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GM crops breed economic dependence, new form of slavery, says cardinal

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VATICAN CITY (CNS) -- If farmers in Africa had greater access to fertile, arable land safe from armed conflict and pollutants, they would not need genetically modified crops to produce food, said the head of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace.

Making growers reliant on proprietary, genetically modified seeds smacks of "the usual game of economic dependence," which in turn, "stands out like a new form of slavery," said Cardinal Peter Turkson.

The Ghanaian cardinal's comments came in an interview with the Vatican newspaper L'Osservatore Romano Jan. 5.

It is "a scandal" that nearly 1 billion people suffer from hunger, Cardinal Turkson said, especially since there is more than enough food to feed the whole world.

Crops and livestock are destroyed because of strict trade restraints or in order to keep food prices high and, in wealthier countries, edible food "is thrown in the garbage," he said.

"All it would take is a little bit more solidarity and much less egoism" and there would be enough food to nourish even twice the current world population, he said.

The cardinal said high-tech agricultural practices and techniques are all but useless in areas of conflict and areas that are ravaged by the exploitation of natural resources.

"In searching for and extracting petroleum, gold or precious minerals present under African soil, multinationals cause enormous damage: they excavate large pits and irreparably devastate fields and forests," he said. Whether such areas would ever be arable again is uncertain "even if one relied on genetically engineered plants."

Cardinal Turkson said some multinational companies are actively engaged in trying to persuade bishops in Africa to support greater use of genetically modified organisms.

"I think that the real issue is not being for or against GMO," he said.

There would be no need for such crops if African growers had access to fertile land that was "not destroyed, devastated or poisoned by the stockpiling of toxic waste" and if growers were able to benefit from the fruits of their labors by being allowed to set aside enough seeds for planting the next year and not be forced to continually buy genetically modified seeds from abroad, he said.

"Why force an African farmer to buy seeds produced in other lands and by other means? I'm beginning to

wonder if behind this there isn't the usual game of maintaining economic dependence at all costs," he said.

Cardinal Turkson said he is not opposed to scientific and technological progress, but it's important to evaluate whether there is a real need for genetically modified crops.

He said people should "honestly ask themselves whether it's more about business trying to make somebody rich," which was "a reasonable suspicion" given the many examples of similar exploitation in Ghana.

The extensive interview with Cardinal Turkson also touched upon the justice and peace council's task of promoting Pope Benedict XVI's encyclical "Caritas in Veritate" ("Charity in Truth"), the 2009 encyclical that addressed social justice issues.

The cardinal said there has been a "satisfactory" amount of attention paid to the document by bishops, professors and scholars, but that the council had to address a number of problems that have arisen in the United States concerning the meaning of some of the terms in the encyclical.

For example, he said the term "social," as in social development or social responsibility, is meant to convey the sense of the common good, not a political ideology associated with socialism.

Also the term "gift" reflects the Christian sense of self-giving, while stateside it was thought to refer to a kind of welfare, he said.

"This made us understand how important it is to put the pope's texts out in such a way that it's possible for them to be understood by everyone, even regular people," he said.

Even though the cardinal was a member of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace for many years, he said when the pope named him in October 2009 to head the council, he wanted a more complete understanding of what the pope had in mind for the church's endeavors in the field of justice and peace.

The cardinal asked for a private papal audience and was granted "a long encounter during which I learned what was the path to take" in the new job.

The pope said that in the field of justice and peace, "it is necessary to teach people to distinguish between pastoral and political" work, the cardinal said.

"We are pastors, and we don't do politics," he said.

The church's pastoral work involves offering a stance and judgment on diverse social issues, not getting involved in the political realm, he said.

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