

News Release:

CATHOLIC SCIENTISTS GROUP HAILS ASTRONOMERS' MOVE TO RECOGNIZE A PRIEST—THE “FATHER” OF “BIG BANG” THEORY

Oct. 31, 2018 -- The Society of Catholic Scientists applauds the recommendation by the members of the International Astronomical Union (IAU), announced Monday, to honor Fr. Georges Lemaître, the Belgian Catholic priest and theoretical physicist who proposed the Big Bang theory in the late 1920's. They would honor him by changing the name of the famous “Hubble Law” of cosmology to the “Hubble-Lemaître Law.”

The Hubble-Lemaître Law states that distant objects in an expanding universe move apart at a rate proportional to their distance from each other. The American astronomer Edwin Hubble discovered this law from observations in 1929. Hubble and most other scientists at the time were unaware that Lemaître had predicted the law from his theory of an expanding universe two years earlier. Lemaître's theory was based on the radical possibility that space itself could be expanding, which he discovered by solving the field equations of Einstein's theory of gravity known as General Relativity.

“This vote by astronomers to recognize the great scientific achievements of Fr. Lemaître is both historically justified and a wonderful gesture,” said Stephen M. Barr, president of the Society of Catholic Scientists (SCS) and a theoretical particle physicist at the University of Delaware. “Our organization—which has grown to almost 900 scientists since it began two years ago—is based on the harmony between the vocation of scientist and the life of faith,” Barr continued. “This harmony was nowhere more evident than in the life of Fr. Lemaître, which is a legacy to be cherished and an inspiration for our times.”

When Hubble discovered the law from his observations in 1929, few scientists were aware that Lemaître (1894-1966) had predicted it two years earlier from his theory of an expanding universe. Lemaître's theory was based on the radical possibility that space itself could be expanding, which he discovered by solving the field equations of Einstein's theory of gravity known as General Relativity.

Lemaître is regarded as the principal founder of the Big Bang theory, in which the universe expands from some original very dense state. In the words of the late physicist Stephen Hawking, “This state was called the ‘primeval atom’ by the Catholic priest Georges Lemaître, who was the first to investigate the origin of the universe that we now call the Big Bang.” (S. Hawking, *The Universe in a Nutshell*, 2001).

Partly because of his self-effacing ways and lack of interest in getting credit for his ideas, Lemaître tended to be overshadowed by other cosmologists, but the magnitude of his contributions is being increasingly acknowledged. Among his many bold theoretical ideas, Lemaître also was one of the first cosmologists to take seriously the possibility of what is now called “dark energy.”

The name of the law describing the expanding universe will now pair Lemaître with Hubble (1889-1953), whose outstanding contributions in astronomy and cosmology are also memorialized in the name of the Hubble Space Telescope, a satellite launched by the United States in 1990.

Such a name change in an astronomical law is not binding on individual scientists. But the recommendation was approved as a resolution by 78 percent of the participants in a recent electronic vote by members of the IAU. Details of the vote and the resolution were [announced Oct. 29, 2018, on the organization’s website](#).

The [Society of Catholic Scientists](#) was founded in 2016. Its goals are to promote intellectual and spiritual fellowship among Catholic scientists, to mentor young researchers, to give witness to the harmony between the scientific vocation and a life of faith, and to be a forum for discussion of science-faith questions and a resource for those wanting to understand them better.

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Members of the Board of the Society of Catholic Scientists available for comment who can knowledgeably discuss the science of Fr. Georges Lemaître:

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