

Powerless prisoners of the profit idol

Appalachian bishops' pastoral holds relevance after 10 years

By Teresa A. Parsons

LaJuane Mack doesn't have a lot of time for church activities. Between football practice and schoolwork, the Pittsford Middle School eighth grader says, he keeps pretty busy.

But because his grandmother and his pastor volunteered him, LaJuane found a few hours last Tuesday night to take part in a dramatization of the Appalachian bishops' pastoral letter "This Land is Home to Me" at St. Bridget's Church. The occasion was a double celebration — National Peace with Justice Week and the pastoral's 10th anniversary.

After the dramatization, he was moved, despite his unwillingness and the fact that the letter was written 10 years ago about a place that's hardly touched his life. In particular, one question in the pastoral struck him.

It asked: "What kind of a world would it be where 'Maximization of Profit' destroys life for so many today, and for future generations?"

LaJuane doesn't really understand maximization of profit, but he does understand the pastoral's warning about mindless consumption of the earth's resources destroying life. As a member of a future generation, that thought worries him.

A forerunner of the bishops' pastoral statements on peace and the economy, "This Land is Home to Me" was written in 1975. In many ways, it prophesied the latter two in stressing the injustice of an unresponsive economic system and the powerlessness people experience in the face of a mighty bureaucratic system, whether that be a coal company or the Pentagon.

The Appalachian region runs from southern New York state, including the southern end of the Diocese of Rochester, to northern Georgia and Alabama, incorporating portions of 26 dioceses in 13 states. But the document addresses an audience beyond geographical boundaries. In the words of the pastoral: "Appalachia is not a simple place. There are rich and poor, big and little, new and old, and lots in between. But somehow, no matter how confusing it seems, it's all tied together by the mountain chain and by the coal in its center, producing energy within it."

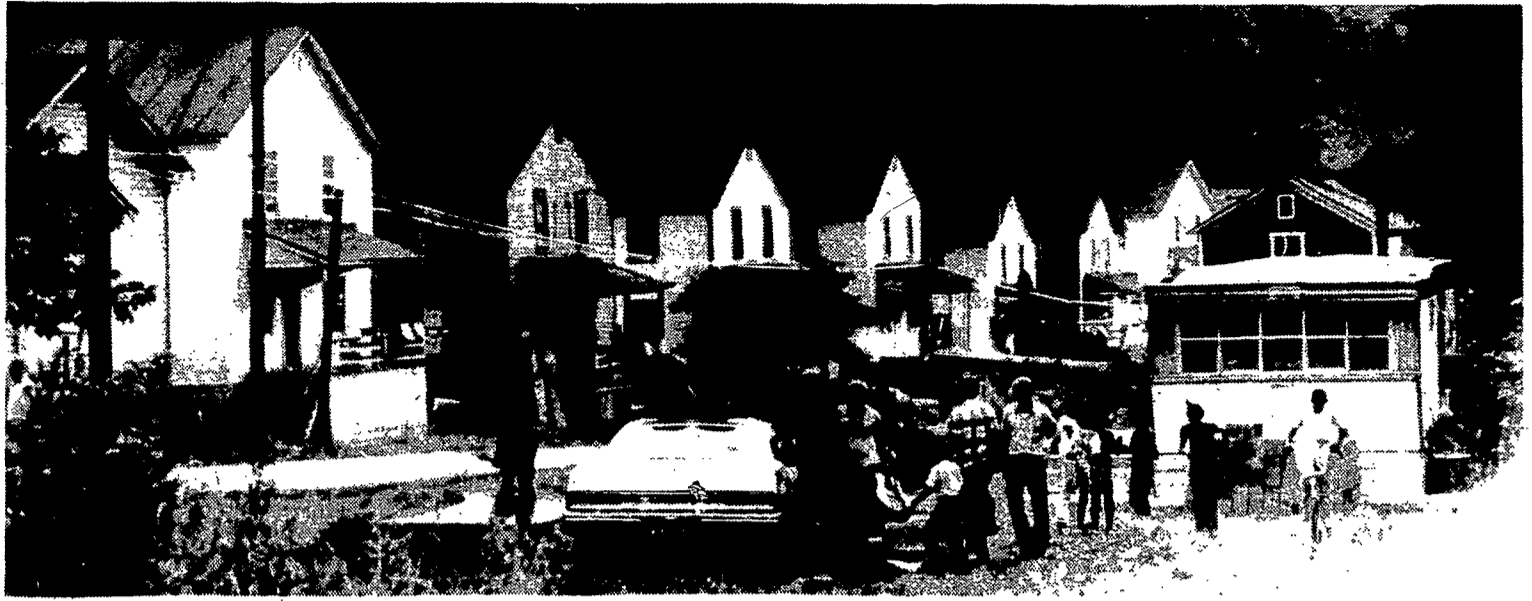
The response of the handful of people who witnessed this first performance is a tribute to the continuing power and wider relevance of the pastoral letter, both in its message and its distinctive, poetic style.

Some cried. Others were smiling broadly as they joined hands at the end.

"It was beautiful," said Norma Holmes in wonder afterward. "I'm going to take this home and read it again."

Another participant remarked: "I had a lump right here a couple of times. I haven't enjoyed something this much in church in a long time."

For that reason, the pastoral has been used as a teaching tool for social ministry training sessions in the Diocese of Rochester during the past two or three years. And that's why Sister Christine Wagner, associate director for peace and justice in the Genesee Valley



A Catholic evangelistic team arrives at a hollow in Eastern Kentucky. The scene is common throughout Appalachia, the subject of the 1975 pastoral letter. (NC photo by Joseph Duerr.)

Office of Social Ministry, chose it to celebrate National Peace with Justice Week, designated to highlight situations that cause or support the suffering of people and to seek solutions.

She recruited Lou Buttino, a professor at St. John Fisher College, to edit and direct the production. Buttino also recently completed a documentary on Appalachia entitled "Even the Heavens Weep" which has won national recognition.

He, in turn, recruited several of his students, Edward Buttaccio, Elizabeth Cunningham and Robert Cullivan, for the production. Other readers included LaJuane, Holmes, Jim Lund and Mary Heidkamp, Pat Mannix, Father Bob Werth, and Dominic and Diana Aquila, accompanied by their six-month-old son, Justin.

The setting was the stark interior of St. Bridget's Church, softened by candlelight. "Even the Heavens Weep," which has won Accompanists were guitarist and singer Joanne Hartman and flutist Glenda Dove.

Tracing the rise and fall of the coal industry and its affiliated unions with the influx of cheap foreign oil and government efforts at attaining energy independence, "This Land is Home to Me" describes the powerlessness of Appalachians in the face of corporate might.

Through cycles of boom and bust, they have remained victims of an "idolatrous" power, the corporate principles of Maximization of Profit and technological rationalization. Although these are not intrinsically evil, the letter describes these principles as forces too often perverted, becoming "hostile to the dignity of the earth and of its people. Its destructive growth patterns pollute the air, foul the water, rape the land."

"There is a saying in the region that coal is king," the pastoral states. "That's not exactly right. The kings are those who control big coal and the profit and power which come with it. Many of these kings don't live in the region."

The letter also speaks of farmers and factory workers whose struggles are both different and the same.

"It is at once the struggle of all Appalachia, of the whole nation, of the human family," the letter says. "The suffering of Appalachia's poor is a symbol of so much other suffering in our land, in our world."

"The same thing which is so obvious in Appalachia goes on outside the mountains. Plain people work hard all their life, and their parents worked hard before them, yet they can't make ends meet," the letter asserts.

"It has become clear to us that the present economic order does not care for its people. In fact, profit and people frequently are contradictory. Profit over people is an idol."

Nor would the bishops accept platitudes in response — "that's economics, be realistic." The letter demands a more personal response and responsibility.

"Economics is made by people. Its principles don't fall down from the sky and remain for all eternity. Those who claim they are

prisoners of the laws of economics only testify that they are prisoners of the idol," the bishops wrote.

Even in Appalachia's rare good times, the document points out, mountain people are swallowed up by a consumer society. They are learning the gospel of cable television, that preaches "happiness is what you buy in soaps and drinks, in gimmicks and gadgets."

On the contrary, the mountain traditions "sing of a life free and simple, with time for one another, and for people's needs, based on the dignity of the human person, at one with nature's beauty, crowned by poetry."

When it was published, the pastoral was hailed as a dialogue between the bishops and their people. In fact, the basis for the document was more than 500 pages of information contributed by people of the region. Continuing that dialogue is the main thrust of part three of the pastoral, "Facing the Future."

"We have no easy answers, so this is but a

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