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THE EARTH LAUGHS IN FLOWERS: PUBLIC PRAYER IN APPALACHIA

John S. Rausch

Public prayer is the salve for society's wounds. 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. While Appalachia has its share of these human and natural disasters, certain structural patterns in the region, especially associated with its physical resources, set an additional context for prayer to hear the cries of the poor and respond to the silent screams of vulnerable creation.

In this article, I reflect on the public prayer rituals I have designed and conducted over my years of ministry in Appalachia. People have often asked my help to confront the causes of flooding; other times, I've initiated a tour to hear the stories of people affected by strip-mining. Prayer rituals with symbols always stood at the heart of the experience, helping to make the gospel concrete.

Public Prayer for Healing

Appalachia's vast mineral and natural wealth has been termed by numerous economists and sociologists "a mineral colony" or a "national sacrifice area." Extractive industries of coal, oil, gas, and timber, that fuel the consumption patterns of people throughout America and the world, create local jobs 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. Public prayer in Appalachia attempts to raise awareness of these structural and spiritual ills and to spread salve on these wounds.

Flooding in Appalachia differs from floods of the Mississippi or Missouri Rivers that put thousands of acres of farmland under water. Typically, the steep mountains of central Appalachia collect the downpour from several inches of rain in a few hours, gush flash floods in the hollows, and swell creeks in the valleys. The aftermath of flooding everywhere, however, remains the same: possible loss of life and destruction of property. Spiritually, people experience grief, depression, and despair that beg a response.

In spring 2003, after a devastating flood in the tiny coal camp of McRoberts, Kentucky, a group of twenty-five church leaders and parishioners

listened to people's stories and planted flowers. We bought flats of begonias, petunias, and marigolds from a sheltered workshop to transplant throughout the town. Rev. Steve Peake, pastor of the Corinth Baptist Church in the nearby town of Fleming-Neon and part of our public prayer leadership team, allowed his presence to lift spirits and remind residents to renew their hope in God's providence. Standing by a row of framed houses on Highway 343, he said, "Every time I drive by, I think of people pushing brooms and shoveling mud out of their homes." Like pilgrims, we visited private dwellings, churches, and public buildings, and heard about the flood from traumatized residents. We said a prayer, then planted a flower to express compassion and to replace ugliness with beauty, death with resurrection. In the midst of a small garden by one house, a plaque read: "The earth laughs in flowers." Standing by that sign, Sister Rosalyn said a prayer, and then Spencer, age seven, planted a begonia.

Public Prayer Linked to Justice

Pope Francis's encyclical on the environment, *Laudato Si'*, encourages a deeper respect for "our common home," and the conviction that everything in the world is connected (LS #138). Referring to St. Francis of Assisi, the pope stresses how relationally the saint dealt with all reality: "He shows us just how inseparable the bond is between concern for nature, justice for the poor, commitment to society, and interior peace" (LS #10). The interdependence of all these aspects underlying the social order exemplifies the richness of public prayer because it calls forth authentic community, confronts the structures of social sin, and reminds participants they form part of the body of Christ.

Because "liturgy" is defined as "the work of the people," public prayer invites people to participate—even simply by standing or walking with those gathered. At other events, participants raise their voices in song, read Scripture, or give prayers and testimony. A most frequent aspect of public prayer in Appalachia involves some symbolic gesture. Amid God's garden, symbols abound. Frequently held outdoors, Appalachian public prayer might incorporate wildflowers, seeds, coal, water, topsoil, or garden tools to poetically convey the message of the prayer event. Participants carry the symbol or gesture in their hearts as they return home. Planting a begonia at a home after a flood leaves an indelible impression.

Assessing 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 might lend themselves to express the full range of human emotions from lament to righteous anger to hope. All forms, however, are deepened through the use of symbols.

Symbols in Public Prayer

While our spirits crave quiet, contemplation, and solitude, noise is everywhere in the hype and rapid verbiage of news commentators and radio

hosts who steal our attention and powers of concentration. Symbols in prayer rituals suspend the clatter, challenge our imaginations, and stay with us for contemplation. Ultimately, they pierce the mystery that envelops us, by keeping one foot in earthly experience and stretching the other through poetic gesture into the spiritual realm.

I use symbols in every public prayer I design. The United Auto Workers Union asked me to conduct an evening service near an auto plant on Workers' Memorial Day, April 28, 2007. Around a small lake, the organizers placed two thousand luminaries, which represented the number of major injuries incurred by workers in the few years of the plant's operations. After song and scripture, as part of the ritual, I arranged for a dozen workers with additional luminaries to step forward and announce a particular work hazard—back injuries, hernias, carpal tunnel syndrome. One by one these luminaries trumpeted whole categories of injuries that graphically symbolized the plight of workers. The action worked liturgically when all recalled their own injuries, and those of co-workers, in earning their daily bread. The crowd participated by responding after each announced injury: "We remember!"

At a public prayer near a fracking well around Warren, Ohio, we used wildflowers to make the petitions. After song, prayer, and testimonies, the action turned to flowers. Because God speaks through creation, God speaks through flowers. Five participants gathered wildflowers from the nearby field and laid them in the driveway leading to the fracking well. "I present this flower that says ..." they began, then made a petition pleading about clean water, air, children, growing food, or jobs. Participants responded by shouting, "Let this flower speak!" Very effective—until the police defending the property rights of those injecting toxic chemicals into the earth saw the driveway flowers and threatened arrest for littering!

On a mountain denuded by mountaintop removal (MTR), an aggressive method of strip-mining that blows the tops off mountains sometimes by 500 feet, community people gathered for prayer to heal the mountain. We chose December 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, instructing them: "Let's take back the mountain for God and our community!" Sixty people fanned out over that moonscape to plant a seed here and another one there. 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 speak when words seem inadequate.

Petition Prayer

Petition prayer seeks something from God: "Ask and you will receive; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you" (Luke 11:9, NAB). Although this verse frequently encourages requests for immediate personal help (such as healing a sick relative), in public prayer the "door" being opened depends on the Holy Spirit and usually leads to social healing. On a clear April afternoon in 2016, a group of seminary

students and I prayed that American chestnut trees would renew the face of the earth and contribute to a sustainable economic future for Appalachia.

Generations ago, the American chestnut tree proved essential to the lifestyle of Native Americans and Euro-American frontiersmen. The wood was strong, yet easy to split for rail fencing or to burn for dugout canoes. In the fall, a single tree might produce as many as six thousand chestnuts, each possessing high nutritional values of fiber, vitamin C, protein, and carbohydrates, but with few calories and low fat. Chestnut leaves, brewed into a broth, could relieve a deep cough. Tribes and families gathered chestnuts to supplement their winter diets, while wildlife feasted on them, insuring a steady supply of game for food throughout the year. This nearly perfect tree was prized for its versatility and value.

Tragically, in 1904 a blight visited the chestnut population, which spread over 200 million acres in North America. By 1925, the American chestnut would grow only a few feet tall before succumbing to the blight. For ninety years, biologists and foresters worked to find an answer and finally introduced a gene from an Asian chestnut tree that might stave off the blight. The 15/16 American chestnut tree promised a return of this most useful gift of nature.

As a bonus, foresters discovered this chestnut could address another problem common in Appalachia: the aftermath of strip-mining. Old or abandoned strip mines at best support scrub growth after seriously disturbing the natural ecosystem. Reclamation requires restoring top soil and digs into profits, so companies either reclaimed half-heartedly or skipped it. Foresters found that the American chestnut tree will grow, and even thrive, in loosened "spoil," a mixture of rock and dirt chunks, because its roots can grow deep and spread horizontally. By planting chestnut trees on strip sites, we would be planting a tree with future economic benefits for Appalachia while restoring the land!

Just as planting a chestnut tree requires a dibble bar to open the earth to transplant the seedling, public prayer requires symbols to connect the physical work of planting with the spiritual moment of reflecting. This happened through ritual with the seminarians, beginning with singing "How Great Thou Art." Then we stood on the site and paid attention to our place in creation. I spoke meditatively: "Feel the breeze, hear the sounds of birds, the rustling of leaves, receive the heat from the sun—we're part of creation." We continued with readings from St. Francis's song of praise, "Canticle of the Sun," Revelation 22:1-3, and a short passage appraising the American chestnut tree. After the readings, participants responded to the question, "What does this moment, this experience, mean to you?" which deepened the participatory dimension of the prayer.

Finally came the symbols. We had three. Since massive earth movers and front-end loaders wreaked havoc on the ecosystem in digging coal, a small garden trowel became our first symbol. I handed the trowel to a participant who read: "I accept this tool as a symbol of our participation in God's work as co-gardeners. We will use all tools, not to destroy, but to nurture life in God's garden."

Furthermore, strip-mining practices frequently disregard the breathing properties of topsoil vital to plants and trees, so after offering a bowl of

topsoil as the second symbol, another participant responded, "I accept this topsoil that is teeming with multiple expressions of life from microbes to tiny insects. We will respect the life properties of this soil and spread it like a blanket around our newly planted trees so they can share and increase the life forms contained therein."

Finally, because mining's blasting and earth-moving put water sources at risk, I gave a pitcher of water as a third symbol to a participant who read, "I accept this water that forms the basis for all life in God's garden. We will give our trees to drink as an expression of the Lord's command to share with the thirsty."

Extending our hands over the seedlings, the earth, and the mountains, we concluded our ritual with a blessing: "We have gathered what we need. We have readied our hearts. Let us call down God's blessing on these trees and our labor [in the name of] + Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Go forth now, and Renew the Face of the Earth!" Response: "Thanks be to God!"

My petition prayers usually address a single theme—a labor issue, environmental problem, or an economic matter. Because prayer rituals make sacramental some ordinary moments of life, people remember them and prize them. The forester guiding us that day told me he tacked a copy of the "Blessing of the Chestnut Tree" on his bulletin board, and when he planted some chestnut trees on his own family farm, he informed his family and friends they would have to pray the ritual! Symbols invite the participants to see, hear, and touch, sometimes smell and taste, ensuring real ownership of the prayer experience. During a centering prayer outdoors, participants may smell lilacs, smoke from a fire pit, or newly cut grass. Other times, they may handle soil or feel the surface of a rock. With song, scripture, and symbols, plus a descriptive reflection and dialogue on the theme's importance, the ritual takes thirty to sixty minutes.

Finally, while prayer has a vertical dimension that appeals directly to God for healing and help, it also has a horizontal dimension that teaches. To pray for a healthy environment means asking for clean water and air, but also meaningful employment that respects creation, triggering connections between our spiritual ideals and earthly economic realities. In short, petition prayer reflects deeply about an issue while commending it to God's care.

Listening Prayer

The story of Bartimaeus in Mark's Gospel illustrates the power of listening prayer. Jesus asked, "What do you want me to do for you?" The blind man replied to him, "Master, I want to see" (Mark 10:51, NAB). Jesus invited Bartimaeus to participate in his own healing by allowing him to name his problem and through his faith to receive the healing power of Jesus. Listening prayer creates a similar dynamic. We participate in the liberation of others by allowing them to name their problem and by listening compassionately to their stories. In the process, our own eyes are opened to the sufferings of others and creation.

Over the past twenty years I have taken hundreds of people to see the land and meet the people of Appalachia. I call each excursion "A Pilgrimage

to the Holy Land of Appalachia," because each trip is more than a tour. A "pilgrimage" is a journey with a spiritual significance, and through group discussion and personal reflection each participant gains insights about social justice, mission, and ministry. Each day the group's theological reflection integrates the experiences with each participant's faith life: "What struck you?" "Where was hope?" "What biblical image, or struggle, comes to mind?" The theological dialogue ties together the sights and sounds, the feelings and faith of all who participate. Further, the "Holy Land" sobriquet of the title recalls the physical aspects of Appalachia. Extractive industries like timber and coal frequently abuse the land and despoil its beauty for the sake of profits that flow outside the region. Since God gave the land as a gift for all, land reflects the holiness of the giver. Wherever people live or work, whether land is mountaintop or valley, it exists as holy land.

Over the years, I designed ecumenical pilgrimages for seminarians, church groups, and even the Catholic Press Association. While some pilgrimages focus on a specific topic, like health care or the environment, probably the most useful pilgrimages introduce people to the problems of Appalachia and how the church is responding. These are especially helpful for people considering full-time ministry in the mountains.

On a three-day pilgrimage a few years ago, we stopped at a free health facility, New Hope Clinic, to hear Deacon Bill Grimes, physician's assistant and nurse practitioner, discuss the uninsured and their common illnesses. As a person of ministry, he distinguished the church's mission from mere "health business." He told us, "Health care means loving people into wholeness." The pilgrimage visited West Liberty, Kentucky, rebuilding with geothermal construction after an EF-3 tornado devastated the town's commercial district two years before. Town officials were using the disaster to build for a sustainable future. At the final stop that first day, we stood by a waterfall listening to Dr. Tom Barnes, a wildlife biologist, explain the effects of climate change in Appalachia. In that shaded cove where shoes should have been muddy, participants understood the context of the waterfall's mere trickle.

In succeeding days, the pilgrimage discussed "life after coal" with a small-town mayor and his advisors. Then we visited a retired Church of God preacher who worked twenty-five years as a coal miner and now sits tethered to his oxygen tank because of black lung. One participant remarked, "It's so rare to hear firsthand the voice of an individual like that." Yet, stories like that represent the grist of listening prayer. Rev. Steve Peake, my co-worker on numerous events, discussed the lifestyle of African-Americans in small-town Appalachia. With the economy depressed, the population of blacks has dwindled as folks moved out for better opportunities. Still with a handful of church members, Steve pastors those remaining.

No contemporary pilgrimage of Appalachia would be complete without a discussion of coal mining. Rarely can groups visit an active strip mine with its million-dollar machines scooping up coal and reconfiguring mountains. Adverse publicity about MTR has blocked easy access, but because of a personal contact, our pilgrimage met the miners and later discussed "jobs versus the environment" as part of our theological reflection. What does a sustainable economy look like? A last stop suggested one component: the

community program, Grow Appalachia, that promotes a healthier diet through family gardens to counter the area's obesity problem. Classes instruct local folks about gardening skills, and the program supplies seeds to encourage healthy cooking and healthy eating.

Listening prayer pilgrimages are based on the requests of the participants and what they want to hear, usually lasting one to three days, depending on the topic and scope. Travel is a complicating factor in Appalachia. A thirty-mile destination might take fifty minutes over back roads; a full day with traveling has a maximum of three stops. Yet, that experience itself impresses participants with the slower pace and physical obstacles in the mountains.

Relationships remain key for a successful pilgrimage. Knowing both the directors and staff of programs and some local residents can guard against a public-relations whitewash of the facts. Struggles about funding, cooperation with the power structure, and unforeseen obstacles for the work all blend into an authentic story that epitomizes listening prayer. Hearing and respecting a person's story allows that person to feel validated. Occasionally, young energetic groups want to "do something" to help, rather than being present with the struggles of another. Ministry represents a two-way street: those who listen are inspired, and the person speaking no longer feels alone. Weeks or months later, the participants will reflect on the stories and some connections will pop to mind. Stories become the symbols in listening prayer.

Meditative Prayer

People often cite Matthew 25 as the cornerstone for Christian social involvement. "'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink?' ... 'Amen I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers [or sisters] of mine, you did for me'" (Matt. 25:37 and 40, NAB). Meditative prayer allows people to connect the sufferings of others with the suffering of Jesus.

A traditional prayer form that focuses on the sufferings of Christ comes from the Middle Ages, the *Via Crucis* or Way of the Cross. The prayer traces the last hours of the life of Jesus in fourteen stations, or "moments for reflection," from his condemnation by Pilate to his burial and resurrection. On Good Friday, contemporary expressions of the *Via Crucis* in urban areas frequently bring prayerful groups to a courthouse to discuss criminal justice in light of Christ's trial or outside a bar to consider alcoholism in light of addiction. Fourteen stations can cover a wide array of justice topics.

We used the Stations of the Cross in Appalachia as a prayer to scan the issues of suffering involving both the people and the earth. In 2010, a group of us organized "The Cross in the Mountains" that drew seventy-five participants to a remote field in Letcher County, Kentucky, for this meditative prayer. At the First Station ("Jesus Is Condemned to Death"), we remembered the legal instrument that separated the surface rights from the mineral rights. "The broad-form deed condemned the land," because it allowed the owner of the mineral rights to retrieve the coal by strip-mining. During the Eighth Station ("Jesus Consoles the Women of Jerusalem"), we recalled that "Mothers and spouses weep over the death of miners," because too often

companies put production and profits before safety. By the Eleventh Station (“Jesus Is Nailed to the Cross”), we reflected that “Drug and alcohol addiction nail many, especially the young, to a cross for life.”

Slowly, reverently, the large crowd moved from station to station in this open field following a 7-ft.-tall processional cross that featured a lump of coal crudely shaped like a heart wrapped in barbed wire that affixed it to the center of the crossbeams. Three participants carried the 25-lb. cross, then held it upright at each station. The other participants held smaller white crosses with sins against creation written on them: “470 Mountains Leveled,” “Water Pollution,” “Destruction of Land.” While most of the crosses highlighted offenses against human community, such as “Homes Destroyed” or “Blasting that Threatens Life,” a number of them spoke directly to climate change: “Ozone or Particle Pollution” and “Endangered Species of Plants and Animals.” Each participant chose a cross of sin as a personal prayer for reparation from thirty different themes. Most people chose their theme based on a certain aspect of destruction around them. The scars of the mountains, certainly, gripped their attention, but the growing awareness of coal’s consequences on the health of people also called for conversion.

In addition to the silence of the gathering, a bagpiper and a soloist added to the solemnity. Sam Newton, a student from Maryville College, piped two haunting melodies on the bagpipes that began and ended the service, but equally captivating was the *Requiem for the Mountains* composed and sung in Latin near an MTR site by Dr. Hunter Hensley of Eastern Kentucky University. The service ended with a communal blessing of the mountains before everyone shared a simple lunch of cheese, bread, and raw vegetables.

Meditative prayer offers a deeper contemplation on a broad array of related topics, because it ties the reflections with the sufferings of Christ. Our Stations of the Cross focused on MTR, but included pollution, violence, and lifestyles, all linked in the coalfields. Still, even with reverent pauses, the prayer lasted only one hour.

Symbols played a significant part in the experience. Coal wrapped in barbed wire represented to the artist, Larry Sloan from Knott County, Kentucky, coal’s apparent contradictions. Coal produces electricity, but gives black lung to miners and pollution to streams. Many of the handheld white crosses depicting sins against creation and community found their way into participants’ homes where they became a sacramental reminder of the prayer. The bagpipes and Latin requiem each added a doleful reminder that destruction and death precede resurrection, and participants could, through this prayerful lament, prepare themselves for it. From the feedback, many praised the ritual as a significant spiritual experience.

“Thy Kingdom Come”

My motivation for public rituals includes both the vertical and horizontal dimensions of prayer that address God and challenge participants. Over the years, I have explained the church’s social teachings with limited success as I discussed human dignity, the common good, options for the poor, rights of

workers, and care of creation using economic and social concepts. The way to the heart seldom seems paved with facts and figures.

Ritual prayer speaks to the heart. It combines elements of a demonstration, a celebration, and reverent prayer that intend to convert some people and deepen the commitment of others. Through symbols and gestures, the poetry of the event plants the seed of clearer understanding and opens participants to the in-breaking of God's reign all around them. 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. Maybe, through ritual prayer, participants in the mountains will realize that hope grows amid the wildflowers and rolling mountains, because God loves simplicity, God revels in fun, and ultimately because "the earth laughs in flowers."

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