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## The Strong Voice of Appalachia's Bishops

Editorial Board

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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



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>

## 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.