

September 2016

Between a Rock and a Coal Mine: The Challenge of "Laudato Si" in Appalachia

Jessica Wroblewski

Follow this and additional works at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations>

Recommended Citation

Wroblewski, Jessica (2016) "Between a Rock and a Coal Mine: The Challenge of "Laudato Si" in Appalachia," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 50 , Article 10.

Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol50/iss1/10>



Between a Rock and a Coal Mine

The Challenge of "Laudato Si" in Appalachia

By Jessica Wroblewski

The concept of integral ecology is undeniably central to Pope Francis' encyclical "Laudato Si'," but an important corollary to this is the interdependence of the principles of solidarity and subsidiarity – in popular terms we might say, "think globally, act locally." Throughout the letter, Francis repeatedly states how "It cannot be emphasized enough how everything is interconnected," (No. 138) not only in the sense that environmental and social issues are deeply intertwined, but also in terms of the complex connections between local and global concerns.

To take but one example, the effects of surface mining on local ecosystems and communities are obvious as mountain-tops are blasted away, streams are buried or poisoned, and

property values and measures of health and well-being decrease. Yet the impact of fossil fuels extends well beyond the regions that produce them, both in the form of carbon emissions and in the political and economic power of the industry. Though the technological, economic, and political factors that give rise to such practices often originate far from the places which feel their impact most directly, addressing these broader dynamics also requires thinking about local and regional solutions. "There are no uniform recipes," Francis writes, "because each country or region has its own problems and limitations" (No. 180).

The region of Appalachia certainly has its fair share of "problems and limitations." In-

deed, the problems and limitations of this region are arguably unique within the developed world. Sometimes described as an “energy sacrifice zone,” the wealth of the land and the poverty of the people of the region have been closely intertwined since the introduction of industry following the Civil War. In “Laudato Si’,” Francis offers one paragraph which is particularly direct in its challenge to the industries which have dominated the Appalachian region for much of its history. He writes, “We know that technology based on the use of highly polluting fossil fuels – especially coal, but also oil and, to a lesser degree, gas – needs to be progressively replaced without delay” (No. 165). Francis recognizes that this energy transition will not be easy or immediate, but he is also aware that much of the challenge



lies in summoning the political will to make the necessary changes – no small task in an area where the fossil fuel industry maintains a force in the imaginations of many people, even though employment in the industry has been in steady decline for decades.

So while a move away from fossil fuel industries may be both inevitable and in the interest of the people of Appalachia, the church as an institution can find itself caught between the proverbial rock and a coal mine (or natural gas well), as can be seen in public statements on “Laudato Si’” by Bishop Michael Bransfield of West Virginia (diocese of Wheeling-Charleston). In an interview with West Virginia Public Radio earlier this year, Bishop Bransfield emphasized the idea that moving away from fossil fuels “is not economically feasible in West

The Strong Voice of Appalachia’s Bishops

The Catholic Committee of Appalachia is a grassroots organization of lay and clergy who have been committed to the promotion of social and environmental justice in the region since 1970. In the early 1970s, CCA held listening sessions with residents of Appalachia and was instrumental in drafting the 1975 pastoral letter “This Land Is Home to Me,” which was eventually signed by

the bishops of the region and which has influenced numerous movements and ministries in Appalachia



and beyond. Twenty years later, the bishops issued a second statement, “At Home in the Web of Life,” offering a vision of sustainable communities – in many ways, an early articulation of an integral ecology. In 2015, CCA marked the 40th anniversary of the original letter by publishing “The Telling Takes Us Home,” a “people’s pastoral” that revisits and

reaffirms their commitment to listening to the voices of the region and responding



to the signs of the times – and places – in which they live.



Far left: Mountaintop removal coal mine operation, Kayford Mountain, West Virginia. Above: A slurry pond; coal dust holding waste of coal mining. Photos by Creighton University student Ayet Nguyen. Courtesy of The Clifford M. Lewis, SJ Appalachian Institute. Top: <http://www.wju.edu/ai/research/research.html#p=1>

Virginia," and in other statements the diocese has stressed that the pope's criticism of fossil fuel industries must be held together with his concern for the workers. "The Holy Father is not trying to run West Virginians out of work," said Bryan Minor, a spokesman for the diocese. In another interview, the bishop focused on the need for assistance with economic transitions in areas that have been heavily dependent on a single industry like coal.

Yet such challenges have not prevented either the church as an institution or the people of God at the grassroots from taking up Francis' call to action in "Laudato Si'." For one example, the Clifford Lewis, S.J., Appalachian Institute at Wheeling Jesuit University was founded in 2002 with a threefold mission of research, service, and advocacy within the region. Elizabeth Collins, who currently serves as the institute's director, is grateful for the pope's message in "Laudato Si'," which has brought weight and credibility to many of the institute's longstanding programs and concerns. Like those who represent the diocese, however, Collins is aware of the challenges of transitioning away from fossil fuels – not only economically but also culturally – within Appalachia. She explains that with coal, there is a growing consensus that the



Above: Community garden project.
Below: Mountaintop mining.
Photos courtesy of The Clifford M. Lewis, S.J.
Appalachian Institute.

industry's days are numbered, but the pros and cons of fracking remain widely and hotly contested. Collins discusses the need for going beyond the usual suspects and having hard conversations about what is ultimately in the best interest of the region. Although here, too, there are often challenges of reconciling mission with financial need, providing a forum for having such conversations is one way that Wheeling Jesuit University lives out its call to the service of faith and the promotion of justice in the region.

Elizabeth Nawrocki, a senior theology major, has worked closely with the institute since she transferred to WJU in 2013 by leading immersion trips, participating in community gardening projects, and helping to develop programs and events. Like Collins, Nawrocki also identified the work of the Appalachian Institute as bringing together the campus and the broader community for conversation and collaboration. "WJU is not a city *on* a hill but a city *in* the hills," she says, "and our location in Appalachia is not coincidental to our mission."

As Pope Francis has written near the end of "Laudato Si'," "Social problems must be addressed by community networks and not simply by the sum of individual good deeds . . . The ecological conversion needed to bring about lasting change is also a community conversion" (No. 219). Certainly, much more could be said about the challenges of community conversion and promoting an integral ecology in a region where economics and environment are often seen as competing values. But ultimately, looking at "Laudato Si'" in Appalachia reveals that Francis' vision of integral ecology requires not only recognizing the relationship between social and ecological concerns but also respecting the particular challenges and integrity of local places.

Jessica Wroblewski is an assistant professor of theology and religious studies at Wheeling Jesuit University; she also serves on the Jesuit Identity Team.

