



The Use of 'Genetically Modified Food Plants' to Combat Hunger in the World



L'uso di 'Piante Alimentari Geneticamente Modificate' per combattere la fame nel mondo

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Introductory note by President Cabibbo – During the closed session of the Academy held during the Plenary Session* many Academicians expressed deep concern at the distorted way in which recent scientific results, and in particular those relating to genetically improved plant varieties, have been presented to the public. It was decided to establish a committee with the task of producing a document on this subject. The chairman of the committee was A. Rich and its other members were W. Arber, T-T. Chang, M.G.K. Menon, C. Pavan, M.F. Perutz, F. Press, P.H. Raven, and R. Vicuña. The document was examined by the Council at its meeting of 25 February 2001, submitted to the members of the Academy for their comments, and then sent to the committee for the preparation of the final version. The document, which is included in the Proceedings, expresses the concerns of the scientific community about the sustainability of present agricultural practices and the certainty that new techniques will be effective. At the same time, it stresses the need for the utmost care in the assessment and evaluation of the consequences of each possible modification, and on this point we cannot but recall the exhortation of John Paul II regarding biotechnologies made in his speech of 11 November 2000 on the occasion of the Jubilee of the Agricultural World: 'they must be previously subjected to rigorous scientific and ethical control to ensure that they do not give rise to disasters for the health of man and the future of the earth'. The document also expresses concern about excesses with regard to the establishment of 'intellectual property' rights in relation to widely used crops – excesses which could be detrimental to the interests of developing nations. A further recommendation, clearly stated in the document, is that the examination of the safety of newly developed cultivars should be based on well-documented methods and that the methods and results should be openly discussed and scrutinised by the scientific community. The Academy will devote an ad hoc meeting to the subject of genetically modified food plants. This meeting will provide an opportunity to examine in depth many issues which are raised in the document and which are of special concern: the methods used in the testing and licensing of the new cultivars; the comparative risks associated with different methods of pest control; and the many scientific, ethical and social issues raised by the introduction of a new and powerful technology directed towards agricultural improvement.

*The Jubilee Plenary Session on 'Science and the Future of Mankind', 10-13 November 2000.