

The Pontifical Academy of Sciences Continues Foolhardy Biotechnology Advocacy

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On January 2, 2009, Carol Glatz of the Catholic News Service, reported from Vatican City that Cardinal Renato Martino, head of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace said the scandal of hunger in the world continues to be of concern. Famine and lack of nutrition are to be blamed on the poor distribution of plentiful foodstuffs. The responsibility for the food crisis "is in the hands of unscrupulous people who focus only on profit and certainly not on the well-being of all people," said Cardinal Martino. A more just system of distribution and not the manufacturing of genetically modified foods is the key to addressing the problem, he said. "If one wants to pursue GMOs (genetically modified organisms) one can freely do so, but without hiding that it's a way to make more profits," he said. Utilizing genetically modified foods calls for "prudence" because genetically modifying organisms can increase yields in some instances, he said, but people must not abuse their power to be able to manipulate nature. This certainly is a move to a more cautious view of gmos on the part of the Vatican, in earlier statements gmos were given a "yellow light", meaning to go with caution. It is clearly a restatement of long term Vatican policy that distribution and social justice are major concerns of the Holy See's food and farm policies rather than the endorsing the encouragement of more production, or the use of biotechnology to increase production. The official policy of the Vatican is at odds with the continuing advocacy by the Pontifical Academy of Sciences for biotechnology as a solution to development issues and for world hunger. In September of 2004 the Pontifical Academy of Sciences co-sponsored a conference at the Pontifical Gregorian University with the United States Embassy to the Holy See entitled: "Feeding a Hungry World: The Moral Imperative of Biotechnology." That meeting and its focus shocked a number of Catholic commentators, including me, then the Executive Director of the National Catholic Rural Life Conference and the Peace and Justice Coordinator for the Congregation of Holy Cross. The Columban theologian, Sean McDonogh criticized it at the time as did Jesuits working in Zambia, Ronald Lessup, SJ and Peter Henriot, SJ who operate a social justice and agricultural development program. The policy promoted by the Pontifical Academy is contrary to the strong statements from the South African Bishops, Bishops of the Philippines, Bishops from Brazil, and a number of other places about the moral concerns associated with agricultural biotechnology. Grassroots networks of Catholic farmers in the International Federation of Adult Catholic Rural Movements (FIMARC), based in Belgium and the International Catholic Rural Association (ICRA) based at the Vatican have both published critiques of biotechnology in agriculture. Monsignor Biagio Notarangelo, ecclesiastical advisor to ICRA, well known in Vatican Offices, commented that biotechnology encourages a "new colonialism" in an ethical evaluation he presented to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations. The Catholic bishops of the United States in their "For I Was Hungry and You Gave Me Food" on food and agricultural policy have a rather nuanced approach to genetic modification of seeds for food. They certainly never touted it as a "silver bullet" or a moral imperative. And when I served as an agricultural policy adviser to them, it was clear to me that there was not a lot of sympathy for Colin

Powell when he asked the Vatican to silence the Jesuits Lessup and Henriot when the United States wanted to give gmo grain for food relief in Zambia.

Now we learn that the Pontifical Academy of Sciences is organizing another pro-GMO conference, this time in a Study Week, in Rome from May 15-19, 2009. The title of the 2009 Study Week is "Transgenic Plants for Food Security in the Context of Development." It is important to recognize that this program is about food security and development. Even the Alliance for a Green Revolution for Africa (AGRA), led by former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, are not talking about the necessity of gmos, they are talking mostly about high quality local seeds from African sources. As AGRA's literature says, their seeds will be "home grown." The linking of food security and development is an effort by companies like Monsanto to further their own goals, to make a profit, as Cardinal Martino states. Monsanto has been very keen to secure the support of the Holy See by adopting a moral perspective. Even where it has not secured the Holy See's official support, the veneer or semblance of such will be touted as a factual demonstration of support. The Pontifical Academy seems to be a willing mouthpiece and launching pad.

When I complained in 2004 about the conference in Rome, to the head of the Pontifical Academy, I was told then to remember that the Pontifical Academy was a place of debate; nothing official was being stated there. This time around, having a weeklong study week with totally one-sided presentations is far from a debate. The general public doesn't know what is official and what is non-official, when Rome speaks, they listen. Companies like Monsanto don't make those distinctions between official and non-official for the public. In 2004 people who were not invited to the event managed to provide the public an alternative perspective by going to the press. Since I was one of the critics at the time, the Catholic press and various websites did manage to get out a different perspective and even spokespersons for the Peace and Justice Office, including Monsignor Frank Dewane, (now bishop of Venice, Florida) told me that when he advised a theologian from the Legionnaires of Christ who was speaking on the program that gmos were not a silver bullet to solve world hunger, the theologian got very upset. At the time of the conference I spoke with Archbishop Raymond Burke, then the Archbishop of Saint Louis and a strong critic of biotechnology and corporate control in agriculture. He had been the President of the National Catholic Rural Life Conference. He told me that shortly after he arrived in Saint Louis he met Peter Raven at a social event. Raven approached him and said: "Archbishop, I understand that you are opposed to gmos." The Archbishop told him, that, yes, he was. And, Raven answered: "I'm going to convert you." Archbishop Burke wrote to the Secretary of State of the Vatican to object to Raven's membership in the Pontifical Academy of Sciences and the Secretary of State at the time wrote back to say that Burke's predecessor, the late Archbishop John May, had been the one who suggested him.

Peter Raven is the director of the Botanical Garden of Saint Louis. He has been the recipient of significant amounts of funds from the Monsanto Corporation, also headquartered in Saint Louis. Peter Raven, when speaking at a conference of the National

Religious Partnership on the Environment that I attended, introduced himself as having a “Catholic background.” At that time he was accompanied by his fourth wife, just having divorced his third wife, who had a position as a public relations director for Monsanto. The Catholic “background” doesn’t include the “family values” of the Holy See. But, Peter Raven has been finding it easy to give voice to his ideas within selected walls of the Vatican. At the conference in the Gregorian University in 2004, Dr. Peter Raven tried to persuade his audience that raising questions about the terminator gene technology was both “emotional and irrational.” The terminator seed would have a profoundly negative impact on subsistence farmers. Most of the world’s work is agriculture; most of those workers are women. These farmers and their families comprise most of the world’s hungry now. The terminator technology exposes the spurious claims of the pro-gmo lobby, including the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, that “feeding the world”, rather than making astronomical profits is the primary goal of biotech corporations. Terminator seeds would strike a blow to the world’s subsistence farmers whose number including their families is in the billions. That focus on profit was the focus of Cardinal Martino’s comments in early January. They simply repeat the words of the Holy See in its 1999 World Food Summit in Rome where it said the following: “There are also many large-scale “structures of sin” which steer the goods of the earth away from their true purpose, that of serving the good of all, toward private and sterile ends in a process which spreads contagiously.” That analysis was presented in a document on world hunger entitled “World Hunger: A Challenge for All: Development in Solidarity.” Surely the focus of proponents of biotechnology such as are represented in this study week are not really concerned about moral issues. They are concerned, as Martino says, about profit.

In the statement of John Paul II for the Jubilee of the agricultural world in November, 2000 we find a very clear observation on biotechnology in agriculture: “This is a principle to be remembered in agricultural production itself, whenever there is a question of its advance through the application of biotechnologies, which cannot be evaluated solely on the basis of immediate economic interests. They must be submitted beforehand to rigorous scientific and ethical examination, to prevent them from becoming disastrous for human health and the future of the earth.” This is far from thinking of biotechnology as the solution to world hunger and central to development.

The role of biotechnology giant, Monsanto, in all of this cannot be underestimated. Monsanto has something like monopoly in gmo seeds. It has bought out rivals. It has a long history of litigation to reach its goal of dominance. It goes after farmers that it thinks have replanted its seeds. Currently it is investigating many farmers in the midwestern section of the United States. Monsanto has opposed legislation in the United States aimed at limiting its monopoly position such as the competition policy proposed in federal legislation. Where Monsanto fights through legal means, it also fights through claiming the terms utilized by its organic and sustainable agriculture opponents. It is now claiming that it deserves the term sustainability. It has run full-page ads in major newspapers claiming that biotechnology is sustainable agriculture. This is the very point of Peter Raven’s speech at the study week, as it was in 2004, biodiversity is enhanced, not diminished, by biotechnology. Where Monsanto cannot fight you, it claims to join you. These are the machinations of Monsanto, willingly put on the world stage as a claim for

feeding hungry people and in the name of development. Such claims need to be challenged. Certainly it should not be provided the veneer of responsible policy at the Holy See. It is as unseemly as giving welcome to the deniers of the Holocaust. If fully implemented, these views would create a new holocaust among the billions of the world's poor farmers and their communities, not to speak of the havoc to be reaped on earth itself.

It is surprising to me that the Pontifical Academy of Science seems mindlessly unaware of the recent scientific studies on the capacity of agro-ecology and organic agriculture to address the issues of hunger and poverty. The International Agreement on Science and Technology in Agriculture (IAASTD) was a four-year study with 400 experts funded for twelve million dollars by the World Bank that released its report in April of 2008. It has a central report and five regional reports. It was a project that Monsanto requested of the World Bank. The results though ran counter to what Monsanto hoped for. Monsanto was hoping to have these 400 scientists, economists, sociologists, indigenous people, farmers to come to the conclusion that biotechnology was the silver bullet to solve hunger and poverty. Instead the group found that agro-ecology was more of the solution. So, Monsanto walked out. Now they are turning to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences to do for them what IAASTD did not do. I suspect that its sponsorship will not redound to the credit of this facility within the Holy See. I think the word of Cardinal Martino about the unscrupulous has relevance here. That is a tragedy. It would be better for the Pontifical Academy to cancel the study week, or at minimum, to host a dialogue between some of the members of the IAASTD study and their biotechnology proponents. That at least would provide a meaningful debate. Instead it has moved into the position of advocacy and enabling virulent efforts to convert countries to adopt gmos. The conference participants will be marshalled to carry forth in every part of the world efforts to grow gmos. It is strange that the Pontifical Academy of Sciences is allowing itself to be used in this way, contrary to the official policies of the Holy See on agriculture, poverty and hunger in light of a development agenda. It is indeed, a sad state of affairs.