

Bishop Sanchez's position on GMOs untenable

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posted by GMWatch, UK

The publication of the *Instrumentum Laboris* for the Synod on Africa on March 19th 2009, must have put a lot of pressure on Bishop Sanchez, the Chancellor of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences who is an enthusiastic supporter of GM crops.

This working document for the Synod has involved extensive collaboration between the 36 Episcopal Conferences and two Eastern Catholic Churches on the African continent, as well as those of the 25 Departments of the Roman Curia and the Union of Superiors Generals. It is critical of the propaganda which has surrounded GM crops. In number 58 it states that:

"Farm workers, on whom a great part of the African economy depends, are victims of injustice in marketing their products. They are often paid a very low price for their goods. Paradoxically, in some parts of Africa, the cost is even set by the buyers themselves. Populations already suffering from a disadvantage are thereby further impoverished. The seeding campaign of proponents of Genetically Modified Food, which purports to give assurances for food safety, should not overlook the true problems of agriculture in Africa: the lack of cultivatable land, water, energy, access to credit, agricultural training, local markets, road infrastructures, etc. This campaign runs the risk of ruining small landholders, abolishing traditional methods of exchanging seeds and making farmers dependent on the production companies of GMOs."

While many bishops in Asia, Africa and Latin America have made similar comments about GMOs, the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, has been doing all in its power to aggressively promote GM crops.

In September 2004, the Academy and the U.S. Embassy to the Holy See, organized a one day seminar in the Gregorian University on the theme *Feeding the World: The Moral Imperative of Biotechnology*. All the speakers at that event were actively involved in promoting GM crops and some, such as Dr. Peter Ravan, the director of the Missouri Botanical Gardens, have close connections with Monsanto.

I attended the seminar and trenchantly criticized the one-sided nature of the debate. I also pointed out that none of the speakers had any competence in the area of development, poverty alleviation or hunger. Those who had such competence, such as *Caritas Internationalis*, were not invited to the event.

As if a one-day promotion of GM crops supposedly to feed the poor was not enough, the Pontifical Academy of Sciences is organising a five day event at the Vatican from May 15th to 19th this year. The title of the Study-Week is *Transgenic Plants for Food Security in the Context of Development*. Many of those who attended the 2004 seminar are speaking at the Study-Week.

In an introduction to the booklet which outlines the topics and speakers for the Study Week, Prof. Ingo Potrykus, Chairman of the Swiss based Humanitarian Golden Rice Board and Network, stated, "Changing societal attitudes, including the regulatory processes involved, is extremely important if we are to save biotechnology."

Prof. Potrykus wants the Academy to support his campaign to dismantle the regulatory system for GM crops. He blames it for impeding the spread of potential benefits to be gained from adopting biotechnology in agriculture. This is also the position of Dr. Peter Raven, director of the Missouri Botanical Gardens.

In an article entitled, Vatican Cheers GM, in Nature Biotechnology [1], Anna Meldolesi quotes Dr. Raven who interprets the Study Week as a sign that the Vatican has given a green light to GM crops, "I think that we are heading in the right direction with this meeting and it will help to dispel some of the myths about GM crops.... I would hope that the high moral ground of the Vatican is relevant, at least in Catholic countries." Dr. Raven's claims are in direct contradiction to what the authors of the working document for the Synod for Africa have written.

Prof. Potrykus admits that this particular Study Week is not a standard 'science' meeting. He claims that opposition to biotechnology in agriculture is usually ideological. However, it is obvious from his introduction that the Study Week is ideologically biased towards advancing the dominance of agriculture by Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs).

The authors of the working document for the Synod for Africa are close to their people and sees GM crops for what they are, namely a way of enriching giant biotech corporations at the expense of the poor. It is a pity that Bishop Sanchez is listening to pro-GMO propaganda, instead of paying attention to the voice of the Church in Africa.

Reference

1. Anna Meldolesi, Vatican Cheers GM, Nature Biotechnology, Vol. 27, No. 3., pp. 214-214 (2009) <http://www.nature.com/nbtjournal/v27/n3/full/nbt0309-21a> (subscription needed).