

Persistent U.S.-to-Vatican GMO advocacy reflects moral deafness

David Andrews | Oct. 25, 2012 Eco Catholic

I have been trying for three years to secure a meeting with the U.S. ambassador to the Holy See in Rome. Last year, I got close and met with the political officer, Kim Pendleton. She was brand new and questioned me about food security issues.

This year, I succeeded in securing a meeting with Ambassador Miguel Diaz. I was happy to meet with him because he taught at Saint John's University in Collegeville, Minn., and I had been to the campus many times in the past and knew several professors quite well.

I had also served as a member of the board of directors of Stonehill College in Easton, Mass., along with Diaz's theological peer in Hispanic theology, Roberto Gozueta. I thought the ambassador and I had enough in common to have a good conversation.

What happened, though, was something I did not expect. Perhaps I should have.

Diaz began by telling me how helpful the chancellor of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, Archbishop Marcelo Sánchez Sorondo, was in advocating for genetically modified organisms. I knew of Sorondo because he had sponsored one-sided "academic" conferences on this topic.

I had written for *NCR* in the past about these promotional meetings that failed to give any balance in their treatment of GMOs. But I was surprised that the first matter that the ambassador addressed with me was GMO advocacy. It was an uncomfortable beginning, with Diaz giving a theological affirmation of the Genesis fostering of human creativity as a warrant for GMO production.

The U.S. promotion of GMOs continues to be a significant position of its advocacy with the Holy See, despite the clear, past comments of Cardinal Peter Turkson, head of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, that GMOs only really help the corporations, not the small farmers.

Even for his World Food Day statement this year, Pope Benedict XVI warned about people needing to exercise precaution about the use of technical means of production:

"It is an alternative vision to that determined by internal and international measures which seems to have as their sole objective profit, the defense of markets, the use of agricultural products for ends other than food, and the introduction of new techniques of production without the necessary precaution."

The Holy See continues to exercise caution when it comes to endorsing GMOs even in the face of insistent U.S. advocacy.

While in Rome for the meetings of the Committee on Food Security (Oct. 8-22), in addition to advocacy directly by Holy See Ambassador Diaz, I received an email from a high-level staff person for the U.S. embassy to the United Nations in Rome.

The Oct. 18 email informed me of a Vatican Radio interview with Tony Hall, former U.S. ambassador to the Food and Agriculture Organization, advocating GMOs even in the face of the Holy Father's statement for World Food Day. The email read:

"Tony Hall was interviewed yesterday by Chris Altieri on Vatican Radio and it aired this AM at 0715. The last thing Hall said in the interview was something along the lines of "you can't solve food insecurity with organic food; it is too expensive to produce" after noting the need to move beyond hybrid seed (we've had it in the U.S. since the 50s) and promote the use of biotech/GMO."

Clearly, I was being lobbied by the ambassador to the Holy See and the staff of the U.S. embassy to the UN in Rome, despite the pope's recent caution about this means of producing agriculture, which he sees as less a concern about hunger and more about a concern for profit.

Such persistent advocacy flies in the face of the clearly moral critique the pope has taken. It bespeaks a certain moral obtuseness in the U.S. embassies in Rome.

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