



Appalachian Spring

In coalfield communities, a grassroots "people's pastoral" takes Catholic tradition in a new direction.

by Barry Hudock

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ON A HOT DAY in summer 2015, Michael Iafrate stared in distress out the window of a tiny Cessna flying over his native West Virginia.

"What I felt," he said later, "reminded me of what it's like when you're driving along a highway and come upon a bad crash. That twist in your gut, knowing that death is happening here."

Below him was the Hobet Mine site, 10,000 acres of what was once thickly forested mountains but is now a flat and desolate moonscape—the result of three decades of mountaintop removal mining and one of many such sites that now dot the Appalachian landscape.

"It just kept going and going, mile after mile after mile of blank, ravaged land," said Iafrate, a 39-year-old doctoral student in theology at the University of Toronto's St. Michael's College. Flying so close over the scarred landscape that unrolled below the plane, Iafrate thought of the apostle Thomas touching the wounded side of Jesus. "It felt like an encounter with some wounds of Christ on the earth."

Iafrate's flight—provided by SouthWings, a small nonprofit group of pilots that advocates for environmental preservation by providing bird's-eye views of the results of inaction—was one step in a project he'd been engaged in for several years. But it effectively brought many hours of research and writing into a harsh and visceral focus.

There was more to Iafrate's anxiety than topography. There was also history, because the text he was working on would become a follow-up to one of the most significant ecclesial statements in U.S. Catholic history. Both the land and the past insisted: He had to get this right.

Listening to the poor in *This Land*

Back in 1975, the Catholic bishops of Appalachia—a swath of territory, marked by intransigent poverty, that stretches from the northern sections of Mississippi and Alabama up to central New York state—published a major pastoral letter on "powerlessness" in the region. *This Land Is Home to Me* was the fruit of much groundwork by a group of committed laypeople, religious, and clergy called the Catholic Committee of Appalachia (CCA).

With the bishops' encouragement and financial support, the CCA had conducted dozens of listening sessions in remote mountain hollows and rural towns. A young doctoral student in theology named Joe Holland had summarized the work in striking, poetic text. All the bishops of the region—25 in all—signed their names to it.

"There is a saying in the region that coal is king," the document said. "That's not exactly right. The kings are those who control big coal, and the profit and power that come with it." The bishops insisted that "the present economic order does not care for its people" and called for Christians to "challenge the rich" and to listen to the poor.

This Land sent tremors through the Catholic landscape of the United States. Priests around the country preached at Sunday Masses about the region and its poverty. School children prayed and donated allowances to help the region's poor. And perhaps most consequentially, religious sisters from dozens of orders poured into the region, determined to respond to the bishops' call. Many of them never left.

Twenty years after the publication of *This Land*, the region's bishops marked the occasion with a second pastoral, *At Home in the Web of Life*, calling for more sustainable development and communities in Appalachia.

The sense of the faithful

To anyone who knew the importance of these two letters, the question of a follow-up in 2015, the 40th anniversary of the original, would be a natural one. By 2009, conversations about it had already begun among the folks at the Catholic Committee of Appalachia. They talked about how things had changed since the last letter: mountaintop removal had emerged as a dominant and controversial method of coal mining, leaving scores of the region's mountains obliterated, and climate change had become a front-burner issue worldwide.

"We knew the time was right," says Jeannie Kirkhope, coordinator of the CCA and director of the Appalachian Catholic Worker Farm outside Spencer, W.Va.

But the makeup of U.S. church leadership had changed as well. The long pontificate of Pope John Paul II, followed by that of Benedict XVI, had produced a body of U.S. bishops dominated, as much in Appalachia as anywhere else, by culture-war conservatives. Their actions included the refusal of Communion to pro-choice politicians, chastising the University of Notre Dame for inviting President Obama to speak at commencement, and expanding the celebration of Mass in Latin in their dioceses. It didn't take much discernment to know these same men were not inclined to sign a strongly worded document on economic and environmental justice in Appalachia.

One hot afternoon in August 2009, several of the CCA crew were hashing out these challenges over beers, while they floated on rafts in the middle of a pond at Kirkhope's farm. "We were laughing and pontificating about how the church should be run and how it was still relevant in Appalachia, even though no one in the institutional church was really paying attention to social justice issues," Kirkhope says.

"What we need," another said, "is a *people's* pastoral." Not an official document published by the hierarchy, but an expression of—to use the traditional theological term—the *sensus fidelium*, the sense of the faithful, through whom, Christian tradition insists, God can be trusted to speak. And the idea was born.

Of course, to express the voice of the people, you first have to listen to it. And listen the CCA did. Over the next four years, the group undertook extensive listening sessions in communities throughout the region. They

sought out the people's experiences and stories about what it means to live and work and struggle and raise a family in Appalachia. They explored the people's faith and their frustrations, their prayer and their politics.

The group approached Holland, the primary author of the 1975 and 1995 letters, about penning the new one. Holland was interested, but—having spent the last several years living in Florida, where he was teaching college—he finally decided he was no longer the right person for the job. The group turned to Iafrate.

A native West Virginian, Iafrate's doctoral studies in liberation theology are an academic expression of his long-term, on-the-ground engagement with a variety of peace and justice causes. But he was initially hesitant to step into the shoes of Holland, admired for decades by Appalachian activists for his work on the previous pastorals. "But then I realized, Joe Holland wasn't 'Joe Holland' yet when he worked on the first pastoral. He was just a doctoral student, in fact."

Iafrate led or participated in many of the listening sessions, and he pored over what came out of all of them. He took the flight over the Hobet Mine site. He visited McDowell County, W.Va., one of the poorest counties in the nation, decimated by the decline of the coal industry. There a friend introduced him to many people; he talked to them and listened to them tell their stories.

"I left McDowell with an ache that has stuck with me ever since. I kept wondering, 'How does a community like this possibly find hope?'"

The stories that shape us

In December 2015, following several rounds of drafts and feedback, the CCA released its "people's pastoral," titled *The Telling Takes Us Home: Taking Our Place in the Stories that Shape Us*. Without a single bishop's signature, the document is a rich and soaring reflection on "what it means to follow Jesus in this place."

It gives voice to the people of various segments of Appalachian society: women, miners, the homeless, LGBTQ people, and more. It also speaks for the natural world, most notably in a striking sidebar that speaks in the voice of a cerulean warbler, and even for the land itself.

Borrowing the Catholic word for the authoritative expression of Christian doctrine usually associated with the teaching of the pope and bishops, the letter invokes "the magisterium of the poor," the voice of God it insists can be heard "in the still, small voices of the least of our sisters and brothers." Before this voice and that of the earth itself, the document insists, "all of God's people, including the powerful, must bow in humility and reverence."

The document considers such voices in the light of Christian tradition. It decries the "love of money and profit" that distorts human relationships and "lurk[s] in a large number of popular—and largely unquestioned—economic, political, and cultural ideas." It invokes several past popes and also Pope Francis. It cites the Old and New Testaments, focusing especially on the example and teaching of Jesus.

In an especially strong section, it interprets the experience of Appalachia in light of this tradition. Expressing sorrow over "the crucified Earth," the letter insists, "Appalachia is still crucified by coal and ... coal industry executives and their political partners are, as Pope Francis says, the Herods of today in our land. King Coal is an empire, a modern tower of Babel."

Finally, the letter surveys the concrete ways some Appalachian people and communities are replacing consumption-centered living with “satisfaction with ‘enough,’ living in kinship with the Earth community and respectful of the limits of nature.” This includes rejection of “the blasphemy of mountaintop removal,” the development of new food economies, and reconsideration of the politics of a broken democracy.

The spirit of Appalachia

Once released, the letter quickly caught the attention of those most engaged in working for justice in Appalachia and beyond. With a bar set high by the previous two pastorals, the new document appears to have cleared it with room to spare.

“The letter is possessed of the spirit of Appalachia,” says Jonathan McRay, a Virginia-based activist who was raised in the Christian Church of Christ and now identifies with no particular denomination. “It’s imbued with a gritty and raw quality because it was derived from the voice of the people living there. You can feel that woven into the seams of the whole thing.”

Allen Johnson, co-founder and coordinator of Christians for the Mountains, recognizes “the voices of the disenfranchised” in *The Telling Takes Us Home*. “It understands that the Good News is likely to come from these people, not from books and degrees. And it is trying to call that forth. Coal is the Pharaoh in Appalachia. The pastoral helps us think about how to stop building his pyramids.”

Kirkhope has been sharing the letter with the groups of interested college students who come regularly to work and learn at the Catholic Worker farm she directs. She’s been fielding requests from teachers for curriculum resources related to the letter. And there’s a playwright in Abingdon, Va., working on a play based on the letter.

The U.S. Catholic bishops have taken notice, too. That’s thanks in part to Bishop John Stowe, named by Pope Francis in spring 2015 to lead the Diocese of Lexington, Ky. Stowe—a Franciscan friar whose academic background includes extensive work in liberation theology—is a “Pope Francis bishop” if ever there was one. Recognizing a likely ally, the CCA approached him to share their work on the pastoral and received warm encouragement.

Following the letter’s release, Stowe sent a copy to every Catholic bishop in the United States with a cover letter that asked them to “join me in reflecting upon this letter and accepting the challenges it presents.” He says the responses he has received from his brother bishops have been positive and encouraging—a telling sign of a “Francis effect” among the U.S. episcopate.

The people’s pastoral, Stowe says, is “very significant. I’m glad the lay leadership really took the lead to continue the tradition [of the Appalachian pastorals].”

That after-the-fact episcopal thumbs-up to a document composed and released by the lay faithful suggests that the tradition of applying the gospel to the circumstances of Appalachia is now being expressed authoritatively in a new, contemporary—and extremely important—voice.