

# THE TABLET

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## CALENDAR

### Sunday 27 April:

Second Sunday of Easter (Year A)  
(or of Divine Mercy)

### Monday 28 April:

St George, Martyr, Patron of England

### Tuesday 29 April:

St Catherine of Siena, Virgin and Doctor,  
Patron of Europe

### Wednesday 30 April:

Easter feria or St Pius V, Pope

### Thursday 1 May:

Easter feria or St Joseph the Worker

### Friday 2 May:

St Athanasius, Bishop and Doctor

### Saturday 3 May:

Sts Philip and James, Apostles

### Sunday 4 May:

Third Sunday of Easter

■ For the Extraordinary Form calendar go to  
[www.lms.org.uk](http://www.lms.org.uk) and look under Find a Mass

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## ACROSS THE UNIVERSE

# Big Bang Bill

GUY CONSOLMAGNO

A MEMBER of our Vatican Observatory community, Fr Bill Stoeger, died of cancer last month. I could say that he was both the smartest man and the holiest man I have known, but he would have rejected that characterisation out of hand. So I will only say that his goodness and his genius never ceased to move me. He's the only person I know who could work the mathematics of the Big Bang, and also direct retreats for women Religious.

Bill's religious faith did not control the science he did, but how he did it. More often than not he collaborated with scientists from the developing world. And he showed a special patience with those members of our scientific community who could be brilliant but eccentric and sometimes hard to deal with.

His scientific output was astonishing. At Cambridge in the 1970s, he was a student of Sir Martin Rees (later Astronomer Royal) and a classmate of Stephen Hawking. Over the years Bill published two major scientific papers a year on cosmology or relativity. His most recent work was to search for a connection between some of the more esoteric aspects of cosmology theory and actual observations of the structure of our universe as seen in distant galaxies. Several hundred papers and theses on cosmology have relied on his published work.

"All of our theories about the origin of the universe assume spherical symmetry; it's the only way we can handle the math," I remember him saying. "But the one thing we know for certain about the early universe is that in some important way, it wasn't precisely symmetric." His paper, "Proving almost-homogeneity of the universe", written with R. Maartens and George Ellis and published in 1995, was his most referenced work.

Those tiny differences made the news last month when the BICEP2 telescope in

Antarctica announced the detection of polarisation in the cosmic microwave background, consistent with gravitational waves propagating during the period of cosmic inflation soon after the Big Bang. Out of those tiny perturbations, eventually galaxies and stars – and we – would arise.

Bill's work with his colleagues in religious life is not so easy to quantify, but it was just as important. He was in regular demand as a spiritual director and leader of retreats, both in the US and Europe. Connected with this work were the series of books he co-edited on divine action in the universe, published jointly by the Vatican Observatory and the Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences at Berkeley.

He followed the career of Stephen Hawking, who a few years ago proposed that quantum fluctuations in the primordial gravity field might have led to the Big Bang, thus obviating the need for a "creator God". Bill disagreed. He wrote that *Creatio ex nihilo* is not an answer to the question of how things got started at the beginning; *Creatio ex nihilo* is, instead, the answer to the ultimate question of why reality itself exists, with all its dimensions of space and time, and all its rules for how those dimensions behave. While the Creator gives the physical processes of the universe the power to be what they are, the Creator is not the same thing as those physical processes.

To the secular world, the line from life to death is simple, direct and final. But Bill's priesthood reflected his faith that, like the Big Bang, reality is slightly more complex than that. The tiny exception of the Resurrection, which we celebrate this Easter season, is that perturbation from which all our future hope arises.

■ Guy Consolmagno SJ is curator of meteorites at the Vatican Observatory.

## Glimpses of Eden



IF I WERE a king I would willingly give up my domains and dominions for the tawny mining bee.

What's a potentate's throne beside the small tangle of back garden on which I encountered this spring bee last week?

Just emerged from hibernation, it lay in the sun on the long grass. Gradually warming, it looked so new that it made the whole world seem freshly created.

Tawny is too thin a word. After a long winter of sere and ashen grey, the tawny mining bee is a sudden, bright brush splashing colour wherever it flies.

Part fiery ginger, part fox, part midnight black,

this bee burns brilliantly, lighting the darkest heart. Nesting underground, it is also known as the lawn bee for its habit of rearing its colonies in gardens.

Look out for little volcanoes of soil among the daisies. Its ability to granulate soil so finely not only reminds us that the tawny miner is a member of the sand bee family, but that we are in the presence of an artist. It won't sting, so we can still pad around the dandelions in bare feet.

On the wing from March to June, these common solitary bees love to feed on the fruit trees of the season. If I were a king I would abdicate my authority, my every palace for a single tawny mining bee.

Jonathan Tulloch