

# FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

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**the  
faith  
of  
father  
gillespie**

by MICHAEL HOLLMAN

The purpose of the trip was not personal glory. They were searching for a habitable planet for Earth's millions.

FATHER GILLESPIE was glad of the eternal night. Faith always seemed to come easiest to men at night. In daylight other thoughts filled their minds, but they hadn't seen a day in several years. Father Gillespie's faith was now all that kept their minds, within the hull of the starship "Vega" and not reeling out into space.

Sam Rothmore sat at the control panel. He slouched in his boredom for he and the rest of the crew had little to do with the operation of the ship except in emergency. The "Vega's" robot entrails determined her course, guided her around obstacles, changed speed, and even, as the crew had jokingly said in the early days of the voyage, "Saw to the comfort of the passengers."

Rothmore muttered partly to the other men and partly to the space before the front panel, "Wouldn't you think that at this speed we'd come to something. An inhabited planet, a purple star, maybe God's underwear hanging out on a line—", he turned around smiling weakly. "I'm sorry Father. It's just that—well

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*Michael Hollman explores a question that must interest many of us—what Religion's role will be in the not too distant future when Man will have begun his long, slow, conquest of the Stars. A student at the University of Indiana, he has had several stories published locally.*

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when I started on this voyage I expected something. Maybe it was childish, but I kind of pictured myself landing on some lush tropical planet, claiming it for Earth, and then coming home and announcing to the world that there was a dream world just waiting to be colonized."

Father Gillespie smiled. "You put that very well, Sam. If you want to know the truth you pretty well summed up my feelings. I thought I'd bring some heathen aliens into the fold. All I see instead is some heathen stars blazing like hell fires. They certainly want no part of me."

The men laughed. Dr. Gillespie continued. "You see what I mean. It's rough on all of us but the purpose of our trip is not personal glory but to find a habitable planet. The peoples of the Earth must have a place to flee. Keep in mind that we are perhaps better off than they are. The world was like one vast tene-ment when we left, and it is worse now. There are over fourteen billion persons crowded on that hunk of rock! Remember that this voyage is dedicated to them. Well, now that I've preached my daily sermon let's pass out our dinner tablets. I hope that my little talk sharpened your appetite."

Rothmore took the tiny tablets in his hand. "I'm sorry I opened up, Father. I'll remember what you said."

Phillips, first mate of the "Vega" kept watch at the controls while the others slept. Seeing distant stars grow huge, then fade away into pin points of light, seeing vast areas of space swept by in seconds by the fantastic speed of the ship, had always filled him with pleasure and wonder. He, and perhaps Captain Peters were the only ones to whom the experience still held interest and uniqueness. Suddenly his lethargy was broken. The pattern of stars growing large then small was gone. There were no more stars ahead!

He cried aloud in his surprise. Captain Peters, drowsing, beside him woke with a start. "What is it son?"

Phillips turned his eyes to the panel. "Look ahead. There are no more stars. There's nothing, nothing!"

Captain Peters stared at the panel. "God, it's true!"

Father Gillespie, awake now, walked over to gaze at this scene. "How can this be, Captain? Maybe we've hit a sort of clear spot in space. In an hour or so the stars will probably be back."

The captain turned to him. "Certain scientists thought that the universe was of finite length, not endless as popular conception has it. Frankly I went along with those who thought it went on forever; but there doesn't seem to be any more—"

Father Gillespie put his

hand on the Captain's shoulder.

"Let's just wait, shall we? It just doesn't seem possible that we've come to the end of the universe. If that were so where are we now?"

The three men stood by the front panel together for several hours. Each hoped that the stars would reappear and that they might laugh together. It was ridiculous to think that they could come to the end of the universe. The stars did not reappear and they did not laugh. As the hours passed, their heads lowered as they realized that they were nowhere.

The crew was awake now and seeing the three defected-looking men ran over to the panel. They stood for long minutes straining their eyes for one tiny speck of light.

Rothmore broke the silence, "We're in nothing! Absolutely nothing!"

The men's voices began to rise and a throbbing panic wove itself into them. Someone began to sob, "We're nowhere. No matter how fast we go we're not going to get anywhere—"

Captain Peters slapped the hysterical man. "Stop it! If we all go to pieces we certainly will be nowhere. What does this word "nowhere" mean? Nothing. We're always somewhere—"

He couldn't stop them. Their voices rose over his. He rushed into their midst but

was knocked down by the men whose only link to the world was the word "Nowhere" they kept repeating. A word that they had used in that world without ever really knowing until now what it meant.

Father Gillespie was standing in front of them forcing his voice to be heard above theirs. "Please, let's stop this! We're still men and not mindless animals!"

The men stopped like a fire that had burned itself out; but their eyes still held some of the wildness.

"Don't ever do this again! Behavior like that is a sacrilege to—"

Someone half shouted and half sobbed, "But, Father, we left God behind when we left the universe. He made the universe but this—"

Father Gillespie stood staring into the "nothing" before the panel. Perhaps the man was right? The panic began to rise again as the Father stood gazing through the panel, the only thing between him and "nothingness." His mind went back to the teeming Earth, so overcrowded that it choked. At least it had a God. He remembered his church and all the others, all the others—

The sound of the men's voices was not so loud now for they had lost the courage to make much noise with nothingness so close. Now they stood quietly while Father Gillespie spoke.

"How many of you remember a church where you lived. The only ones I know are my own and another several hundred miles away. Don't you see? Mankind has forgotten God. The only thing it has thought of during the last several hundred years is getting men like you out into space with enough power to reach any point in the universe." He hoped that they could accept his next words.

"God can only exist where he is recognized. We have found that man is the only thinking creature in the uni-

verse." His voice began to rise but it never lost control. "If God can't exist in Man's universe anymore, he *must* be around us in this nothingness!"

Father Gillespie and the rest of the crew stood looking through the panel knowing that what was just spoken was true. They could feel God around them as they never had on Earth, and their panic gave way to an intoxicating calmness. They were almost sorry when the ship was turned around and headed back into a Godless universe.