

Vatican, food experts say biotechnology will improve African farming

By Sarah Delaney

African farmers should be able to use new biotechnology, including genetically modified organisms, to help lift their continent out of poverty, Vatican officials and agricultural experts said.

Focusing on agricultural development is the key to improving the lives of Africans and their economy, and all tools must be considered to further that goal, according to speakers at a symposium Sept. 24 in Rome on the topic "For a Green Revolution in

Africa."

The participants agreed that one of those tools could be genetically modified products, the use of which is widespread in the United States but controversial in Africa. Archbishop Giampaolo Crepaldi, former secretary of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, said that underdevelopment and hunger in Africa are due in large part to "outdated and inadequate agricultural methods."

Therefore, he said, new

technologies "that can stimulate and sustain African farmers" must be made available, including "seeds that have been improved by techniques that intervene in their genetic makeup."

Father Gonzalo Miranda, professor of bioethics at the Pontifical Regina Apostolorum University, which sponsored the symposium, said in support of new biotechnology that, "if the data shows that biotechnology can offer great advantages in the development of Africa, it is a moral obligation to permit these countries to do their own experimentation."

The symposium was held just before the Synod of Bishops for Africa, which was set to begin at the Vatican Oct. 4. The question of genetically modified foods has been a controversial one in the pre-synod discussions.

The synod's working paper, released by the Vatican in March, called for a commitment to development in Africa but warned against the belief that genetically

modified products were the answer to the continent's hunger problem. It said that using modified crops risks "ruining small landholders, abolishing traditional methods of seeding and making farmers dependent on the production companies" selling their seeds.

But speakers at the Rome symposium spoke in favor of the responsible use of new biotechnology methods and emphasized that genetically modified products made up only a part of those new techniques.

Eric Kueneman, deputy director of the Plant Production and Protection Division of

the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization, said that "biotechnology is not an evil empire" but is an element of a group of tools that also includes traditional farming methods.

With regard to genetically modified foods, he said the FAO allows each country to decide and provides guidance to countries that want to use them.

"It's not that they are good or bad; their use needs to be evaluated in a local context and on a case-by-case basis," he said.

Sylvester Oikeh, a Nigerian who manages an improved corn project for the African



Agricultural Technology Foundation, a nonprofit organization that assists farmers, said Europeans tend not to embrace genetically modified products because they have a surplus of food. But that is not the case in Africa, he said. "More than 200 million starving people

urgently need appropriate technology for survival," Oikeh said. "There is no choice." Farmers from South Africa and Burkina Faso were on hand to testify to the improvements in their farming and their lives when they introduced genetically modified crops on their land.

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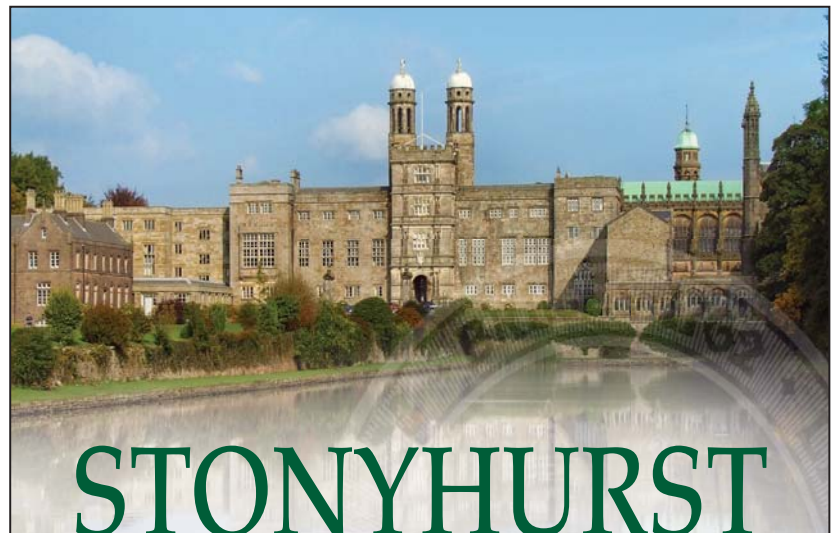
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