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2008

Ring Nebula

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Roche, Fr. Randy, "Ring Nebula" (2008). *Spiritual Essays*. 18.
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Ring Nebula

Astronomers have given special names to some of the awe-inspiring sights that have been photographed by the Hubble and other advanced telescopes. Of the millions of galaxies and other phenomena that have been cataloged with number and letter combinations, some are so unusual and beautiful that they also have names, much like the cars that have "vanity" license plates instead of the usual alphanumeric identification.

Cataloging stars or other stellar spectacles is not the same as knowing all about them, as scientists and students can tell us. God, however, knows every star, nebula, gas cloud, radiation source, or whatever we are able to identify, and can call each one by a familiar name. When we talk about the sun, which we consider a quite well-known star, we do so with far less understanding than God has for every single star in even the farthest galaxy from our own. Yet we are able to interact freely with the Creator of the universe more easily than we can look up on a clear night and see the moon. Which is more amazing: the hugeness and beauty of the heavens, or our ability to converse with God who creates it all? Both are worthy of wonder and gratitude.

Huge databases are required to list the individual stars that are close enough to single out and the vast number of galaxies that are farther away, each one containing millions of individual stars. We can only make a general estimate of how many stars there might be in the universe, and we will never be able to list them all. We are very, very small before such magnitudes of numbers, vastness of space, and expanses of time. But the God of all creation desires to relate directly with each of us, personally. We are not treated as an interesting phenomenon to be cataloged, but as active participants in creation.

The Ring Nebula is one of the many magnificent stellar objects we can view and seek to understand in its complexity. We know more about the exploding star now than was possible in previous years, and we will learn still more in future years. But there are also aspects of this one stellar spectacle, as well as the millions of others we can see with our powerful array of telescopes and satellites, that we might never comprehend. We have a choice: we can either appreciate the mystery of what we cannot fathom, or we can consider ourselves deficient when we cannot explain the things that we can observe.

Many of us experience awe and reverence when we look up to the heavens, whether directly, or by means of the printed and digital

media available to us. Our eyes see, our minds ponder, and our hearts engage both the physical mystery of the visible universe, and the spiritual mystery of the invisible God who provides us with our physical and spiritual capacities. Who is this God, knowable as creator, present in all, including ourselves, and also beyond all comprehension? We can take joy in the experience of continuing to learn about both the observable heavens and the Creator of all that exists and with whom we can converse as readily as children with parents, or lovers with each other.

When we encounter God, whether mediated through our senses or in direct experiences, we encounter a mystery that is far greater than the Ring Nebula.