

## Ever-expanding Horizons: The Wondrous Gift of the James Webb Telescope

By Sister Mary Mettler

A new telescope – the James Webb space Telescope has arrived and is delivering absolutely stunning pictures of the cosmos. Do you remember when the book, “The Hand of God: Thoughts and Images Reflecting the Spirit of the Universe,”<sup>1</sup> first came into your hands?

It was printed in 1999 and showed amazing pictures of galaxies with stars forming and others dying. For many of us non-astrologers it was the first most significant revelation of the majesty of the universe and the wonder of space and of God’s creative activity.

These past months, we have had our minds truly blown wide-open with the pictures shown by the James Webb Space Telescope. It reveals a truly infinite expanse of deep space, far beyond the work of the earlier Hubble telescope which has been beaming back jaw-dropping photographs of psychedelic nebulae whirling galaxies and radiant gas formations for more than 30 years. Those are the pictures in the book referred to above. Until the Hubble telescope, few of us ever knew that beyond the visible stars, moon and occasional planet, there lay worlds without end. Yet the stars have always drawn us and like the ancient artists drawing petroglyphs on cave walls we too experience both awe and terror at the unknown. The universe has always captured us with its beauty and its mystery. It has also left us with the existential question of its purpose and meaning.

Brian Swimme reminds us that “we are the first humans to look into the night sky and see the birth of stars, the birth of galaxies, the birth of the cosmos as a whole. We are the first generation to live with an empirical view of the origin of the universe. Our future as a species will be forged within this new story of the world.”<sup>2</sup>



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In 1992, there was a gathering of scientists and religious leaders who came together in Assisi to hear and learn from each other. The era of the separation of religions and science, brought about at the time of the Enlightenment needed to end. The scientists were awestruck by what they were learning about the universe and knew that there was another dimension here beyond science but they didn’t have the language to speak of it.

And the religious leaders and thinkers of the time knew that the story of the universe being revealed through science needed to be brought into the religious sphere of knowledge and truth.

In his book “The Phenomenon of Man,” de Chardin wrote, “Neither in its impetus nor its achievements can science go to its limits without becoming tinged with mysticism and charged with faith”.<sup>3</sup>

The question for us today is: will these two, science and religion, once again come together as One – science expanding religion and religion enriching science? May we live creatively in these challenging and awesome times.

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1. Reagan, Michael, editor. *The Hand of God: Thoughts and Images Reflecting the Spirit of the Universe*. Templeton Foundation Press. 1999
  2. Ibid pg. 156
  3. Ibid pg. 90