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The ethics of organic farming

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Do organic farms, and the organic food industry in general, represent a distinctive social and environmental approach to agriculture? Do they incorporate a unique set of ecological and spiritual values, or merely reflect, on a smaller scale, the same dog-eat-dog, "survival of the fittest" approach of their behemoth agribusiness cousins?

These are questions that will be seeded Jan. 28-31 at the 29th annual Guelph Organics Conference (www.guelphorganicconf.ca), one of the largest such gatherings in North America. There, CEOs of multi-million-dollar organic food companies will share food and reflection with small-scale local organic farmers in a harvesting of concerns and ideas, as the organic food business, once perceived as a hippie-esque pastime for "granola-crunching" bohemians, has grown into a burgeoning multi-billion-dollar industry.

Among those providing a uniquely spiritual flavour to these conversations will be Rev. James Profit, SJ, executive director of the Ignatius Jesuit Centre of Guelph and founder of the Jesuit Ecology Project, which sponsors community supported agriculture, trains young organic farmers, helps restore old growth forest, and blends pesticide-free soil with Christian spirituality to raise both crops and awareness around the spiritual values inherent in farming and food.

Profit, with a hat trick of degrees in agriculture, sociology and theology, is one of the founders of the Guelph Organics Conference, and has long pondered the spiritual, ecological and social justice implications of organic agriculture.

In his essay, *Connecting with the Earth: Experiencing the Sacred*, Profit notes that spiritual connection with nature does not just happen "down on the farm," but can be nourished even on concrete sidewalks.

"We as a human community can prayerfully spend time with trees, with a compost heap, with the beauty of creation in our own local environment. Even in an inner city, we can experience the life-giving beauty of God expressed by a weed in the crack of a sidewalk. When we experience the Earth as holy ... our actions may change from control and destruction of the Earth, to living in respect for and communion with the Earth."

Profit is part of a larger movement of religious voices worldwide, especially women religious (known as "green nuns"), who see organic farming as a way of building community, promoting spiritual and physical well-being, and expressing respect for the sacred dimension of creation. One of the lighthouses in this field is Sister Miriam Theresa MacGillis, a Catholic nun whose Genesis Farm in Pennsylvania has become a mecca for people of faith seeking to root their love of the Earth and dedication to organic farming within a larger spiritual framework.

For Sister Miriam, organic agriculture springs from a sense of deep interconnection with both the Earth and the cosmos. As she observes in one interview: "We're beginning to realize now that the self is an

expression of the deeper Earth self, and the even deeper Universe self. ... The feelings of communion, union with the whole ... are no longer just the idealistic notions of poetic insight. ... We know that in our very genes we are connected to the whole. ... When we begin to identify with the whole physical being of the planet, then we can see the necessity of enhancing and conserving the integrity of the whole natural world. ... Without air, water, soil, vegetation, there's no human life. ... The Earth literally is our body."

By placing agriculture within a larger sense of interconnection with a sacred understanding of creation, both Profit and MacGillis are hoeing a row for organic agriculture that leads away from a profit-driven, chemically based, highly competitive and ecologically destructive agribusiness model. For them, organic farming is not about "survival of the fittest," but about the flourishing of all within a sacred Earth community. Such an approach can yield healthy harvests for us all.

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