



Catholic Committee of Appalachia  
81 Puddle Run  
Spencer, WV 25276

April 29, 2019

Dear Archbishop Lori:

As you are well aware, since your appointment as Apostolic Administrator of the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston, West Virginia Catholics have requested a meeting with you multiple times, through the leadership of the Catholic Committee of Appalachia, to discuss concerns with the state of our Diocese, the multiple scandals facing our local church, and the local needs that should be considered as we choose our next bishop. Via Diocesan Delegate Bryan Minor, it was our understanding that you, too, desired such a meeting, though our requests continue to be rejected.

At the Chrism Mass during Holy Week at St. Joseph Cathedral in Wheeling, you presented the following message to lay people:

*Your prayers and your presence this evening are, as always, most encouraging but you bring to the Church more than your presence and prayers. [...] The Risen Lord... has endowed you not only with natural talents so needed by Church's life, but also with many spiritual gifts of discernment, prophecy, and healing, gifts needed in these days and in fact needed at all times for the Church's mission. [...] As you pray with and for me and my fellow priests who are privileged to serve you, we, in turn, pledge to form with you a closer and more vibrant partnership in which your gifts of nature and grace can be unleashed to repair, strengthen, and enrich the social and spiritual fabric of this diocese as it prayerfully awaits the arrival of a new and loving shepherd.*

We welcome this promise you made to the laypeople of West Virginia. However, we continue to urge you to fulfill these promises concretely beyond mere words. Just before the Chrism Mass at which you delivered this homily, a group of lay Catholics informed Fr. Louis Bianco that we would like to approach the altar to make a sign of peace with you. Fr. Bianco stated that we were not welcome to do so. When two people from our group did approach the altar, they were ignored. And as we gathered outside the Cathedral after Mass, to speak with parishioners about the crisis facing our Diocese, you chose to remain inside the Cathedral rather than greeting the people outside. Attached is a statement expressing our rationale for the Chrism Mass witness.

Ordinary lay Catholics are ready to engage in important conversations with you and with our diocesan leadership. But these conversations need to be real, and they need to be open to the *parrhesia* Pope Francis encourages in order to hear critical perspectives that have so far been largely ignored.

With continued prayers, but also a longing for engaged action, for the healing of our Diocese,

We are,

Michael J. Iafrate and Jeannie Kirkhope  
Co-Coordinator  
Catholic Committee of Appalachia

To Archbishop Lori, members of the clergy and the People of God in West Virginia:

As concerned Catholics, we approach the altar to offer a sign of peace, in hopes for the healing and peace that only truth and openness can bring.

We believe that for too long, the laity have been held at a distance, kept in the dark, and treated as inessential to the fundamental mission of the Church.

And so, on this occasion of the renewal of priestly vows, we also renew our commitment to remain active as full members of the Body of Christ, equal in dignity if different in function from the clergy. Our presence today is not fundamentally protest, but rather a promise to remain engaged in spite of the temptations to cynicism and despair.

We call on the clergy to reject attitudes of defensiveness and secrecy surrounding abuses of the past and present, and to give an honest account of the failures of the Church so that all may grow together in holiness.

We call for transparency and accountability from all who are entrusted with positions of power within the Church, that we as a body might remain faithful to Christ, who came into the world to testify to the truth (John 18:37), even at the cost of his life.

We ask especially that the clergy and other members of Church leadership listen to the voices of those who have been wounded by the Church, and to recommit to extending welcome and peace to those who are vulnerable and estranged, that all may be healed and embraced in the peace of Christ.

Sincerely,  
Concerned West Virginia Catholics  
Tuesday of Holy Week  
April 16, 2019