

Prayer Can Stop Mountains From Moving
by Fr. John S. Rausch

With storm clouds changing the sky by patterns of various lights and darkness, 75 people gathered last September on Pine Mountain near Whitesburg, Kentucky, to pray. The ecumenical gathering called “The Cross in the Mountains” (check *YouTube*) prayed for a renewal of Appalachian communities on a four acre prayer site that looked onto Black Mountain where strip mining was eating away part of Kentucky’s highest ridge.

People of faith revert to public prayer to remind themselves about putting everyday life in the hands of God. Fishing fleets get blessed before sailing for the season’s catch, and pets with their owners come for a blessing on the feast of St. Francis. The faithful also pray publically when social, economic or environmental forces overwhelm the vulnerable. At the outbreak of war, after natural disasters, or prior to an execution they frequently gather for candlelight vigils.

As public prayer, “The Cross in the Mountains” emphasized that every community depends on the natural habitat surrounding it, so the prayer combined gratitude for creation while it sought forgiveness for its abuse. It promoted prayer with a holistic view of community: a healthy environment for children, safety for miners, sustainable jobs for the unemployed, healthy forests, clean water and security from flooding and property damage caused by the aggressive mining practice known as mountaintop removal (MTR).

For some time Appalachian religious leaders have sought to cast MTR in an ethical and religious context and public prayer offered an appropriate forum. The mining practice lops the tops off mountains by enormous blasts that loosen the ground above the coal seam and pushes the overburden (the loosen earth) into the valleys filling the streams and creeks. The coal is then easily, and most cheaply, scooped up by front-end loaders. The price paid by the local residents: flooding exacerbated by denuded mountains, cracked foundations from blasting and water polluted by mine drainage. The local eco-system stands utterly destroyed.

A major religious concern stems from the powerlessness of the people and the Church’s fundamental option for the poor. Both *America* magazine (October 4, 2010) and *Sojourners* (June, 2010) have addressed MTR from an ethical perspective, citing corporate greed and cheap energy as the culprits for this assault on God’s creation and human community. More than 500 mountains and 1.2 million acres of hardwood forests (about the size of Delaware) have fallen to MTR.

Proponents of MTR emphasize the jobs created, but mining employment has dropped 60 percent between 1979 and 2006 in Kentucky and West Virginia mainly due to more surface mining. Alternative energy jobs, conversely, have increased, and total wind-energy jobs now surpass those in coal mining.

Public prayer calms and leads to conversion, especially for the participants. Using the Way of the Cross as a format, participants paused at each Station to reflect on a particular community issue. At the Eighth Station (“Jesus Consoles the Women of Jerusalem”) the folks recalled that “Mothers and spouses weep over the death of miners,” sparking a meditation about mine safety and corporate indifference. At the Eleventh Station (“Jesus is Nailed to the Cross”) they remembered that “Drug and alcohol addiction nail many, especially the young, to a cross for life.”

The event had participants carrying white crosses with sins against creation written on them: “Water Pollution,” “Methane in Water Wells,” “Mud Slides and Flooding.” Slowly, reverently, the facts and figures about the region’s problems began to penetrate like a steady spring rain, and the faithful grew more aware and, with God’s help, more determined to make a difference.