

CHURCH'S SOCIAL TEACHING AND THE ETHICS OF GMOs

by

Roland Lesseps, S. J., Ph.D.
Senior Scientist
Kasisi Agricultural Training Centre
P. O. Box 30652
Lusaka, Zambia

and

Peter Henriot, S. J., Ph.D.
Director
Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection
P. O. Box 37774
Lusaka, Zambia

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Before opening our remarks on this topic, let us make four brief points that set the tone for our intervention.

1. We appreciate very much the invitation from Cardinal Martino to participate in this Study Seminar, since we have been exploring this issue for a long time. We approach the topic not primarily as academics but as practitioners, coming from a very poor African country that has made a political decision, based on scientific advice, to delay importation of GM foods and the implementation of GMO agriculture. Our perspective arises from daily involvement in the lives of small-scale farmers and regular policy analysis of agricultural and food security issues.
2. I am very happy that Cardinal Martino in his opening remarks stressed the importance for us to inform our reflections on GMOs by what our faith tells us about creation and that he and several other speakers spoke about the ethical issues of using GMOs in agriculture. In fact, it might have been better if a session on theological and ethical perspectives of GMOs had been placed in the opening position, so that the issues of scientific research, trade, health, environment, etc., could have been evaluated from that perspective, guided by the social teaching of the Church.
3. We are concerned that several voices of church leaders around the world are not represented on these panels. We think, for example, of recent statements made about GMOs by the bishops and other church leaders of the Philippines, of Brazil and of South Africa, statements expressing deep concerns based upon practical experiences.
4. We are committed to a very open dialogue on this topic, ready to learn from others, and eager to have others learn from us. This Study Seminar is being closely watched by governments, church groups, civil society and academics around the world – especially in the developing world in countries like Zambia. For it is in Zambia and other poor countries that this topic is not abstract but very concrete, not discussed primarily in economic terms but in ethical terms.

THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

We think it is important to situate our ethical reflections about GMOs in a larger theological framework, so we begin our paper with a brief presentation about creation. We begin with creation because any ethical study of a human technology is also a study of our relationship with the created order here on earth. In this approach we follow the lead of Pope John Paul II, who, in his message for World Day of Peace in 1990, begins his consideration of the ecological crisis (which, he says, threatens world peace) with a reflection on creation.

It is crucial that we recognize that human well being must be attained in harmony with our whole, single earth community. Since we are an integral part of this created order, “we must take into account the nature of each being and of its mutual connection in an ordered system which is precisely the ‘cosmos.’” (Pope John Paul II, *The Social Concern of the Church*, #34, 1987)

A fundamental theological principle to guide us in our reflection about GMOs is that all of God's creatures have intrinsic value, in and of themselves. Nature is not just useful to us humans, but is valued and loved in itself, for itself, by God in Christ. One scriptural basis for this appreciation of all creatures is in the first chapter of Genesis: "God saw that it was good...God saw everything that God had made, and indeed, it was very good." God does not say that creatures are good for human beings, but simply says that creatures are good, in fact, very good!

An example of this same appreciation of creatures, coming from an early Father of the Church, is this surprisingly modern prayer of St. Basil: "O God, enlarge within us a sense of fellowship with all living things, our brothers and sisters the animals, to whom you gave the earth as their home in common with us. We remember with shame that in the past we have exercised high dominion with ruthless cruelty, so that the voice of the earth, which should have gone up to you in song, has been a groan of travail. May we realize that they live not for us alone but for themselves and for you, and that they love the sweetness of life."

St. Basil's mention of human dominion of the earth arises, of course, from the statement in the same first chapter of Genesis that portrays God giving humans dominion over all earth creatures. The earth, however, remains the Lord's, and human dominion is to be exercised in ways that are in accord with God's plan for the earth. In the present context it is crucial to note that God also gives "to all wild beasts ... all the foliage of plants for food" (Gen 1: 30). The right to use other creatures does not give us the right to abuse them. Pope John Paul II makes this very clear in *The Social Concern of the Church* (# 34): "The way in which resources are used must include respect for moral demands. One of the latter undoubtedly imposes limits on the use of the natural world. The dominion granted to man (sic) by the Creator is not an absolute power, nor can one speak of a freedom to 'use and misuse', or to dispose of things as one pleases."

Another theological affirmation about creation is that it is sacred. Why? God dwells in all creation, and all creatures participate in the Divine Goodness. "The world is charged with the grandeur of God," wrote the poet Gerald Manley Hopkins. St. Thomas Aquinas, in his *Summa Theologiae* (Part I, Question 47, Art 1), put it this way: "God brought things into being in order that the divine goodness might be communicated to creatures...The whole universe together participates in divine goodness more perfectly, and represents it better, than any single creature whatever." God labours in all creatures, continually calling them out of chaos and nothingness. God dwells in all creatures and reveals Himself to us in them, so they are all sacred, holy. "Take off your shoes, for the place where you stand in holy ground" (Exodus 3:5).

Realization of this sacredness and intrinsic value of creatures leads to the "respect for nature" that the Pope calls for in that same 1990 message for World Peace Day. The Pope goes on to say that "certain elements of today's ecological crisis reveal its moral character. First among these is the indiscriminate application of advances in science and technology...The application of these discoveries in the fields of industry and agriculture have produced harmful long-term effects. This has led to the painful realization that we cannot interfere in one area of the ecosystem without paying due attention both to the consequences of such interference in other areas and to the well-being of future generations."

In the next section of his message, Pope John Paul II makes this powerful statement: "We can only look with deep concern at the enormous possibilities of biological research. We are not yet in a position to assess the biological disturbance that could result from indiscriminate genetic manipulation and from the unscrupulous development of new forms of plant and

animal life, to say nothing of unacceptable experimentation regarding the origins of human life itself. It is evident that in any area as delicate as this, indifference to fundamental ethical norms, or their rejection, would lead humankind to the very threshold of self-destruction.”

What are some “fundamental ethical norms” that can guide our evaluation of genetic engineering? One such norm is the precautionary principle that Our Holy Father used when he said: “We are not yet in a position to assess the biological disturbance that could result from indiscriminate genetic manipulation and from the unscrupulous development of new forms of plant and animal life.” We should, at the very least, follow this precautionary principle and not adopt a technology that is still inadequately tested.

We already have many examples of serious problems brought about by our not being able to see the undesirable consequences caused by our use of what seemed to be a wonderful benefit. Sad examples include: the insecticide DDT was later found to lead to death of bird embryos by thinning the egg shells, the refrigerant gas chloroflourocarbon was found to be destroying the ozone layer, and the tranquilizer thalidomide caused severe abnormalities in over 7,000 children born of women who took the drug during pregnancy.

CHURCH’S SOCIAL TEACHING PERSPECTIVES

In speaking of the Church’s social teaching (CST), we refer to that body of social wisdom about the human person in the community of creation that describes and prescribes the values and structures of society that enable the human person to become fully alive. It is found in scripture, in theological reflection, in ecclesial documents and in the witness of individuals and communities.

We strongly feel that there is a value-added dimension that the CST brings to policy discussions, debates and decisions. This dimension is necessary for both efficiency and equity. This is especially true when the topic under discussion is something as basic to human life as food.

An example of how CST principles can illuminate an ethical principle is found in developing the meaning of the oft-cited “precautionary principle.” As mentioned above, this principle plays a key role in deciding policies about GMOs. We believe that the precautionary principle is strengthened by two key emphases found in the church’s social teaching:

1. *Respect for human rights*: the social teaching makes very clear that the economy is for the human person, the human person is not for the economy. Therefore any economic intervention in the social order must be evaluated in terms of its impact on the well being of human persons in community. In the face of serious questions about the impact on that well being raised by introduction of GMOs, respect for human rights demands application of the precautionary principle.
2. *Respect for the natural world*: the social teaching emphasises, to again cite Pope John Paul II, that “one cannot use with impunity the different categories of beings, whether living or inanimate – animals, plants, the natural elements – as one wishes, according to one’s own economic needs.” (*The Social Concern of the Church*, # 34, 1987) When there is serious question regarding the consequences of GMOs on other elements in the created order, then the precautionary principle must be invoked.

A full treatment of the CST in relation to GMOs demands a book-length review of these CST principles as they have evolved over the centuries and have been applied in various circumstances. For our purposes here, let us be brief and simply highlight four principles that

are valuable in evaluating the use of GMOs in agriculture and that we have seen have direct relevance to the Zambian situation we come from.

Common good: The oft-repeated calls for promotion of the national common good have in recent years been supplemented by calls for the global common good. The common good has been defined as the sum total of the structures and practices of society that make possible the fullness of human life and the integrity of creation. It is a principle with political implications. Thus promotion of the common good demands the subordination of economic interests (e.g., profit maximisation, protection of proprietary rights) to the overall improvement of human life.

What this means in practice, for example, is that corporations coming into Zambia with GMOs must take as their primary responsibility the promotion of the common good and not simply a return to their shareholders. The ethic of the common good is recognized in the social teaching as a restraint on the operations of the free market. It raises questions such as: can seeds of life be patented or subjected to “terminator” processes if this endangers the common good? The CST says no!

Option for the poor: Our CST emphasises clearly that the political decisions governing policies in and between countries must always be made on the basis of answering a priority question: what impact does this have on the poor in our society? And that impact must be measured in both short-term ways and in long-term ways.

Here the introduction of GMOs faces two important challenges. First, the current design of commercially promoted GMOs is based on an industrial model of agriculture that favors large farms and high external inputs at the expense of smaller family farms. This introduces a serious dependency of small-scale and mostly poor farmers on large multinational corporations for seeds and complementary necessities. The ability to practice alternative agricultural approaches— e.g., organic farming – is severely limited. The ancient tradition of saving seeds each year for replanting is abrogated. In Zambia, it threatens the continued existence of the small-scale farmers that we daily work with.

Secondly, the frequently advanced grounds for introducing GMO crops – that its supposed increase in productivity will lessen the problems of hunger – is open to direct challenge. From the case of Zambia and other poor countries, it is clear that hunger is not primarily a matter of scarce food resources but of the economic structures of distribution and accessibility and the social structures of traditional practices and education. In short, hunger is directly related to poverty. We all know the figures that tell us there is no shortage of actually produced food in the world today, and no shortage of potential food production. Referring to the latter, a statement from the Justice and Peace Environment Desk of the Southern African Catholic Bishops Conference noted the untapped potential within the wealth of existing crop varieties. “In Africa, for instance, more than two thousand native grains, roots, fruits and other plants are found. These have been feeding people for thousands of years, but most are receiving no scientific attention whatsoever today.”

Subsidiarity: This CST principle states that decisions that can be made responsibly and effectively at the local level should not be taken by a higher level. The presumption is that those closer to the issues will have both the wisdom and the concern to make the best decisions. Even with ever increasing international interdependencies, this principle still has political and ethical value. Indeed, in the age of globalisation, it assumes a fundamental importance relating to the legal conditions of national sovereignty.

Look at the case of Zambia, a nation faced in 2002 with a food shortage because of poor weather conditions. The President had to resist very strong international pressures, primarily coming from the USA, to introduce GMO crops before any adequate bio-safety policy was in place. And after a thorough study about the safety of the GMOs was conducted – paid for by the USA – the President was ridiculed for accepting the results of that study and maintaining policy based upon the “precautionary principle.”

Solidarity. Something new in the CST and very dear to the current Pope is the principle of solidarity. This is the recognition of the interconnectedness -- *ethical* as well as *empirical* -- of personal and institutional activities that make up the social fabric of human existence. In the church’s social teaching, solidarity is promoted in conscious acts that build community. Solidarity among humans is not vague compassion for the less privileged but active structuring of a society of mutual and socially just sharing. When economic activity undercuts community -- e.g., creating the great gaps between rich and poor that exist throughout the world today -- then solidarity is destroyed.

This understanding of solidarity is what drives the recent papal concerns about the dynamics of globalisation. The case of Zambia’s resistance to GMOs is a classic example of the geo-political and neo-liberal forces of globalisation that would trivialize Zambian concerns and marginalize Zambian decisions. We believe that this is why the Pope has so eloquently spoken of the need for a “globalisation with solidarity, a globalisation of solidarity.” The exclusive political and economic dynamics of a non-solidarity-oriented globalisation has been strongly criticised by the Vatican at international gatherings such as the recently concluded WTO meeting in Cancun. Surely the outcome of this Study Seminar should echo the same position.

CONCLUSION: AN ETHICAL WAY FORWARD

In the letter of invitation to this Study Seminar, we were reminded that the duties of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace include the “assembly and evaluation of various types of information and the results of research on justice and peace, the development of peoples and violations of human rights.”

Our paper has attempted to address the most important kind of research that can be done by this Pontifical Council, namely, the theological and ethical perspectives informed by the Church’s social teaching.

Our theological perspective stressed the respect due to all of God’s creation, a respect that recognises the sacredness and inherent value of the cosmic order. As a consequence, genetic modification can never be viewed simply as a technological or economic tool in the hands of humans. This enables us to see that the so-called “precautionary principle” invoked, for example, by Zambia, is more than a temporary scientific safeguard. It is a fundamental call to humility before the awesome goodness of God’s creation.

Our CST perspective demonstrated the value-added dimension given to GMO discussions by the principles of the common good, option for the poor, subsidiarity and solidarity. These principles provide fundamental challenges to the geo-political and neo-liberal forces that are promoting GMOs in agriculture today. Certainly they should guide any church responses to GMO policies.

We feel that these two perspectives both broaden our vision and deepen our compassion when we look at the way the question of GMOs is frequently – and mistakenly – put: an either-or choice of feeding a hungry world. There are other and more suitable ways to feed a

hungry world than adopting genetic engineering of crops. These are the ways that are revealed when we look seriously, as Pontifical Council and as concerned members of the human community, at the issues of “justice and peace, the development of peoples and violations of human rights.”

This is all the more obvious when we remember that food is not merely another economic commodity governed in its production and distribution by the laws of the market. Since it is essential to life, it is both a sacred entity and a global common good.

The conclusions of our presentation here are therefore clear:

1. Theological and ethical concerns must be primary in any discussion promoted by church groups.
2. Genetic modification does not meet the tests of the social teaching of the church for genuine integral development that respects human rights and the order of creation.
3. The church has the responsibility to educate its members to the religious values essential in evaluating use of GMOs in agriculture.
4. Political pressures should be brought by Justice and Peace groups across the world to promote non-GMO approaches to meeting problems of hunger.

To conclude on a personal note, when we return to Zambia after this Study Seminar, we will be asked by fellow church members, government officials, civil society groups, citizens and the farmers we work with: does the Church support the stand of the Zambian government on not accepting the introduction of GMOs into our agriculture?

We pray that our paper and the intelligent and prayerful deliberations of this Study Seminar will enable us to answer that question with an unequivocal Yes!

Thank you.