



Catholic Committee of Appalachia  
81 Puddle Run  
Spencer, WV 25276

March 3, 2018

To: Pope Francis  
Archbishop Christophe Pierre (Apostolic Nuncio to the U.S.)  
Cardinal Marc Ouellet P.S.S. (Prefect, Congregation for Bishops)  
Cardinal Blaise Cupich (Member, Congregation for Bishops)  
Cardinal Donald Wuerl (Member, Congregation for Bishops)

Dear Brothers,

In September 2018, Bishop Michael J. Bransfield of the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston in West Virginia will submit his request for retirement in accordance with Canon Law. Having led a large diocese that encompasses the entire state of West Virginia since 2004, Bishop Bransfield deserves to retire at this time.

It is in anticipation of Bishop Bransfield's coming retirement that we, the Catholic Committee of Appalachia (CCA), write to you. The USCCB states that when a bishop retires, "[b]road consultation within the diocese is encouraged with regard to the needs of the diocese."<sup>1</sup> As a grassroots network of people of faith that has been committed to the work of justice in the Appalachian mountain region of the United States, CCA believes we are well-positioned to offer a view from below regarding the ministerial needs of our state and of our region. We respectfully offer these requests for your consideration as you work to discern a successor to Bishop Bransfield to lead the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston.

West Virginia is the only state that falls entirely within the Appalachian region of the United States. We believe that this region is not simply a neutral backdrop for the mission of the People of God, but a place with a unique history, with specific issues to address, and a deep connection to the peoples who live here.

The story of Appalachia is told in poetic detail in the pastoral letters of the Appalachian bishops.<sup>2</sup> Since the rise of industrialization in the Appalachian mountains after the U.S. civil war, the people and ecosystems of the region have suffered from the deepening effects of the desecration of God's creation. Exploitation of both land and people, rooted in a pervasive global extractivist economy that values profit over people, has taken its toll over many decades. Today, a dying coal industry continues to maintain its control of local economies in the region, devastating the land through radical strip mining practices (often called "mountaintop removal" mining) that poison air and water. The oil and gas industry has learned from the coal industry's playbook, intensifying its activity in the region through hydraulic fracturing. The dominance of these industries has actively prevented economic diversification, leaving whole communities struggling with joblessness and addiction, and these pressures of daily existence can result in a mentality looks for a scapegoat to blame, often minorities and others marginalized in our communities.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.usccb.org/about/leadership/appointing-bishops.cfm>

<sup>2</sup> "This Land is Home to Me: A Pastoral Letter on Poverty and Powerlessness in Appalachia" (1975) and "At Home in the Web of Life: A Pastoral Message on Sustainable Communities in Appalachia" (1995), both of which are available at <http://ccappal.org/publications/pastoral-letters>.

The Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston has a rich history of deep listening to and engagement with people struggling for a better life in the Appalachian region, a history that is visible in these powerful pastoral letters. It is, however, an unusually wealthy diocese within a poor state and a poor region. Over time, we believe this has had an effect on the priorities and allegiances of church leadership as well as the laity, sometimes compromising the church's willingness and ability to live its calling as Prophet in our region and in our world.

Yet, time and time again we are given the opportunity to recommit to the Spirit of Justice. As the Catholic bishops of Appalachia wrote in their 1975 pastoral letter "This Land is Home to Me": *"Through the ages, the church tries to be faithful to this message. At times it begins to stray from it, but always the Spirit is alive within it, stirring up new voices to call it back to its mission for Justice."*

The Catholic Committee of Appalachia sees the ministry of Pope Francis as an example of the Spirit alive in the church, and of this "stirring" of new voices. Indeed, when Francis issued *Laudato Si'*, CCA published a statement to the Appalachian bishops outlining some specific ways our dioceses could implement the encyclical in the Appalachian region. Then, in late 2015, we published a "people's pastoral letter" which presents the voices of Appalachian people, and the Earth itself, and calls the church to respond in action for justice and the healing of creation. We include copies of these documents along with this letter.

In light of the three Appalachian pastorals and the pastoral priorities of Pope Francis,<sup>3</sup> we offer these points for consideration as you work to select a new bishop. The people of West Virginia need a bishop who:

- is committed to the ongoing reform begun by the Second Vatican Council
- strives to be pastor rather than an administrator
- consults and dialogues with laity, especially those who are not wealthy or part of industry elites
- respects the experience, insights, and knowledge of women religious and clergy in the diocese
- has, or is willing to develop, experience in rural ministry
- lives simply rather than princely, and seeks to serve rather than to be served
- follows Pope Francis' commitment to social, economic, and ecological justice in word and action
- prophetically proclaims the fullness of the church's social teaching on local, regional, national, and global issues of concern and encourages priests and deacons to preach the same
- continues the tradition and message of the Appalachian pastoral letters
- partners with groups at the grassroots to expose and work to rectify the root causes of the region's poverty, unemployment, and ecological destruction
- encourages economic transition for a new Appalachia rather than maintenance of the status quo

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<sup>3</sup> In a recent speech to the papal nuncios, Pope Francis said "In the delicate task of carrying out inquiries for episcopal appointments be careful that the candidates are pastors close to the people, fathers and brothers, that they are gentle, patient and merciful; animated by inner poverty, the freedom of the Lord and also by outward simplicity and austerity of life, that they do not have the psychology of 'Princes.' Be careful that they are not ambitious, that they do not seek the episcopate - *volentes nolimus* - and that they are married to a Church without being in constant search of another. That they are able to 'watch over' the flock that will be entrusted to them, take care to keep it united, 'vigilant' of the dangers that threaten it, but above all that they are able to 'watch over' the flock, to keep watch, imbue hope, that they have sun and light in their hearts, to lovingly and patiently support the plans which God brings about in His people. Let us think of the figure of St. Joseph, who watches over Mary and Jesus, of his care for the family that God entrusted to him, and the watchful gaze with which he guides it in avoiding dangers. For this reason Pastors must know how to be ahead of the herd to point the way, in the midst of the flock to keep it united, behind the flock to prevent someone being left behind, so that the same flock, so to speak, has the sense of smell to find its way." Full text is available at [https://web.archive.org/web/20160320010505/http://en.radiovaticana.va/storico/2013/06/21/pope\\_to\\_nuncios\\_be\\_pastors\\_who\\_carry\\_christ\\_to\\_the\\_world/en1-703615](https://web.archive.org/web/20160320010505/http://en.radiovaticana.va/storico/2013/06/21/pope_to_nuncios_be_pastors_who_carry_christ_to_the_world/en1-703615).

- and continually examines the sources of our dioceses' funding, will divest from fossil fuels if necessary, and reinvest in renewable energy and other life-giving projects.

Whether potential candidates come from within the diocese, or without, we urge the selection of a bishop who will embody the freshness, compassion, and commitment to justice we see so clearly in Pope Francis. We pray that the Spirit will guide your work as you choose a new bishop for the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston.

In the Spirit of Justice,



Jeannie Kirkhope  
Co-Coordinator  
Catholic Committee of Appalachia



Michael Lafrate  
Co-Coordinator  
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