

# Public Prayer *to move hearts in Appalachia*

By Father John S. Rausch

In my Ministry for Appalachian Justice Education, I have explained the church's social teachings by economic and social concepts with limited success. I have discussed human dignity, the common good, option for the poor, rights of workers

and care of creation either in harmony, or in contrast, with free market principles. I have found the way to the heart seldom seems paved with facts and figures.

Pope Francis in his encyclical, *Laudato Si*, which is subtitled, "On care for our common

home," writes that the market promotes extreme consumerism (L.S. #203), and the emptier a heart is, the more a person needs things to consume (L.S. #204.) He concludes: "Obsession with a consumerist lifestyle...can only lead to violence and mutual destruction" (L.S. #204).

Consequently, to root out violence with its destruction and to replace it with a spirit of non-violence towards our brothers and sisters and all creation begins by transforming the heart. "From within people, from their hearts, come evil thoughts..." (Mk. 7:21). The question remains: how can we encourage this change of heart?

## Public Prayer in Appalachia

Public prayer provides salve for the wounds of society. After mass shootings, airplane crashes and natural disasters, communities gather with lighted candles or tolling bells to comfort one another and probe the deeper significance of the tragedy. Central Appalachia, which includes West Virginia, eastern Kentucky, east Tennessee and southwest Virginia, suffers some of the country's worst social and economic indicators. The region constitutes a true tragedy, but few register alarm because the situation grew slowly over time, not from a single ►

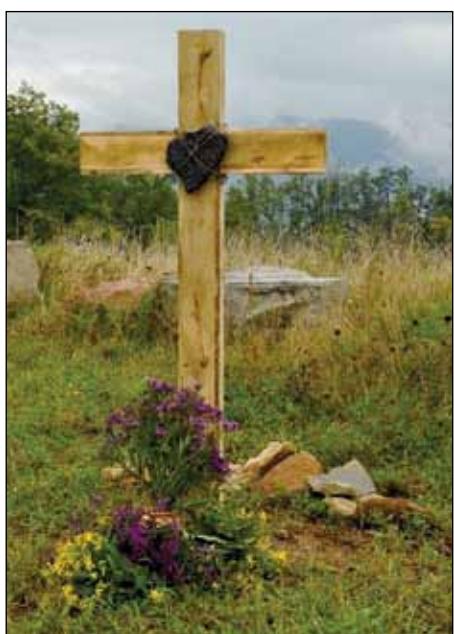


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◀catastrophic explosion.

With its vast mineral and natural wealth, Appalachia has been termed by numerous economists and sociologists “a mineral colony” or a “national sacrifice area.” Extractive industries like coal, oil, gas and timber that fuel the consumption patterns of people throughout America and the world, create jobs for local workers, but channel the vast profits to outside owners. The lack of diversified employment, the health hazards from mining and the limited opportunities for young people, leave the region gripped in poverty and the earth scarred by pollution. I use public prayer conducted outdoors amidst the beauty of the Appalachian countryside to raise awareness of these structural and spiritual ills and to spread some salve to dress these wounds.

an aggressive method of strip mining that blows the tops off mountains by sometimes 500 feet — community people gathered for prayer to heal the mountain. We chose Dec. 10, International Human Rights Day, to emphasize that everyone has a human right to a healthy environment. To conclude the prayer, I gave everyone a handful of wildflower seeds and then instructed them: “Let’s take back the mountain for God and our community!”

Sixty people fanned out covering that moonscape, intentionally planting a seed here and another there, but one senior, a lifelong resident of the area, chose a spot visible from her house below and was overheard saying, “I’m sowing my community back!” Symbols such as wildflower seeds speak poetically when words seem inadequate.

*“Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature.”*

- Pope Francis, Laudato Si



Public prayer attempts to change hearts.

As I assess my various experiences, I group public prayer into three categories: petition prayer, listening prayer and meditative prayer. Depending on the subject matter, the circumstances, and the participants, certain forms of public prayer lend themselves to express the full range of human emotions from lament to righteous anger to hope.

All prayer forms, however, are deepened through the use of symbols and amidst God’s garden, symbols abound. Frequently, Appalachian public prayer might incorporate wild flowers, seeds, coal, water, top soil or garden tools to poetically convey the message of the prayer event. Participants experience the support of communal prayer at the prayer site, then carry the symbol in their hearts as they return home.

### Petition Prayer

Petition prayer seeks something from God. On a mountain denuded by mountaintop removal —

### Listening Prayer

Over the past 20 years, I have driven hundreds of people through Appalachia in vans and cars to see the land and meet the people. I call each excursion “A Pilgrimage to the Holy Land of Appalachia,” because a pilgrimage is a journey with a spiritual significance, and because land reflects the holiness of God, the Giver. We listen to the stories of the people and see the tortured land polluted by careless mining. We ask why the destruction, why the inadequate safety net, why the oppressive structures remain in place.

Every day, the group’s theological reflection integrates the experiences with each participant’s faith life. Imagine the reflections about a free health clinic for the uninsured, dilapidated housing along narrow back roads, an abandoned strip mine site with only shrubs growing, a former miner with black lung tethered to his oxygen supply, and a middle-aged unemployed woman learning the computer. Consider further the discussions about the

drug problem, schools and poverty.

Listening and respecting a person's story allows the person to feel validated. Ministry becomes a two-way street; we pilgrims listen and are inspired, and our host shares her struggles and no longer feels alone. Stories become the symbols in listening prayer.

### Meditative Prayer

Meditative prayer allows people to connect the sufferings of others with the sufferings of Jesus. We used the Via Crucis (Way of the Cross) as a prayer to scan the issues of suffering in Appalachia. Reflecting the original 14 stations, our rewritten meditations connected the passion of Jesus with the death of miners, pollution of streams, addiction to pain pills

and numerous other scourges. Our 7-foot tall processional cross featured a lump of coal crudely shaped like a heart wrapped by barbed wire affixed to the center of the crossbeams. The barbed wire around the coal symbolized the gift and the consequences of coal for the region. While the cross processed to each station, the 75 participants followed reverently holding small white crosses depicting some social sin, like "Black Lung," or "Land Destroyed." Many took their hand-held crosses home where they became a sacramental symbol of the prayer experience.

### Conclusion

Ritual prayer speaks to the heart neutralizing violence. It combines elements of a demonstration, a celebration and devotional prayer that intend to convert some, and deepen the commitment of others. Through symbols and gestures, the poetry of the event plants the seed of nonviolence and opens participants to the inbreaking of God's reign.

Ministry in Appalachia demands listening to the needs of the people, petitioning for healing and renewal and contemplating the consequences of sin and greed. Pope Francis reminds us, "Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature" (L.S. #139).

In Appalachia, the laments and righteous anger over suffering and structures of sin always give way to hope, because God has bathed the area in beauty and remains the ultimate giver, and owner, of the land.



PHOTOS / GLENMARY HOME MISSIONERS



**PUBLIC PRAYER:** Prayer can stop mountains from being moved. Above and at right, people participate in an ecumenical prayer service designed to raise awareness of problems caused by mountaintop removal mining. The photo at top is a mountaintop removal site. Public prayer services like these have a two-fold purpose. They comfort those who pray, and they raise awareness of the structural or spiritual ills being prayed about.

