

Laudatio for Charles Robert O'Dell by Professor Józef I. Smak

In few minutes Professor Charles Robert O'Dell will receive the Nicolaus Copernicus Astronomical Center Medal - in recognition of his outstanding contributions to the field of gaseous nebulae and the crucial role he played in the creation of the Copernicus Astronomical Center. To illustrate those two points I will share with you some of my memories from the past.

We first met at the Lick Observatory in November of 1963. Bob was at that time an Assistant Professor at the Astronomy Department of the University of California in Berkeley and was coming regularly to the Lick Observatory to use its 120-inch telescope and the Crossley Reflector. Even on Mt. Hamilton some nights can be cloudy. And on one such cloudy night, when we sat in my room talking about practically everything, Bob told me about his recent work on the planetary nebula in the globular cluster M15. The results, published next year (C. R. O'Dell, M. Peimbert, T. D. Kinman, *Ap.J.*, **140**, 119, 1964), were quite surprising: the helium content turned out to be very high: $N(\text{He})/N(\text{H})=0.18\pm 0.03$, comparable to that in young Population I objects; and the Abstract of that paper contained the following prophetic statement: "*strong arguments can be presented, supporting the hypothesis that the original helium content of the globular clusters was much higher than the very low values usually assumed*". To appreciate the revolutionary character of this result one should recall that the common belief at that time was that only hydrogen was created during Big Bang and all other elements, including helium, were produced later in stellar interiors. According to this belief the helium content of Population II objects should be close to zero. One year later the background radiation was discovered, other discoveries followed and in few years we all knew that O'Dell was right.

In January of 1971, the *National Academy of Sciences* created its *Special Committee for the Celebration of the Copernicus Quinquecentennial*. It consisted of six prominent American scientists: Owen Gingerich, Nicholas Mayall, Stanisław Mrozowski, Jerzy Sława-Neyman, Charles Robert O'Dell, and Antoni Zygmund. Profesor Zygmund told me later that – although he was the Chairman of the Committee – its real *spiritus movens* was O'Dell. And it was indeed O'Dell who convinced his colleagues that their Committee should make a recommendation to the U.S. authorities that the best form of celebrating the Copernicus Anniversary would be "an American gift for Polish astronomers". What kind of a gift? The answer to this question was to come from O'Dell's visit to Poland in May 1971. During that visit he met with Professor Janusz Groszkowski, president of

the Polish Academy of Sciences, went to Toruń, and – most importantly – participated in a meeting of young Polish astronomers, representing all major academic centers, which took place on May 17 in the historical building of the Warsaw University Observatory. Discussion during that meeting lasted for several hours, occasionally becoming quite chaotic, with many different ideas being brought forward (including a Polish observatory in Chile – an idea totally unrealistic at that time). But when we sat in the evening over gin-and-orange in a bar of the Grand Hotel, Bob did not have any doubts: *“It must be a modern institute, equipped with a computer, oriented towards domestic and international cooperation – The Copernicus Center”*.

Later that year Professor O’Dell became Deputy Director for Science of the G.C.Marshall Space Flight Center in Huntsville (Alabama) and Project Scientist for the Large Space Telescope. In spite of those new, demanding responsibilities he devoted quite a lot of his time and all his heart to the idea of the Copernicus Astronomical Center until our dream became reality. Today, on this special occasion, speaking on behalf of all of us, I say: Thank you, Bob!