NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (https://ncronline.org)

Turkson: 'Sustainable food systems for world food security should be our goal'

Megan Fincher | Oct. 18, 2013 Eco Catholic
Des Moines, Iowa

The world's current food problems can be linked to a global loss of faith, Ghana's Cardinal Peter Turkson told a standing-room-only crowd Wednesday night.

"The challenge that is facing us is that [the earth] belongs to God in the first place," he said. "It is entrusted to us, given to us in custody, but we may never accept or pretend that we are responsible for this."

Turkson was speaking to a crowd of people opposed to agribusiness and the use of biotechnology in food production at the First United Methodist Church here. The event was sponsored by an Iowa group calling itself Occupy the World Food Prize, formed in opposition to the World Food Prize convention also being held in Des Moines this week.

After his speech to the often-lively Occupy crowd, Turkson moved on to St. Ambrose Catholic Cathedral, where he led a more subdued interfaith prayer service to end world hunger.

Hundreds of audience members filled First United, and when the cardinal took the lectern, they stood up and cheered.

Turkson spoke off-the-cuff, telling the audience, "I was thinking about how to address this group. I had a small talk, but I think at the end of the day, it's just a piece of paper."

He reminisced about Pope John Paul II's visit to Des Moines: "I recall 34 years ago, Pope John Paul II stood here on this land, beholding a field bedecked with corn, and challenged America to feed humanity with its harvest."

However, John Paul "cautioned about the need to guide science with morals" and not let "financial gain and profit dominate."

"I just want to go back to what the word of God tells us," Turkson said. "God created the earth and he entrusted it into the hands of human beings. He entrusted to humanity everything that was good."

"It was chaos until God spoke his word," he said. "Then there was order, then beauty, then goodness. If we forsake the word of God, we will go back to the chaos and confusion."

Turkson disagreed with the belief that a growing population will accelerate food shortage.

"God says I know what your needs are," he said. "Can we ever have a creation that God cannot sustain?"

Everyone needs to recognize his or her "sense of responsibility to the earth. When we attain clarity, we can have

a relationship with the land, with God. When we have fashioned justice on that level, then we can fashion justice between one another."

After his remarks, Turkson sat for a few moments in the audience with Des Moines Bishop Richard Pates before they both hurried to the diocesan cathedral. The prayer service was advertised as a public event on the World Food Prize schedule.

At St. Ambrose, African groups dressed in colorful traditional garments waited in the autumn chill to greet Turkson. They coaxed him to dance and sing with some of the children before diocesan staff steered the cardinal into the cathedral.

The service itself was subdued, as Christian, Jewish, Buddhist and Muslim faith leaders prayed for an end to world hunger.

Turkson spoke slowly and quietly to the interfaith congregation. He mentioned that the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization gathered in Rome this past week, and he invoked their motto: "May there be bread for all."

He spoke of the "scandal of world hunger" and told everyone that "hunger means our neighbors, both near and far away, go to bed without food."

"Sustainable food systems for world food security should be our goal," Turkson said.

He described the three-fold approach of sustainability: economic, environmental and social.

Economic sustainability means "everyone can make a decent living, even when companies don't make a profit." Environmentally, people need to "leave the air, land and water as good or better than they found it." And socially, "people's need for food is met in a dignified manner."

"Food security is a human right for each and every child of God," the cardinal said.

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