Opinion
EarthBeat
mountain

A mountaintop removal coal mine is seen in the Appalachian Mountains in Virginia Aug. 13, 2019. (CNS/Reuters/Charles Mostoller)

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On a beautiful day in Doddridge County, West Virginia, I was traveling with some of my housemates to a mountain justice meeting when over the radio came the announcement that a new pope had been elected.

I had been confirmed in the Catholic faith less than two years prior, so the 2013 papal election was the first I paid attention to. None of us on the trip had heard of Jorge Mario Bergoglio, but as young organic farmers, we were impressed that he picked the papal name Francis. When we arrived at the meeting, we skipped through the parking lot singing, "Pope Francis!"

The gathering had been called to oppose fracking and mountaintop removal in the region and to plan our course of action to protect the Earth and the people who lived in our community. Little did I know at the time how significant these themes would be to the papacy that began that day.

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Two years later, Francis highlighted this connection to climate justice with his encyclical "*Laudato Si*', On Care for Our Common Home." I was serving as associate director of justice and peace for the Diocese of Joliet in Illinois. In that role, I was responsible for programming related to many Catholic social teaching issues.

I wanted to do my best to address the many injustices in our world, but I was starting to feel spread thin. When I read *Laudato Si*', my whole worldview coalesced. It opened my eyes to the fact that all injustices are made worse when you add the climate crisis: violence increases, hunger increases, more people are displaced, and the poor and vulnerable are the most affected. By highlighting integral ecology, Francis made clear that the way to address the many issues I cared about was to focus on the climate crisis.

Pope Francis, and *Laudato Si*', helped me find my vocation. I now work for Catholic Climate Covenant, a national organization working to inspire and educate the U.S. Catholic Church to care for creation and achieve climate justice through the lens of integral ecology. I am blessed to spend my days working in communion with fellow Catholics, specifically youth, to care for our common home.

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For 12 years, we were blessed to have Francis as our leader. In those years, the world has changed drastically. We've had unprecedented division in the United States and the world. We're continuously breaking the record for hottest year in history, with 2024 the first year surpassing 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial temperatures, a threshold scientists have warned us about. Thousands of climate related disasters have led to countless deaths.

Sometimes it is difficult to keep hope.

In this Jubilee year, I've been reflecting on where I see hope in these desperate times, and I'm reminded of my favorite line in *Laudato Si*': "The entire material universe speaks of God's love, His boundless affection for us. Soil, water, mountains – everything is, as it were, a caress of God."

I remember time spent working in a garden, putting seeds in the ground, little pods of energy that sit in the darkness of the soil until it is the right time to emerge into

the light. I reminisce about hikes around craggy forests with my friends. I am taken back to early mornings in the holler in West Virginia — where I lived in the early days of Francis' papacy — looking up at the Appalachian mountains that surrounded us, watching the fog hover around them as if they were breathing.

Creation itself shows us all we need to know, and that is God's love. I'm grateful for a pope who reminded me of this truth.

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