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W.Va. bishop writes pastoral on mine safety

Colleen Rowan Catholic News Service | May. 3, 2010

WHEELING, W.Va. -- In the second pastoral letter of his episcopacy, Bishop Michael J. Bransfield of Wheeling-Charleston called attention to mine safety in West Virginia.

In his letter, "On My Holy Mountain," released at a news conference April 30 at diocesan offices in Wheeling, the bishop noted mine disasters in West Virginia -- the Monongah Mine disaster of 1907 that killed 362 people, the Sago Mine disaster of 2006 that killed 13 miners and the April 5 Upper Big Branch Mine explosion in Montcoal that killed 29 miners.

"West Virginia's coal helps to supply over half of our nation's energy," Bishop Bransfield said in the letter. "A good deal of our state's coal is exported to help other nations improve their economies and further their development. These are facts of which we can be extremely proud. We can also reasonably expect that miner safety be a higher priority than coal production. The disaster at the Upper Big Branch Mine raises concerns about the conditions within the coal mines across our state and the atmosphere existing in the coal industry's corporate culture."

This is a time of transition in the coal fields, the bishop said, and it is certain that the nation will need West Virginia's coal for years to come.

"Just as certainly, our nation's energy needs must increasingly be met by sources that contribute less carbon to the atmosphere," the bishop said. "As coal is mined, more attention must be devoted to the increased incidence of black lung disease. Attention must also be paid to the health of communities situated near mines, and to the purity of water flowing through and leaving the coal fields."

Bishop Bransfield also cited in his letter the 1975 pastoral letter by the bishops of Appalachia, "This Land is Home to Me," in which they recognize that the coal industry created many jobs and brought great progress to the country, but that "oppression for the mountains" and suffering for many resulted from tragedies such as the Upper Big Branch Mine disaster.

"We have seen the great foresight of the bishops of Appalachia," Bishop Bransfield said. "There have been advances in mining and still, for many of our fellow West Virginians, coal is not simply a way to make a living, it is a way of life.

"We owe it to them and to ourselves to ask the questions that will lead to good safeguards and adequate technologies that prevent disasters; we owe it to them and to ourselves to ensure that unsafe mining practices and mines with a disproportionate number of violations are properly addressed, before lives are jeopardized; we owe it to them and to ourselves to make certain that 'safety first' isn't just a motto but that it is a lived reality in our state's mines," he said. "Indeed, we owe it to our miners and mine operators alike to demand that mines become 'zero-accident' workplaces, where an accident is unacceptable to all and where production would always be halted rather than risk an accident."

The letter also includes remarks from Nick Helms, who lost his father, Terry, in the 2006 Sago Mine disaster, who spoke about the grief and pain that coal-mining families feel. "West Virginia needs coal mines," Helms said. "But West Virginia doesn't need unsafe coal mines."

Bishop Bransfield said the church has always been responsive to the concerns of workers and noted the response to grave concerns about the worker's plight worldwide by Pope Leo XIII in his encyclical letter "On the Condition of the Working Class" ("Rerum Novarum," 1891). The bishop said Pope Leo drew attention to the essential partnership between capital and labor for their mutual benefit and the common good, the importance of safe working conditions and a living wage, the state's role in regulating work relationships and conditions, and the right of workers to organize for reasons of justice and safety.

"The church has an obligation to continue to remain vigilant in these areas to ensure that justice is served and human dignity is protected," Bishop Bransfield said. "By virtue of human dignity, all persons have a right to a safe work environment and one in which unsafe conditions can be reported without fear of blacklisting or loss of one's job."

Noting that workers represented by the United Mine Workers of America have seen "measurable benefits in terms of safety," he said, "We must discover why union mines have a lower fatality rate in West Virginia and appear to have a much better safety record."

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