

## **On Comments by the Governor-General**

By Archbishop Prendergast, S.J.

Governor General Julie Payette has the formidable task of representing Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth. She is an intelligent person with multiple degrees and vast experience in space exploration and scientific endeavours. She is a role model for young people, particularly women. In some sense, she also symbolizes and represents the people of Canada. She reflects our hopes and aspirations.

However, one of her first major addresses—a talk she gave to scientists—has troubled many people in our country. On November 1, she lumped together people who seemingly do not fit in with life in the modern world.

She provided illustrations of these backward folks. Some people deny that humans cause climate change. Some follow their horoscope for guidance. Some try to cure cancer with sugar pills. Others believe that divine intervention rather than, say, some random process, is responsible for the origin of life.

This last category sets up the perennial conflict between faith and science as if they were mutually exclusive categories. The statement implies that any true scientist could not also be a believer, someone who lives by religious faith. This dichotomy is neither necessary or helpful.

In astronomy, zoology, and every science in between, Christians have been pioneers and contemporary champions. For example, Jesuit Brother Guy Consolmagno is living proof that science and religion can be harmonious. In 2014, the papal astronomer received the prestigious Carl Sagan Medal for “outstanding communication by an active planetary scientist” by the American Astronomical Society’s (AAS)

Division for Planetary Sciences. The AAS press release noted, “Guy has become the voice of the juxtaposition of planetary science and astronomy with Christian belief, a rational spokesperson who can convey exceptionally well how religion and science can co-exist for believers.”

There is a misconception that science and religion are opposed rather than simply different ways of knowing. We have come to think that science means facts, whereas religion means beliefs in personal opinions.

Science, however, is silent on some of our most important questions. Why are we here? What is the meaning of life? Some people think that because science cannot adequately answer these questions, there is no answer. The Enlightenment wrongly insisted that science could explain everything in the universe and so we would no longer have a need for God.

We fail to acknowledge that science and religion have one important thing in common: all forms of knowledge take some things “on faith” in our search for the truth. Few people, for example, know much about particle physics. If you read an article about quarks, you must take it “on faith” that author has written the truth.

People sometimes consider, however, that the first-hand accounts in the Gospels of the eyewitnesses to Christ’s life, death, and resurrection are mere opinions.

Pope John Paul II’s 1998 encyclical “Faith and Reason” begins by noting: “Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth; and God has placed in the human heart the desire to know the truth—in a word, to know himself—so that by knowing and loving God, men and women can come to the fullness of the truth about themselves.” If science and religion are to reconcile or

co-exist, we must acknowledge that they work together in our search for the truth.

The Governor General has many years to serve and a great number of addresses to give. I wish her well. I hope that the disappointment people of faith experienced will lead her to reassess her outlook about religious belief and help her forge unity rather than division among us.