

# Get Your Hands Dirty!

An exercise to help you connect with the Earth

## Introduction

**Creation is dirty.** A lot of people shun dirt. But to understand God's creation, you have to get your hands dirty, at least a little. In modern times, men and women have shifted away from raising their own food. It would actually be quite a shock to most people if they understood how poultry is prepared for market, or how vegetables are harvested. Farming, on the whole, is out. Urban living, on the whole, is in. Except for garden spaces here and there, urban living is generally disconnected from the earth itself.

But faith that is not connected to the earth is thin.

**Bread and wine.** Where do you think bread and wine comes from? A farmer somewhere begins by plowing fields for wheat. When he or she turns over the soil, roots, worms, and other living creatures make a stunning appearance! They seem to come from nowhere. Earth is teeming with this life - and all of it is sacred. Then the farmer works that soil, adding manure or fertilizer until it is ready for the seed. Once seeded, the farmer steps aside and watches. Will the rains come? Will the hail stay away?

Jesus himself taught from earthy images all the time. "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies," Jesus once said, "it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." (John 12:24). He used this powerful image to explain the Paschal Mystery itself! How can we teach this without knowing about wheat, without getting our own hands as dirty as Jesus' must have been in order to understand this?

And as for the grape, it doesn't just appear in a grocery store in a cellophane wrapper. The vines are painstakingly trimmed and trained by the keeper of the vineyard. They're protected from deer and birds who would otherwise consume them. And they're tested over and over again until the sugar content of the grape is just right - and then they're picked for the winemaking.

Again, Jesus knew about this. "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower," he told us in John 15. What does this mean? "Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me."

Get thee to a vineyard. Or a garden. Or a farm. Or a container on your window sill. Learn about growing things. Get your hands dirty. It's one of the ways you prepare to be a Teacher of the Faith.

**The land.** But it's more than just understanding the teachings of Jesus. It's also understanding God's own promises. What did God tell Abraham he would have in return for his fidelity? The answer is all over the Book of Genesis: God promised land. Land. The earth. "A land flowing with milk and honey" (Deuteronomy 11:9).

And today all around the world, people fight for the right to live on their ancestral land. In Guatemala, for example, the local Indian people, the descendants of the Mayans, have had their land systematically taken from them. A small band of wealthy owners employ much of the population, virtually enslaving the people. Much of the fighting there in this century has been over the rights to that land. To the Mayans, the corn raised on that land is sacred. It was corn, in the hands of a gentle, mother God, shaped into the form of a human, that gave rise to all human life!

The Bible sees the land as belonging to God alone. Those who live on it are tenants, stewards, caretakers. But God is the owner. Both the law and the prophets remind us that God gives the land for the benefit and use of everyone, not for a tiny few. To teach this message in today's culture and political climate is revolutionary! But it is part and parcel of coming to mature faith in Jesus Christ.

For Teachers of the Faith, it is necessary to grow to love the land itself in order to help those apprenticed to him or her appreciate the tremendous gift God has given in the earth.

## Exercise

Find yourself a piece of ground – actual dirt!

- This could be a flower pot, a garden, a bit of lawn, or an entire farm.
- Put your hands into the dirt itself, feel it and rub around in it.

Plant a seed of some kind.

- You can find seeds for sale in most stores, in small inexpensive packets. Buy only a little.
- Choose something you would like to grow – an herb or flower maybe. You'll be surprised how easy it is to raise things.
- Seeds need water to germinate, but not so much that you drown them! Give them plenty of light.

Take care of this plant – for as long as it grows!