NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Biologist, former Dominican, wins Templeton Prize

Rich Heffern | Apr. 12, 2010

Francisco J. Ayala (CNS)

A former Dominican priest and molecular biologist who has vigorously opposed the entanglement of science and religion while also calling for respect between the two has won this year?s $1.53 million Templeton Prize.

Francisco J. Ayala, a professor of biological science at the University of California, Irvine, was named the winner of the 2010 prize March 25. According to the John Templeton Foundation, which has awarded the prize yearly since 1973, Ayala?s ?respect for the rightful, if separate, roles of science and faith have allowed him to consider questions ... that draw upon each discipline and may bring new insights that advance human endeavor.?

John Templeton Jr., president and chairman of the West Conshohocken, Pa.-based foundation, praised Ayala?s research, scholarship, development of new schools of thought, and innovative assessments of some of the most fundamental questions of life.

?Ayala?s clear voice in matters of science and faith echoes the foundation?s belief that evolution of the mind and truly open-minded inquiry can led to real spiritual progress in the world.?

The Templeton Prize is the world?s largest annual award given to an individual and honors a living person who has made exceptional contributions to affirming life?s spiritual dimension.

The actual prize will be awarded to Ayala at a private ceremony at Buckingham Palace in London May 5, presented by the Duke of Edinburgh, Prince Philip.

A pioneer in genetic research, Ayala made many discoveries, including proof that the parasites responsible for Chagas? disease, an often fatal illness affecting millions of people in the tropics, reproduced not sexually but by cloning. The discovery led to similar ones about the parasites that cause malaria and other tropical diseases, opening up new approaches to potential vaccines.

In 1995, President Bill Clinton appointed Ayala to the U.S. President?s Committee of Advisors in Science and Technology. In 2001, he was awarded the National Medal of Science.

In 1981 he served as an expert witness in a pivotal U.S. federal court challenge that led to the overturning of an Arkansas law mandating the teaching of creationism alongside evolution.

Ayala, a naturalized American who moved from Spain to New York in 1961 for graduate study, soon became a leader in the field of molecular evolution, and has devoted more than 30 years to asserting that both science and faith are damaged when either invades the proper domain of the other.

Even as he warned against religion?s intrusion into science, Ayala has also championed faith as a unique and important window to understanding matters of purpose, values and the meaning of life.

Born in Madrid in 1934, shortly before the Spanish Civil War was unleashed there, he grew up amid the smothering restrictions of the Franco era. Ayala showed an early interest in science that was cultivated by the Dominican priests who taught him. In 1960 he was ordained a priest but soon decided to leave, receiving his doctorate from Columbia University in 1964.

Ayala said he does not consider himself a ?Catholic scientist,? but rather a scientist who is interested in spiritual questions. Still, he said his relations with the Catholic church remain cordial, noting the church?s supportive intellectual tradition of scientific inquiry.

In a statement at a news conference following the announcement of the prize, Ayala forcefully denied that science contradicts religion. ?If they are properly understood, they cannot be in contradiction because science and religion concern different matters, and each is essential to human understanding.? Referrring to Picasso?s ?Guernica,? he noted that while science can assess the painting?s massive dimensions and pigments, only a spiritual view imparts the horror of the subject matter. Together, he explained, these two separate analyses reveal the totality of the masterpiece.

Other notable Catholics who have won the prize include Mother Teresa in 1973, Cardinal Leon Suenens in 1976, and Benedictine monk Stanley J. Jaki in 1994.

Source URL (retrieved on *12/04/2013 - 10:49*): http://ncronline.org/news/people/biologist-former-dominican-wins-templeton-prize