

GMOs: The Vatican, the archbishop and Monsanto

Rich Heffern | May. 20, 2009 NCR Today

The Vatican's Pontifical Academy of Sciences just concluded a study week with a focus on agricultural biotechnology as a way to feed the hungry in developing countries. In Sept. 2004 the Academy co-sponsored a conference at the Pontifical Gregorian University titled: "Feeding a Hungry World: the Moral Imperative of Biotechnology."

After the 2004 conference, many were concerned with the direction the Vatican seemed to be taking on the biotechnology issue, including Br. David Andrews, then director of the National Catholic Rural Life Conference and Jesuits working in the developing country of Zambia, Ronald Lessups and Peter Henriot, who operate a social justice and agricultural development program there. They pointed out that the policy being promoted by the Pontifical Academy was contrary to strong statements from the South African bishops, bishops of the Philippines, from Brazil, and a number of other places about the moral concerns associated with agricultural biotechnology.

Br. David Andrews, currently of Washington-based NGO, Food and Water Watch, told *NCR* that at the time of the 2004 conference, he spoke with Archbishop Raymond Burke, then archbishop of St. Louis, and former president of the National Catholic Rural Life Conference, a strong critic of biotechnology and corporate control in agriculture. Burke told Andrews that shortly after he arrived in St. Louis he met with Peter Raven, director of the Missouri Botanical Garden, at a social event. Burke said that Raven approached him and said: "Archbishop, I understand that you are opposed to GMOs." The archbishop agreed then Raven told him: "I'm going to convert you."

Peter Raven, a Catholic, had just been appointed as a member of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences. Raven had been the recipient of significant amounts of funds from the St. Louis-based Monsanto Corporation, the world's largest biotechnology company, and was a featured speaker at the 2004 Vatican Conference.

Archbishop Burke wrote to the Secretary of State at the Vatican to object to Raven's membership. The Secretary of State wrote back to him to say that Burke's predecessor, the late Archbishop John May, had been the one who suggested him.

"Spinwatch," an independent body in the United Kingdom that monitors the role of public relations, has described the Vatican study week as a "total farce," charging that the speakers are "all GMO supporters, with many well known for their extreme pro-GMO views or having vested interests in GMO adoption." A May 13 release from the group asserts that several speakers have financial ties to Monsanto.

NCR's John Allen reports on our Web-site that, "in one sign of concern about the appearance of corporate influence, sources told *NCR* that plans for the study week originally called for a couple of Monsanto employees to discuss public/private partnerships in the delivery of GMO technology. Roughly a month ago, however, the Monsanto officials were quietly advised not to attend."

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