



## Faith of a Physicist

In 2015 Father John John Kartje was named Rector of Mundelein Seminary in Chicago, but his path to that post was not a usual one. His boyhood love for science led to a Ph.D. in astrophysics at the University of Chicago and a career analyzing data from far distant stars to understand how galaxies formed in the earliest days of creation. “When you do research on something no one else has done before,” Father Kartje says, “you’re right there on the edge of the unknown.” This “encounter with the mystery” led him to think deeply about the Creator of the universe he was so intently exploring.

At first his Catholic upbringing was not much help because “I pretty much only had the faith of my eighth-grade-religion-class self, and that hadn’t grown up with the rest of me.” He was “on the edge of just chucking” it.

But the scientist in him said to look at the data. After all, Christians had kept alive the memory of Jesus Christ for 2,000 years. “Just by the data alone, there’s got to be something here that speaks to the human condition.” For the first time the learned astrophysicist stepped beyond the feeble faith of his youth. Lowering his sights from the skies, he began to follow the trail of different data down below.

He began to read books that drew his mind deeper and deeper into the emerging beauty of the Christian life. Then, as an opportunity to gather more data about this Faith, he

volunteered to be a Eucharistic minister to patients in the cancer ward of the hospital. “From that moment,” he says, “things really started rolling for me.” Serving these suffering people, he found himself “on the edge of the unknown” in a new and heart-changing way.

A different world began to come into view. “The lie is that your limitations define you—your marriage just ended, or you’re dying . . . this painful death.” Not true. Amid the death-dealing limitations of the cancer ward, the Eucharist-bearing physicist could see for certain that his patients were far more than their illness.

None of them chose to be there. Each was a victim of “forced vulnerability.” Yet in their life-constricting limitations the attentive researcher witnessed the “transformative power” of the Eucharist “right there in real time.” For “even in the midst of that incredible vulnerability” his communicants could still “give and receive human and divine love.” He had found the data he’d been seeking: “once you’re able to face your vulnerability . . . you’re in the midst of what the Incarnation is all about.”

For years his thoughts had ranged into the galaxies. Now “Mrs. Jones in Room 706 of the oncology ward started pushing the galaxy off the table. I’d be thinking of her reaction, our conversation . . .”

Taking these thoughts to prayer brought to light a calling to be a priest. “I was increasingly finding something that was real,” he said. “And like any good scientist who gets a little result, you never stop there. That helped me hone how . . . I articulated what was in my heart to God. Now, 20-plus years later, it has never stopped.”

John Kartje spent years of his life searching the

skies for evidence of where the light comes from. Now, his eyes still wide open, *Father* John Kartje is himself evidence for those who seek the Light of the World. It's a long way from the Milky Way to Mundelein, but in becoming a priest, this astrophysicist committed his life to the One who brought heaven to earth.