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Cardinal Turkson, say 'no' to GMOs

David Andrews | Jul. 29, 2013 Eco Catholic

The following is an open letter to Cardinal Peter Turkson, president of the Vatican?s Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, who will speak at the World Food Prize 2013 Borlaug Dialogue (Des Moines, Iowa, Oct. 16-18), which will include an award ceremony honoring three scientists [1] (among them a Monsanto executive and the founder of Syngenta Biotechnology) for GMO, or genetically modified organism, discoveries:

Your Eminence,

As you know, the United States government and agriculture giant Monsanto have been seeking the support of the Holy See [2] for genetic modification of food for years.

During my last visit to the U.S. Ambassador Miguel Diaz, just before he resigned, Diaz sung to me the praises of Bishop Marcelo Sánchez Sorondo, chancellor of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, because he supported GMOs. I wonder what you will say, particularly given your leadership of the synod on Africa and the strong advocacy that Monsanto and the U.S. government have for transforming African agriculture through the G-8?s New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition [3].

As you know, the U.S. has repeatedly advocated that the Holy See promote genetic modification of seeds as a moral obligation. The policy of the Pontificial Council for Justice and Peace has been to resist officially adopting GMOs. While the Academy of Sciences has recurrently hosted one-sided conferences on GMOs in 2004 and 2008, the Holy See formerly has not done so. Cardinal Renato Martino, your predecessor at the justice and peace office, came close but backed off, and you yourself have been quite careful.

At the conference on the rural world you co-hosted last year with the International Catholic Rural Association, there was some strong criticism of industrialized agriculture, including a critique by his Eminence Cardinal Raymond Burke in his homily. Burke, who heads the Apostolic Signatura, comes from a farm family background and is an expert on contemporary agriculture. It would be well to seek his counsel on what to say at the World Food Prize ceremony in October.

The typical U.S. line on the world?s food needs and on African food production is that it needs to produce more food, with genetic modification the path to do so. But African farmers overwhelmingly disagree, believing instead that agro-ecology is the better way to go: through methods of production more in harmony with their own cultures and traditions, and more realizable by small-scale farmers and women producers.

In my meetings with the U.S. Agency for International Development, the State and Agriculture Departments and congressional staff, this method of production ? agroecology, which was endorsed by the United Nations through the 2008 International Assessment of Agricultural Science and Technology in Development [4] ? is referred to as eco-topian thinking, theology or faith-based reasoning. Yet more than 50 countries endorse that study, conducted by hundreds of scientists and agriculturalists.

As the North American focal point for the civil society mechanism of the Food and Agriculture Organization?s

Committee on World Food Security, I have been meeting at length with peasant farmers for three years. I know that civil society groups from around the world have very different ideas about food production than those posed by Monsanto and the United States. It will be important that the Holy See maintains its solidarity with small farmers.

While the U.S.?s official policy framework, ?Feed the Future,? rightfully places an emphasis [5] on gender, small-holder farmers and climate change in its policy, in practice its most recent assessment shows bias toward males, export crop production and a focus on large farms.

Many U.S. farmers complain that Monsanto has bought upwards of 60 percent [6] of seeds in the country, so to limit those available. That track record is not helpful or positive, and the New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition fails to provide adequate guidelines for responsible agricultural investment.

I had asked David Lane, U.S. ambassador to Food and Agriculture Organization, to meet with me on these issues the last time I was in Rome. He met with the members of the New Alliance, with the private sector, but not with civil society [7]!

I hope you will speak to the U.S. public about the important issue of GMOs in your World Food Prize address in Des Moines.

Sincerely in Christ,

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