

Vatican astronomer's backing of evolution no factor in his exit: Coyne to remain chair of observatory foundation

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The former director of the Vatican Observatory has rejected speculation that he was replaced because of his vocal opposition to “intelligent design,” adding that Pope Benedict XVI “enthusiastically supported” his work.

Breaking a three-week silence, the Jesuit priest and astronomer George Coyne said he volunteered to step down, citing a need for fresh leadership at the observatory following his nearly 28-year tenure.

Coyne made his comments in an e-mail to Religion News Service on September 9 after returning from a summer holiday. That vacation overlapped with the Vatican's announcement on August 19 that José Funes, also a Jesuit priest, was appointed to succeed him.

“Upon my return from a vacation, during which I purposely avoided the news, I hear some media reports that I have been dismissed by the pope. This is simply not true,” Coyne wrote.

Over the past year, Coyne has frequently attacked intelligent design—the idea that the world is too complex to have evolved according to Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection—as a “religious movement.”

In staunchly defending evolution, Coyne has also frequently crossed swords with Austrian cardinal Christoph Schonborn, a former protégé of and close adviser to Benedict, whose support of intelligent design has been instrumental in introducing the theory into Catholic discourse.

The clash opened a divide between Vatican scientists who support evolutionary theory and prominent theologians who believe that evolution has been exaggerated to mount ideological attacks in an effort to disprove the existence of a creator God.

Coyne, who has served under three popes, dismissed as “imaginative journalism” reports linking his outspoken views to the decision to replace him. Coyne said he had in recent years pressed his Jesuit superiors who operate the centuries-old observatory to find a new director. The search began in May.

Coyne said he was delighted with the appointment of Funes, whom he praised as a “well-established international scholar” who is “devoted to the intellectual life of the church.” The Argentine-born Funes, 43, holds a doctorate in astronomy from the University of Padua in Italy. He also studied theology at the Jesuit-run Gregorian University in Rome.

Coyne, who will retain his post as chair of the Vatican Observatory Foundation, last month began a one-year sabbatical, serving as a parish priest at St. Raphael the Archangel Church in Raleigh, North Carolina. Coyne is no stranger to the U.S.; the Vatican Observatory has a modern research center on Mount Graham in Arizona. He said he will return to the observatory’s research staff after his sabbatical. *-Religion News Service*