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Catholic Sisters and Cornfield Activism: The Fight for Green Religious Rights

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Abstract

Since 2016, the Adorers of the Blood of Christ, an international order of Catholic women, have partnered with a grassroots movement called Lancaster Against Pipelines (LAP) to resist construction of a $3B fracked-gas pipeline in rural Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. Together, the groups built an outdoor chapel blockade that became a locus of earth-honoring ceremonies and a pilgrimage site for eco-activists in the region. It also served as the focal point for a series of peaceful direct actions against pipeline construction that resulted in twenty-nine arrests. The Adorers–LAP partnership is an important case study in a growing movement of faith-fueled environmental activism across the United States today. Specifically, it offers valuable lessons on the possibilities for creative grassroots cooperation across religious divides, the use of religious ritual as a tool of resistance, the experience of women who often lead these movements, and current trends in judicial responses to faith-inspired eco-activism.

Keywords

Catholic Sisters, nuns, environmental justice, grassroots activism, non-violent direct action, pipeline resistance, Standing Rock, #NoDAPL, Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA), rituals

> *The Sisters of the Adorers of the Blood of Christ in Pennsylvania put a chapel right there where the Atlantic Sunrise gas pipeline would come through in order to block the pipeline. This is literally putting your faith on the line.*
>
> —Yeb Saño (2020), Executive Director
> Greenpeace Southeast Asia

Introduction

In July 2017, under a blistering sun, more than 300 local residents joined a community of Roman Catholic Sisters in a Pennsylvania cornfield to dedicate a rustic outdoor chapel as both sacred space and pipeline blockade. The land on which this Chapel of Resistance was built has been farmed by the Adorers of the Blood of Christ since the 1920s. The Adorers are an international Catholic order of vowed religious women, some of whom live in community across the street from that cornfield. Between the Chapel dedication in the summer of 2017 and the day that gas started to flow through the contested pipeline in the fall of 2018, a series of prayerful protests took place at that ritualized site of resistance. These protests resulted in the arrests of twenty-nine friends of the Sisters.

In many ways, the Adorers' story is a continuation of the one told by Sarah McFarland Taylor in *Green Sisters* (2007). Taylor's book chronicles the faith and work of the Sisters of Earth Network, a loosely affiliated community of earth-conscious Roman Catholic women religious throughout the United States and Canada. In other ways, the Adorers, who are not formally tied to the movement described by Taylor, offer important new insights into the ongoing phenomenon of Earth-conscious Sisters. This essay explores the organizational, liturgical, and legal dimensions of the Adorers' faith-based resistance by examining their rich partnership with local grassroots organizers, their performance of rituals as a tool of resistance against corporate exploitation of the natural world, and their invocation of religious liberty protections to pursue environmental justice in federal court. I conclude by considering the ways in which the Adorers' activism has exposed a deep divide between their own ecologically informed faith and an all-male Catholic hierarchy that consistently displayed indifference, and occasional hostility, toward their embodied green theology.

This is an unapologetically personal story for me, one that arises from my twin roles as scholar and activist. As a founding member of Lancaster Against Pipelines, the grassroots movement that partnered with the Adorers in the work of sacred resistance, my relationship to the Sisters is not merely as a professor of religion but also as a fellow advocate for environmental justice. Therefore, while much of the material for this project was generated through the traditional scholarly avenues of conducting interviews, scouring archives, pouring over newspaper articles, digging through social media posts, and reading reams of legal briefs, my role as LAP's liaison to the Adorers means that my work is also informed by the hundreds of phone calls, thousands of emails, and countless face-to-face conversations that have passed between me and the Sisters while planning the interfaith vigils, frontline actions, press conferences, public lectures, and courtroom appearances described in the pages that follow. I share these observations both to locate myself in the story and to shed light on the methodology that informs my analysis.[1]

Spirited Eco-Activism Comes to Rural Pennsylvania

In early 2014, the Oklahoma-based pipeline giant Williams/Transco announced plans for a new $3-billion project called the Atlantic Sunrise Pipeline (ASP). The centerpiece of the project was a new 198-mile, 42-inch, high-pressure transmission line designed to carry fracked gas from Pennsylvania's Marcellus Shale region to processing facilities along the East Coast. The majority of the gas was contracted for markets in India and Japan (Witmer 2015; Armstrong 2014). The ASP construction process alone carried staggering environmental impacts (FERC 2016): 331 waterbody crossings, 251 wetland crossings, the permanent fragmentation of forty-five interior forests, the clear-cutting of more than 2,600 acres of land, and further degradation of the Susquehanna River that in 2016 was ranked the third most endangered river in the United States (American Rivers 2016). The ASP also violated the conservation easements of more than forty preserved farms in Lancaster County alone (Martynick 2016), while disproportionately targeting the county's Amish landowners whose religious teachings, conveniently for Transco, discouraged them from challenging the company's eminent domain seizures in court (Clatterbuck 2016).

Since becoming operational in October 2018, the pipeline continues to threaten even greater ecological harms. Thousands of new fracked-gas wells will likely be drilled in Pennsylvania to service the new line, with

1. Many of the quotes appearing in this article arose from a series of in-person interviews, both individual and group, that I conducted among the Adorers in July 2021 at their Ruma Center (Illinois) and in September 2021 at their De Mattias Center (Pennsylvania). During my time at Ruma, Sr. Regina Siegfried generously arranged for my access to the Order's archives. I am deeply grateful to the many Adorers who shared their stories with me for this project. I also wish to acknowledge grant support for this project from the Louisville Institute.

each well consumptively using an average of 4.25 million gallons of water in its lifetime (Kondash and Vengosh 2015). These new wells will require the disposal of toxic fracking fluid in containment ponds and injection wells, both of which routinely poison underground aquifers and local drinking water supplies. All of this activity will substantially increase methane emissions, which are already accelerating global warming at an alarming rate. Beyond the environmental harms, natural gas extraction through the process of hydraulic fracturing, more commonly known as fracking, also poses significant public health risks such as low birth weights, pre-term births, increased rates and severity of asthma, congenital heart defects, migraines, chronic sinus symptoms, and severe fatigue. Studies have also identified increased cancer rates among children in heavily fracked regions of the country (Concerned Health Professionals 2019). In June 2020, the Pennsylvania Attorney General's Office released a 243-page grand jury report detailing acute public health risks and environmental harms as a direct result of gas industry activity in the state, including the persistent contamination of drinking water (Shapiro 2020: 22-47).

For all of these reasons, local residents founded a non-profit organization called Lancaster Against Pipelines (LAP) to educate the public about the dangers posed by the ASP and to organize a grassroots resistance to derail the project.[2] My partner, Malinda Harnish Clatterbuck, and I were among the founding members and served on the leadership board through the movement's five-year campaign. At first glance, Lancaster County appears to be an unlikely place for large-scale environmental activism. Donald Trump, who made climate denial and unfettered fossil fuel production centerpieces of his political agenda, won Lancaster County by a 20% margin in 2016 and a 15% margin in 2020. The county is home to one of the nation's largest Amish populations, a deeply conservative religious community that avoids the spotlight and generally eschews the political fray.[3] Given the rural landscape and stoic German heritage of the county, residents have a reputation for keeping their heads down and minding their own business, hardly a recipe for grassroots activism. But from 2014 to 2018, Lancaster County was home to one of the most vibrant pipeline battles in the country. In the final two years of the campaign, roughly a thousand residents pledged support

2. For more on the LAP community, see https://www.facebook.com/lancasteragainstpipelines/.

3. Although the majority of Amish choose not to vote, the Republican Party has made a concerted effort in recent years to increase voter turnout among the group as evidenced in the 2016 establishment of the Amish PAC. See Zauzmer 2019.

for civil disobedience to resist the pipeline. Of those, 600 attended locally run direct action training workshops. By the time the pipeline became operational, LAP had organized over twenty non-violent mass actions against the project resulting in fifty-three arrests.

In September 2016, I received a phone call from Sister Sara Dwyer, a vowed member of the Adorers of the Blood of Christ who leads the Order's office of Justice, Peace, and Integrity of Creation. Dwyer told me that the courageous, prayerful activism of tribal elders fighting the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) at Standing Rock, North Dakota, which was reaching a crescendo at the time, had inspired the Adorers to elevate their own opposition to fossil fuels from passive non-compliance to active resistance. As I explore later in this essay, environmental justice has long played a central role in the Order's charism. According to Dwyer, the Order's leadership decided that the best way to support the #NoDAPL movement was to openly join the pipeline resistance taking place in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, where members of the Adorers have lived and managed farmland since the 1920s. In her book *Inspired Sustainability*, Erin Loathes Biviano (2016) asks a compelling question: when it comes to religious communities that are committed, in principle, to environmental justice, why do so many fail to translate those convictions into action? She suggests three key obstacles that account for this disconnect between faith and action: the knowledge gap, the caring gap, and the action gap (2016: 58-59). Conversely, she identifies 'the power of group energy' and 'collective conversion' as key drivers for helping communities, who have already mastered the knowledge and caring gaps, to make the final leap across the action gap (2016: 111-45). This was certainly the case for the Adorers, whose quiet opposition to the gas pipeline was transformed into bold, public defiance in solidarity with the Indigenous Water Protectors at Standing Rock.[4]

Moved to action by the courage and boldness of Native Water Protectors at Standing Rock, Sister Sara wanted to know how the Adorers and LAP might work together to resist construction of the Atlantic Sunrise Pipeline in our own community. Just as the Indigenous-led #NoDAPL movement wed prayer and ceremony to a sacrificial defense of the Earth to form a seamless garment of communal activism, the Sisters were ready to nourish the grassroots work of LAP with the deep waters of their own spirituality.[5] She explained that the Adorers felt

4. For more on the #NoDAPL movement, see Estes 2019. For an important study placing the Standing Rock resistance within the centuries-long Indigenous fight for environmental justice, see Gilio-Whitaker 2019.

5. While a shared reliance on ceremony and spiritual convictions links the #NoDAPL movement in North Dakota and the ASP resistance in Pennsylvania,

drawn to the spiritual values evident in LAP's work. Despite being a federal 501c3 non-profit organization without formal religious affiliation, LAP's educational events, rallies, flyers, press statements, and social media posts regularly referenced 'sacred resistance', 'spiritual strength', and 'moral clarity'. A number of key positions in the organization were filled by local religious leaders, both lay and clergy. At the height of LAP's direct action campaign, four of its seven board members were associated with the Community Mennonite Church of Lancaster (CMCL), including one who was a pastor on staff at the time. In 2017 and 2018, CMCL held Easter sunrise services at two different blockade sites along the pipeline route and hosted a LAP-sponsored direct action training workshop in their sanctuary. The ethos of LAP was a natural fit with the Adorers' own faith-based opposition to the pipeline. An article in *The New Yorker* titled 'The Renegade Nuns That Took on a Pipeline' quotes Sister Sara Dwyer calling LAP's founders 'the religious leaders of our day' (Griswold 2019). A shared understanding of eco-justice as a sacred calling was the foundation for the relationship that developed between the Adorers of the Blood of Christ and Lancaster Against Pipelines during their multi-year, direct action campaign. Indeed, a reverence for creation and a penchant for sacred rebellion have been in the Order's DNA from its founding.

The 'Obedient Rebel': A Charism of Action

Sister Bernice Klostermann, a vowed member of the Adorers for sixty-one years, recently told me: 'Religious women are known, as a group, to do things that need to be done. If you're looking for change, look at religious women and how they push forward' (Forgotch et al. 2021). This certainly has been the case for their own Order, which was founded in 1834 by Saint Maria De Mattias in Italy. Following a mystical vision at the age of sixteen, Maria developed a deep devotion to the transforming power of Christ's blood. This devotion, combined with her captivating public preaching and organizational prowess, produced a prolific life of service. Maria's efforts were particularly focused on the education and

crucial differences distinguish the campaigns. The former was led by Indigenous communities who have experienced centuries of state-sanctioned violence and overt racism and whose ceremonial traditions have been systematically suppressed by federal and state governments throughout US history; the other was led primarily by white Christians who continue to enjoy extraordinary social, legal, and political privileges in the United States. As such, Indigenous water and land protectors routinely face much greater risks on the frontlines of environmental justice campaigns compared to their white allies. For more on this, see Levin 2016 and Tali-Corpuz 2017.

spiritual formation of women, leading her to establish nearly seventy schools primarily for women in underserved, rural communities. The community of women she inspired during her lifetime continued to grow following her death in 1866, eventually spreading throughout Europe, the United States, South America, Asia, Africa, and elsewhere around the world. Historically, the Order's ministries have focused heavily on the education of women and children, orphanages, and caring for the sick and elderly. Today, the Adorers are comprised of roughly 1,100 Sisters living in 25 countries. Their work remains dedicated to social action, especially in the pursuit of anti-racism efforts, immigration reform, and care of the environment.

Despite the crucial support she received from Gaspar de Bufalo and other clergy who supported her in establishing the Adorers, Maria de Mattias was often denounced by the Catholic hierarchy who disapproved of her wildly popular preaching and the large crowds she attracted. Maria's biographer, Michele Colagiovanni, who titled the story of her life *Obedient Rebel*, records how she was regularly derided as 'a would-be priest'. The archpriest of Acuto reportedly declared with disgust: 'One of these days, she will go to the confessional or you'll see her secretly saying Mass!' (1984: 81).

St. Maria's fearless commitment to underserved communities through actions considered unconventional by the standards of her time continues to animate the work of the Adorers in the US Region today. 'When you study our history, not only in relation to the Earth but across the board, when it comes to power, we were the ones who tried to raise the voice', says Sister Sara Dwyer. '[Our foundress] went against the power structures of the church even to get established as a Congregation. And when you look at our history, we've always kind of pushed the boundaries'. She says the Adorers have long understood their mission 'to listen to the word of God, to be grounded in the word of God, but to rebel against anything that's oppressive' (Brought et al. 2021). Sister Bernice Klostermann agrees, and ties this historical orientation to the Order's current work for climate justice:

> Our whole constitution, through St. Maria De Mattias our foundress, calls us to do what we can 'to bring about the beautiful order of things'.… At that time, it was education of women, and helping women. Now, it's the call for the environment. (Forgotch et al. 2021)

This 'call for the environment' was, in fact, a key part of what first brought the Adorers to rural Lancaster County in the 1920s. The newly established community eagerly embraced farm life, planting the fields and tending the orchards in their bulky habits and wimples (Fig. 1).

Figure 1. Photo courtesy of the Adorers Archives (Ruma, IL)

Sister Maria Hughes, who serves on the Adorers' US Region leadership team, emphasizes the impact that the 'farming sisters' of Pennsylvania have had on the Order through the years. She refers to the 'seed' of charism that resides in each person at birth, which is then nurtured during one's life. Considering that so many of the Sisters grew up in farming families, Hughes believes that the legacy of tending the land has shaped the Adorers' work right up to the present time, both nationally and around the world (Brought et al. 2021). This deep connection to the land among the Lancaster County Sisters is viscerally expressed in Sister Leona Hunter's reaction to the moment when pipeline construction began on their farmland:

> The most intense time of being with the LAP group for me was when…the big machinery was coming in to work, and when I saw that hitting the earth and tearing it apart, I just felt like part of me was being ripped apart. The Earth was being violated and it really, really touched me. I actually cried when I saw that, and it brings tears even now. (Forgotch 2021)

In 1985, the Order's Provincial Assembly in Ruma, Illinois, established an Earth Stewardship Committee to support sustainable, local agriculture during the farm crisis in the Midwest (Adorers n.d.). At their 1995 International General Assembly, the Sisters committed themselves to 'radical initiatives for our planet's welfare and to a lifestyle which is ecologically responsible' (Quirin 1997). In 1997, the Order hosted a global Earth Summit at their rural center in Ruma to explore the relationship between ASC spirituality and ecology. At that summit, Adorers from across the United States were joined by participants from Europe, Asia, South America, and Africa (Quirin 1997).

In 2005, the Adorers formalized their environmental priorities in a 'Land Ethic' that declares, in part:

> As Adorers, we honor the sacredness of all creation; we cultivate a mystical consciousness that connects us to the Holy in all of life. As women, we celebrate the rhythms of creation…. As prophets, we reverence Earth as a sanctuary where all life is protected. (Adorers 2005)

The document instructs members of the Order to 'choose simple lifestyles that avoid excessive or harmful use of natural resources' and to 'seek collaborators to help implement land use policies and practices that are in harmony with our bioregions and ecosystems' (Adorers 2005). The Order has pursued such collaborators around the globe. Adorers serving in Guatemala, for example, have spent the past decade supporting *La Puya*, a grassroots resistance movement working to protect local drinking water from dangerous gold mining operations. *La Puya's* efforts have included a four-year human blockade of the US-based El Tambor mine. Sister Dani Brought, who served the community as a health care administrator, joined the resistance and provided medical care for villagers following brutal attacks by riot police and vigilantes.[6]

Putting faith into action lies at the heart of the Adorers' mission. Sometimes that commitment has come at a terrible cost. In 1992, five of the community's members were martyred in Liberia during the course of their mission activity as educators and healthcare workers.[7] Their witness of ultimate sacrifice in fulfillment of the Order's charism continues to guide and inspire the Sisters' lives of service today. When paired with their conviction that care of Creation is a Gospel imperative—or as Sister Dani Brought explains, 'We are called as Adorers to live the word of God. And the first word of God is creation'—it is hardly surprising that eco-activism is a core mandate of their continuing witness today.[8]

Sister Anne Irose offers a striking articulation of her Order's commitment to environmental justice and action-driven faith. After spending

6. See McConahay (2015) for more on the Adorers' support of *La Puya*.

7. For an examination of how these Sisters' deaths shed light on the changing nature of martyrdom in contemporary Christianity, see Elizabeth Kolmer, ASC (2006), whose sister and cousin were among the victims.

8. The Adorers' example of bold and courageous work for environmental justice confirms many of the observations raised by John E. Carroll in his book *Sustainability and Spirituality* (2004). In his analysis of women religious engaged in eco-justice work, he identifies several factors that are found among the Adorers: a deep sense of place, a willingness to challenge the status quo born of an inherently counter-cultural monastic lifestyle and frontlines work among marginalized communities, a commitment to living out their values despite the costs, and extensive—sometimes dangerous—international service.

decades among the Aymara and Quechua communities in Bolivia, she believes that the Catholic Church has a great deal to learn from Indigenous ways of interacting with the natural world. Her theological orientation is unabashedly rooted in Latin American liberation theology, a tradition that gives priority to orthopraxis over orthodoxy and embraces an ecclesiology from below, rejecting hierarchical top-down models of the church. During her time in Bolivia, she was immersed in *communidades de base*, a lay-driven movement of ecclesial base communities. Years after returning to the United States, she still speaks longingly of these small groups 'directed by lay people' where often 'there are no priests around', explaining: 'There's no sermon. Everybody shares the word of God. And it's always for action—to look, to see, to judge what the word of God is calling us to do and then to act, go forth, and to do!' For Sister Anne, the work of the church is dependent on the community, not on the hierarchy. 'It's wherever *we* are. We are the church, and we are empowered by this word which is so forcefully present in the entire world' (Irose 2021).

For Sister Anne, faith does not exist in the abstract. Instead, it is rooted in the natural world and must always be expressed in action.

The Cornfield Chapel

Given the Adorers' history of costly public service and passionate commitment to environmental justice, it was hardly a surprise when the Sisters refused Transco's financial offers to secure permission to build a climate-warming fossil fuel pipeline on their Pennsylvania farmland. This time, it was a group of local environmentalists who became their 'collaborators' to 'reverence the Earth as a sanctuary'. Over lunch one day in the spring of 2017 at their St. Maria De Mattias community house, the Sisters met with members of LAP to craft a partnership of resistance to Transco's pipeline, a project that both groups considered a violation of the sacred. By the end of the meal, everyone around the table had agreed to build a rustic outdoor prayer arbor in the middle of the Adorers' cornfield, directly in the path of the proposed pipeline. Beyond serving as a public proclamation of their faith, this Chapel of Resistance, as some of the Sisters called it, would also be a place where people from any religious tradition, or none at all, could gather to pray, celebrate the Earth, and live out their own convictions about the sacredness of the land.

Within weeks, LAP started construction on the Chapel. The project was overseen by Jon Telesco, a local builder, animal rights activist, and key leader in Lancaster's pipeline fight. It included an altar, an arbor, and wooden outdoor pews surrounded by a low rope fence (Fig. 2).

Figure 2. Photo credit: Charles Mostoller

When LAP and the Sisters posted an open invitation for a dedication service at the site, gas industry advocates reacted swiftly. The region's largest pro-industry newsletter responded with an inflammatory screed that began: 'Here's a story of some Catholic nuns who have forsaken their vow to serve Christ, and instead have taken up a vow to serve radical environmentalism—which is apparently their new religion' (Willis 2017a). In the months that followed, the same influential newsletter accused the Adorers of 'sacrificing Christ on the alter [*sic*] of politics' (Willis 2018) and routinely referred to these vowed Catholic women as 'Sisters of the Corn', a reference to Stephen King's famous short story 'Children of the Corn' in which a cult of murderous children worships a demonic cornfield deity (Willis 2017b, 2019).

Transco's lawyers also wasted no time in responding to news of the dedication. Within days of the announcement, the company filed an Emergency Motion in US District Court for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania seeking immediate seizure of the Sisters' land, even before the land was condemned through eminent domain (*Transco v. Adorers* 2017a). Testimony accompanying the Motion declared: 'It appears that Landowners—in conjunction with Lancaster Against Pipelines—are seeking to obstruct construction of the Project and/or interfere with Transco's possession of the Rights of Way [by] dedicating the "prayer chapel" on the Rights of Way' (*Transco v. Adorers* 2017b: 2).

Transco had good reason to be worried. Flyers advertising the event featured stylized praying hands blocking bulldozers (Fig. 3), accompanied by the following event description:

> The Adorers carry a deep spiritual connection to the Earth as reflected in their 'Land Ethic'. People of goodwill, from all faith traditions, are warmly invited to participate in this dedication service marking this as a Site of Sacred Resistance against corporate exploitation of Creation. (LAP 2017b)

Figure 3. Designed by Josh Yoder

To the Sisters' relief, the judge denied Transco's bid to immediately seize their land and dismantle the Chapel. Two days later, more than 300 people joined LAP and the Adorers to dedicate the space. The austere wooden benches were filled to capacity, with additional lawn chairs packing the perimeter.

Sister Janet McCann, the Adorers' US Regional Councilor and point person for the Order's partnership with LAP, delivered the homily. She said of the Sisters' Chapel blockade, 'This is not a political statement but a spiritual stand as people of faith' (McCann 2017). The two-hour service concluded with a ribbon-tying ceremony as congregants showed their solidarity by offering silent intentions while leaving colorful strips of material on the rope fence encircling the Chapel. In doing so, the Sisters were realizing their vision for a sacred site where inner convictions about the sacredness of Earth took visible form in acts of ritual performance. Two large signs, one planted on each side of the Chapel entrance, greeted congregants as they gathered for the service. One contained the Sisters' 'Land Ethic'. The other displayed LAP's 'Pledge to Resist' that concluded with a communal 'vow to protect our communities through nonviolent Civil Disobedience' by putting 'our bodies between the land we love and those seeking to destroy it' (LAP 2017a).

Following the dedication service, the Sisters and their allies began holding weekly prayer vigils at the Chapel. Clergy and lay leaders from a variety of local Protestant churches took part.[9] The vigils were intentionally interreligious and steeped in the tradition of non-violent social activism. Passages from the *Tao Te Ching* and the Qur'an mingled freely with readings from Martin Luther King, Jr.'s *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*. The founder of a local Engaged Buddhist sangha became a regular attendee. Local Jewish congregants held a Rosh Hashanah service at the Chapel later that fall. Members of the Lancaster Friends Quaker Meeting began convening there on Saturday mornings for silent meditation.

The Chapel soon became a pilgrimage destination for faith-based activists far beyond Lancaster County. Groups of Catholic sisters from across the region journeyed to the site, leaving packets of songs and prayers for future pilgrims. Volunteers with the Catholic Worker Movement, including a group from New York City, made regular visits to the consecrated cornfield; some were later arrested during peaceful mass actions at the Chapel. Many eco-pilgrims left colorful prayer ties to symbolize their solidarity with the Adorers. One group installed a wooden birdhouse inscribed with the words, 'One day a family of beautiful choir singers will move in this house to help defend this chapel and to remind you of why you stand strong'. An offering of eclectic items sprang spontaneously around the altar: handwritten notes of support, printed prayers, small stones, loaves of bread, fresh produce, flowers, and a pair of Pennsylvania Dutch cornhusk dolls. One woman left a pair of well-worn shoes, the date of her baptism scrawled across them with a Sharpie.

One of the most intriguing aspects of the movement was the extent to which self-identified non-religious individuals participated in the Cornfield Chapel phenomenon. I regularly spoke with vigil attendees, including some who participated in direct actions at the site, who openly aired their distaste for traditional religious practice while feeling entirely at home singing hymns and offering prayers alongside these eco-passionate Catholic nuns. A shared commitment to the sacredness of Earth seemed to transcend sectarian divides, creating an extra-ecclesial community bound together by a shared 'ultimate concern' for the natural world, to borrow Paul Tillich's famous phrase. One local resident, who had abandoned organized religion years earlier, was so drawn to the Earth-loving faith she encountered at the Chapel that she asked to be baptized under the arbor. She later publicly testified at a Chapel vigil that although her mother used to call her 'a heathen', a deep love for the land and attachment to the Chapel proved her mother wrong. As Sister Sara Dwyer observed about this striking alliance of religious and secular lovers of the land: 'That's one of the beautiful things. People of any

9. For a story celebrating this ecumenical activism, see Sensenig 2017.

religion or no religion can get behind the sacredness of Earth' (Adams 2020). This partnership between the Adorers and non-religiously affiliated environmental advocates appears to be consistent with a larger, national movement as reflected in the 'Nuns & Nones' initiative established in 2016 that brings together Catholic sisters and diverse spiritual seekers who, despite their dogmatic differences, share a deep commitment to community, spirituality, and justice.[10]

Another remarkable feature of the Adorers–LAP partnership is the extent to which the Sisters credit this grassroots activist movement for helping the Order live more fully into their own charism. Dwyer recently spoke to me about her first experience participating in LAP's direct action campaign, which took place at a frontline pipeline blockade that local activists had dubbed 'The Stand'. 'When I went to the Stand for the first time', said Dwyer, 'I was on fire, because you all were on fire…. For me, it was just like a sacramental moment' (Brought et al. 2021). For Sister Janet McCann, the partnership with LAP was:

> …a way that we [Adorers] can publicly give witness to what we have on paper, and what we say we believe. It was a way to give witness to that. We've talked often that we could not have done what we did on our own…. Fear is contagious, but so is courage. We received that gift from LAP a lot throughout this process. (Brought et al. 2021)

Sister Anne Marie called the Adorers' collaboration with LAP a 'godsend' through which 'God was telling us something—that we had to speak out' (Forgotch et al. 2021). For Sister Bernice Klostermann, her encounter with LAP came as a sacred calling: 'My faith says, "Do what you can". For me, the call came from Lancaster Against Pipelines'. She described her participation in direct actions at the Chapel in overtly religious terms: 'They were such sacred moments. Such sacred moments' (Forgotch et al. 2021).

The Chapel's ability to become both an interreligious and extra-religious space of eco-activism was made possible, in part, by the Adorers' belief that God's love, presence, and activity transcends dogmatic loyalties and sectarian divides. Sister Bernice Klostermann has described the rich confluence of religious and secular participants at the Chapel like this: 'It's the God within each one of us that reaches out to the God in the other person, no matter what we call them or how we worship'. Regardless of our varied religious backgrounds, she believes that we need to ask critical questions about shared values and what brings people together. This is why Bernice says that, during vigils and

10. See https://www.nunsandnones.org.

actions at the Chapel, 'We never looked at what our differences were. We looked at what was common to all of us' (Forgotch et al. 2021).

Sister Mary Alan Wurth was born and raised on a farm in central Illinois, holds a doctorate in physiology, and has been an Adorer for 63 years. She believes the unifying principle at the Chapel was a shared commitment to what St. Maria De Mattias called 'the beautiful order of things'. Wurth explained that while protecting 'that beautiful order' certainly draws on each person's 'particular spirituality', it also relies on what she calls 'a universal spirituality' (Brought et al. 2021). Sister Anne Irose develops this theological concept even further. 'The Christ of the universe, the universal Christ, is not the historical Jesus', she explained, adding: 'Jesus was great, but *this* is the universal Christ from the very beginning. From the very beginning was Father, Son, Spirit. In whatever way we explain it, from the very beginning was that Spirit' (Irose 2021). She contends that the divine nature found in Jesus the Christ is the same divine nature found in creation. In this way, the communion experienced among fellow defenders of the natural world is inherently spiritual and transcends religious affiliation.

As the Adorers' grassroots resistance in partnership with LAP gained more participants and wider media coverage, Williams/Transco redoubled their efforts. Despite the company's earlier failure to access the Adorers' land by way of a court-sanctioned land grab, it nonetheless persisted in its efforts to seize the property through eminent domain. The Sisters responded by invoking the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA) in US District Court.[11] Their complaint asserted that forcing a fossil fuel pipeline on their farmland was 'antithetical to the deeply held religious beliefs and convictions of the Adorers' whose 'religious practice includes protecting and preserving creation, which they believe is a revelation of God, the sacredness of which must be honored and protected for future generations' (*Adorers v. FERC* 2017a, §1).

RFRA won unanimous support in the US House and near-unanimous support in the Senate (97-3) on its way to becoming law in 1993. It stipulates that 'Government shall not substantially burden a person's exercise of religion even if the burden results from a rule of general applicability' unless the burden is determined to be the least restrictive means of furthering a compelling governmental interest (§3). The Sisters argued that being coerced by the government, through eminent domain, to use their own property for a privately owned, climate warming pipeline was a direct violation of their deeply held religious convictions.

11. The Adorers' years-long legal battle against the ASP has been led by Lancaster County attorneys Dwight Yoder and Sheila O'Rourke of Gibbel Kraybill & Hess.

The court disagreed. In a sharply worded opinion defending Transco's seizure of the Adorers' land, district judge Jeffrey Schmehl bluntly dismissed the Sisters' RFRA claims (*Transco v. Adorers* 2017c: 22). That opinion was accompanied by a court order validating Transco's 'substantive right to condemn' the Adorers' land. The order included a heavy-handed enforcement provision, authorizing the US Marshal Service 'to investigate and to arrest, confine in prison and/or bring before the Court' anyone who interfered with Transco's seizure of the land. Clearly aware of the Sisters' partnership with LAP, the judge warned that the Sisters themselves would be subject to arrest and confinement in federal prison if they authorized 'third parties' to interfere with pipeline activity on their property (*Transco v. Adorers* 2017d: §3).

Rituals of Resistance

Pipeline construction on the Sisters' farmland was set to begin on Monday 16 October 2017. Undeterred, the Sisters posted a 'Call to Action' on their website inviting supporters to join them 'in holy Vigil' at their Chapel of Resistance (Adorers 2017). LAP, too, issued a public call for action which welcomed supporters to 'hold a prayerful, songful vigil at the very edge of Williams' desecration corridor'. They warned that: 'Those who choose to place themselves in the pipeline easement should be prepared to face arrest by US Marshals who, despite their duty to serve and protect the citizens of this nation, will be serving, instead, the financial interests of a private, for-profit, out-of-state, billionaire-run, fossil fuel industry' (LAP 2017c).

The evening before Transco broke ground on the Adorers' land, a solemn vigil was held at the Chapel. The weight of the approaching conflict was evident in the songs, prayers, and reflections chosen for the service. Sister Bernice Klostermann was among those who spoke, raising the poignant question, 'How do I find God in my enemy?' She called on congregants to move with both 'non-violence' and 'reverence' when confronting pipeline workers in the days ahead (Klostermann 2017). The next morning, just after sunrise, roughly one hundred supporters of the Sisters were gathered at the Chapel. Pipeline security personnel, local police, state troopers, and US Marshals were also on site. After a time of singing, leaders of LAP spoke of the 'moral crisis' posed by the pipeline, and urged participants to engage in peaceful, disciplined resistance. A variety of roles were assigned to ensure an orderly day of protest: police liaisons, legal observers, song leaders, medics. A large, military-style support tent had been erected beside the Chapel space to provide participants with food, water, cots, and medical attention if needed.

It was mid-morning when construction activity began. In an interview with Lancaster's local newspaper after the event, a Transco spokesperson conceded that the company chose the Adorers' land as the first location to break ground along the 200-mile construction corridor as a direct result of the Sisters' public opposition (Crable 2017). When the first excavator rolled onto the field, it was swarmed by local allies of the Sisters who formed a human blockade in front of the machinery, bringing it to a standstill (Fig. 4).

Figure 4. Photo credit: David Jones

The group carried a rustic wooden processional cross draped with colorful ribbons, along with banners proclaiming 'You Will Not Spoil This Land' and 'You Will Not Endanger Our People'. For more than an hour, familiar hymns and well-known movement songs filled the air, from 'Amazing Grace' and 'This Little Light of Mine' to 'Solid as a Rock' and 'Which Side Are You On?' (LAP 2017d).

Later that morning, the police issued their final warning for pipeline opponents to leave the portion of the Sisters' farmland that Transco had recently seized for its right-of-way. Twenty-three people remained, ranging in age from 16 to 86, singing until the last person was arrested (Crable and Blest 2017). They were handcuffed, transported to local police stations, and ultimately detained in Lancaster County Prison until the following day. Three pastors from three different denominations were among those arrested, along with the coordinator of a local Engaged Buddhist community rooted in the teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh.

In the months that followed, community members joined the Adorers and LAP in a series of additional direct actions. Central to the Sisters' campaign was the use of religious ceremonies as acts of sacred resistance. Less than a week following that initial action, dubbed the 'Chapel 23', six individuals, including members of the Catholic Worker Movement, were arrested while disrupting pipeline construction by way of a quilt blockade at the Chapel site. The fifty-foot quilt contained hundreds of handmade squares, each designed by a different local resident and collectively expressing the community's opposition to the pipeline. Given the rich quilt-making heritage among the region's Mennonite and Amish communities, the months-long process of crafting the individual squares, and then sewing them into attachable panels to stretch across the full length of the construction corridor, can be understood as a quintessentially Lancaster County ritual (Fig. 5).

Figure 5. Photo credit: David Jones

One week later, 80 local residents marched with several Sisters into an active work site adjacent to the Chapel carrying a processional cross, singing hymns, and offering homemade bread to a confused crew of welders and backhoe operators. Sister Sara Dwyer, who led the procession, explained to the outdoor assembly how the modified eucharistic meal was simultaneously a celebration of the Earth's bounty, a ritual of repentance for humanity's violence against the natural world, and a public call to halt construction of the pipeline. The congregational trespassers joined hands in a large circle, offering prayers and hymns until Pennsylvania state troopers descended on the site with tactical zip-tie handcuffs to arrest everyone in the construction zone. The ceremony concluded before any arrests were made.

The Adorers chose Palm Sunday for another demonstration of liturgical resistance. Defying industry warnings to stay off the dormant work site on their own farmland, the Sisters were joined by a large congregation in raising a 10-foot wooden cross in the middle of the right-of-way (Fig. 6).

Figure 6. Photo credit: Dave Parry

Figure 7. Author's photo

Participants also created a large, heart-shaped prayer labyrinth out of straw bales directly in front of the cross (Fig. 7). Together these sacred objects made a pipeline blockade out of the heart-and-cross logo that serves as the Adorers' official symbol. During the ceremony, which doubled as a direct action, the Sisters led the congregation in praying the

Stations of the Cross around the labyrinth. They also issued an open invitation for supporters to use the new labyrinth as a public site of meditation in the days ahead, despite Transco's demand to stay off the property. Additionally, two signs were posted in the middle of the construction zone beside these newly installed religious structures. One was the Adorers' 'Land Ethic'. The other contained this straightforward proclamation: 'We continue to affirm our religious right—and duty—to challenge Transco's unholy and unconstitutional seizure of our land for a climate-warming fossil fuel project in direct violation of our deeply held religious convictions'.

In July 2018, a crowd of supporters joined the Sisters for a service marking the Chapel's one-year anniversary. After a time of songs, prayers, and reflections at the Chapel, the congregation processed into the construction corridor to encircle the cross and straw bale labyrinth where Sister Mary Alan Wurth led a call and response. The chant declared solidarity with the forests, the rivers, the ecosystem, and with pipeline resistance movements around the country—from Camp White Pine in Pennsylvania, to Camp Turtle Island on the White Earth Chippewa (Anishinaabe) Reservation in Minnesota, to the Standing Rock Sioux (Lakota and Dakota) Reservation in North and South Dakota. The Sisters closed the ceremony by leading congregants in a ritual scattering of wildflower seeds, symbolizing their hope that new life would spring from that sacred site of resistance despite the deadly fossil fuel pipeline being planted in their field.

In her book *For the Wild*, Sarah M. Pike (2017) identifies two kinds of rituals that are routinely found among eco-activist communities: rituals of conversion that initiate individuals into the realm of environmental activism, and subsequent rituals of protest enacted to defend the natural world (2017: 16). For the Sisters, their conversion was understood primarily in the context of the Catholic theological tradition. Pope Francis himself called for 'ecological conversion' in his 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si'* (§217). For many others in the movement, however, conversion to environmental activism was understood in less overtly theological terms, particularly for those who identified as having no religious affiliation. Even so, I would argue that for many of these individuals their experience of ecological conversion and subsequent participation in eco-activism was no less religious than the experience of the Sisters.

I offer this claim with three observations in mind. First, the language of the Lancaster County pipeline resistance movement was awash in religious rhetoric, among secular and religious participants alike. Almost without exception, members of the movement described their turn to activism in familiar religious language: it was a sacred calling, a sacred duty, the most important thing in their lives, that which gave them meaning, their highest priority. As a consequence, high-stakes protests, including actions that carried a high probability of arrest and potential jail time, were embarked upon with a kind of joyful eagerness that struck many outside observers as incongruous for a group of local residents who had, for the most part, never taken part in acts of civil disobedience before this pipeline fight.

Second, the movement's protests were consistently performed in a manner akin to religious devotion. All of the mass actions conducted at the Chapel—including those that blockaded heavy equipment, confronted pipeline security personnel, and defied police orders—were carried out by individuals holding hands and singing spiritual songs, with eyes closed and faces turned upward as if in prayer. Their highly choreographed direct actions essentially functioned as religious ceremonies of rapturous disruption. This may explain why so many of the participants in the Chapel actions balked at being called 'protesters' or 'activists', insisting instead that they were simply fulfilling a sacred obligation. Their experience of protest as religious ritual, rather than political action, is consistent with a growing body of testimony from social justice movements across the United States, including #NoDAPL and BLM.[12]

Third, the Adorers-LAP partnership cultivated a powerful sense of communal belonging among participants that produced striking parallels to a tightly knit religious community. During my years serving as LAP's liaison with the Sisters, I heard many members liken their experience in the movement to 'finding their true family'. The group frequently gathered to celebrate the birth of babies, mourn deaths, and celebrate birthdays of its members. Participation in the work proved personally transformative for many. Others found a sense of belonging and shared purpose that so exceeded the connections they had previously experienced within faith congregations that they no longer felt compelled to attend traditional religious services. The Sisters, likewise, came to regard the movement as a kind of extra-ecclesial religious family. Noting the lack of support they felt from their own church, Sister Sara Dwyer described the 'sense of community' that developed around the actions, regardless of religious 'labels or stuff like that', until the movement, for many, 'now became your faith home' (Brought et al. 2021).

12. See, for example, Oyster 2019, Zaitchik 2017, and Farrag 2018.

Then Jesus Asked, 'What Is Written in the Law and How Do You Read It?'

While these acts of ritual resistance were taking place in the cornfield, the Sisters continued waging their legal battle in the courtroom. After a US District Court dismissed their RFRA claim citing lack of subject matter jurisdiction, the Adorers took their case to the US Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit in Philadelphia. While the environmental impacts of increased fossil fuel consumption were at the heart of the Sisters' RFRA appeal, they were not the only religiously motivated argument presented in the filing. The Adorers also drew attention to the ways that climate change is closely linked to economic inequality, another core religious concern of the Sisters. Their filing argued that 'the earth and its inhabitants, particularly the poor, are under serious threat due to global warming and climate change caused by the trapping of greenhouse gases created by the use of fossil fuels', adding pointedly: 'The poor and most vulnerable will experience the greatest harm' (*Adorers v. FERC* 2017b: 32).

According to Sister Sara Dwyer, many of the Adorers experienced a turning point around climate justice in the 1990s while studying the work of Fr. Thomas Berry, among others.[13] They began to see care of creation as an integral component of broader social justice concerns. 'We began understanding the significance of humans and earth forming one sacred community', she says. 'Most of the Adorers had connections to the earth either by being from farm families or serving in farm communities'. She situates the Order's staunch defense of the natural world squarely within a Catholic pro-life ethos, broadly understood. 'We began to see that our ASC charism for life—and in particular, here in the US, our "Land Ethic"—was a moral and religious stance expanding and deepening our pro-life values', Dwyer said. 'We are one with the Earth, one body of Christ, mutually and intimately interrelated'. For this reason, she expresses frustration for those Catholics whose pro-life convictions are reserved exclusively for unborn babies, while having no interest in 'education, job training, housing or other issues that foster life for a mother and child' *after* birth, let alone the natural environment on which

13. Thomas Berry (d. 2009) was a Passionist priest and renowned scholar in the history of religion, evolutionary cosmology, and religion and ecology. He often referred to himself as a geologian. In her book *Green Sisters*, Sarah McFarland Taylor explores the critical role that Berry played in the ecological turn of so many US Catholic women religious since the 1990s (2007: 5-8). For an excellent recent study of Berry's life and work, see Tucker, Grim, and Angyal 2019.

all life depends. 'We Adorers realized that without clean air, clean water, and good soil, there is no life—not for humans or creation!'[14]

Despite the Adorers' impassioned appeal for judicial relief, the Third Circuit sided with Transco and the federal government in concluding that the provisions of the Natural Gas Act (NGA) supersede protections offered by RFRA. The precedent-setting opinion contends that the Sisters effectively forfeited their right to religious freedom protections 'because they failed to engage with the NGA's [Natural Gas Act's] procedural regime'. This proved a bitter irony for the Sisters, who had intentionally avoided participation in FERC and Transco's public hearings out of concern that their involvement would give the false impression of cooperation with the pipeline builder. Nevertheless, the Court concluded that it was 'without jurisdiction to hear the Adorers' claims' (*Adorers v. FERC* 2018a: 23). For this reason, the three-judge panel did not even consider the Sisters' religious rights argument against the pipeline. Instead, their RFRA claim was dismissed, with startling brevity, in the final footnote of the Court's opinion (23).

The Adorers responded to the ruling with a scathing press statement:

> While historically, the federal courts have been the stalwart protectors and defenders of religious freedoms in our country, today's panel sided with the interests of the powerful gas and oil industry over the religious freedoms of the Adorers.… [T]he Adorers believe that their faith and religious beliefs will ultimately prevail. At issue is nothing less than the future of our sacred earth. (Adorers 2018)

Soon after the Third Circuit's ruling, attorneys for the Sisters advised FERC and Transco that they would be filing a petition before the US Supreme Court to reconsider their RFRA claim (Yoder 2018). Despite knowledge of these ongoing legal proceedings—or, perhaps, because of them—Transco employees entered the Sisters' property on the morning of 1 October 2018 to topple their cross and dismantle their prayer labyrinth.

Three weeks later, the Adorers filed their promised petition before the US Supreme Court. The *writ of certiorari* filing argued that 'the Third Circuit erroneously decided a legal question that has not been, but should be, settled by this Court. The decision incorrectly disregarded a clear conflict between RFRA and the NGA [Natural Gas Act], which must be resolved in favor of RFRA' (*Adorers v. FERC* 2018b: 16). As such, the filing contended that the District Court should be forced to reconsider the Sisters' case and address the merits of the Order's religious freedom argument rather than preemptively dismissing it on procedural grounds.

14. Sara Dwyer 2020. Personal correspondence with the author (23 June).

Sister Janet McCann prepared a statement that was read from the steps of the Supreme Court building as they filed their petition. It concluded: 'We invoke the words of Jesus and ask, "What is written in the law and how do you read it?"' (McCann 2018, citing Luke 10:25-28).

To the Sisters' disappointment, in February 2019, the court denied the Adorers' petition, allowing the Third Circuit's dismissal of their case to stand. The Order's attempt to halt construction of the Transco pipeline through a religious freedom challenge was never even considered in a court of law. This unwillingness to hear the Sisters' RFRA complaint reinforces a disturbing trend emerging in US federal courts. Whether a party in a suit is granted religious liberty protections appears to depend a great deal on whose faith, and which religious convictions, are being threatened. Such unequal application is the subject of a 2019 report by the Law, Rights, and Religion Project of Columbia Law School titled *Whose Faith Matters? The Fight for Religious Liberty Beyond the Christian Right.* The study examines how:

> …advocates, legislators, courts, and journalists have contributed to a climate in which only the religious liberty claims of conservative people of faith 'count' as religious, while the claims and rights of progressive people of faith are dismissed or ignored as 'merely' political in nature. (Platt et al. 2019: 6)

The Adorers' faith-based environmental advocacy is cited in that report as an example of this very trend (51-53).

A Church Divided: Activist Women, Obstructionist Men

While engaged in a predictably uphill battle against the fossil fuel industry and the courts, the Sisters found themselves facing additional opposition from a source much closer to home: the hierarchy of the Catholic Church. Despite the highly visible and openly religious nature of their campaign, the response of the Church's male-only leadership ranged from silence to disdain. Tellingly, neither the Diocese of Harrisburg nor any of the ninety parishes within its jurisdiction publicly supported the Adorers' religious defense of their land. The few who did raise their voices tended to express annoyance at the women for daring to speak up, rather than at the industry for violating the Order's religious convictions. One Sister, who has spent more than a half-century in vowed religious service to the Catholic Church, told me how the priest of a large local parish personally scolded her in church one day for her activism, snapping: 'You shouldn't be involved in these pipeline demonstrations!'[15] About that same time, I broached the subject of the Chapel with a Catholic priest I met at a local pizza shop. He simply rolled his eyes and suggested that the Sisters should stick to religion.

The total lack of support from Bishop Ronald Gainer of the Harrisburg Diocese, home of the Cornfield Chapel, has been particularly conspicuous. Through two years of well-publicized vigils, hymn sings, and interreligious services at the Chapel located just thirty-five miles from the Cathedral, the bishop chose not to attend a single event at the site. Nor has he expressed any public support for the Sisters' internationally recognized work on behalf of the environment. Despite attracting large crowds and widespread media coverage between 2017 and 2019, the Chapel was never mentioned in *The Catholic Witness*, the bi-weekly diocesan newsletter. This was a remarkable omission considering that the editors routinely found space to promote a steady stream of arguably less momentous events: parish flea markets, golf outings, and chicken barbecues. At times, the newsletter's silence on the Sisters' work bordered on the absurd. The edition released during the same week as the Chapel's nationally publicized dedication service contained a lengthy, impassioned appeal for Catholics everywhere to boldly defend religious liberties (Zygmont 2017: 11). Despite the fact that a community of Catholic Sisters within the diocese was, at that very moment, waging a religious freedom battle in federal court, *The Witness* made no mention of the Adorers' struggle.

In July 2018, I contacted Bishop Gainer's office for comment on the Adorers' environmental efforts. At that time, the Sisters' religious freedom lawsuit was in full swing. A ruling from the US Third Circuit Court of Appeals was expected within days. The Chapel was continuing to attract a high level of media attention, in addition to the coverage it had already received from *The Washington Post* (Zauzmer 2017), CNN (Watts and Levin 2017), and the BBC (Crawley 2017). The Adorers–LAP partnership had also been featured in high-profile documentaries by CBS National News (Kineke 2017) and *The Guardian* (Phillips et al. 2018), alongside independent film productions like *Half-Mile, Upwind, On Foot* (McDermott 2019). The decision to sit on such an inspiring story unfolding in their own diocese was particularly baffling to me at the time, considering that the Pennsylvania Attorney General's grand jury investigation into clergy sexual abuse was preparing to release its damning report later that summer, a report that would include allegations against 45 priests within the Harrisburg diocese (Shapiro 2018: 149-

15. Unnamed 2020. Personal conversation with the author. Columbia, PA (27 January).

206). In response to my queries, a clearly agitated diocesan spokesperson curtly informed me that the bishop had never visited the Chapel because the Adorers had never invited him. I later confirmed that the Adorers had, in fact, extended a personal invitation to the bishop ahead of the Chapel's dedication service more than a year earlier.[16]

The Catholic hierarchy's dismissal of the Sisters' activism extended all the way to Rome, where the Adorers have been recognized as a pontifical institute since 1878. In the summer of 2018, the Vatican hosted an international conference to commemorate the third anniversary of the encyclical *Laudato Si'*. During the conference, the Sisters hand-delivered a written request to Pope Francis seeking a statement of support for the Adorers–LAP partnership ahead of the Chapel's one-year anniversary (McCann and Clatterbuck 2018). The Adorers' request was unexpectedly buoyed by the comments of world-renowned environmentalist Bill McKibben, who was among the conference's plenary speakers the following day. While reviewing strategies for mass mobilization to advance climate justice, McKibben highlighted the Adorers' Chapel as a model of non-violent resistance in the spirit of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (McKibben 2018). The crowd erupted in applause. Vatican officials were less enthusiastic. After six months without a reply, the Adorers finally received a brief letter from the Vatican's Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development instructing them to 'first seek the support of the US Catholic Bishops Conference' after which time the Dicastery would 'discern about whether and what to add' (Turkson 2018).

As it turned out, the US Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) was equally reluctant to support the Sisters. When the Adorers filed their petition for *writ of certiorari* before the Supreme Court later that year, they invited the USCCB to prepare an *amicus curiae* brief supporting their cause. Representatives of the Conference declined to get involved. One constitutional lawyer with extensive experience in religious liberty cases on behalf of the US bishops, and who served in the Trump administration's State Department, replied to the Sisters' request for legal support by writing: 'I cannot think of a more wasteful use of legal time and talent'.[17] John Whitehead, constitutional attorney and founder of the influential Rutherford Institute, held a very different opinion of the Adorers' petition, saying: 'These nuns have every right to tell the

16. I spent six months requesting an interview with Bishop Gainer for this article. Despite numerous assurances from diocesan staff that an interview would be arranged, in the end I received the following email from his secretary: 'Bishop Gainer must decline an interview'. No further explanation was offered.

17. Personal email correspondence with the author (17 October 2018).

government and its corporate partners to stay off the convent's land and respect the nuns' right to exercise their religious beliefs about the sacredness of God's creation' (Rutherford Institute 2018). The *amicus* brief that the Rutherford Institute filed on behalf of the Adorers described the lower court's dismissal of the Sisters' RFRA claim as having potentially 'dire effects on the ability of the [Adorers] and countless other persons of faith to live and act according to their religious beliefs' (*Adorers v. FERC* 2018c).

The US bishops' refusal to advance the Adorers' RFRA case is telling given that the USCCB has filed 27 *amicus curiae* briefs since 2000 that deal directly with religious liberty protections. They filed four such briefs in 2019 alone. However, a closer look suggests that the US bishops do not defend all Catholic teachings with equal zeal. For example, the Church's commitment to protecting religiously motivated infringements on LGBTQ rights (e.g *Masterpiece Cakeshop v. Colorado Civil Rights Commission* 2017) and faith-based restrictions on women's access to federally mandated reproductive health care (e.g. *Sabelius v. Hobby Lobby* 2014) account for more than half the religious freedom *amicus curiae* briefs filed by the USCCB over the past 20 years. The US bishops have not filed a single brief pertaining to religious freedom protections related to environmental justice.[18]

During the interviews I conducted with the Sisters, most expressed very little surprise at the hierarchy's failure to support them. Sara Dwyer situates the hierarchy's response squarely within a long history of gender inequality within the Catholic Church:

> As women in a patriarchal church, we don't have the same kind of voice or access to decision making that the men do…. At a basic kind of level, we [women religious] are equal to the lay people; we're not clerics. So, to be invited to work with a community of lay people like Lancaster Against Pipelines, it didn't surprise me at an organizational level that nobody [within the hierarchy] stood forward. Because, unless the power man says 'yes you can do this' they're not going to be able to make an independent decision. Whereas, as women religious, we've struggled with that issue, in lots of cases, all of our religious history. (Brought et al. 2021)

Dwyer joins her community in feeling compelled to act on their charism despite the silence or pushback they experience from male church leadership. She explained to me her belief that 'women are more resilient, and…more willing to risk, because we don't have the sense of

18. To access a listing of *amicus curiae* briefs filed by the USCCB office of the General Counsel in recent years, see http://www.usccb.org/about/general-counsel/amicus-briefs/index.cfm.

power loss that a guy would feel if he steps across a line. So, if they don't come along, no problem. We're going to do it anyway'. In the end, this is why she felt so confident working with Lancaster Against Pipelines.

Although not surprised, Sister Helene Trueitt—who joined the Adorers 64 years ago, marched for Civil Rights in the 1950s and 60s, and played an active role in the pipeline resistance—expressed grave disappointment for the failure of church leaders to support the Sisters' work for environmental justice. She told me:

> I felt very bad that our bishop and all the priests in this diocese were not strong enough to say, 'I believe in this; I'm going to support those women'. But they did not. They have not. And that's such a [thumbs down hand sign] for me, being a Roman Catholic. (Forgotch et al. 2021)

For all those who admonish women religious to quit lives of activism and stick to prayer, Sister Anne Irose, who lives at the Adorers' Ruma Center in southern Illinois, has a ready response: 'The gospel sends us out. Read the word of God! My gosh, it's like, "Go forth! Go tell them! Go and tell the world!"'. She points to Mary Magdalene, who didn't wait for others to take the lead, but proclaimed of herself that 'she would be the disciple, she would be the messenger'. 'We're all called to be Mary Magdalenes', she said, and added with a wry nod to the Catholic hierarchy: 'Overlooked, of course. Overlooked. We know where we stand' (Irose 2021).

Conclusion

There are signs all across the United States that faith-based environmental activism is on the rise. There is also evidence that the trend is having a real impact on the fossil fuel industry. In July 2020, Dominion Energy and Duke Energy abruptly announced cancellation of their $8-billion Atlantic Coast Pipeline after six years of persistent grassroots opposition. That opposition was led, in part, by an unlikely alliance between environmentally conscious Hindu yogis at the Satchidananda Ashram and Reverend Paul Wilson, the pastor of an African American Baptist congregation in rural Buckingham County, Virginia (Schneider 2018). Together, they produced some of the most visible and vocal opposition to the project through public rituals of resistance, community education, regulatory pushback, and legal challenges.[19]

19. For more on the role of religion in the Atlantic Coast Pipeline fight, see Vogelsong 2020.

Back in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, the Adorers of the Blood of Christ did not succeed in stopping the pipeline project threatening their community. Even so, their campaign can hardly be called a failure. The ecumenical, interfaith, and secular partnerships they forged with local community members offer a promising model for future grassroots alliances working for environmental justice. Their daring, meticulously orchestrated, and joyfully executed mass actions of liturgical resistance serve as a blueprint for ritual acts of civil disobedience across a wide range of protest settings. Their legal challenges have succeeded in highlighting important possibilities, as well as current obstacles, attending religious freedom protections for faith-based environmental activism. And their message of spirited defiance in the face of multi-billion-dollar fossil fuel companies captured a remarkable level of media attention on the coattails of Standing Rock's extraordinary success at framing pipeline resistance as both a moral and spiritual battle.

The Adorers–LAP partnership has also exposed how regulatory agencies and courts routinely privilege corporate profits over local communities, the natural world, and religious rights. Given the extent to which oil and gas industry interests are disproportionately wed to conservative politics in the United States, the prominence of the Sisters' grassroots campaign against a fracked-gas pipeline in rural, deep-red Lancaster County may prove a significant indicator of shifting public opinion on the moral necessity of climate action. Furthermore, the Adorers' pipeline fight offers poignant lessons on the role of gender in faith-based eco-justice work in the United States today. Women have long been at the forefront of grassroots environmental activism around the world. The Adorers' campaign is one more example of that reality. In addition to highlighting the tone and tactics being used by women leaders in eco-activist movements, the Sisters' work also highlights the kind of male-led resistance that environmental advocates are facing in virtually every arena of the fight. This is certainly a dynamic that deserves further scholarly attention.

Perhaps the best evidence that the Adorers–LAP partnership posed a legitimate threat to the fossil fuel industry is the response it provoked from Pennsylvania's heavily pro-gas industry legislature. Just as the movement's direct action campaign was heating up, Lancaster County's state senator Scott Martin, whose district is home to both LAP and the Chapel of Resistance, proposed two separate bills designed to suppress mass protests, with a clear focus on curbing grassroots pipeline resistance. The first was proposed one month after hundreds of local residents dedicated the Adorers' Chapel directly in the path of Transco's pipeline. The bill would have forced protesters to reimburse police response costs incurred at demonstrations where even a single participant was convicted of a crime, however minor. This would apply even to misdemeanor trespass charges arising from acts of civil disobedience. In a clear attempt to discourage faith-based resistance like that taking place in his own district, the bill's language specifically identified 'the holding of vigils or religious services' among the kinds of demonstrations being targeted (see SB 323, 2019).

The second anti-protest bill sponsored by Martin (SB 887, 2019) sought to designate natural gas pipelines as 'critical infrastructure' and to reclassify even peaceful pipeline protests as felonies.[20] Under this measure, merely walking onto a posted pipeline site without permission would have constituted a third-degree felony, punishable by up to a year in prison and a minimum fine of $5,000. Entering a pipeline infrastructure site with the intent 'to impede or hinder operations'—which is often the goal of peaceful demonstrators resisting new pipeline construction—would have been classified as a first-degree felony punishable by up to two years in prison and a minimum fine of $10,000. In this way, the bill put peaceful, religiously motivated pipeline protests on par with voluntary manslaughter and rape. Both bills have since expired.[21]

Meanwhile, the Sisters' legal battle over religious freedom protections continues to be waged in federal court. In November 2020, the Adorers filed a fresh lawsuit against Transco in the District Court of the Eastern District of Pennsylvania seeking damages for the company's willful violation of their religious convictions (*Adorers v. Transco* 2020). The claim argues that Transco's seizure of the Sisters' land to install the fracked gas pipeline 'caused a substantial burden to the religious exercise of the Adorers in violation of RFRA by forcing them to use their own land, which they hold in sacred trust as God's creation, to facilitate the extrac-

20. The bill is modeled on legislation drafted by the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) to protect so-called 'critical infrastructure', a term broadly defined in the bills to safeguard all sites related to the extraction, transmission, and production of oil and natural gas. In the summer of 2019, a version of ALEC's critical infrastructure bill was introduced in the US Congress, signaling efforts by industry advocates to chill oil and gas protest on a national level. The bill, known as the Protecting Our Infrastructure of Pipelines and Enhancing Safety (PIPES) Act of 2019, would make peaceful, religiously motivated disruption of pipeline construction—like the prayerful acts of ritual resistance performed at the Adorers' Chapel—punishable by up to 20 years in prison (Brown 2019).

21. In the wake of the Standing Rock resistance of 2016–2017, dozens of state legislatures introduced a range of bills designed to chill mass protest, many explicitly designed to protect the interests of the fossil fuel industry. For more information, see Epstein and Mazzei 2021.

tion, transportation and use of fossil fuels that will accelerate global warming and cause great harm to the Earth' (§111). In October 2021, their suit was dismissed at Transco's request (*Adorers v. Transco* 2021).

The Adorers have already announced their intention to file an appeal in the US Third Circuit Court of Appeals. If they ultimately win their case, the precedent-setting victory could have enormous implications for the future ability of religious communities to defend the natural world from corporate exploitation as a matter of religious conviction. Indigenous-led frontline movements to defend water and treaty rights, movements which are consistently grounded in ceremony and prayer, could be among the primary beneficiaries of such a decision, bringing the Adorers' initial hope to 'stand with Standing Rock' full circle. If this happens, it may well prove to be the most significant consequence of these Sisters' remarkable campaign for environmental justice, a campaign that started at a humble outdoor chapel in the middle of a Pennsylvania cornfield.

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