

Cardinal Turkson to speak to groups with opposing views on GMOs

Megan Fincher | Aug. 30, 2013 Eco Catholic

Two organizations with opposing views on the genetic modification of crops will host events this fall on the same weekend in the same city with the same featured speaker: Cardinal Peter Turkson of Africa.

Turkson will be in Des Moines, Iowa, Oct. 16-18 to speak at an event honoring the 2013 recipients of the World Food Prize, three pioneers in genetically modified organisms, or GMOs, as well as at an event hosted by the movement Occupy the World Food Prize, which protests the organizations that donate to the award's foundation.

As the president of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, Turkson hopes for dialogue between the two factions.

"Well aware of the controversy surrounding GMOs, on balance, the Cardinal feels it is best to accept the invitations," Turkson's adviser, Fr. Michael Czerny, wrote in an email to various activist groups.

Turkson, archbishop emeritus of Cape Coast, Ghana, has called economic dependence on multinational companies "a new form of slavery." He says if multinational corporations refrain from extracting petroleum and mineral products from African lands, farmers have a better shot at using that land for food production.

The 2013 World Food Prize laureates are three pioneers of GMOs: Robert Fraley, Monsanto's executive vice president and chief technology officer; Marc Van Montagu, founder of three biotechnology companies; and Mary-Dell Chilton, founder of Syngenta Biotechnology.

The World Food Prize is "the foremost international award recognizing ... the achievements of individuals who have advanced human development by improving the quality, quantity or availability of food in the world," according to its website. It is often referred to as the "Nobel Prize of Agriculture," which gives a nod to its founder -- Norman E. Borlaug, winner of the 1970 Nobel Peace Prize. His work to create new wheat varieties and prevent famine revolutionized agriculture in Mexico and eventually Asia and Latin America.

According to its website, Occupy the World Food Prize was established in 2012, when activists learned that 28 percent of donations to the World Food Prize Foundation came from agribusiness, including Monsanto. Equally appalling to the activists were the top donors: the Gates Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation, who together created the pro-GMO charity, Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa.

Frank Cordaro, organizer of Occupy WFP, told *NCR* that agribusiness harms the world's food supply with pesticides, fertilizers and machinery that are required to maintain genetically modified crops. Independent studies on animal consumption of GMOs show "serious health risks," according to the American Academy of Environmental Medicine, including "changes in the liver, kidney, spleen and gastrointestinal system."

The Occupy WFP mission statement says the World Food Prize should be given to people working for "more local, sustainable forms of agriculture, both here in the USA and abroad."

The World Food Prize Foundation says that by 2050, there will be an estimated 9 billion people to feed. Biotechnology can reduce poverty, it says, and the three World Food Prize laureates said at their June 19 awards ceremony that biotechnology will eventually solve world hunger.

The award "will help convey to consumers the value, utility and safety of genetically modified crops," Chilton said, and Van Montagu said it "emphasizes the importance of GMO technology as a contribution toward sustainable food production."

"While there are those who may not support our advanced research in biotechnology, the need for food security and the opportunity for farmers around the world to meet the growing demand is much more important than any differences of opinion that exist," Fraley said.

Turkson, in a Jan. 5, 2011, article in the Vatican newspaper *L'Osservatore Romano*, said farmers using genetically modified seeds would be forced to buy them year after year because they are nonpollinating. Farmers would also be obligated to buy pesticides and fertilizers made specifically for GMOs, Turkson said.

The cardinal, whose mother sold her vegetables in a market to support 10 children, knows well the agricultural hopes and struggles of a developing nation. Ninety percent of Ghanaians are subsistence farmers, and agriculture accounts for one-quarter of Ghana's gross domestic product and half of its workforce, according to the CIA World Factbook.

"For my part, I think the real issue is not to take sides for or against GMOs," Turkson said. "You should try to understand that if an African farmer is given a chance to sow on fertile ground -- not destroyed, devastated or poisoned by the storage of toxic waste -- in the end he will have the opportunity to pick the fruit of his work.

"Therefore, there would be no need for any genetic engineering. In this way, the farmer would not be obligated to buy GMOs from abroad."

The cardinal said in the article that food is often destroyed in poor countries to drive up prices or is wasted and thrown away in wealthy countries.

"I have personally witnessed the slaughter of cattle to maintain the high price of meat," he said. "There would be a chance to feed everyone" if these practices were changed, he said.

Turkson has a simpler answer to the world food crisis: "We only need a little more solidarity and much less egoism," he told the newspaper.

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Source URL (retrieved on 06/27/2017 - 04:00): <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/eco-catholic/cardinal-turkson-speak-groups-opposing-views-gmos>