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Turkson meets with opponents of GMOs, pledges study of issue

Megan Fincher | Oct. 17, 2013 Eco Catholic
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As Cardinal Peter Turkson sat with a small group of Iowans in a Des Moines church basement Wednesday night, his lack of formal red robes set the evening's tone. In a gray suit and Roman collar, the cardinal from Ghana could have been mistaken for a local priest, with only his African accent to give him away.

Turkson will be a keynote speaker at the prestigious 2013 World Food Prize conference this week in Des Moines, but he also delivered opening remarks Wednesday at an event hosted by a local group that opposes the prize's recent embrace of biotechnology and agribusiness. The event by the group, which calls itself Occupy the World Food Prize, filled to capacity the First United Methodist Church of Des Moines, and the audience welcomed Turkson with a standing ovation.

Before the event, though, Turkson met in the church basement with a small group that included Iowa farmers, a soil scientist, a retired Methodist minister, a former Catholic priest and members of the Catholic Worker and the Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement. He listened to their concerns and their pleas that he publicly denounce the use of biotechnology in farming. In response, he promised to use his role as president of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace to draw the world's bishops into the debate and to seek a way to address their fears.

Nobel Prize winner Norman Borlaug created the World Food Prize in 1986 to recognize those working to end world hunger, as well as to inspire others to support the cause, according to the World Food Prize website [1].

In recent years, the World Food Prize has emphasized biotechnology, agribusiness and genetically modified organisms (GMOs) as viable means to ending world hunger. This year's laureates are Robert Fraley, the executive vice president of the world's largest GMO business, Monsanto; Mary-Dell Chilton, the founder of the world's third largest GMO company, Syngenta Biotechnology; and Marc Van Montagu, founder of two biotechnology companies and a nonprofit that promotes biotechnology in developing countries.

A group of Iowans formed Occupy the World Food Prize last year to protest agribusiness donations to the World Food Prize, christening themselves after the national Occupy Wall Street movement.

In the past, Turkson has said he approaches biotechnology with caution [2], and Wednesday, the activists encouraged him to endorse their opinion when he gives his keynote address at the World Food Prize. Their comments ranged from "We are asking you to be our champion" to "The Catholic church has a moral obligation to refuse GMOs."

When they finished pleading their case, the cardinal said, "I can see these people have passion for the soil and for their communities."

"You share the intimacy of your life with me, someone who is close to being a stranger," he continued. "You

share this all from your heart."

"Initially, I will refrain from demonizing anybody, not this group, not the other one," Turkson said. "I rather seek to fashion openings where we can talk, negotiate and convince."

He expressed disappointment that the two groups did not set a meeting.

"I was coming here to encourage conversation," he said. "Whether I was naïve to promote that dialogue this week, I'm here, and I'm a priest, I'm a Christian, I'm a Gospel-preacher, and the message central to the Gospel is reconciliation and fashioning communion where it doesn't exist or where it has broken down."

He told the group that the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization "meets around the table, making room for everybody, small-scale farmers, big farmers."

"Can some form exist like that here? That big farmers can hear your anxieties, hear you speak from your hearts?" he asked. "We need to promote something like that."

Turkson then made Occupy the World Food Prize an offer.

"At the dawn of 2000, the bishops of Africa organized with other bishops to go to the International Monetary Fund and push for debt cancellation. That did work.

"If the situation you present is so life-threatening, we can do that again. We acquired debt cancellation for billions of dollars that countries owed. We can follow the same channel. Which means that at a certain point, I will liaison with the [U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops], the Vatican, the U.N. in New York or Geneva. We can put in motion the same machinery we did in 2000."

The Occupy members nodded their heads as he spoke.

"We had the financial crisis begin here in the U.S. Is [agribusiness] another experience that will blow up for the whole world?" Turkson asked, and the group audibly agreed.

He lightly chastised them, saying, "What drives people to do this? It's ultimately from the human heart. I heard you say, 'Corporations are not people,' but at the end of the day, corporations are not faceless either. It's human beings who are driving the system. We can get to the human hearts behind these big, big systems."

"I appreciate your pushing for a very basic human occupation -- farming. I call it the culture of agriculture," Turkson said. "It's not just putting seeds in the ground. Why would Jesus use it in his parable?

"It's a culture of patience: You can put a seed in the ground, and you see it grow. You are not the cause of it growing, but you can just see it, observe it. Farming teaches the human person a lot about his whole life."

At the end of the meeting, Turkson said, "I'll take the concept forward. We will organize in the [Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace] a study on this issue if you will allow me."

He acknowledged the group's request that he speak out against agribusiness, but said, "I will not be able to wave a magic wand. Think of tomorrow as a single day in this. Probably nothing radical will happen [at the keynote address]. But for me, it's the beginning of a process that will ultimately lead us to what we desire and expressed tonight."

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