

The Telling Takes Us Home: Taking Our Place in the Stories That Shape Us; A People's Pastoral from the Catholic Committee of Appalachia

Spencer, WV: Catholic Committee of Appalachia, 2015; 74 pp.

The Telling Takes Us Home is a lyrical and theological call for justice to the poor and eco-justice to the land in Appalachia. It is also a love letter by the church to the people and communities, the hills and valleys of the Appalachian region. The Catholic community—a minority in Appalachia but a majority in global Christianity—believes God is among the people and places of Appalachia, says *The Telling Takes Us Home*. The piece expresses profound discontent over abuse of the land and exploitation of people, intimating that God suffers in and with the land and the people. The letter envisions ways to cherish and rebuild a shared Appalachian “home.”

For Appalachian studies, *The Telling Takes Us Home* is a strong example of religious concern for the society and ecology of the Appalachian region. No other religious group has issued a recent statement regarding Appalachia. Since the demise of the Commission on Religion in Appalachia (CORA) in 2006, the denominations of the organized churches in Appalachia have lacked focus and initiative for issues of social and ecological justice in Appalachia. *The Telling Takes Us Home* arrives on the scene with an explicitly ecumenical, interfaith, and civic intention to call all people of good will to its broadly inclusive vision for basic decency and honor for the poor and new levels of respect for the Earth.

The Catholic Committee of Appalachia (CCA) is a grassroots network founded in 1970 for women and men from the laity and clergy of the Roman Catholic Church. Michael Iafrate is the principal author of *The Telling Takes Us Home* on behalf of CCA. The book is the third in a trio of Appalachian statements from the CCA that began with *This Land Is Home to Me* in 1975, and continued with *At Home in the Web of Life* in 1995. The two preceding statements were signed by twenty-seven bishops representing dioceses (Catholic districts) in the Appalachian region, thereby qualifying the documents to be bishops' pastorals. Such letters issued by the larger Conference of Catholic Bishops in recent decades spurred the anti-nuclear movement and church advocacy for economic justice.

With *The Telling Takes Us Home*, CCA has proposed a new category of ecclesiastical letter, a “people's pastoral.” Instead of drawing on authority from current bishops, the people's pastoral draws on the broad “authority” of the poor and the Earth. Regard for the poor has increased in the church since the 1970s through the influence of Liberation Theology, while Ecological Theology edged forward under Popes John Paul II, Benedict, and

Francis. Reception of a people's pastoral (and "Earth Pastoral") will be an internal church matter to watch, but if *The Telling Takes Us Home* gains external impact equal to the other Appalachian letters, it will influence religious environmentalism and social justice work far beyond church circles, regardless of official reaction.

The Telling Takes Us Home came on the heels of the major Encyclical Letter by Pope Francis on climate change, poverty, and justice: "Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'* [Praise Be] of the Holy Father Francis: On Care for Our Common Home" (2015; http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html). The CCA presaged *The Telling Takes Us Home* by a "Statement on the Implementation of *Laudato Si'* in Appalachia," which calls for application of Catholic social teaching to environmental issues, an end to mountaintop removal mining, divestment from fossil fuels, and partnerships with secular and religious groups "to resolve the tragic effects of environmental degradation on the lives of the world's poorest" ("Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'*" [item 13]).

Both *The Telling Takes Us Home* and *Laudato Si'* face steep challenges in Appalachia. "Globalization continued to absorb resources from Appalachia as a mineral colony," noted Father John Rausch (2016), a stalwart leader in CCA, in a summary of *The Telling Takes Us Home* shared with the West Virginia Council of Churches in 2016. Economic globalization left "folks suffering from pollution and exaggerated income inequality." Then coal began to die, spurring emigration and uncertainty. According to Rausch, a hermeneutical struggle between "resource" and "home" ensued in the "story of the mountains." *The Telling Takes Us Home* offers guidance for any who would resist a dread sense of inevitability regarding the exploitation of the land and people. Instead, as Father Rausch explains, *The Telling Takes Us Home* opens "a mystic activism" that makes the story of Appalachia a story of "home."

The Telling Takes Us Home is worthwhile reading for all scholars of Appalachian culture, economy, and society, and potentially inspirational reading for both the devout and the generally curious. Reading the three CCA pastorals together yields a survey of enduring problems and resilient hope in Appalachia over four decades.

Gilson Waldkoenig is Professor of Church in Society at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.

References

- Rausch, Father John. 2016. Acts of mercy in West Virginia. Keynote address at the 135th Annual Assembly of the West Virginia Council of Churches, October 16–17, in Charleston, West Virginia.