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More groups call for Vatican response against growing agribusiness models

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In late July, *Eco Catholic* contributor Br. Dave Andrews addressed Cardinal Peter Turkson in an open letter before the Ghanaian prelate's appearance at the World Food Prize 2013 Borlaug Dialogue in October in Des Moines, Iowa. Andrews called Turkson to speak out against genetically modified organisms (GMOs) in light of the World Food Prize organization recognizing three scientists with the award for their work in such genetic engineering.

But Andrews is not alone in his calls for Catholic leadership to speak forcefully against GMOs and large-scale agribusiness.

After the open letter to Turkson published, *Eco Catholic* received copies of letters several other groups had written to Vatican leadership. One, from a group calling themselves Occupy the World Food Prize, wrote the cardinal in June and invited him to attend a public meeting they and other organizations will hold during the week of the World Food Prize.

The group highlighted an Oct. 2011 proposal Turkson submitted to the Vatican as head of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, in which he advocates economic and financial reform through values reinforcing the common good.

"The universal values of Spirit and common good which you cited in the Proposal should apply equally to the world's food and agriculture sectors. However, the World Food Prize ignores these values," the group wrote, saying that this year's winners "celebrate the genetic engineering practiced by large agribusiness corporations."

The group also quoted extensively from past speeches and writings of former Des Moines Bishop Maurice Dingman, who spoke often in defense of family farms and widespread ownership of land.

“The problem is a value crisis. There has been a shift from agriculture to agribusiness,” they quote the bishop saying in a 1984 speech at Iowa State University.

“In our thinking we have accepted the alleged efficiency of the large farm conglomerate – an efficiency which has never been proven – permitting our policy to drive people from the land to the cities. We should include the social and human costs resulting from the needless shift of population from the vacated farm homes to overcrowded cities and suburbs,” Dingman said, according to the letter.

The group invited Turkson to attend a meeting Oct. 16 where Jim Hightower, a noted writer and speaker on farm issues, will contrast the agribusiness model with practices more focused on sustainability, health and the common good. Occupy WFP has also offered Turkson an opportunity to speak to the group.

Earlier in the year, a separate organization sought Vatican intervention on the issue of agribusiness from a higher office than Turkson and the justice and peace office. In an April letter addressed to the Pope Francis, the Argentina-based Grupo de Reflexión Rural also warned of the widespread harm that can accompany GMOs and agribusiness models.

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Specifically, they referenced a model implemented in Argentina during the 1990s, describing it as one “which destroys the livelihoods, peace and the happiness of rural communities.” They accused the corporatization of agriculture of transforming the country from what was once “the grain basket of the world and a producer of healthy and high-quality foods” into “a producer of animal forage” for livestock in Europe and China.

“Similar measures are taken all over the world, behind the back of public opinion, without allowing the population their sovereign right and freedom to choose the methods of production and ways of life that would guarantee them a dignified existence and [with] respect and care for Creation,” the letter stated.

Grupo de Reflexión Rural say that millions of Argentine people now “live within a consumer society that lacks any trace of spiritual direction,” connecting a bevy of problems – “marginalization, social fragmentation, extreme insecurity, poor nutrition, rising levels of disease, people trafficking” – to the consequences “of the compulsive urbanization which confuses urban living with supposed progress.” At the root of it, they allege, are food-security-threatening GMOs, controlled by multinational corporations.

“Nothing is sacred to them [corporations], and they have displaced millions of people who are now uprooted and deterritorialized,” the group said.

The problem magnifies when viewed on a global scale, according to Grupo. They see a situation where developing countries sell fertile lands that local farmers could use to agri-corporations under the guise of “promises of assumed prosperity.”

In response to these threats, they asked Francis to use the church's platform to speak against the growing agribusiness model, seeing great influence in what he and the Vatican say on the issue.

'We are convinced that certain global corporations need the moral support of religious leaders in order to drive biotech policies which are even more audacious than the policies they have implemented to date,' the letter said.

They urged Francis to refocus the Pontifical Academy of Sciences to incorporate in its review of GMOs and other agricultural models 'scientific points of reference whose priority is a love for life, humanity and for Creation, and who are not motivated by corporate profit, technological efficiency or scientific gain.'

'The solution [to world hunger] will not come from an increasing number of agri-businesses. On the contrary, there is a need to increase the numbers of rural workers and small and medium-sized producers who have long-established links to the land and to growing food. As a community and as a Church, we cannot sidestep this issue,' they wrote.

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