



PRESS RELEASE

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VATICAN TELESCOPE BECOMING AVAILABLE TO STUDENTS AT JESUIT UNIVERSITIES.

The Vatican Observatory is making its main telescope available to students at Jesuit universities.

Recently, the Observatory successfully completed the robotization and automation of its Vatican Advanced Technology Telescope (VATT), located on Mt. Graham in Arizona (USA). This was accomplished thanks to the generosity of the Thomas Lord Charitable Trust. It means, among other things, that astronomers can use the telescope remotely, without having to be up on the mountain. Vatican Observatory (VO) astronomers are now utilizing its exciting capabilities.

The new automation system (named “Don” after the late Don Alstadt of the Thomas Lord Charitable Trust) also means the VATT can be used remotely by others. While work on the “Don” system was underway in 2024, Kim Bepler first visited the VO at Castel Gandolfo as part of a delegation from the Jesuit Fordham University (USA). She would in time provide a grant to enable the VATT to be used remotely by students at Jesuit universities.

Bepler is a supporter of several Jesuit causes. She served as a Trustee of Fordham, and generously supported the 2025 Vatican Observatory Summer School. In January, a discussion between Bepler, Vatican Observatory Director Fr. Richard D’Souza, S.J., and Vatican Observatory Foundation President Br. Guy Consolmagno, S.J. led to the development of a program to bridge the VATT seamlessly to Castel Gandolfo, and more broadly, to allow its use by Jesuit universities worldwide, especially those who wouldn’t otherwise have the opportunity to use an advanced research telescope. To launch

the project, she offered a substantial gift in honor of the Rev.

Joseph (“Joe”) M. McShane, S.J., President Emeritus of Fordham University and a member of the Vatican Observatory Foundation’s Development Committee.

This new initiative, the “Jesuit Observatory Experience” (JOE), will bring the power of the VATT into Jesuit classrooms. It is being developed by D’Souza and other VO astronomers. Several USA-based Jesuit universities will participate in a pilot program this fall. If this program works well, JOE will branch out globally.

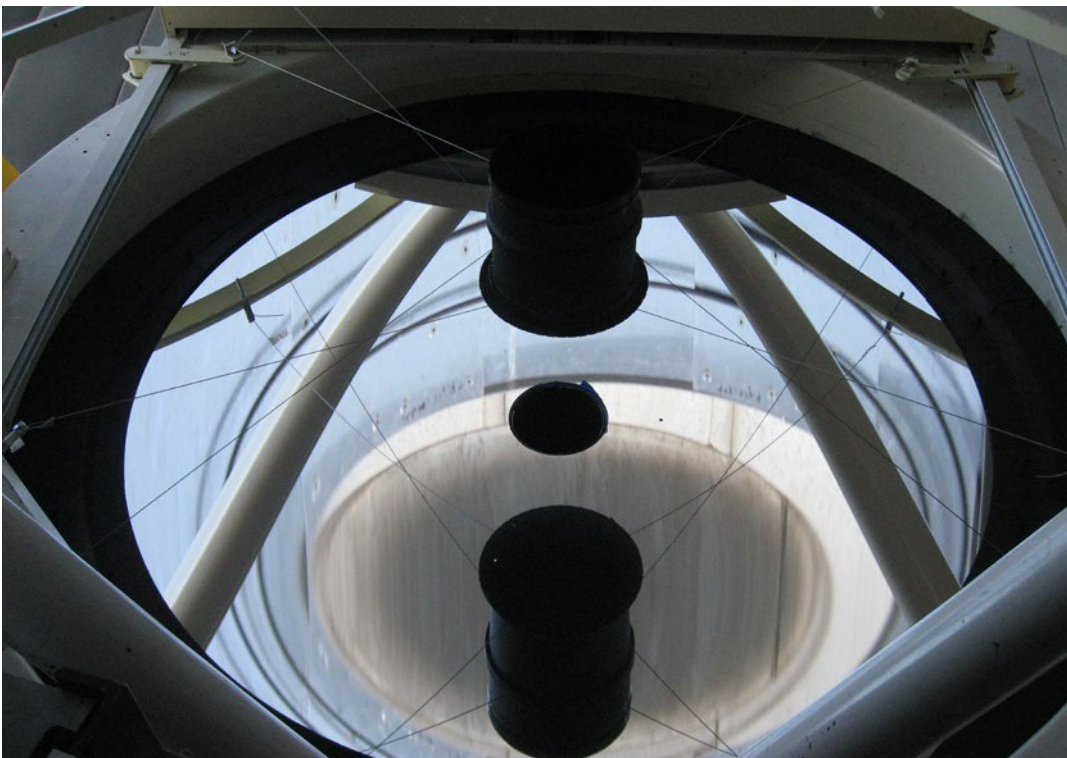
JOE will be filling an historical gap. At one time Jesuit universities regularly operated their own observatories. But the nature of astronomical research has changed, and waste artificial lighting has brightened the skies in populated areas. Research is now done primarily at larger telescopes in remote locations. JOE will bring access to a research-grade telescope back to Jesuit institutions like Fordham.

Prof. Robert Duffin of Fordham is one of the astronomy professors (along with professors at Creighton and Le Moyne Universities) planning to take part in the fall pilot project. The Fordham physics and astronomy department is very excited about this program, and in March VO Vice-Director Fr. Paul Gabor, S.J. gave Duffin a tour of the VATT. Gabor reported that the winding, gravel road that leads up the mountain was “somewhat muddy with some wet snow patches” for Duffin’s tour—and then it began to snow!

But with the “Don” robotic system in place, the students at Fordham and the other Jesuit universities will be spared the harrowing drive. Thanks to the generosity of Kim Bepler, the Thomas Lord Charitable Trust, and all the others who support the VO through the Vatican Observatory Foundation, the JOE program will allow the VATT to serve a new, broader part of the Catholic Church and the astronomical community by restoring to Jesuit universities their access to a research observatory.



*Images from the
Vatican
Advanced
Technology
Telescope
(VATT)*



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