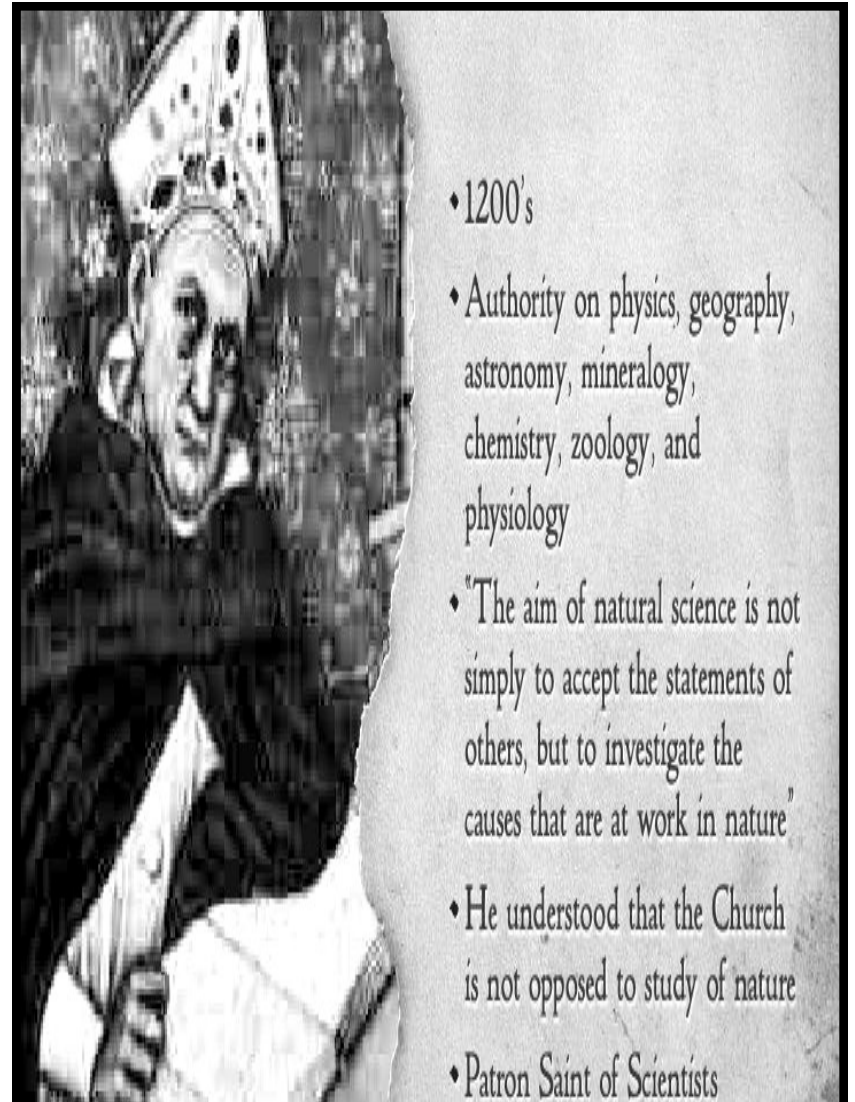




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Catholic Physics - Reflections of a Catholic Scientist - Part 11

*Top-down to Jesus—
On bypassing the road to Damascus*



- ♦ 1200's
- ♦ Authority on physics, geography, astronomy, mineralogy, chemistry, zoology, and physiology
- ♦ "The aim of natural science is not simply to accept the statements of others, but to investigate the causes that are at work in nature"
- ♦ He understood that the Church is not opposed to study of nature
- ♦ Patron Saint of Scientists

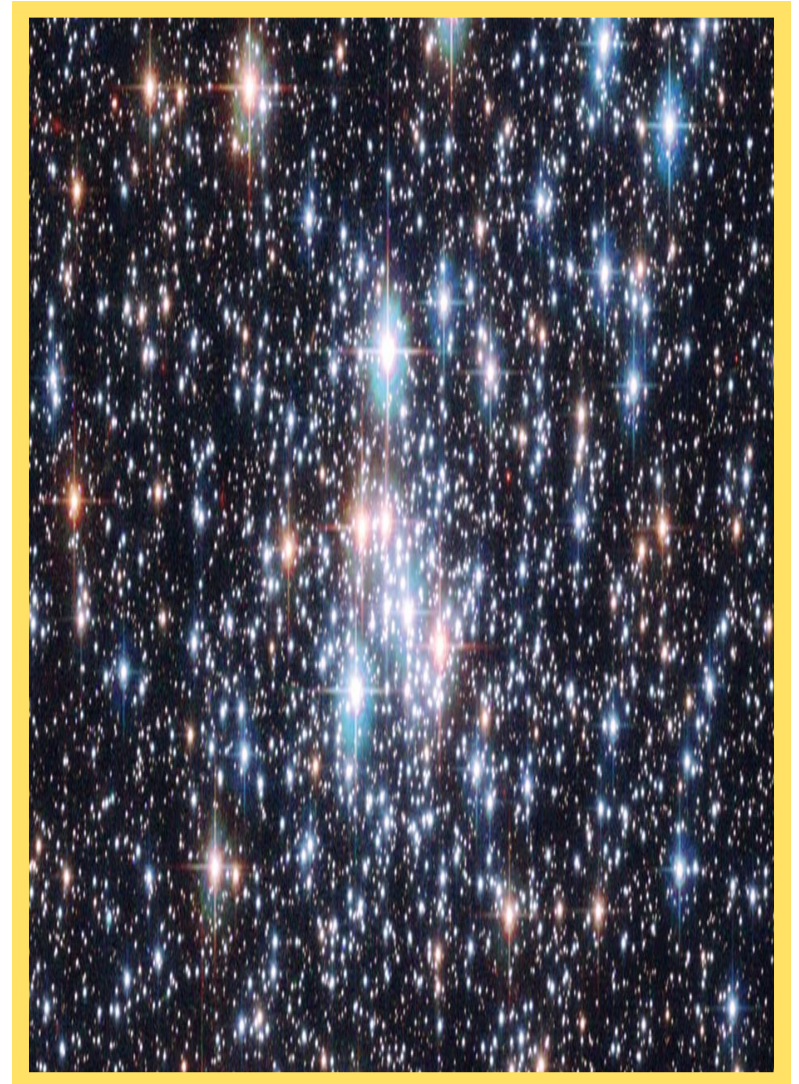
Catholic Physics - Reflections of a Catholic Scientist - Part 11

Top-down to Jesus—On bypassing the road to Damascus

“Be not afraid of faith: some are born with faith, some achieve faith, and some have faith thrust upon them.”



In my very first blog I promised to tell the story of my conversion—how an agnostic Jewish scientist became a Catholic in his senior years, to the horror of many colleagues, the amazement of his family, and the delight of his wife. Conversion stories interest the Catholic faithful (possibly because the missionary impulse that goes with faith is vicariously satisfied). However, in telling this story I have a different focus than auto-biographical, I propose to explore the roots of faith—revelation, grace and rational conviction. The last is not important for some and crucially important for others, but as Pascal pointed out in his wager, rational conviction can lead to grace-filled faith (see “The Pearl of Great Price—Pascal's Wager Revisited”).





There is another continuation here: in my second blog, “Belief, Knowledge and Faith”, there was a promise to discuss further the difference between faith and what might be termed “scientific knowledge”. By distinguishing my belief in science from that in the dogma/doctrine of the Catholic Church, I hope to demonstrate the limits of the scientific domain and the unlimited power of rationally based faith.

So, let’s begin with the minimum bit of biography. I’m not going to say much about my early religious life, other than I grew up as a secular Jew, despite having several rabbis as great-grandparents. (In the great wisdom of early adolescence, I refused to be Bar-Mitzvah’d, believing it to be a sham ceremony when there was so much misery and injustice in the world, misery and injustice ignored by those fur-coated ladies parading in Temple.) Nevertheless, there was a belief of sorts in a Creator—my teen-age passion was astronomy, visiting the local planetarium and constructing (not well) a six-inch reflecting telescope; I realized instinctively the dictum of Psalm 19A, “The Heavens declare the glory of God”. Working during a college summer in the Yosemite forest service, lying underneath one of the big trees, I was filled with awe at the Creator’s work here on earth. My wife is Catholic, and we were married in a Catholic church. But I stayed my distance from the Church, only attending functions at my children’s Catholic school and at baptisms (at one of these, for my oldest daughter, I was much embarrassed by being asked to serve as an altar boy for the priest—my protestations that I wasn’t Catholic were to no avail).

Now into each life some rain must fall, and fall it did in mine—without going into detail and violating confidences, I’ll say that in my 60’s I became a member of a Twelve Step Groups—Hi, I’m Bob and I’m a ____ (fill in the blank); the presence of a Higher Power (uppercase obligatory), who will help to break addictive chains—alcohol, drugs, food, persons—is a guiding principle of such groups. I was disposed to believe in the presence of such a Higher Power, but I came to realize that the phrase was doublespeak, Orwellian “sheer cloudy vagueness”, a euphemism for God, so I began to search for a more satisfying way to think about the deity (at that time in lowercase).

Fortunately at this point the Holy Spirit intervened (exactly how, this old guy’s memory fails), and I was prompted to read “Who Moved the Stone” by Frank Morison, a pseudonym for Albert Henry Ross, a British writer who originally set out to disprove the Resurrection, but who, on evaluating the biblical accounts, came to believe. I won’t recount the evidence (it’s detailed more fully in the linked articles), but it seemed to me that an impartial jury (not composed of evangelical atheists) would give a verdict of “innocent”, i.e. the arguments that the biblical account of the Resurrection were true. What struck me even more on going from “Who Moved the Stone” to the the New Testament. was that this bunch of uneducated

yahoos—fishermen, tax collectors, women—had managed to out-talk the scholars of Judaism and thereby to spread the Christian faith through the Roman world. Surely they must have been inspired by encounters with the risen Jesus and the inner voice of the Holy Spirit. It also occurred to me that if one does believe in the Gospel account of the Resurrection, then one should also credit other incidents described there, in particular the words of Jesus giving the keys of the Kingdom to Peter, thus founding the Catholic Church. Accordingly, the Christian religion to which I would convert should be Roman Catholic (this choice also eliminated a certain amount of domestic controversy). I must emphasize that this whole process was one of rational decision making—no visions, no voices—whence “Top Down to Jesus”. I envy those who have had visions of our Lord and heard His voice (and I have had first hand accounts of such from some of my friends), but this was not my good fortune.

Of course conversion is an ongoing process—study, service, prayer, adoration, retreats—all the tools and fertilizer to make the fig tree of faith bear ever more fruit. To fully recount this continuing process would take a book chapter, not a blog. Much is related or implied in my other blogs and in the biographical note below, but I’ll add these brief (?) comments. First, as a scientist, I had to struggle to believe in miracles—Fr. Mc___’s answer during my initial catechesis to my questions on points of dogma, “If you believe in one miracle, the Resurrection, why are you having problems with others?” and “If you believe in the possibility, even if you have questions, that is enough.”—helped. As I looked at the evidence for contemporary miracles, particularly that reported by Dr. Alexis Carrell at Lourdes, and read what C.S. Lewis and Ralph McInerny had to say about the reality of miracles, my scientific skepticism waned. Second, those few non-“Top Down”, but “In the Heart” moments where I felt the presence of Deity (not well defined, not as an image or as a voice) have been evoked by music: Gregorian chant during a retreat at St. Vincent Archabbey, certain hymns and liturgical music, and very, very infrequently, at quiet times in early morning during Adoration or other prayer, when the melody of some favorite hymn would come to mind.

Now I claim that this belief in Jesus and in the dogma/doctrine of the Catholic Church, this faith, is akin in certain respects to and also different from my belief/faith in science. To begin with let me assert that by no means can science explain everything, that is to say, “scientism” is a false doctrine. The books of Keith Ward, the writings of Fr. Stanley Jaki (particularly “The Limits of a Limitless Science”), and most recently an essay by the eminent biologist Austin Hughes on “The Folly of Scientism” effectively demolish the positions of the evangelical atheists, Dawkins, Atkins, and (of late) Hawking, who believe that science is the only answer. They ignore all that science can’t explain, the “why” questions; for example, they believe that since we can show by functional MRI where the brain is active when we pray or contemplate, we fully understand how and what the mind is doing in prayer or mystical experience. Wrong!

Most people put the same faith in what science tells them as the Christian faithful did in the dogma of the Church. How many people have done Galileo’s inclined plane experiment to verify laws of motion (which I did in the physics lab at Caltech)...etc. The essence of the scientific method is that theoretical predictions can be verified by repeated measurements, and this in turn implies that those things and realities that cannot be quantified and realized by an experiment cannot be dealt with scientifically. And even then science is limited in setting up idealized experiments, situations isolated from the surroundings for which the theoretical gedanken experiment may not always be possible. And of course there is the fundamental incompatibility of the two major theories, quantum mechanics and relativity, that are the foundation of modern science. In desperation to avoid the act of creation that implies the Deity, theoretical physicists are putting their faith in multiverse theories, M-theories with infinite landscapes, theories that are most unlikely to be verified experimentally (i.e. to be capable of being falsified), exercises in mathematical metaphysics, exercises which are even more removed from one’s experience than that supposedly put by Medieval theologians: how many angels could stand on the point of a pin (which was, in fact, a reasonable question—how many immaterial entities could be contained in a point). Indeed, it is clear that the lucid framework of physical science cannot even support all the occurrences in our everyday experience—the butterfly wings beating in China to yield the tornado in Oklahoma, order springing from disorder as shown by the Nobel prize winner Ilya Prigogine, mathematical unknowability (the last is surprising and possibly not in everyone’s everyday experience).

To sum up, and this has been a long and exhausting effort, let me assert that religious faith can be attained by a variety of roads—the vision, the voice from above, or by rational “Top Down” endeavor. As the quote at the beginning put it, some are born with faith, some achieve faith and some have faith thrust upon them. And the faith we have in Jesus Christ is as well founded in terms of empirical evidence and inner knowledge as the faith we as physicists have in what science tells us about the world.

From a series of articles written by: Bob Kurland - a Catholic Scientist