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No sale yet on GMOs from African bishops

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tLast May, the Vatican's Pontifical Academy for Sciences hosted a study week on Genetically Modified Organisms, or GMOs, which coincidentally took place around the same time that a preparatory document for the Synod of Bishops for Africa was released. That document took a skeptical line on GMOs, which set off alarms within the Pontifical Academy, whose roster of scientific consultants tends to reflect a strongly pro-GMO view.

tAs a result, the academy decided to invite an African bishop to join them during the study week, perhaps hoping to ?seed? the Synod for Africa with a more GMO-friendly perspective: Bishop George Nkuo of the Kumbo diocese in Cameroon.

tTo extend that botanical metaphor, it would seem from Nkuo?s remarks yesterday that the pro-GMO conclusion organizers of the study week might have anticipated has yet to fully bloom.

tNkuo, the first speaker at the synod to treat GMOs at any length, offered this bottom line:

?Because this technology is still relatively new and requires long term study of environmental and human health impacts,? he said, ?we in Cameroon suggest that Africa should not rush blindly to embrace it. This technology should be pursued with the greatest care, even if it promises economic salvation for Africa.?

tThough the Vatican does not release the full text of speeches in the synod, each participant provides a summary for distribution to the press. The following is the summary that Nkuo provided, as released by the Vatican Press Office yesterday:

His Excellency George Nkuo, Bishop of Kumbo (CAMEROON)

Apart from greed, corruption and lack of confidence in our political leaders, one of the great obstacles to justice, peace and reconciliation in Africa is poverty. There is poverty in Africa and there is hunger in many parts of the continent of Africa. There are greedy people in Africa including our leaders who do not care about their brothers and sisters.

Poverty means that basic needs for food, water and shelter are not being met. Poverty means that security in the community is not available. Poverty means that the means to heal our families is not available. Poverty means that our children will have no future with hopes of having a family and a means of support. Poverty means that sadness and fear have replaced joy and serenity. This is the poverty of many places in Africa. Poverty is the single greatest cause of hunger.

There is poverty in Africa but Africa has almost all it takes to be the richest continent on earth. Africa is about

the wealthiest continent in natural resources in the world. Farmers are poor in Africa because the productivity of their land and labour remain so low. Rural poverty of this kind was once the norm in Europe and North America as well. It would seem this poverty must be overcome with ways we have not met before. True enough, there are no quick fix solutions to solving large scale poverty, but we must begin somewhere.

The eventual escape from these impoverished rural conditions in Europe and America came when the new discoveries in science were applied in farming. It was the availability of productive new technology for farmers that allowed Europe and America in the early and middle years of the twentieth century to bring a final end to widespread rural poverty.

Today we are faced with the issue of introducing Genetic Engineering (GE) crops in Africa. The question is: Are these new technologies inherently harmful or can they have positive contribution to people's lives in poor African countries. Is GE intrinsically immoral or is it just another technology applicable to agriculture? Is this biotechnology an evil empire, as some people want us to believe?

On the other hand, this new science says that not only will the quality of life for the poorest of people be raised tremendously but they will also begin the process of economic development. It is a technology that offers to the poorest farmers, one of the keys to making the breakthrough out of poverty.

But because this technology is still relatively new and requires long term study of environmental and human health impacts, we in Cameroon suggest that Africa should not rush blindly to embrace it. This technology should be pursued with the greatest care even if it promises economic salvation for Africa.

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