

Did The Vatican Endorse GM Crops?

Fr. Sean McDonagh, SSC (June 15, 2009)
posted at GM Watch, UK

The spinning has already begun. On June 9th 2009, Dan Piller of The Des Moines Register staff blog wrote that the, "Vatican has given a somewhat surprising endorsement of genetically modified crops. A report issued by the Pontifical Academy of Sciences in May 2009, says that genetically modified crops offer food security, better health and environmental sustainability."

On this side of the Atlantic the prestigious science magazine NewScientist also claimed that "GM crops were heartily endorsed at a week-long seminar held by the academy (Pontifical Academy of Sciences) in Mid-May. Participants agreed that the crops offer food safety and security, better health and environmental sustainability." The text goes on to state that "the verdict is not shared by the International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development, a global UN-backed think tank that last year rejected GM as a solution to hunger."

The first thing to say about both reports is that they are simply wrong. The Pontifical Academy of Sciences, while it meets under the auspices of the Vatican and has a bishop as its chancellor, does not speak for the Holy See (Vatican). The Pontifical Academy of Sciences brings people together from various disciplines to discuss various scientific issues.

Even when they come up with specific recommendations this does not mean that they are shared by the Holy See. If, on the other hand, the approval of GMOs had come from either the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace or the Secretariat of State, this would represent the Holy See's position on the particular issue.

In fact, the Pontifical Academy of Sciences has been promoting GMOs for almost a decade. They published a "Study Document on the Use of Genetically Modified Food Plants to Combat Hunger in the World" in 2003.

A copy of this document was given to each participant at a seminar which I attended in the Gregorian University in Rome on September 24th 2004. The first recommendation states that, "the rapid growth of the world population requires the development of new technologies to feed people adequately; even now an eight of the world's people go to bed hungry. The genetic modification of food plants can help meet part of this challenge." The second recommendation claimed that, "agriculture as it is currently practiced is unsustainable, as is indicated by the massive losses of topsoil and agricultural consequences of massive application of pesticide and herbicides throughout most of the world. Techniques of genetically engineered crop plants can make an important contribution to the solution of this common problem."

The final twelve recommendations all support the introduction of GM technology. Number six is aimed at the 'developing' world. It states that, "genetically modified food plants can play an important role in improving nutrition and agricultural products, especially in developing countries."

One should not be surprised that the Academy endorses GM food since many of the people who spoke at the 2004 seminar and the 2009 Study Week have very close connections with the biotech industry.

Dr. Eric Sachs who read a paper entitled "The Path to Sustainable Yield: Opportunities and Obstacles," has worked for Monsanto for 30 years. The short biography in the Introductory Document says that "his primary responsibility includes broadly communicating principles of risk assessment and risk management of GM crops; enabling the development and application of harmonized GM crop regulation based on science and comparative risk; responding to false and misleading claims regarding biotechnology regulation..." One would hardly expect him to question the safety of GM food.

Dr. Peter Raven was one of the main speakers both at the 2004 seminar and the 2009 Study Week. At the 2004 seminar, he claimed that anyone who questions the safety of GM crops or asks whether they are the best solution to world hunger, is being ideologically driven. He even tried to persuade his audience that raising questions about the terminator gene technology was both emotional and irrational.

Dr. Raven is the Director of the Missouri Botanical Garden. He is passionate about stemming the tide of extinction which is now gripping the biological world. His solution is the mastery of biology allied to the power and efficiency of corporations. Over the years, he has received massive grants from Monsanto. He argues that GM crops will protect biodiversity.

Most other commentators point out that GM soya is having a devastating impact on the environment and human communities in Argentina, Brazil and other Latin America countries.