



CCA West Virginia State Chapter

STATEMENT ON THE VERDICT AND SENTENCING OF DONALD L. BLANKENSHIP

The Catholic Committee of Appalachia, West Virginia Chapter, finds the outcome of the trial of Donald L. Blankenship emblematic of the larger systemic disregard for human life and dignity in Appalachia.

On December 3, 2015, Blankenship was found guilty of willful conspiracy to violate mine safety laws. As a result, on April 6, 2016, he was sentenced to one year in prison and fined \$250,000.00, the maximum possible sentence for a misdemeanor. The Catholic Committee of Appalachia, WV Chapter, commends the judgment that Blankenship willfully put his employees in danger, a danger that cost twenty-nine miners their lives at Upper Big Branch Mine on April 5, 2010. Still, like many other West Virginians, we are outraged that conspiracy to violate mine safety regulations is categorized merely as a misdemeanor. Had he been found guilty of the charges of which he was acquitted – lying to the federal security regulators and lying to his investors – Blankenship would have received a sentence of up to 25 years. It is startling that, in our justice system, lying to those who have power in our society is a felony, while taking tragic risks with human life is a misdemeanor. The Blankenship case is another example of low sentences for those who take risks with public safety, a disturbing trend in our state seen also in the lenient sentencing of Freedom Industries executives responsible for the 2014 chemical spill in Charleston, West Virginia.

West Virginia's bishop, Michael J. Bransfield, stresses "the temptation toward 'maximization of profit' can lead to a disregard for human beings and their needs and lead to 'a new kind of powerlessness.'"¹ Likewise, as we noted in our recent pastoral letter, "Coal industry villains come and go, but the attitude which places profit above safety is deeply embedded in the coal economy."² The Blankenship trial and sentencing accentuates this disregard for human beings. The loss of life and justice for miners and their families call us to greater responsibility for one another, and we call for this responsibility to be reflected concretely in law. We, again, join our bishop in saying "The Church has an obligation to continue to remain vigilant in these areas to ensure that justice is served and human dignity is protected. This is an essential part of proclaiming the Gospel of Life."³

¹ Bishop Michael J. Bransfield, *On My Holy Mountain: Mine Safety in West Virginia*, p. 4, available at <http://www.dwc.org/on-my-holy-mountain.html>.

² Catholic Committee of Appalachia, "The Telling takes Us Home: Taking Our Place in the Stories That Shape Us," p. 15, available at <http://www.ccappal.org/thetellingtakesushome2015.pdf>.

³ Bransfield, p. 5.