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The Vatican Observatory available to Jesuit students

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The Vatican Observatory is making its main telescope available to students at Jesuit universities. Recently, the Observatory successfully completed robotisation and automation of its Vatican Advanced Technology Telescope (VATT) on Mount Graham in Arizona, USA. This was achieved thanks to the generosity of the Thomas Lord Charitable Trust. This means astronomers can now remotely use the telescope without needing

to be on the mountain. Vatican Observatory (VO) astronomers are now taking advantage of its exciting capabilities.
The new automation system, named “Don” after the late Don Alstadt of the Thomas Lord Charitable Trust, also allows others to remotely use the VATT. While work on the “Don” system was underway in 2024, Kim Bepler, a supporter of several Jesuit causes, first visited the VO at Castel Gandolfo as part of a delegation from Jesuit Fordham University in the USA. She later provided a grant to enable the VATT to be used remotely by students at Jesuit universities.

Bepler has a long-standing support for 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 programme to seamlessly connect the VATT to Castel Gandolfo and more broadly allow its use by Jesuit universities worldwide, particularly those without the opportunity to use an advanced research telescope. To launch the project, she presented a substantial gift in honour of the Rev. Joseph “Joe” M. McShane, S.J., President Emeritus of Fordham University and a member of the Vatican

Observatory Foundation’s new initiative, the “Jesuit Observatory Experience” (JOE). JOE aims to bring the power of the VATT into Jesuit classrooms, developed by D’Souza and other VO astronomers. Several USA-based Jesuit universities will participate in a pilot programme this fall, with the potential for JOE to expand globally if successful.

JOE will address a historical gap. Once, Jesuit universities operated their own observatories. However, the nature of astronomical research has changed and waste artificial lighting has brightened skies in populated areas.

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Consequently, research is now primarily conducted at larger telescopes in remote locations. JOE will restore access to a research-grade telescope to Jesuit institutions like Fordham.
Prof. Robert Duffin of Fordham, along with professors at Creighton and Le Moyne Universities, is among those planning to participate in the fall pilot project. The Fordham physics and astronomy department is very enthusiastic about this programme, and in March, VO Vice-Director Fr. Paul Gabor, S.J. gave Duffin a tour of the VATT. During the tour, Gabor reported the winding gravel road leading up the mountain was "somewhat muddy with some wet snow patches" for Duffin, only for it to start snowing!

However, with the "Don" robotic system in place, the situation improved.
Students at Fordham and other Jesuit universities will be spared the long drive. Thanks to Kim Bepler, the Thomas Lord Charitable Trust and others supporting the VO through the Vatican Observatory Foundation, the JOE programme will enable the VATT to serve a wider audience within the Catholic Church and the astronomical community. This will involve restoring access to a research observatory for Jesuit universities.

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