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If you ever find yourself arriving in Rome by train, and you feel like some real Australian food, you can take a short walk from Roma Termini to the Piazza della Repubblica where you'll find a McDonalds. And the good news is that you can get a beer at Maccas in Europe.

On the way you'll notice on your right the vast ruin of the ancient baths of Diocletian, and perhaps you'll read in your Lonely Planet Guide or on Wikipedia via your iPhone that it was turned into a Carthusian monastery by Michelangelo in his last commission, when he was aged over 80. You may decide to have a look around the Church that Michelangelo built there: the Basilica of St Mary and the Angels and the Martyrs. And if you do, you'll find things that will surprise you.

The Basilica has become virtually a shrine to Galileo, who was condemned by the Church in the 1630s, essentially for undermining the ancient world view of Aristotle. Galileo further developed Copernicus' vision of our solar system, with planets orbiting the sun, which with his other experimental discoveries overturned Aristotelian physics.

Aristotle had become very important for Catholic rationalism in its fight against Protestantism, so an embattled Church felt it had to close ranks against this new experimental science. But various key Churchmen in Rome refused to join in the condemnation, and within sixty years of Galileo's death the Church had changed its tune.

In this Basilica you'll find a sundial erected high up under the roof by Pope Clement XI in 1702, a great solar telescope without lenses. And right across the Church, past the altar, you can step out along the Clementine line, a ruler set into the floor along which daily measurements of light coming through the sundial made this Church an early observatory. You'll also find a sculpture of Galileo's inclined plane, and a huge pendulum recalling his discovery that for small amplitudes the period of swing depends only on the pendulum's length.

There's a beautiful skylight, too, set into the pinnacle of the roof to mark the new millennium, by the splendidly named artist Narcissus Quagliata. It directs sunlight right onto the centre of the rotunda every solstice and equinox, and on it are some words from Pope John Paul II: "science has roots in the immanent, but leads man to the transcendent."

Galileo was a Christian, who looked to the Bible and the guidance of God's Holy Spirit as the keys to finding our way in life. And it was his faith in the Bible's God that demystified the world, freeing his mind to view the world as God's creation, blessed by its creator with the liberty to run according to its own laws.

Galileo taught that God had written two books, the book of scripture and the book of nature. This is what he wrote about the book of nature: "this grand book, which is always open in front of our eyes ... cannot be understood if first one has not learnt to understand the language and read the alphabet in which it is written. It is written in the language of mathematics, and its characters are triangles, circles, and other geometric figures, without which it would be humanly impossible to understand a word of it, without which one wanders vainly in a dark labyrinth."

In the hills outside Rome at Castel Gandolfo, the summer residence of the popes, you can find the Vatican Observatory, one of the oldest in the World. These days, since the expanding Rome suburbs have made the night sky too bright, the Vatican Observatory runs its astronomy research group from the University of Arizona in America, where Jesuit priests work as astrophysicists. At the Mt Graham Observatory near Tucson is their newest eye on the sky, called VATT: the Vatican Advanced Technology Telescope.

The Vatican observatory co-publishes a series of books with the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California, called "Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action", with titles like *Quantum Cosmology and the Laws of Nature*, *Chaos and Complexity*, but also *Evolutionary and Molecular Biology*. I studied these and many like them when I wrote my own book on God's action in the world understood in the light of modern physics and evolutionary biology (*A God for This World*, London: Continuum, 2004).

As for the origins of life, we know that many fundamentalist Christians reject evolution by natural selection and, as a result, the whole modern science of molecular biology. They say that evolutionary theory betrays the book of Genesis, insisting on their right to teach so-called creation science as if it were real science, and not just reheated biblical literalism. But does it?

Thirty years ago, in the deep South, the American Council of Civil Liberties took the Arkansas School Board to the Supreme Court, winning their case that creation science was actually the covert teaching of religion, which is banned in American public schools.

The Catholic Old Testament scholar and priest, Professor Bruce Vawter, was called to give evidence. He testified that no serious Bible scholar takes these Genesis texts literally. We should read them allegorically, as celebrating God's gift of an ordered and meaningful world in which human beings can be at home with God, rather than a scientific account. For that we look to the astrophysicists, and to the evolutionary biologists.

At one point in the trial the stenographer had to ask leave of the court for Fr Vawter to repeat some of his evidence. She apologised and said she'd been so interested in his testimony that she'd forgotten to type it into the record. "I'm a Catholic", she said, "And I wish our priest would tell us these things from the pulpit".

My point is that despite some early errors, the Church has embraced science as profoundly compatible with Christian faith. Many working scientists and science teachers testify to the wonder of studying the book of nature in the language of mathematics. They discover what amounts to a miracle in our nihilistic, relativistic age. That is, in our age when aggressive meaninglessness and the attitude of 'whatever' is our best answer to the question of truth.

The miracle is that by our reason, our logic, our mathematics, which are all products of human creativity, we can penetrate to the heart of reality and, as Albert Einstein said, we can hear God thinking. The mysteries of our world and the creativity of our minds are shown by science to be deeply connected, which is a miracle in a world full of weary cynics. What's more, God's love for the world, God's joy in the world, finds an echo in the sense of wonder

and satisfaction that science delivers, motivating so many scientists to persevere with their investigations for a lifetime.

If you want to know more about this God who loves the world and delights in its creatures, who wants to satisfy our sense of wonder and bring us to the fullness of truth, then you need not just the book of nature but the other book to which Galileo referred, the book of Scripture. There we meet Jesus Christ, in whom all the truth, and all the wonder in the world, finds its beginning and its end.

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