows a view of Saint Peter's Basilica at The Vatican. Is there life on other planets? The Vatican has asked that age-old question over the past five days during a "study week" on astrobiology gathering leading scientists from around the world.

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"The questions of life's origins and of whether life exists elsewhere in the universe are very suitable and deserve serious consideration," said the chief papal [astronomer](#), Father Jose Gabriel Funes.

Although the questions "offer many philosophical and theological implications," the gathering of about 30 leading astronomers, geologists, biologists, physicists and other scientists "focused on the scientific perspective," Funes said, according to the Vatican news service.

The event hosted by the Pontifical Academy of Sciences was held to mark the International Year of Astronomy.

"There is a palpable expectation that the universe harbours life, and there is hope that the first discovery is only a few years away," said Chris Impey of the University of Arizona.

"It is appropriate that a meeting on this frontier topic is hosted by the Pontifical Academy of Sciences," Impey said. "The motivations and methodologies might differ, but both [science](#) and [religion](#) posit life as a special outcome of a vast and mostly inhospitable universe."

Technological breakthroughs have led to the discovery of more than 400 planets beyond the solar system, he noted.

His colleague Athena Coustenis of the Paris-Meudon Observatory, told AFP she thought that if life exists "we will find it soon," and most likely within our solar system.

In astrobiology, "we realise every day that reality goes beyond fiction," she said.

The participants hoped to publish their conclusions in a book, Funes said.

The Jesuit priest broached the question of extraterrestrial [life](#) in an interview last year, when he said the search for aliens did not contradict belief in God.

"As an astronomer I continue to believe that God is the creator of the universe," Funes told the [Vatican](#) mouthpiece, the Osservatore Romano.

The possibility raises a difficult theological question concerning

redemption from the original sin, which by Christian tradition occurred in the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit of a particular tree.

Funes told the Osservatore Romano: "If other intelligent beings exist, it's not certain that they need redemption."

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