

Comments on the genesis of Columban concern about the production and consumption of trans-genic foods prepared by Rev. Dr. Charles Rue to introduce the DVD 'Unjust Genes: Life and Death for Sale'.

The Columbans are an overseas Catholic Missionary Society preaching the Gospel both as Good News and having the power to make a difference. We began to connect faith and environmental issues in the 1970s faced with the plight of the people we worked among in RP. You know the story of clear felling rainforests and the effect on homes, livelihoods etc.

In the 1990s the new environmental issue affecting the people we worked among was the introduction of genetically engineered (GE) organisms into food crops. Farmers in poorer countries were used as guinea pigs in experiments by international agri-chemical companies such as Bayer, Monsanto, Adventis etc. Farmers were fooled into growing GE crops with promises of greater yields and use of fewer chemicals. Cardinal Martino of the Vatican was even fooled by this hype and, with the US embassy at the Vatican, co-hosted a conference on it GE foods.

The promises of GE food have proved hollow but the consequences have been dire. Local crop varieties were contaminated once GE seeds entered the market place so, by law, farmers were obliged to pay royalties to the bio-tech seed companies. Saving or swapping unique seed varieties among themselves became useless as traditional seed banks were contaminated.

Perversely, some GE seed the farmers were forced to pay royalties on was developed from traditional seeds that these same farmers had developed over centuries. This is robbery of the poor by rich companies, sanctioned under the WTO Agreement and local patenting laws.

The first Columban action was to challenge the 'Agreement' on the copyrighting of human foods pushed through the World Trade Organisation (WTO) at the behest of agri-chemical companies. Member nations had to enact legislation that connected trade and US-style patenting laws (TRIPs).

The GE problem did not end there. Some farmers and their families fell sick to allergies, stomach complaints and skin disorders. The only new factor in their lives seemed to be GE food. Scientific research into these incidents, that is open to the public, is rare. Bio-tech companies keep their own research secret so that it is not open to peer-review and their scientists have often been fired for revealing negative reports.

Leading scientists began publishing that the science itself was regarded as suspect. They said that the technology is totally new and that is why it is named 'Recombinant DNA'. It is not merely a continuation of traditional biotechnology techniques such as selective breeding or using yeasts. Genes were now being transferred between unrelated species to create Trans-genic food, something that does not happen in nature. The methods of gene transfer using viruses, anti-biotic markers, and more recently nuclear transfer, raised

questions of safety. The long-term impact on the health of humans and ecosystems risks is little researched.

Faced with this systematic injustice around such a basic human need as food and agri-business companies campaigning against the precautionary principle of safety being brought into play, Columbans became more active in preaching a Gospel about food justice, the scandal of patenting God-given life forms, and threats to nature's ecosystems.

In November 2005 the Columbans in the Philippines, together with a local Catholic university and environmental groups, co-sponsored an international Conference in Manila 'Safe Food: A Human Right'. Specialists such as British scientist Dr Mae Won Ho of 'Science in Society' and Malaysian lawyer Lim Li Ching from the 'Third World Network' were speakers.

In the light of such a rare opportunity, Columban JPIC coordinators worldwide decided to use the Safe Food conference as a basis for DVD footage on GE Food. Media producer Bruce Dynan from Sydney was contracted.

When creating a story line for the DVD, it became obvious that GE Food issues were affecting developed countries like Australia - In interviews, canola farmers spoke of lost premiums as crops became contaminated with GE seed. Consumers said they found it harder to buy non-GE and properly labelled foods in the supermarket so losing their right to choice. Ecologists said they feared the contamination of the natural environment as genes spread to wild relatives. Scientists confirmed the dangers inherent in the science itself. All groups pointed to advancing conventional or organic breeding as a safer path, of greater benefit and a more cost effective way forward for disease control, increased yield and the like. Using knowledge of gnomes, Marker Assisted Selection (MAS) has developed without using GE reproduction processes.

As interviews continued, the main culprits identified in this story were the international bio-tech companies. They want to control the human food chain and make money from their monopoly. Their main instrument to get their way is the law – enacting local laws on intellectual properties and patenting. Also accused were leaders in government, farmer and regulator groups for failing their citizens and members. Are they stupid, blinded by the PR spin of the bio-tech companies, or even dishonest?

As the Columban campaign on GE Food production and consumption developed, the main issues were:

- The push by agri-chemical companies to control the food chain
- The use of the WTO to force enactment of US-style patenting laws
- The loss to farmers of income and traditional non-contaminated seed
- Risks inherent in the science itself
- The un-researched possible health risks associated with GE food
- The lack of choice for consumers
- The manipulation of people by misinformation from PR companies
- The diversion of research funds away from alternative methods.

A 26 minute DVD called 'Unjust Genes: Life and Death for Sale', with an accompanying Booklet, was the end product of this Columban project. It seeks people's understanding that moral and spiritual issues are at stake. It seeks to build food producer, consumer and student involvement to face it.

Bishop Pat Power launched the DVD and Booklet in Canberra 28 August 2006. Leaders in both the Catholic and civic community attended. Showings of the DVD to Catholic Education Office and Social Justice Groups have already taken in Cairns, Townsville, Parramatta and Sydney, and more are planned. Happily, it was shown at a Faith and Ecology Forum in Sydney on 'Safe Food' sponsored by eight different religious faiths.

Columbans, with interested teachers, are exploring how the DVD and Booklet can be used within the curriculum of upper high schools and universities. As a case study, GE food has a place within religious, biological, economic, law, health and nutritional studies.

Travelling around to lead showings of this DVD on GE food, I see myself as being a missionary responding to one 'sign of the times', proclaiming moral justice and spiritual respect for creation in the name of the God of Life revealed to in Jesus Christ.

NOTE ONE

Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 'Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church', Strathfield: St Pauls, 2004. Besides teaching relevant to consideration of the natural environment scattered throughout the Compendium, it specifically address the environment in numbers 451-487 and biotechnology in numbers 472-480.

NOTE TWO

PR people and scientific sceptics – fools or deceitful? Eg. After Al Gore's film 'Inconvenient Truth' there was reactions in the media 12 09 06. Why the different responses we should ask?

Matthew England in SMH, UNSW Director of Climate Dynamics, praised Gore for getting the science right, in line with the findings of the International Panel of Scientists to which most world governments sponsored members. He points to scientists' integrity that is tested by peer review. He ends by challenging people's comfort zone and to act now.

Terry McCrann in the Sydney Telegraph used ridicule of Gore (jetting around the world etc), did not understand what are off-sets (carbon trading), and called it all science fiction as he did not understanding the graphs. He misuses percentages when saying what difference can Australia make compared with China (energy importer), ignorant that China is rapidly changing its ways and has become an exporter of solar products, and finishes by appealing to readers' fears about no air conditioning.