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"Surely, among the structures of sin in the world today are agro-food corporations that steer the goods of the earth toward themselves solely for profit. If one thinks that the focus of these multinational corporations and their supporters is to cure world hunger, then one is among the most naïve on the planet."

World hunger and biotechnology debated; Honors for pro-choice politician; Lefebvrite update; Cardinal Arinze in New York; Sects and 'African Initiated Churches'

By **JOHN L. ALLEN JR.**

The adjective "relentless" seems coined for figures such as James Nicholson, the United States' Ambassador to the Holy See.

Since his arrival in 2001, Nicholson has been a relentless advocate for the Bush administration in its dealings with the Vatican. Among other things, this put him in the awkward position of defending the Iraq war, even as Pope John Paul II emerged as one of its leading critics. Yet Nicholson persevered, and has impressed Vatican officials with his zeal, if not always with the substance of American positions.

Nicholson is at it again this week, this time on genetically modified organisms, or "GMOs." It may seem an odd priority for an ambassador to the Vatican, but Nicholson understands that resistance to GMOs, which form an increasingly important component of the American biotechnology industry, is not just scientific, but political and moral. Voices in the developing world argue that GMOs are a boondoggle for giant First World biotech companies, without adequate assurances about their impact on the environment, human health, or traditional farming practices.

These considerations have already led the Zambian, South African and Brazilian bishops to express doubts about GMOs. If the Vatican were to do the same, the bad publicity could have serious repercussions for American companies such as Monsanto. (By 2001, more than 109 million acres worldwide were planted with bioengineered crops). In part for that reason, in part out of genuine conviction that biotechnology can help solve the problem of global hunger, Nicholson rarely misses an occasion to make the case.

All of which brings us to today's conference at the Gregorian University, co-sponsored by the U.S. Embassy to the Vatican and the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, titled "Feeding a Hungry World: The Moral Imperative of Biotechnology."

Even before the conference began, critics were claiming that the deck was stacked with pro-GMO voices.

Holy Cross Br. David Andrews, executive director of the National Catholic Rural Life Conference in the United States, charged in a Sept. 20 statement that "the Pontifical Academy of Sciences has allowed itself to be subordinated to the United States government's insistent advocacy of biotechnology and of the companies which market it."

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Andrews did not mince words.

"Surely, among the structures of sin in the world today are agro-food corporations that steer the goods of the earth toward themselves solely for profit," he said. "If one thinks that the focus of these multi-national corporations and their supporters is to cure world hunger, then one is among the most naïve on the planet."

In essence, Andrews charged that the Pontifical Academy has been bought off by American biotech interests.

"It reminds me of many state sponsored universities in the United States which take funds from biotechnology companies and lose their scientific critical culture for one of uncritical endorsement of the agenda of the companies which fund their research," he said.

Jesuit Frs. Roland Lesseps and Peter Henriot, both experts on agriculture in the developing world living in Zambia, argued that the conference at the Greg was based on faulty premises. Hunger, the two Jesuits said, is a problem not of production but of distribution.

"The world produces enough food, but -- shamefully -- it is not justly distributed," they wrote. "While millions suffer from hunger and malnutrition, others suffer from obesity."

Lesseps and Henriot too charged that the conference was one-sided.

"To be honest, how is it possible to examine with full intellectual vigor such an important topic without voices that hold contrary views to those espousing biotechnology as the solution to the world's hunger problems?" they asked.

* * *

Advocates of GMO were by no means willing to cede the moral high ground at the Gregorian conference. They argued that faced with a world in which 13,000 people die of hunger every day, technology that promises to produce more food at a lower cost, using less land and other resources, amounts to a moral obligation.

"Some environmentalists, consumer groups and members of churches have challenged the overwhelming scientific evidence on the benefits of biotechnology and have succeeded in sowing fear among some governments in the developing world," Nicholson said.

"The worst form of cultural imperialism is to deny others the opportunities we have to take advantage of new technologies to raise up our human condition," Nicholson said.

Peter Raven, a professor of biology at Washington University in St. Louis and a member of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, was even more pointed.

Referring to arguments such as those of Lessups and Henriot that distribution, not production, is the key to solving hunger, Raven warned against the "escapist statement that there's plenty of food," calling it "in a practical sense absurd." Two billion more people will be added to the human population before it reaches stability, he said, and by 2025 half of those people will be living in regions facing severe water shortages. Meanwhile, land once available for agriculture continues to be gobbled up by urban sprawl. Developing higher-yield crops that need less water, he said, is imperative.

There is no documented case, Raven said, of any human or animal illness anywhere in the world attributable to GMOs. Virtually all of the beer and cheese now consumed around the world, he said, uses biologically engineered materials.

Raven was dismissive of fears that GMOs would unleash new diseases or create other health consequences.

"To a mother in a famine-struck region of Africa, the disease is hunger and the cure is food," he said. "The efforts of Greenpeace [to oppose GMOs] are doubtless helpful to the finances of an organization that does not spend one cent to alleviate starvation, but they are outrageous and should be rejected out of hand by any moral person."

Perhaps the most compelling testimony of the day came from farmers from the developing world. Edwin Y. Paraluman of the Philippines reported that he planted genetically modified corn on his farm at a time when most Filipinos rabidly opposed it; there was even a rumor, he said, that walking in a field with GMO crops could make someone gay. Yet his crop yield went up, the crops were safe, and as a result of his increased earnings, he was able to buy a refrigerator and a motorcycle for his family.

Sabina Khoza from South Africa, who described herself as "a very, very proud indigenous woman in agriculture," said that her genetically modified corn had a similar impact on her life. She asked for a round of applause for her smart blue business suit, saying, "If it weren't for biotechnology I wouldn't be dressed like this."

Khoza also insisted that the food is safe.

"We are growers and farmers, and we are the very first consumers," she said. "Whatever I plant, I've eaten and consumed before it goes to the market. Here I am."

Lester Crawford of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration described the extensive testing process followed in the United States to ensure food safety.

"To date, bioengineered foods have proven to be no different from their conventional counterparts," he said.

Crawford noted that 68 percent of the soybeans in the United States, 70 percent of the cotton crop, 26 percent of corn and 55 percent of canola are genetically engineered.

Legionaries of Christ Fr. Gonzalo Miranda provided a theological framework, arguing that "it is not Christian" to argue that human beings are prohibited from altering plants and animals with technology, because there is an "ontological difference" between humans and the rest of creation. Hence there is no intrinsic problem with GMOs, Miranda suggested, and they should be evaluated on a case-by-case basis.

Bishop Marcelo Sánchez Sorondo, chancellor of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, did not take a direct position on the GMO issue. He did, however, refer to a 2004 publication of the academy, "Study Document on the Use of 'Genetically Modified Food Plants' to Combat Hunger in the World," that took a cautiously supportive stance.

"Genetically modified food plants can play an important role in improving nutrition and agricultural products, especially in the developing world," it concluded.

Raven, Sánchez noted, was a primary contributor to that document. Some critics note that Raven is also the director of the Missouri Botanical Gardens in St. Louis, which receives financial support from the Monsanto corporation; the Monsanto Fund, for example, recently committed \$1 million toward construction of a new children's garden.

Vatican sources told *NCR* Sept. 24 that an explicit statement on genetically modified crops is unlikely from the Holy See in the near future, but that most officials seem inclined to give it a "yellow light," meaning "proceed with caution."

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The *Catholic Herald* recently carried an interesting item about Julian Hunte, a pro-choice Catholic politician in the West Indies who was awarded a papal knighthood Sept. 19. Hunte was made a Knight of the Grand Cross Pisan Order. Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Angelo Sodano bestowed the honor in a New York ceremony.

As the *Herald* story notes, the award is especially interesting in light of the debate currently swirling in the United States over the eligibility of pro-choice Catholic politicians for the Eucharist.

Hunte, the Minister for External Affairs of Santa Lucia, recently concluded his term as president of the United Nations General Assembly. The Vatican recognized him for his role in a resolution regarding the work of the Holy See in the United Nations.

Hunte was also, however, the deciding vote last year on a bill in the upper chamber of the St. Lucian parliament that decriminalized abortion in that Caribbean nation. In December, that measure passed by five votes to four, with Hunte in favor.

"I think every woman must have a choice. I am a pro-choice man," Hunte said during a parliamentary debate before votes were cast.

"A woman must be the one who will decide what she wants to do in any given situation. I respect the views of those who feel it is wrong. This is their right. I will give them that right, as I will give the woman the right to determine how she wishes to treat her life," he said at the time.

Some Catholics in St. Lucia were, therefore, opposed to the Vatican honor.

Fr. Linus Clovis, for example, was appalled, according to the *Herald*.

"It makes a mockery of what we stand for and it compromises us because now the public perception on abortion will be: 'What are you complaining about? The Vatican does not see anything wrong with it.' "

Clovis has appealed to the pope to overturn the decision.

American Catholics will no doubt be struck by the contrast between the Vatican award to Hunte, and the refusal of some American bishops to allow pro-choice Catholic politicians to speak on diocesan property or at Catholic colleges, and most recently, to receive the Eucharist.

For anyone familiar with the patterns of Vatican diplomacy, however, Hunte's knighthood is hardly surprising. The Vatican's classic approach to political forces with which it disagrees might be dubbed "constructive engagement." The idea is that it's better to keep lines of communication open than to burn bridges. It's as important to encourage positive acts as to condemn negative ones; after all, Hunte was honored for supporting the Holy See in the U.N., not for his vote on abortion. Public excoriations may be momentarily satisfying, seasoned Vatican diplomats argue, but they rarely produce forward movement.

A senior Vatican official once expressed the idea to me this way: "Not every sentence of a heretic is heresy."

Outside the Eucharist debate, one clear example of the principle would be John Paul's 1987 visit to Chile, when the pope appeared on the balcony of the presidential palace alongside Augusto Pinochet. John Paul was criticized for doing so, but behind the scenes, Vatican sources say, he warned Pinochet that he had to go. The year after the visit, a national plebiscite rejected military rule.

The same psychology was implicit in John XXIII's and Paul VI's *Ostpolitik*, the policy of engagement with the Socialist world. Obviously the Catholic church did not approve of atheistic Communism, but these two popes calculated that their capacity to steer the Soviet bloc in a positive direction would be enhanced by dialogue.

Not all Catholics, of course, find this logic morally persuasive. During the Cold War, many felt that the Vatican, especially in the person of Secretary of State Agostino Casaroli, had sold out believers suffering behind the Iron Curtain, and had confused the broader public about the Church's anti-Communist stance. (Indeed, some within the Vatican itself held this view). Similarly today, some Catholics argue that "constructive engagement" with Catholic politicians who defy church teaching on a matter as fundamental as abortion amounts to fecklessness in the face of evil. Again, there are some officials in the Holy See who lean towards this position.

Yet the center of gravity in the Vatican is closer to constructive engagement than to public confrontation. That's one reason the American debate over pro-choice politicians and the Eucharist seems destined to remain just that -- an American debate.

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Periodically, rumors circulate concerning a healing of the rupture between the Society of Pius X, the so-called "Lefebvrites" who are attached to the pre-Vatican II Tridentine rite of the Mass, and Rome. Typically those rumors are wildly misleading.

The Italian press has reported that the society is now suffering internal divisions, pointing to two Lefebvrite priests in Bordeaux, France, who have contested its direction. Some articles hinted at an internal crisis, suggesting, for example, that Lefebvrite seminarians might not come back after the summer break.

On Sept. 21, the Italian branch of the society issued a press release insisting that two disgruntled priests do not add up to a crisis. The release provided some interesting figures about the continuing growth of the Lefebvrite movement.

"Every year 15 to 30 priests are ordained for the society," it said. "In 2004, there were 17 new priests, a number that therefore reflects the annual average. Moreover, all seminarians came back to the seminaries after the summer period. The problem denounced by two priests of the Bordeaux priory is inexistent. It remains the case, however, that the number of vocations is a bit too low for the needs of the society."

"It's well known that not all the young men who enter the seminary arrive at the priesthood; the percentage of departures from the seminary in recent years is the same as during the 35 years of its existence, between 40 and 60 percent," the release stated.

"The apostolate of the Society of St. Pius X, moreover, is not limited to France, and certainly not to Bordeaux. Its 464 priests operate in all five continents and in more than 60 countries. There are seminaries in Switzerland (Econe), Germany, France, the United States, Argentina and Australia."

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Regular readers of "The Word from Rome" will recall a recent interview with Cardinal Juan Cipriani of Lima, Peru, one of the world's two Opus Dei cardinals ([July 16](#)). Among other things, he recounted the story of the "falsified letters" scandal: three letters that surfaced in 2001 linking Cipriani with the dreaded former Peruvian security chief Vladimir Montesinos turned out to be fakes.

In our interview, Cipriani charged that forces within the church, including bishops, had concocted these letters in an effort to discredit him. A recently concluded civil investigation in Peru apparently agreed, identifying the Bishop of Puno, Jorge Carrión, as the responsible party.

To recap, in 2001, the then-Minister of Justice in the Peruvian government, Fernando Olivera, secretly carried three letters to the Vatican, one allegedly written by Cipriani, the others by the papal nuncio, or ambassador, Archbishop Rino Passigato. Cipriani's letter was addressed to Montesinos, head of the security forces under former Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori. (Fujimori is in exile in Japan for his role in a corruption scandal, while Montesinos is in prison). The letter purportedly

showed Cipriani asking for the "elimination and incineration" of secret videotapes showing him with Montesinos. The other letters purported to show the nuncio thanking Montesinos for a contribution of \$120,000 and asking for more money.

The letters, however, turned out to be fakes. They were apparently concocted using scanned copies of letterhead stolen from the offices of the Peruvian bishops' conference.

"There are bishops involved," Cipriani told me in July, describing himself as "completely convinced" that the attacks against him came from senior levels inside the church. He declined to name names.

On Sept. 14, a Peruvian prosecutor named Mirtha Salinas concluded an investigation that had stretched over several months by naming Carrión, charging that he is guilty of "an offense against the public faith in the mode of falsified material." Exactly what civil or criminal consequences might follow was not immediately clear.

The secretary general of the Peruvian bishops' conference, Monsignor Juan José Larrañeta, was quoted as saying there is "great discomfort" within the church in the wake of the report. He said, however, the church would not come to a stand-still as a result of the incident.

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This week, 230 Benedictine abbots from around the world are meeting at the Benedictine headquarters on the Aventine Hill at Sant'Anselmo. They're gathered for the abbots' congress, held every four years.

There are 438 Benedictine monasteries throughout the world, making it one of the Catholic church's most global religious communities. The Benedictines have chosen "globalization" as the theme of their congress, inviting Norbert Walter of the Deutsche Bank of Frankfurt and the ubiquitous Andrea Riccardi, founder of the Community of Sant'Egidio, to address them on the subject.

Five representatives of other Christian confessions have also been invited, along with 24 Benedictine sisters.

"We want to look beyond the walls of our monasteries," said Abbot Primate Nokter Wolf. "Let's allow ourselves to be challenged by globalization. It challenges our spiritual potential."

Riccardi's presence is noteworthy, given the tensions that have sometimes surrounded the relationship between established religious orders and the so-called "new movements," such as Sant'Egidio, Focolare, the Neocatechumenate, and other realities such as the Legionaries of Christ. The established orders sometimes complain that the movements do not collaborate well, and enjoy too much papal favor; the new realities, for their part, sometimes grouse that religious orders are slow-moving and insular.

Sant'Egidio has a good track record at reaching out to religious orders (though superiors still sometimes grumble that Sant'Egidio insists on "doing things its way"). Inevitably, the growth of new forms of life in the church generates tension, and it can be creative as long as conversation does not break down. Riccardi's visit to Sant'Anselmo should perhaps be seen, at least in part, in this light.

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An item from the "keeping an eye on the papabile" file:

Nigerian Cardinal Francis Arinze, prefect of the Vatican's Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, visited Long Island (in New York)

last week. He spoke during the 2nd Annual Cardinal Bevilacqua Lecture in Pastoral Theology, held at the Seminary of the Immaculate Conception in Huntington. He was invited by Bishop William Murphy, head of the Diocese of Rockville Centre.

International travel is, of course, one of the ways that a potential pope comes to the attention of his brother cardinals and the broader Catholic world.

More than 200 Catholic clergy and lay people attended the event to hear the cardinal address the importance of the Eucharist in the pastoral ministry of the priest.

"If you touch the holy Eucharist, you touch the heartbeat of church life," Arinze said, emphasizing the need for priests to abide by the norms of the sacrament. Priests should remind parishioners of the importance of confessing their sins before receiving the blood and body of Christ, he said.

Though Arinze did not spell it out, the comment could not help but have political echoes given the current debate over pro-choice politicians and the Eucharist. Earlier in the year, Arinze made waves at a Vatican press conference when he said that a politician who does not follow church teaching on abortion should not present himself for communion, and if he does, the priest should not administer it.

"Objectively, the answer is clear," Arinze said April 23. "The person is not fit. If he shouldn't receive it, then it shouldn't be given."

His reputation as a papal front-runner preceded him to New York.

"I'm very interested in hearing the cardinal, especially since he's being talked about as the next pope," Tony Korec of Medford, NY, told *Newsday*, the major daily serving Long Island.

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The canon law faculty at Santa Croce University, operated by Opus Dei, has the reputation of being one of the best in Rome. Last week, the university held a seminar on the subject of annulment. Unlike civil divorce, which dissolves a valid marriage, annulment is a canonical finding that a marriage never existed.

More than 200 canonists from 33 countries took part in the Santa Croce seminar.

According to figures from the university, in 2002 there were 56,236 ordinary procedures seeking an annulment in the Catholic church, 46,092 of which ended in an affirmative sentence, meaning that the annulment was granted. Among the most common grounds were "simulation," meaning that one of the partners did not fully share the Catholic faith regarding marital unions, and "incapacity," which usually means a psychological anomaly that rendered one of the partners incapable of freely making the requisite choices.

Given the growing number of requests for annulments, the challenge for the church today lies "in imposing a correct preparation for candidates for the sacrament," meaning verifying "the will of the candidates to unite themselves in matrimony for their entire lives," said Professor Eduardo Baura of Santa Croce.

Baura added that the role of ecclesiastical tribunals is to ascertain the truth of the candidates' will and capacity at the moment they got married, not when the request for an annulment is filed.

Fr. Frans Daneels, promoter of justice for the Signatura, more or less the Vatican's supreme court, said the church must balance "seriousness of jurisprudence" against "the real possibility of obtaining a declaration of nullity in a reasonable period of time, whenever the matrimony is truly invalid."

It's a matter of record that the bulk of those 46,092 annulments granted in 2002 came from the United States. This has long been a sore point for canonists from other

parts of the world, who sometimes accuse the American church of being an "annulment factory." Some American canonists and bishops, however, argue that the American church has simply invested in making canonical resources available, so that more people are aware of their options and have the means to pursue them.

Vatican officials have dropped hints in recent years that they would like to "tighten up" on the granting of annulments, but to date no new rules have been announced.

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Last week's column was written from Africa, and among other things I interviewed two leaders of the African church: Archbishop Ndingi Mwana a'Nzeki of Nairobi, Kenya, and Msgr. Joseph Obunga, secretary general of the Ugandan bishops' conference. Both discussed the growth of new Protestant movements in Africa, referring to them as "sects."

Several readers wrote to challenge the term, suggesting that it is prejudicial. The more neutral verbiage gaining ground in scholarly discourse these days is apparently "African Initiated Churches," and some of my correspondents see these new churches as important phases in the inculturation and modernization of Christianity in Africa. One observed that these movements have been less successful at attracting Catholics than historical Protestants in much of Africa, but argued that they offer genuine spiritual depth.

In any event, those who wrote me argued, it is unecumenical to refer to other Christian groups as "sects."

I take the point, though as a practical matter Catholics in both Latin America and Africa know what the term "sect" means in a way that other words simply can't replicate. "Locally initiated Protestant churches" or some such verbiage is unlikely to dislodge "sect" anywhere other than in scholarly abstracts. Hence let me at least be clear: in this space, when the term "sect" is used, it's a descriptor for new Protestant-inspired religious movements, largely in the developing world, with no disrespect intended. (It's worth noting that Obunga did not himself seem dismissive of the "sects," suggesting that the Catholic church has much to learn from them in terms of pastoral care of the whole person).

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I was in Chicago for a few days this week, and managed to make time for dinner with Fr. Andrew Greeley, a keen observer of church affairs, and perhaps equally importantly, creator of the "Blackie Ryan" series of mysteries that form some of my favorite airplane reading.

No encounter with Greeley would be complete without a copy of his latest book, and indeed he was waiting for me on Michigan Avenue clutching a copy of the galleys for *Irish Cream*, his latest Nuala Anne McGrail mystery, scheduled for publication in February 2005. Those put off by Greeley's unabashed enthusiasm for sexuality won't care for it, but it's full of good humor, human insight, and Irish dialect. I read it on the plane back to Rome, a welcome distraction from wondering how many years off of purgatory I might receive for enduring 10 hours in coach.

I can also report that a new Blackie Ryan novel is on the way. Greeley said he was putting the finishing touches on it this week.

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