

**CATHOLIC COMMITTEE OF APPALACHIA  
STATEMENT ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF LAUDATO SI' IN APPALACHIA  
TO THE BISHOPS OF THE REGION**

Although Pope Francis' encyclical, *Laudato Si'*, offers the church in Appalachia much to reflect on for years to come, its promulgation urges us, the Catholic Committee of Appalachia, to make the following immediate, concrete suggestions to the bishops of our region:

**1) Employ an “integral ecology.”**

Catholics in Appalachia notice when their bishops are tentative if not absent in publically voicing how Catholic social teaching relates to environmental issues specific to our region. Real concern has been expressed when bishops have placed near exclusive focus on a protectionist view of jobs while ignoring the exploitation of natural resources and ecological destruction that is rampant in Appalachia.

Catholic Committee of Appalachia (CCA) has always insisted that human and ecological concerns are interrelated and must be addressed together. That is why we stand for and by miners in the struggle for worker justice, while, at the same time, fighting mountaintop removal and other ecologically destructive practices of extractive industries, and we do not see any contradiction in doing so. Likewise, in Pope Francis' encyclical, he states, ***“Today, however, we have to realize that a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor” (Laudato Si', no. 49).***

CCA is in its 45<sup>th</sup> year of calling Appalachian bishops, Catholics and all people of good will to expand their views to include concerns for the whole, and we reiterate that call now.

**2) Expose and work to rectify the root causes of the region's poverty, unemployment and ecological destruction.**

This has been CCA's prophetic voice in the region from the beginning. We are not aware of any bishops clearly, strongly and unmistakably speaking out against industrial corporate interests, acknowledging the economic effects and structural violence they have inflicted on the people of Appalachia, both historically and in the present. (These industries include coal, gas, oil, timber and any corporate ventures that gain a profit at the expense of people, communities and creation, such as private prisons and factory farming.) When bishops neglect to do so, Catholics, the general public and industry itself are at risk of understanding that silence as approval of new industrial developments such as the expansion of oil and gas extraction that is spreading across the region in the form of hydraulic fracturing. This is an industry which has followed the same patterns as the coal industry, perhaps in even more destructive ways.

CCA publicly called for a moratorium on mountaintop removal mining in 1998. Without endorsement from the Church, in 2004, we offered an educational forum on the issue for bishops in the region. Statements from our church leaders in defense of God's creation and people are in line with the “precautionary principle” Pope Francis encourages, namely that, ***“If objective information suggests that serious and irreversible damage may result, a project should be halted or modified, even in the absence of indisputable proof” (no. 186).***

We ask Appalachian bishops to unambiguously call for a moratorium on mountaintop removal and other forms of extraction of natural resources that destroy God's creation beyond repair, endanger communities, and poison residents, including babies in the womb. Although bishops may be working on these concerns indirectly through their lobbying Catholic Conferences, it is important for Catholics to hear our bishops publically issue this challenge.

### 3) Move concretely away from fossil fuels.

It is contradictory and damaging to the integrity of our faith tradition when bishops speak about justice, concern for the poor, and care for God's creation while allowing their dioceses to benefit financially through investments in the very industries that structurally impose injustice, impoverish communities, and destroy creation.

Reducing and eliminating the use of fossil fuels and divesting of them while moving towards alternative renewable energy sources has been an ongoing educational theme of CCA. It is also a central imperative challenge that Francis makes; and one that needs to be amplified by the church specifically in a region that most needs to hear the message. ***"A strategy for real change calls for rethinking processes in their entirety, for it is not enough to include a few superficial ecological considerations while failing to question the logic which underlies present-day culture" (no. 197).*** There could be no more significant and profound shift in paradigms than coal country reducing the use of and divesting from coal.

CCA calls the church of Appalachia to explore, with diocesan finance councils, options for divestment from fossil fuels at the earliest opportunity and redirection of finances into socially responsible investments such as alternative energies. Other Catholic institutions, mainly colleges, have felt this contradiction and have divested from fossil fuels, and faith communities such as the Episcopal Church have divested as well. The church in Appalachia, of all places, needs to be taking leadership in this area.

### 4) Partner with groups at the grassroots.

Catholic Committee of Appalachia, Christians for the Mountains, Kentuckians for the Commonwealth and Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition are examples of grassroots groups that are working to address regional justice issues on the ground and have decades of experience and wisdom to bring to the discussion. The encyclical aligns the Catholic Church with the grassroots climate movements like these, not with institutions that produce and ignore crisis. ***"Particular appreciation is owed to those who tirelessly seek to resolve the tragic effects of environmental degradation on the lives of the world's poorest" (no. 13).***

There are many ways that these groups and the church in Appalachia can connect and learn from one another: listening sessions, tours of rural communities affected by mining, theological reflection, prayer, and celebration. CCA would like Appalachian bishops to join us around the table for dialogue and clarification of thought of the Pope's messages in *Laudato Si'* and to see how they can be fully implemented in Appalachia. For starters, we invite them to CCA's Annual Gathering, September 18-20 at St. John XXIII Pastoral Center in Charleston, West Virginia. See our website at [www.ccappal.org](http://www.ccappal.org) for more detailed information.

July 14, 2015

Feast of St. Kateri Tekakwitha