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Cardinal's Food Prize speech a good opportunity for truth

David Andrews | Oct. 8, 2013 Eco Catholic

Cardinal Peter Turkson, president of the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, will speak at the World Food Prize 2013 Borlaug Dialogue [1] in Des Moines, Iowa, Oct. 16-18. The event will include a ceremony to honor this year's recipients of the prize: three scientists (among them a Monsanto executive and the founder of Syngenta Biotechnology) for GMO, or genetically modified organism, discoveries.

Perhaps I should make clear my own bona fides relative to this issue. I lived in Iowa for 13 years and have worked on rural life issues, food and farm policy for 40 years. I was the executive director of the National Catholic Rural Life Conference based in Des Moines. I served on the Domestic Policy Committee of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and was a consultant to the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace at the Vatican when the late Cardinal Van Thuan was president. I served as senior adviser on food policy at the United Nations. I currently serve as the focal point for North America at the Committee on World Food Security for the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization in Rome. I am not new to these issues. I have followed them in some detail for many years.

There have been two major conferences in Rome on biotechnology hosted by the Catholic church and sponsored in part by Monsanto. The first one, in 2004, was at the Pontifical Gregorian University, and the second one, hosted by the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, was in 2008. In neither case was the official teaching of the church or policy involved. After the second conference, which was totally one-sided, the publication that ensued was identified as the product of the participants, not of the academy. But such nuances were lost on the public, which does not differentiate who speaks for whom in the Holy See.

Monsanto promoted the meetings as the Vatican's endorsement of biotechnology. Keep in mind that Monsanto has spent millions of dollars proclaiming itself on the radio, television, in posters and ads, as being an exemplar of sustainable agriculture.

Turkson should use this opportunity to set the record straight about Monsanto, as well as about climate change, world hunger and nutrition. The company has put many competitors in the seed markets out of business, so comments on capitalism coming from the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace would have a particular relevance and deserve application in this instance.

As a leader from Africa and the Synod of Africa, Turkson will know well what African farmers prefer in terms of agricultural technology. I am in ongoing and frequent contact with small holder farmers and their organizations from Africa and they are very clear about what it is they want -- and it is not biotechnology.

Unfortunately, the United States government speaks as though it is one and the same with Monsanto on this issue. When I have met with U.S. representatives in Rome, they tended to advocate biotechnology.

When the report from the International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development was published in 2008, it called for the use of agroecology and did not advocate biotechnology. Monsanto and Syngenta walked out and withdrew their support, as did the United States. That report came out

after 400 participants, years of study, and $12 million in expenses. It resulted in the statement that business as usual is not possible, and called for a change in agriculture practices.

Turkson should call attention to the fact that political and economic conditions prevail on the Monsanto agenda, not science or agricultural benefits. This is a company that has spent decades suing farmers and spent millions on fighting transparency in labeling. Turkson should repeat the church's strong support of the right to food, the right to water and the right to seeds.

Another factor is the impact of the product Monsanto promotes, its seed, on the environment. As the strength of the seed builds resistance in pests or weeds, it damages soil and adds to the toxic impact it has on the environment.

The problem with agricultural production today as advocated by the U.S. and Monsanto is that it is focused on growing animal food and biofuels, not food for people. They use the need to feed 9 billion people as an excuse for producing more grain for livestock and for biofuels. When Pope Francis was archbishop of Buenos Aires, farm advocates met with him to explain how biotechnology had ruined and changed the face of Argentine agriculture, moving it into production of single crops such as corn or soybeans on huge farms and changed its family farm tradition.

An Argentine group called the Grupo de Reflexión Rural recently shared with me a letter written to the pope asking that Turkson recognize the devastation caused by biotechnology in Argentina and the world. "In recent years, we have disseminated the concept of Ecotheology through ecumenical meetings and the Internet to encourage Catholics to recover their values of caring for Creation and to seek spiritual inspiration in Nature and the environment," the group said in the letter.

Like others, the Argentines recognize the important role Turkson has in speaking at the Borlaug Dialogue where Monsanto will be honored, and they like to share something he told *L'Osservatore Romano* Jan. 5, 2011: African farmers would have no need for GMO seeds if they had access to arable land that was "not destroyed, devastated or poisoned by the stockpiling of toxic waste," he said. Forcing farmers to buy patented seeds reproduces "the usual game of economic dependence," which in some way is "a new form of slavery," he said. This statement accurately reflects the point of view of civil society and millions of small farmers.

A new form of colonialism is being spread around the world and Monsanto is a major carrier of it. I am not simply articulating a Luddite resistance to new technology; I have seen that technology in use long enough to lead me to caution Turkson against giving the wrong message in Des Moines. He needs to be direct and clear in speaking truth to power.

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