



First Remote Observing with VATT from Tucson

✦ by Fr. Richard P. Boyle, S.J. ✦

Remote control of a telescope can mean the observer-operator is not present at the telescope but can accomplish a full scientific observing run safely and efficiently from elsewhere. At the Vatican Advanced Technology Telescope (VATT) observers have been operating it “remotely” to some degree from its local warm control room in the facility on Mt. Graham.

To try distant remote control of VATT for the first time on March 30, 2011, the setup was this. In room 488 of Steward Observatory, Tucson, technician Chris Johnson already had configured with an internet link to VATT three large screen HP Thin Client monitors, compliments of Hewlett-Packard via VOF Chairman, Rich Friedrich. At nightfall technicians Ken Duffek and Dave Harvey at VATT by hands-on tasks made VATT ready for me to operate it remotely from room 488 in Tucson. This I did comfortably and successfully for a two hour test period. Having the necessary video monitoring of weather conditions, the sky, the guider camera and dome interior, I opened the dome slit, mirror cover, enabled the altitude, azimuth and derotator motor drives, set on a bright star to initialize on celestial coordinates, collimated the mirror optics, focused the telescope and made several exposures on star fields with the CCD camera.

To conclude this two-hour remote observing session I performed the normal shutdown procedures and turned control back to the local technicians for their shut downs requiring hands-on such as the oil to azimuth bearing and the primary mirror thermal control. As the remote observer I felt right at home! There only remain a few more details to make remote observing to VATT fully safe and efficient for observers intending full scientific runs not only from our control station at Steward Observatory but from elsewhere.

Fr. Boyle is one of the staff celebrating 50 years as a Jesuit.



photo courtesy of Frank Gizon

Noteworthy



Fr. Andy Whitman, S.J., received the Holy Cross Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice award, a special honor given for distinguished service to the Church by lay people and clergy. The medal was established by Leo XIII, the same Pope that refounded the Vatican Observatory in 1891.

Fr. Whitman is a priest and mathematician, having founded the Clavius Group and served as a member of the Vatican Observatory for many years. He is known for welcoming guests in Tucson and faculty and students in Castel Gandolfo. For many students in the Vatican Observatory Summer Schools, he was like a grandfather.

In presenting Fr. Whitman with the award, Fr. José Funes remarked that, “Andy has been an extraordinarily good example of the intellectual apostolate of the Church. To be a good apostle, a good Jesuit, we need to be Christians, Catholics, and especially good human beings. Andy is all those things. Tonight I am delighted to be here and present this award that recognizes Fr. Andy Whitman’s devoted service to the Church.”