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CNS Story:

GM-ACADEMY Dec-1-2010 (780 words) xxxi

Vatican has not endorsed genetically modified food, official says

By Carol Glatz  
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY (CNS) -- The Vatican did not endorse an 11-page final statement in favor of easing restrictions on and allowing more widespread use of genetically modified crops, especially in poorer nations, said a Vatican official.

"The statement is not a statement of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences because the Pontifical Academy of Sciences as such -- 80 members -- wasn't consulted about it and will not be consulted about it," Bishop Marcelo Sanchez Sorondo, the academy's chancellor, told Catholic News Service.

The statement, which was recently made public by a private science-publishing company in the Netherlands, also "has no value as the magisterium of the church," he said in an e-mail response to questions Dec. 1.

Later the same day, Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesman, issued a similar communique, adding that the pro-GM statement "cannot be considered an official position of the Holy See."

Some news agencies had mistakenly reported that the statement represented the Vatican's endorsement of easing regulations on and promoting the use of genetically modified food crops.

The Pontifical Academy of Science's headquarters hosted a study week in May 2009 on "Transgenic Plants for Food Security in the Context of Development."

The final statement summarized the week's proceedings and recommended that genetic engineering techniques be freed from "excessive, unscientific regulation" so that modern and predictable GM technologies could be used to enhance nutrition and food production everywhere.

It called for greater cooperation among private corporations, governments and nonprofit organizations with the aim of increasing funding from governments and charities so that GM crops could be "cost-free" for poorer regions.

It also encouraged more widespread use of sustainable and sound agricultural practices to help improve the lives of the poor.

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The statement said its conclusions were "drafted and endorsed by all participants of the study week," which included 33 outside experts and only seven academy members, including the academy's chancellor, Bishop Sanchez.

Bishop Sanchez told CNS that the final statement was signed by all of the participants and "therefore it is a statement that has the authority and value of the participants."

Most of the 40 participants were longtime supporters of using modified crops for boosting food production and creating new sources of energy from nonfood crops.

A number of participants have invented genetically modified foodstuffs or work for companies that sell genetically modified seeds.

There also were at least four speakers who have ties to the U.S. agribusiness giant Monsanto, which created a synthetic bovine growth hormone to boost cow milk production as well as insect- and herbicide-resistant seeds.

Bishop George Nkuo of Kumbo, Cameroon, attended the closed-door study week with the idea that he would talk about a warning by African bishops against claims that genetically modified crops would solve Africa's food crises.

A working document for the Synod of Bishops for Africa released two months before the meeting in 2009 said that using modified crops risks "ruining small landholders, abolishing traditional methods of seeding and making farmers dependent on the production companies" selling their genetically modified seeds.

Those in charge of organizing and inviting speakers for the study week were academy members Ingo Potrykus, who invented a genetic strain of rice that is rich in beta carotene; Werner Arber, a 1978 Nobel Prize winner in medicine; and Peter Raven, retired president of the Missouri Botanical Garden, which is home to the Monsanto Center and its offices, laboratories and millions of plant specimens.

"Finally, for the moment, the Pontifical Academy of Sciences is not planning another meeting on this topic," Bishop Sanchez wrote to CNS.

The academy hosted talks in 2000 and 2004 on whether genetic modification should play a role in promoting food security. After co-hosting the 2004 meeting on modified foods with the U.S. Embassy to the Vatican, the academy showed its support for the potential of modified foods when it released a statement -- based on the conference discussions -- that praised the important contributions such foods could make in fighting hunger.

However, the Vatican has never taken a formal position supporting or opposing genetically modified foods.

Pope Benedict XVI has denounced the continued scandal of hunger in the world, saying its root causes have more to do with problems of distribution and sharing than with there not being enough food in the world.

The Vatican newspaper, L'Osservatore Romano, said earlier this year that it was not a coincidence that in 2009 the use of genetically modified food crops grew by 13 percent in developing countries and that GM crops covered almost half of the world's total arable land. And yet "the number of hungry people in the world has for the first time reached 1 billion people," the paper said.

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