

Across the Cosmos March 2025: Space Science and the Human Spirit

I write this at a time when the future of my entire field hangs in precarious balance. My organization, the Planetary Science Institute, for example, is almost entirely dependent upon NASA and NSF grants, both of which face unprecedented budget cuts. It is often difficult to “sell” the importance of the space sciences, which can be seen as esoteric and divorced from the concerns of people in general. One strategy to counteract this view has been to communicate the plethora of technologies with medical and other applications that have resulted directly from space exploration.¹ These are unarguably important; however, this month I want to briefly recount the experience of a good friend, whose life choices were shaped by another compelling reason.

In the early 1980s, a “burned out” planetary scientist named Guy Consolmagno joined the Peace Corps.² With advanced degrees from MIT and the University of Arizona, he was sent to teach high school science in a poverty-stricken, remote village in Kenya. What he learned from the remarkable people with whom he worked – people who lacked the basic necessities that most of us take for granted – guided him back to his career as a planetary scientist, and to joining the Jesuit community.

Consolmagno found that amidst extreme poverty, disease, and death, people flocked to look through the small telescope he would set up for his little talks on astronomy. Why? For similar reasons to why they flocked to church on Sunday: the intense human desire to connect to something bigger than themselves, and the basic need to feed the soul as well as the body. I encourage you to read the full story (and many others) in *Brother Astronomer: Adventures of a Vatican Scientist*.

I think this story is particularly timely in light of last month’s Religion and Science *Living in Awe* theme, and perhaps even more timely given the state of despair in which many of us find ourselves in the wake of recent events. The proposed budget cuts to NSF and NASA would be nothing less than disastrous for science and science education. As with many other budget cuts, the greatest impact will ultimately be felt by communities that can least afford to be hurt.

The Planetary Society has set up an easy-to-use online action site to allow people to send a message to their representatives in Congress, the White House, and the Office of Management & Budget, to urge against the proposed 50% cut to NASA, which would result in the lowest funding since 1985: planet.ly/nasacuts.³ It takes less than one minute to complete, though you are encouraged to take some time to personalize the message!

¹ See, for example, https://technology.nasa.gov/Spinoff_2025_Release

² Consolmagno, G. (2000). *Brother Astronomer: Adventures of a Vatican Scientist*. McGraw Hill. pp. 129-136.

³ <https://www.planetary.org/advocacy-action-center#/50>

Finally, I promise not to turn this column into a plea for money; however, I want to note briefly that the Planetary Science Institute has added a Donate⁴ button to its home page, where people can choose to contribute to various PSI programs, including education & public outreach. So many of my own efforts during the course of my career have been voluntary, with no expectation of compensation – this is true of other scientists as well. I don't know anyone who became an astronomer or planetary scientist for the money, but I do know colleagues who are sadly being forced out of the field because they have families to feed! In the words of Forrest Gump, "That's all I have to say about that."

Until next month,

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⁴ <https://www.psi.edu/donate/>