

Vatican studies genetically modified crops

Rome

Sandwiched amid Pope Benedict XVI's trip to the Middle East and President Barack Obama's commencement address at Notre Dame, a behind-closed-doors "study week" in Rome sponsored by the Pontifical Academy for Sciences on genetically modified organisms, or GMOs, has so far flown largely below radar.

Yet the May 15-19 event could help drive the Vatican toward a pro-GMO stance, disappointing some social justice activists, as well as a cross-section of Catholic bishops and theologians, who see genetically altered crops as risks to the environment and human health as well as a boondoggle for giant agribusiness corporations.

To date, the Vatican has not taken an official position on GMOs. In recent years, both pro- and anti-GMO forces have clamored for Vatican support, on the theory that a statement could be crucial in framing moral debate.

The "study week" is unlikely to produce immediate conclusions, and the Academy for Sciences is essentially a think tank that does not issue authoritative church teaching. Nonetheless, the thrust of the event seems to mobilize support for GMOs as a safe way of combating poverty, feeding the hungry, and protecting the environment.

Read Rich Heffern's backgrounder [What are GMO foods?](#) [1].

The driving force behind the study week is Ingo Potrykus, a German-born scientist credited with being the inventor of "golden rice," a genetically modified rice plant which produces high levels of a precursor to vitamin A. Proponents claim that "golden rice" could save up to a million lives a year, mostly in the developing world, from illnesses due to vitamin A deficiency, but others charge its benefits have been over-sold. Potrykus is a Catholic and a member of the Academy of Sciences.

The formal title of the study week is "Transgenic Plants for Food Security in the Context of Development," which is taking place at the headquarters of the Pontifical Academy for Sciences in the Vatican's Casina Pio IV.

Well before the event even began, it stirred contrasting reactions.

"Spinwatch," an independent body in the United Kingdom that monitors the role of public relations, has described the 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, an American agricultural company that is the world's largest producer of genetically engineered seed.

In an April 19 issue of the Irish Catholic, environmental writer Fr. Sean McDonagh, a Columban missionary, charged that the Academy of Sciences event is "silent" about the role that "massive profits" for biotech companies play in influencing pro-GMO arguments.

McDonagh told NCR he's planning to hold a small demonstration in Rome on Monday to provide an alternative point of view.

Potrykus wrote a letter to the editor of the Irish Catholic insisting that "it should be obvious that this study week is truly in the interest of the poor." Piero Morandi, an Italian scientist and another study week participant, wrote that anti-GMO regulation "is excessive, very costly, not science-based and therefore not only useless, but damaging the interests of people, especially the poorest."

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.

Though the sessions are not open to the public, preparatory materials for the conference, including abstracts of presentations published on the Web site of the Academy for Sciences, offer a flavor of the discussions.

An introduction refers to GMOs as "life-sustaining and lifesaving technologies," and asserts that "no substantiated environmental or health risks have been noted." It charges that "extreme precautionary regulation," especially in Europe, has limited the spread of GMOs, thereby restricting "the huge potential of plant biotechnology to produce more, and more nutritive, food for the poor."

The introduction says the study week is "not a standard science meeting," but rather has the goal of developing "strategies to inform the media, the public, the regulatory authorities and governments that it is unjustified, even immoral, to continue with current attitudes and processes."

Judging from the abstracts, virtually all of the official speakers at the conference share that view.

Andrew Apel, who edits a biotech news outlet called "GMObelus," charged that opposition to GMOs comes from "an international "protest industry which serves its own interests, and the interests of its funders." Henry Miller, of the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, wrote that failure to adopt wider use of GMOs is the result of a "public policy miasma," and amounts to "one of the great societal tragedies of the past quarter century."

Baron Marc Van Montagu, president of the European Federation of Biotechnology, said that "refusing GM technology will hold back efforts to alleviate poverty and hunger, to save biodiversity and protect the environment." Robert Paarlberg of Wellesley College charged that the anti-GMO movement is an "imperialism of rich tastes imposed on the poor."

Though his name does not appear on the published program, Swiss Cardinal Georges Cottier, former theologian of the papal household under Pope John Paul II, has also addressed the study week.

While conference materials frequently refer to anti-GMO sentiments among politicians, NGOs, and the media, they do not directly avert to one other source: Catholic leaders, including several bishops' conferences in the developing world.

In February 2003, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines asked then-President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo to postpone use of a genetically modified corn, citing possible health risks. In 2002, the Catholic Bishops of South Africa declared, "It is morally irresponsible to produce and market genetically modified food."

In 2003, 14 Brazilian bishops put out a "declaration on transgenic crops," in which they condemned the cultivation and consumption of GMOs. The bishops cited three risks: 1) health consequences, including increased allergies, resistance to antibiotics, and an increase in toxic substances; 2) environmental consequences, including erosion of bio-diversity; and 3) damage to the sovereignty of Brazil, "as a result of the loss of control of seeds and living things through patents that become the exclusive property of multinational groups interested only in commercial ends."

While few of these voices are on the program, organizers did invite Bishop George Nkuo of Cameroon after a working paper for this fall's Synod of Bishops for Africa contained critical language about GMOs. The document warns that a pro-GMO push "runs the risk of ruining small landholders, abolishing traditional methods of seeding, and making farmers dependent on the production companies."

The Academy of Sciences has long been favorably inclined to GMOs. In 2004, it released a study document praising the role that GMOs could play in combating world hunger.

How far the study week may go in resolving the broader Catholic debate, however, remains to be seen. A May 1 editorial in L'Osservatore Romano, the Vatican newspaper, said that for now GMOs remain "an open question."

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Other stories:

John Allen interviews:

Fr. Sean McDonagh: [GMOs are going to create famine and hunger](#) [2]

Professor Bruce Chassy: [Resistance to GMOs works against the hungry and poor](#)
[3]

Bishop George Nkuo of the Kumbo diocese in Cameroon: [Lone African bishop at pro-GMO meet unsure what to believe](#) [4]

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