THE CATHOLIC Spirit

Pastoral Letter's 50th Anniversary Events Shed Light on Plight of Appalachia

By Colleen Rowan

Two recent events marking the 50th anniversary of the Appalachian bishops' 1975 pastoral letter "This Land Is Home to Me" have shed light on the plight of the region and its people.

On Oct. 25, Bishop Mark E. Brennan joined Bishop Mark A. Eckman of Pittsburgh and retired Bishop David A. Zubik at "A Healthy Future for This Land" conference that focused on the anniversary of the pastoral letter and the 10th anniversary of Pope Francis' 2015 encyclical "Laudato Si'". In Charleston two days later, the West Virginia Council of Churches hosted a day of speakers on "This Land Is Home to Me" at its 144th annual assembly.

Joining Bishop Brennan at these two events were clergy, religious, diocesan administration, and laity.

In his address at the Pittsburgh event, Bishop Brennan said that stubborn inequities persist in the Appalachian economy, according to an Oct. 30 article from Our Sunday Visitor. Bishop Brennan stated: "This region of our country — the backbone of the Appalachian Mountains — is rich in

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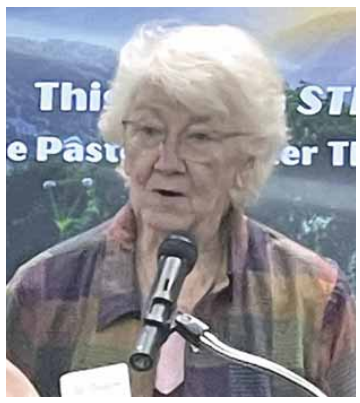

Sister Gretchen Shaffer, CSJ, speaks at the West Virginia Council of Churches event on the pastoral letter "This Land Is Home to Me" Oct. 27.
Courtesy photo

Pope Calls Treatment of Migrants in U.S. 'Extremely Disrespectful'

By Cindy Wooden, Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY (CNS) — Insisting that the dignity of all people, including immigrants, must be respected, Pope Leo XIV asked U.S. Catholics and "people of goodwill" to read and listen to the U.S. bishops' recent pastoral message on the topic.

"When people are living good lives — and many of them (in the United States) for 10, 15, 20 years — to treat them in a way that is extremely disrespectful, to say the least," is not acceptable, the pope said Nov. 18.

Meeting reporters outside his villa in Castel Gandolfo, Pope Leo was asked what he thought of the "special pastoral message on immigration" approved overwhelmingly by members of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops Nov. 12.

"We are disturbed when we see among our people a climate of fear and anxiety around questions of profiling and immigration enforcement," the bishops said. "We are saddened by the state of contemporary

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Power of Unity on Display at Mary's Refuge Gala

By Meg H. Partington

MARTINSBURG—The power of a unified front was on full display during the fourth annual gala for Mary's Refuge.

About 250 area church members, clergy and the general public gathered Nov. 6 at the Hilton Garden Inn Martinsburg to celebrate and expand upon the growth of the maternity home, whose mission is to provide a safe and stable environment for young mothers and mothers-to-be. Seated among them in the ballroom were 10 of the 11 refuge residents and two of the youngest children. One mother was home resting after having given birth to twins on Nov. 3; another woman living there is due to deliver her child on Dec 1.

Nearly $81,000 was raised through the fundraiser for the first maternity home in the Eastern Panhandle, which opened Jan. 9, 2023, in a former convent at 111 E. Stephen St. in Martinsburg. Other figures of note displayed on video screens for attendees were these recorded since

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Meg H. Partington photo
Allison Ferrell, executive director of Mary's Refuge in Martinsburg, holds 5-month-old Amina, one of the residents of Mary's Refuge, during the annual fundraising gala on Nov. 6 at the Hilton Garden Inn Martinsburg.

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From the Waters of Baptism to the Water of Physical Need

St. Thomas Church in Gassaway

Courtesy photo

Pictured are Father Thien Nguyen, SVD (left); Freddi Friend, godparent and sponsor (back left); Beata Pawlowski, godparent and sponsor (second from left); the McLaughlin Family — Robin (center) and Joshua (back right) holding their son Matthew, and their other children Ciaran, Molly, and William (front from left); and Mac Bails, OCIA coordinator (right).

By Father Thien Duc Nguyen, SVD

This past Easter at St. Thomas Parish, we experienced the profound joy of welcoming 13 new members into full communion with the Catholic Church through Baptism and Confirmation, celebrated by Bishop Mark Brennan.

Among them was the McLaughlin family, a household of six who have journeyed with us through the Order of Christian Initiation of Adults (OCIA) since June 2024. Their deep faith and sincere desire to follow Christ have inspired our entire parish community.

Through the waters of Baptism, their four young children, ages two to 12, began their sacramental life in the Church while their parents, Joshua and Robin, were received into the Catholic faith. Their story beautifully echoes the Gospel of John, in which Jesus meets the Samaritan woman at the well and offers her "living water," a symbol of eternal life and the grace that quenches every human thirst.

And yet, while the McLaughlins have received the spiritual living water of Christ, they are in urgent need of a basic necessity that most of us take for granted, physical water.

The family lives in a remote, off-grid area of West Virginia without access to gas, electricity or city water. A few solar panels power their home, but they must purchase water every four days, hauling it in large containers for drinking, cooking and hygiene.

I vividly remember one bitterly cold winter evening when they arrived for an OCIA class, towing a trailer with a large tank. When I asked about it, they explained they were out of water again and had to refill. In extreme cold, their water tanks often freeze for days, leaving them completely without water.

Despite these hardships, Joshua works long hours operating heavy equipment at a lumber company, and Robin lovingly homeschools their children in the Catholic tradition. They attend daily Mass whenever possible and regularly volunteer at our parish food pantry. Their two sons, William and Matthew, have even expressed a desire to become priests someday God willing!

Moved by their faith and perseverance, St. Thomas Parish launched the Well Drilling Project to provide the McLaughlin family with consistent, clean and safe water year-round. As their pastor, I felt deeply called not only to care for their souls but also for their well-being—like Christ cared for the woman at the well, offering water that restores both body and spirit. This project is more than a practical solution; it is an act of faith, a response of love to the real needs of our brothers and sisters.

However, the estimated cost of drilling a well was far beyond the family's means and posed a challenge for our small parish, which already supports numerous ministries for the poor. I reached out to Divine Word Residence at Techny (near Chicago) and another parish for assistance. Both responded immediately, and their generous financial support allowed us to fund the project.

After a long delay due to rain, which made it impossible for the drilling truck to cross the creek to the McLaughlin home, the work was finally completed with great joy on June 5, 2025. The family cried out, "It is finished! Praise be to God!"

The well reaches a depth of 91 feet, producing more than 30 gallons of water per minute.

> The McLaughlin family.... Their deep faith and sincere desire to follow Christ have inspired our entire parish community.
>
> **—Father Thien Duc Nguyen, SVD**

The McLaughlins responded with heartfelt gratitude, saying, "We are just completely thankful and overwhelmed by everyone's kindness. We cannot thank you enough!"

In July, 2025 they shared… "For the last two weeks that the new inverter and panels have been running we have not had to run the generator once. When we get the rest of the panels put up we should make enough power from the solar to keep the batteries charged even during the dark overcast days in winter. The two new batteries have doubled the amount of power that we are able to store allowing us to run the house for 2 days with no sun or 4-5 days if we are careful with the power we use.

"Few people will understand how great of a blessing this has been for our family. The amount of stress and constant worry that this has solved is immense. Especially while I'm working and Robin is alone at night with the kids. I don't have to worry all night anymore that they have enough power to make it to morning or if the old cheap inverter finally failed and caught fire. My multiple prayers every night that God may protect them and the house and keep the power running have all been answered in a way I never would have imagined. My family and I will be thankful for the rest of our lives and humbled by the generosity and work that others were willing to do for us. With love and thanks."

As I transition from my role at St. Thomas Parish to serve as a formator at Divine Word Formation House in Chicago, I reflect on this final project in West Virginia, which I had the privilege to lead. Though I now serve elsewhere, the legacy of love, compassion, and commitment to the poor continues. May the Gospel and the love of God remain ever present in the life and heart of West Virginians!

I am especially grateful to the Society of the Divine Word Techny House, Deacon Dave Galvin, and St. James the Greater Parish (Charles Town) in West Virginia for their support in this project for the McLaughlin family.

Courtesy photo

At the Easter Vigil on April 19 at St. Thomas Church in Gassaway, Bishop Mark Brennan anoints Matthew McLaughlin for Confirmation.

Courtesy photo

Drilling of the well at the McLaughlin property begins in May.