

# What does the Church say about extraterrestrials?



**Question:** What does the Church believe about extraterrestrials?

– **Elena Dixon**, Arlington, Virginia

**Answer:** The Church has no direct teaching on this matter. As such, Catholics are free to speculate. But by using Catholic and scientific principles, some of the following parameters and distinctions may be interesting or helpful.

In the first place, we ought to define “extraterrestrials.” If by this term we mean “persons,” then it is clear that there are myriads of extraterrestrials, since angels are persons. God makes use of his angels to guide all of creation, so angels are everywhere in the universe, assisting in God’s governance of all things.

If by extraterrestrials you mean biological life of any sort, all the way from simple paramecia to more complex life forms, it seems likely that there is some of this sort of life out there, especially less complex forms of life.

If however, you mean humanlike creatures with physical bodies and rational souls, the likelihood drops significantly, but it is not zero. Many point to the vast size of the universe with billions of galaxies, each with billions of stars and presumably a lot of planets. They argue that, statistically, there must be many stars with planets like our own.

Others, however, point out that for the earth to be what it is and be able to support our kind of intelligent life, it cannot

be the result of a few factors. It is the result of hundreds, even thousands of factors. The sun must be stable, and there must be just the right kind of sun without too much of the wrong kind of radiation. The planet must have an orbit that is closer to a circle than a steep ellipse (Earth is only three degrees from a perfect circle, a rare kind of orbit). The atmosphere must have just the right kind of gases. It must be a volcanic planet that generates those gasses and also generates a magnetic field that deflects the most harmful rays of the sun. The earth also benefits from Jupiter and Saturn nearby that catch comets and other space debris. The earth has a good balance of land and water, and the continents are rather evenly distributed. This limits deserts and other weather extremes. Earth also has a steady rotation on a stable axis that permits seasons and the proper distribution of rain, and an almost-perfect relationship with our moon, so that tides are steady and ocean currents are assisted. The list is long.

However, the statistical probability of all these same sorts of things coming together in this way, or a similar combination, on distant planets is rather low. There is just a kind of "God-given" perfection to earth that is hard to replicate statistically. Scientifically, this is called the "Rare Earth" theory.

All that said, there are no theological problems with believing that there is intelligent, humanlike life on other planets. But even if there is, we would still have to ask: Do they have free will? Do they have a conscience? Has God revealed himself to them? How? Do they sin and need redemption? Did God join their race or family by becoming one of them? Will they go to heaven? If so, why has no one who has a vision of heaven ever seen them there?

Speculations could become numerous. As for us today, God has not revealed anything specifically about life elsewhere. Evidentially, he doesn't think we need to know too much about

this. Thus we do well to spend only a little time wondering about it.

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