

Glenmary Father John Rausch is seen in this 2014 file photo at his Appalachian home near Stanton, Ky. He died Feb. 9, 2020, at age 75. (CNS/Tyler Orsburn)



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Glenmary Father John Rausch is seen in this 2014 file photo at his Appalachian home near Stanton, Ky. He died Feb. 9, 2020, at age 75. (CNS/Tyler Orsburn)

Glenmary Father John Rausch recognized early in his time as a missionary in Appalachia that people were facing severe environmental and economic challenges and devoted his ministry to seeking solutions and calling attention to their predicament.

For 53 years, Rausch of Stanton, Kentucky, who died Feb. 9 at age 75, traveled around the region, speaking, writing, organizing and praying in a lifelong effort to carry out the biblical call to justice, friends and colleagues recalled.

"He was very dedicated to justice," Father Dan Dorsey, Glenmary's president, told Catholic News Service Feb. 11. "Pope Francis' encyclical, Laudato Si', seemed to sum up his own ministry and passion as far as care of the earth. He had just an incredible love of Appalachia and its people."

Visitors to Rausch in Kentucky often were treated to hearty meals and warm hospitality. "It was the ministry of the table," Dorsey said.

That love led Rausch to the Catholic Committee of Appalachia, for which he served as director from 2005 to 2013. The organization presented him with its Bishop Sullivan Peace and Justice Award in 2016.

Michael Iafrate, the committee's current co-coordinator, credited Rausch for being "a regular guy."

"He was on the other end of clericalism, of being with people and not imposing stuff on them, and standing with them in whatever struggle they might have, a personal struggle or a political struggle," Iafrate said.

"He also had a way of communicating what Catholic social teaching is about and reaching people who you wouldn't think would be very receptive to it," Iafrate added in a Feb. 11 interview with CNS.

Rausch, who was writing an autobiography for the University of Kentucky Press at the time of his death, had been a longtime supporter of coal miners and their families. In recent years, he spoke against efforts by mining companies to shed pension and health care liabilities for retired workers.

In his wide-ranging ministry role Rausch also served with the Commission on Religion in Appalachia, the Appalachian Ministries Educational Resource Center, Christians for the Mountains and the Laudato Si' Commission of the Diocese of Lexington, Kentucky. He joined the faculty at the Coady Institute at St. Francis Xavier University in Nova Scotia, Canada for three summers.

A native of Philadelphia, Rausch began his work with Glenmary in the mid-1960s as an associate pastor at the order's missions in Norton and St. Paul, Virginia. He later became pastor of St. Paul.

A pastoral letter by the 25 bishops of the Appalachia region, "The Land is Home to Me," influenced Rausch in 1980 to devote his life to serving the Appalachian region without a traditional church assignment. "He viewed all of Appalachia as his parish," Dorsey said.

The pastoral letter marked the first effort by the bishops as a group to call attention to the dire economic hardship, rising drug abuse, environmental destruction and a decline in the culture that defines the 205,000-square-mile region that extends from southern New York to northeastern Mississippi and is home to more than 25 million people.

Rausch organized pilgrimages for religious leaders, journalists, elected officials and parishioners from across the country to see firsthand the resiliency of the people in the face of the hardships.

In his writing, Rausch described the experiences of the people of Appalachia in a column that appeared in diocesan newspapers as well as in articles for various publications. He won 10 Catholic Press Association awards for his work published in Glenmary Challenge magazine.

In 2007, Pax Christi USA awarded Rausch with its Teacher of Peace Award.

Johnny Zokovitch, executive director of Pax Christi USA, recalled the priest for his witness in life that "spoke to the peace of Christ, care of creation and the church's preferential option for those who are impoverished."

Rausch is survived two sisters, Marian J. McGinty and Melanie V. Cannon.

A funeral Mass will be celebrated Feb. 19 at St. Matthias Church in Cincinnati. Rausch will be buried at Gate of Heaven in Montgomery, Ohio.

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