system. Bigger than the galaxy we see spread out above us at night, as far as we can see. Bigger than all the galaxies, seen and unseen. Bigger than whatever parallel universes may or may not exist beyond our own.

Indeed, God is so big that, even in all this immenseness, He is able to concentrate His entire effort, energy, and love on each one of us tiny individuals on this tiny planet. And, I have confidence, on any other individuals on any other planet, as well.

Contemplating what it would mean for humans to encounter aliens also forces us to ask in a new what just what it means to be “human.” The natural next question to arise is, “human as compared to what?” The literature of science fiction is filled with alien creatures, or sentient computers, or half human/half machine constructs. Fantasy stories add the whole spectrum of mythical elves and ghosts. But the central character of any such story, regardless of how many tentacles it has, is recognizably human: self aware, free to choose, to love or to hate. Free to do good; or to sin. And in need of redemption. It’s no surprise that so many of these stories have been written by Catholics, like R. A. Lafferty or J. R. R. Tolkein or Gene Wolfe.

Indeed, a common insight of these stories is that any creature of this universe, created and loved by the same God who created and loves us, would be subject to not only the same laws of physics and chemistry as us, but also the same rules of right and wrong. What else is there, 

**THE HUNCH**

I have a hunch... I can’t prove it, I can’t be sure I’m right, indeed I could well be wrong, but still... I have a hunch that, sooner or later, the human race will discover that there are other intelligent creatures out there in the universe.

Part of my reason for that hunch is scientific: there are already hundreds of nearby stars that we know have planets, and there are so many billions of other stars waiting to be explored in our galaxy, and so many billions of other galaxies (each with billions of stars) in the visible universe... surely, somewhere in that number, there must be other civilized, rational beings.

Part of my reason for that hunch is not scientific at all, but just a comfortable familiarity with the idea of “aliens” from a lifetime of reading science fiction. (Perhaps too much science fiction, some might say.)

And part of my reason is simply aesthetic: I am not the first astronomer, nor the first religious believer, to see the amazing panoply of the stars in the sky at night and intuit that God’s fecund creativity couldn’t possibly just stop with us.

It’s a hunch.

But the first and most important fact we have to confront in the whole question of “extraterrestrial intelligence” is this: we don’t know. Of all the planets
we’ve found orbiting other stars, it’s not clear if any of them are suitable places for life as we know it. On none of them, nor indeed anywhere closer to us in our own Sun’s system of planets, have we ever found evidence that completely, uncontroversibly, proves life originated in some place other that just here on Earth. As far as we know for sure, we could be alone.

And so that means that everything else we can say about extraterrestrial life, indeed almost everything in this booklet, is speculation and guess-work. Certainly, some of it will turn out to be wrong. Possibly, all of it is wrong. We don’t know.

So why do we even bother speculating about such a topic?

Well, for the same reason that you’ve picked up this booklet in the first place.

Because human beings have always found the topic somehow fascinating.

Indeed, stories and speculations about races and beings other than human are as old as story-telling. Ancient Greek and Roman myths were populated not only by gods, heroes, and demons, but by any number of strange and monstrous beings. Lucian of Samosata in AD 160 wrote perhaps the first tale of travel to the planets, and he imagined various alien races living and warring there. As we will see, even the Bible talks about non-human intelligent beings, created by God.

What Does It All Mean?

The American cartoonist Walt Kelly perhaps had the clearest insight into the whole extraterrestrial intelligence debate. In the early 1970s, a character in his comic strip Pogo mused, “There’s only two possibilities: there is life out there in the universe which is smarter than we are; or we’re the most intelligent life in the universe. Either way, it’s a mighty sobering thought.”

The mere possibility of intelligent life elsewhere puts a human (or at least, human-like) face on the far better established astronomical observation of the enormity of our universe. For Catholics, the sobering thoughts that come from contemplating this question, in the absence of any firm answers, should lead us to focus on realizing God’s greatness and His special love for us.

For most of us, most of the time, our lives are centered on our immediate needs and fears, our own personal joys and sorrows. But it is important to remember that God, and the meaning of our life that comes from loving God, is greater than the daily traffic, the pile of dirty laundry, the question of “what’s for lunch.”

God is bigger than our family problems, our city, our sports teams, our nation. Bigger than bombs; bigger than history. Bigger than the whole world and all its past and future. Bigger than our sky or our Sun or our solar
Giuseppe Tanzella-Nitti, an astronomer and Opus Dei priest who teaches theology at the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross in Rome, comes to the same conclusion. He has written a lengthy entry on Extraterrestrial Life in the *Dizionario Interdisciplinare di Scienza e Fede* (*The Interdisciplinary Dictionary of Science and Faith*, of which he was an editor). But at the end, he concludes by saying (in my translation of his Italian), “the last word on the question of extraterrestrial life will not come from theology, but science. The existence of intelligent life on planets other than the Earth neither rules in nor rules out any theological principle. Theologians, like the rest of the human race, will just have to wait and see.”

But there’s more value to this pondering than just indulging our fantasies by thinking about extraterrestrial life. Imagine you were born and raised on a desert island that had only one tree. You’d be hard pressed to appreciate just what a “tree” was. Would you think that all trees had palm leaves and coconuts? If you were then transported to Britain, would you be able to recognize that firs or oaks were trees as well? Most of us have experienced how traveling to another city, or another country, can make us recognize and appreciate the things we take for granted at home. In the same way, thinking about “aliens” is a good way to understand, and appreciate, what it means to be human.

I have to recognize that there is another reason why a lot of people are hungry to be visited by alien beings. Seeing a world full of pain, full of disease and warfare, injustice and poverty, they hope that somehow any race advanced enough to cross the vast distances between the stars and visit us must also be advanced enough to know how to overcome all those human problems. They look to The Aliens to be the saviours of humankind.

On that score... well, again I have only my hunches to play. But my hunch is not too sanguine. Consider the fate of the alien in the classic science fiction movie *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, who came to Earth exactly to help humankind. (It’s not a happy ending.)
And after all, haven’t we already had a Saviour visit Earth? And look what happened to Him.

(The makers of that movie appreciated the parallel; to make the connection with Jesus all the more obvious, they even had the alien call himself “Mr Carpenter”.)

But this also highlights perhaps the deepest value of contemplating, and speculating, about life elsewhere in the universe. Looking at this topic from a religious perspective adds a new dimension to our own understanding what it means to be in a relationship with God.

Appreciating God as the Creator of a universe big enough to contain those billions and billions of galaxies and stars makes us realize just how immense God’s infinity must be. Asking what it would take for an “alien” to have something like a “soul” forces us to confront just what we mean when we use that word. Speculating on how Christ’s salvation could apply to other beings is a wonderful way to appreciate anew what that salvation means to us humans.

But we must never forget that what we are doing is indeed appreciation, contemplation, and speculation. It isn’t science; not yet. Maybe, not ever. It isn’t theology, either. It’s science fiction, or fantasy, or poetry. It’s great fun... precisely because, in fact, we don’t know.

to world, in an endless succession of death, with scarcely a momentary interval of life.”

Paine’s argument, though crude, deserves an answer. In fact, it has received many answers, not all of them compatible with each other. It is not outside the realm of possibility that we are, indeed, in a unique position in the universe. Nor is it impossible that the Second Person of the Trinity, who was indeed present (as St John tells us at the start of his Gospel) in the Beginning, as The Word, should be expressed in more than one place, “spoken” in more than one “language”. The multiple lives and deaths of that Second Person which Paine so glibly mocked are in fact a fundamental Catholic truth expressed in our understanding of the Holy Eucharist. Christ is truly, physically present in a million places, and sacrificed a million times, every day at every sacrifice of the Mass.

Eman McMullin, a priest and philosophy professor at Notre Dame (with a background in physics), has discussed the possible impact on Christian theology of discovering extraterrestrials, and he concludes only that it would certainly inspire theologians to develop new ways of thinking about topics like original sin, the immortality of the soul, and the meaning of Christ’s redemptive act. But, as he points out, there is already a voluminous literature, and hardly a consensus, on these points among theologians even today, without ETs!