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[The Lights Come On After Sunset at St. Peter's Basilica](#) by [Diana Robinson](#) | Flickr | CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

## Vatican Visit

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I was somewhat apprehensive about taking my invited place at [the workshop on biological extinction of the Pontifical Academies of Science and Social Sciences](#) at the end of February. Right wing Catholic websites were loaded with outrage and lies about my invitation, and that of John Bongaarts from the [Population Council](#), and more than 10,000 people had signed petitions to get me (or us) excluded.

My apprehension was unnecessary. The view of the Academies, backed by the Vatican, was that "all voices should be heard." The workshop, arranged by my old friends and colleagues Peter Raven and Partha Dasgupta, was one of the most productive and informative I have ever attended. It was an assembly of stars, and everyone was treated with dignity, respect, and fine hospitality. The presidents of the two Academies, Werner Arber and Margaret Archer, and their Chancellor Msgr. Marcelo Sánchez Saronco were open and friendly. The papers (which will be published commercially), were (with a single exception) excellent, as was most of the discussion. Everyone emphasized the grave danger extinctions pose both to human life-support systems and the ethical duties of humanity to preserve "the creation" –the only life-forms we know of in the universe. There was essentially complete agreement that the drivers of the

now-underway sixth mass extinction were human overpopulation, overconsumption by the rich, and inequity (poverty).

The only issue that was carefully avoided was contraception. Everyone there, like virtually everyone, wanted abortion to be extremely rare. Since it was not in our charge, there was no point in having a discussion of methods of birth control, but everyone was aware of the view, which I share with all of my colleagues (including many Catholics), that contraception should be available to all, as a major tool in both the needed reduction in birth rates and avoidance of abortion.

All in all it was an encouraging experience. The Catholic Church is the only one with scholarly academies charged with providing unbiased information. As a result, for example, it has led the way in the battle against climate denial and long ago accepted the overwhelming evidence for evolution. In a civilization facing existential risks, it should be praised and supported for this attitude toward science.

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*The MAHB Blog is a venture of the Millennium Alliance for Humanity and the Biosphere.  
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