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Revising the forecast on GMOs

John L. Allen Jr. | Nov. 19, 2009 NCR Today

tHarold Macmillan, British Prime Minister in the late 1950s and early 60s, is famously credited with perhaps the best reply ever when asked by a reporter what might throw a government into tilt: ?Events, my dear boy, events.?

tHis point that was that the best-laid plans often founder on the shoals of unforeseen events ? an insight that applies to the fine art of futurology every bit as much as politics. A case in point comes this week from the Philippines, where the bioethics office of the Filipino bishops? conference has announced that it will not oppose the use of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) to solve a persistent rice shortage in Asia.

tIn *The Future Church*, I take up the subject of GMOs. I note that while the Vatican?s Pontifical Academy for Sciences has been strongly GMO-friendly, Catholic leaders in the global south have been more critical:

t?In 2002, the Catholic bishops of South Africa declared, ?It is morally irresponsible to produce and market genetically modified food.? In 2003, fourteen Brazilian bishops put out a declaration in which they condemned the cultivation and consumption of GMOs, citing three risks: 1) health consequences, including increased allergies, resistance to antibiotics, and an increase in toxic substances; 2) environmental consequences, including erosion of bio-diversity; and 3) damage to the sovereignty of Brazil, ?as a result of the loss of control of seeds and living things through patents that become the exclusive property of multinational groups interested only in commercial ends.?

tThat background led me to the following forecast:

?The rise of the global South in Catholicism is likely, over time, to push the Vatican towards a more cautious and critical stance ? It will become steadily more difficult for Vatican officials to move towards a formal, public approval of GMO technology.?

In the light of this week?s development in the Philippines, however, that forecast may need some tweaking.

According to UCAN News, Dominican Archbishop Leonardo Legaspi of Caceres said that the bishops were initially against GMOs when the technology was ?not yet so well defined,? but today there?s ?a gradual evolution? toward acceptance, as it became apparent GMO offers food safety and security as well as environmental sustainability.

?Church opposition is no longer as strong,? UCAN quotes Legaspi as saying, particularly after a seminar on GMOs held last May by the Pontifical Academy for Sciences.

To be sure, there are still signs of skepticism. For example, the pro-GMO organizers of that study week in Rome last May invited a lone African prelate to join them, Bishop George Nkuo of Cameroon, patently hoping that Nkuo would provide a GMO-friendly voice during the Synod for Africa in October.

In the end, however, Nkuo struck a cautious note in his speech at the synod.

?Because this technology is still relatively new and requires long term study of environmental and human health impacts,? he said, ?we in Cameroon suggest that Africa should not rush blindly to embrace it. This technology should be pursued with the greatest care, even if it promises economic salvation for Africa.?

Nevertheless, the new tone in the Philippines at least hints that the anti-GMO pressures on the Vatican from the global south may be weakening ? and if so, that could clear the way for the church?s current yellow light on the technology to turn a bit greener.

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