

How Standing Rock became a spiritual pilgrimage for activists

Eileen Markey
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In December 2016, when thousands of Native Americans, environmental activists and their supporters were camped on the high plains of North Dakota hoping to stymie an oil pipeline mapped beneath the drinking water source of the Standing Rock Sioux reservation, Chief Arvol Looking Horse, a Lakota spiritual leader, addressed a massive interfaith prayer service. People from Native American nations across the United States had traveled to camp at Standing Rock and on nearby land, the most comprehensive gathering of native people since before the Indian wars of the 1870s. Indigenous people from Hawaii, Norway, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Mexico and Honduras arrived at the camps and hoisted their flags beside those of 300 American tribes.

Brayton Shanley, a Catholic peace and environmental activist who lives in an intentional community in rural Massachusetts, has a shock of white hair and the robust energy of someone who spends a great deal of time outdoors. At the end of November, he drove to North Dakota in a truck filled with straw bales, offered as insulation on the windswept, winter prairie. Joe Fortier, S.J., a former entomology professor at St. Louis University, who for the past 15 years has lived and ministered on the Colville Indian Reservation in Washington State, arrived the day before, changing out of his usual clothes and into a clerical collar, so people would know a Catholic priest was supporting the protest. Father Fortier, a self-effacing man whose gentleness belies the depth of his convictions, felt compelled to align himself with the people gathered at Standing Rock.

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The camps had become a place to take a stand for the right to clean water and against its privatization, contamination and degradation. But they were also a site of pilgrimage, a place of profound prayer where Lakota women walked to the Cannonball River each morning to enact a water ceremony and where chants in the Lakota language, called to the rhythm of round drums, rose from the camp at dawn and Lakota elders tended a sacred fire all day and night. “Water is life,” they said. “Defend the sacred.”

On this biting cold December day, when fingers went numb if exposed to the air for more than a few minutes, more than 1,000 people gathered for a three-hour prayer service in which a rabbi, a Buddhist monk, various Protestant clergy and Father Fortier each offered prayers before the fire that Lakota elders had been tending throughout the protest. They spoke of their faiths’ common commitment to caring for the earth and their common belief in the sacredness of the physical world. Looking Horse spoke of the threat to clean water at Standing Rock as only one of millions of attacks on the integrity of the earth’s elements. Fighting back would take a particular kind of power, he said. “We will be victorious through tireless, prayer-filled and fearless nonviolent struggle. Standing Rock is everywhere.”

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A few months into the Trump administration, oil is flowing through the pipeline and the historic encampment has been dispersed. The oil industry won. But Looking Horse may yet have been correct. The explicitly religious and imagination-grabbing protest at Standing Rock has inspired similar encampments and other forms of protest in defense of clean water across the country. From Pennsylvania to Texas, Florida to New Jersey and in South Dakota, Ohio, Massachusetts and Canada, newly emboldened “water protectors” have taken to the land in hopes of disrupting oil and natural gas pipelines they consider dangerous. For many of these protectors, defending access to clean water is a project rich in religious and spiritual meaning. They draw inspiration from “Laudato Si” as well as indigenous religious practice.

The tribal leadership of the Lakota Sioux is pursuing lawsuits against Energy Transfer Partners, the Texas-based company behind the Dakota Access pipeline. Some of the Lakota and other indigenous people who were part of the Standing Rock protests have reconvened at a prayer camp on the Cheyenne River Reservation downriver in South Dakota.

A coordinated campaign

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On May 9, the Treaty Alliance Against Tar Sands Expansion, a coalition of 121 indigenous groups from the United States and Canada, launched a coordinated divestment campaign against the banks funding the Dakota Access pipeline and crude oil pipelines snaking from Canada to Mexico. Religious congregations organized under the Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility are engaged in shareholder activism, urging major banks to withdraw from financing the Dakota Access pipeline and demanding that corporations from Coca-Cola to Campbell Soup

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with large agribusiness companies that trade on the New York Stock Exchange to convince them to adopt sustainable water management practices and join the United Nations' [CEOWater Mandate](#), an initiative to engage businesses in water stewardship and sustainable development goals.

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Cities, counties, public employee pension funds and individuals have withdrawn \$5 billion from companies invested in the Dakota Access pipeline in an echo of the the divestment movement against South African apartheid in the 1980s. Major investment banks in Norway, the Netherlands and France have sold their shares of loans to Energy Transfer Partners. The Jesuits, women religious, Catholic Workers and others have joined or deepened their involvement in water protection efforts. They draw links between the environmental battles of indigenous people in the United States and those elsewhere—notably in Honduras and in the Amazon region, where several environmentalists have been killed by corporate security forces and assassins linked to the national military forces.

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In Conestoga, Pa., a farm field along the route of a natural gas pipeline has been transformed into a quiet protest site. On weekends, area residents gather to sing, pray and make art. They have been pushing for three years for their municipal governments to ban the proposed pipeline, citing instances of natural gas explosions and tainted drinking water. They attempted legal maneuvers to escape eminent domain to no avail, explained Mark Clatterbuck, a Conestoga resident and professor of religion at Montclair State University. He and his wife, Melinda, a Mennonite pastor, have been central actors in the pipeline opposition. Out of options, in February, Lancaster Against Pipelines, an association of local citizens, launched the Lancaster Stand in this placid corner of the county famous for its gently undulating farmland and its Amish community. “If we’re not careful we could lose the countryside and then what would we have? That’s what’s at risk,” said Tim Spiese, the Lancaster Against Pipelines board president, as he stood in the unplanted corn field before a large whitewashed barn with the words “Welcome to the Stand” painted in block letters on its side.

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On a Saturday in early April, two dozen people, most in their 50s and 60s, are gathered inside a large army tent. Seated on low benches made from cement blocks and long 2-by-8 boards, they are shaking painted maracas and beating rhythm sticks as two women with guitars lead the group: *We are here standing strong in a ripe old place/ Solid as a tree/ silent as a rock/ We are here in a ripe old place.* The back wall of the tent is rolled up, open to the breeze, framing the Lancaster County hills in spring: budding trees and green fields. More than 300 people have completed training in nonviolent protest at the camp. Committees meet to plan civil disobedience, to sort food donations and devise a rainwater collection system.

In May, Regina Braveheart, a Lakota woman who survived the massacre at Wounded Knee in 1973 and was part of the prayer at Standing Rock, visited the Lancaster Stand to urge the activists on and share stories. For Kathleen Meade, a case manager in a brain trauma rehabilitation center, who like many of her neighbors relies on well

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“It’s just amazing how the existing structure is set up for the corporations, not the people.... We realize that we’re up a creek and if we don’t do something soon, we’re out of luck.”



Activists in Lancaster, Pa.

Mr. Clatterbuck and other Lancaster people visited the camps at Standing Rock in the fall and were struck by the prayerful attitude, the deeply spiritual stance of the Lakota leaders. They noticed how it affected other activists. “The language that’s used is the language of the sacred,” said Mr. Clatterbuck, who edited a volume on Native American and Christian interaction this year called *Crow Jesus: Personal Stories of Native Religious Belonging*, published by University of Oklahoma Press. “All of these kinds of religious streams are feeding in together. The way religious language is fueling the resistance right now, religion becomes relevant again.”

So many people in conservative and bucolic Lancaster County, hardly a hotbed of protest, have been drawn to the Stand because it represents something deeper than the defense of property values or landowner rights (important as those might be), Mr. Clatterbuck said. Instead, they see a moral imperative to protect the place they

call home, to care for the their corner of creation.

Pope Francis instructed the same embrace of the integrity of creation in “Laudato Si’,” writing that access to clean drinking water is a fundamental human right and that humans need to live in concert with the earth.

Saving a fragile system

Cherri Foytlin is not Catholic, but she takes Pope Francis’ words to heart. “I couldn’t understand how people can pray to God, praising his creation, and then not do everything they can to care for it. It’s like saying Picasso is a great artist and then ripping up his paintings,” she said. The oil that moves through the Dakota Access pipeline will eventually finish its journey in Louisiana, where Ms. Foytlin lives. A former newspaper writer, she has been working for environmental justice in the Louisiana wetlands since BP’s Deepwater Horizon oil spill in 2010. While reporting on the spill, she saw that many bayou crawfishermen, who have made their living in the swamps of Louisiana since their ancestors were expelled from French Acadia, had their livelihoods destroyed, and she saw how the oil company lied about and covered up the extent of the damage. The miasmic grandeur of the sleepy bayou, with its ancient cypress trees, which began growing when Christ walked beside the Jordan, and its drooping moss, in whose humid tangle migrating birds seek rest, were under grave threat, she realized.

“These systems are quite fragile, really. I think how quickly we can lose that,” she said. Pipelines have criss-crossed the bayou country for a generation, ferrying oil and natural gas to refineries on the coast, a significant component of Louisiana’s economy. But Ms. Foytlin believes this latest one, the Bayou Bridge Pipeline, is too dangerous. And it only anticipates 12 permanent jobs. The proposed pipeline channels through bayous already damaged by previous infrastructure, which has chewed away at the swampland and degraded its ability to absorb storms. The loss of Louisiana wetlands was one of the reasons Hurricane Katrina and more recent flooding elsewhere in the state have been so devastating. The company constructing the Bayou Bridge Pipeline was fined in early May by the Federal

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With Bold Louisiana, a community organizing group she directs, and a network of environmental, homeowner, crawfishermen and indigenous groups, Ms. Foytlin is trying to inform Louisianans of the threat to their water and their wetlands. The groups are leafleting at New Orleans Jazzfest and protesting at the state capital. They are sending postcards to their elected officials and raising money through bake sales. Ms. Foytlin, who is a member of the Cherokee Nation and originally from Oklahoma, visited Standing Rock to show her support and be part of the historic gathering of indigenous people. More recently she traveled to the Two Rivers camp near Marfa, Tex., where protesters were trying to stop a pipeline that would flow under the Rio Grande, carrying U.S. natural gas for export. That camp was broken up in April and that arm of the pipeline, another Energy Transfer Partners project, was completed.



Lancaster Against Pipelines, an association of local citizens, launched the Lancaster Stand to support clean water.

“I wanted to let them know that what they were doing was important,” Ms. Foytlin said, adding that the power of the Standing Rock prayer camps continues to reverberate. “People felt activated and connected spiritually in the water and the land,” she said. “Standing Rock continues. People are eager to put it to bed, but it’s not over. These little people are still together and that has power.” An amalgam of groups, Ms. Foytlin’s among them, plans to launch a protest camp deep in the bayous in late June, when they expect the state to give Energy Transfer Partners final approval permits for the pipeline. On rafts built from repurposed plastic bottles and water barrels, with art and music and a deep love for their unique southern Louisiana waterways, they’ll make a watery stand. The camp is called *L’eau Est La Vie*, or Water Is Life.

Our common home

On the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, people are still digesting the experience of Standing Rock—and carrying on the work, said Peter Klink, S.J., the vice president of mission and ministry and former president of the Jesuit Red Cloud Indian School on Pine Ridge. At the height of the protests, the girls basketball team at Red Cloud wore “Water Is Life” slogans on their jerseys. Lakota people from Pine Ridge joined the encampment and some took central roles in promoting the divestment campaign. “What we need to continue to nurture is: How are we going to care for our common home, Mother Earth? I’m not sure we can close our eyes to what we are doing on a daily basis,” Father Klink said. A consumerist, acquisitive culture is ultimately driving the environmental crisis, he believes. “If we don’t check that machine, that sense that what we have is never enough, that becomes the motor of destruction of our common home.”

During the Standing Rock encampment, the Jesuit Conference of Canada and the United States issued a statement in support of the Lakota people’s right to sovereignty and clean water. Tashina Rama, who is executive director of

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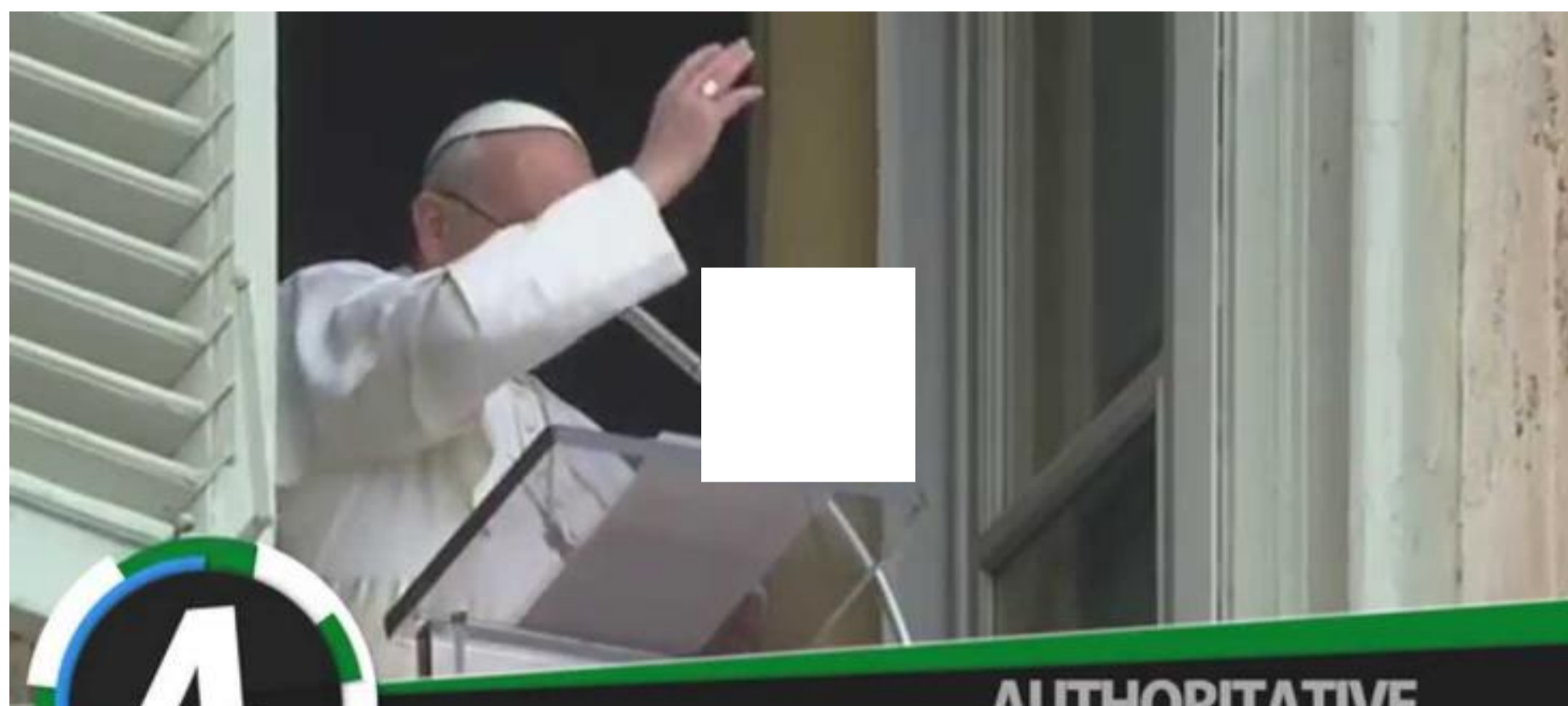
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the central need for access to clean water, invoking the sentiment found in “Laudato Si” that indigenous people must be consulted on projects that affect them, and she mourned the destruction of the Standing Rock camps, including one she stayed in with the female members of her family.

Ms. Rama underscored the value of water by invoking the Sun Dance, a Lakota ceremony that spans four days in June, when select members of the community dance all day in the blazing Badlands of South Dakota. “There is little relief with no clouds or breeze. Our lips are cracked and our mouths dry because whatever water we had in our bodies was gone by the second day of dancing,” she told the congressional staff. “Our ancestors prayed in this way and they passed it down to us; we are taught that through this sacrifice the Great Spirit will hear our prayers. For four sacred days we give ourselves to the Sun. Our bodies are dying and we know that with that first drink of water when the Sun Dance is over, that water is life. I was raised to pray in this way, and I find it to be a humbling way to connect with the Great Spirit, our Creator God and to give of myself so my children and my family can be healthy. We owe it to ourselves and our descendants to protect what remaining lands we have, the lands where our ancestors roamed and the sacred sites where they are buried so they can have these ceremonies to pass on to their children and so on.”

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Forming right relationships

The Canadian and U.S. Jesuits see a link between protecting water and the defense of human and cultural rights. “We see common environmental and human rights challenges from extractive industries facing indigenous people around the world,” explained Cecilia Calvo, the senior adviser on environmental justice to the Jesuit Conference. “And a common thread really is water.” Of particular concern is what Ms. Calvo terms the criminalization of environmental and human rights activists who stand up for their rights. In Honduras, 123 environmental activists,

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On March 17, Zebelio Kayap Jempekit, a member of the Awajun Wampi indigenous people of Peru, walked into the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights in Washington, D.C., carrying with him the pleas and alarm of thousands of Amazonian people. Part of a team representing a coalition of indigenous and church groups across nine Amazon countries, called Red Eclesial Panamazonia, Mr. Jempeki urged the commission to take action to preserve the rights of indigenous people to protect their ancestral lands and water. The delegation, which included Archbishop Pedro Ricardo Jimeno, S.J., of Huancayo, Peru, was hosted by the Jesuits, the Sisters of Mercy, the Maryknolls and other U.S. Catholic groups, and visited Georgetown University and Catholic University. Jempekit, speaking in Spanish and wearing a traditional headband of deep red and brilliant yellow flowers, told the commission that oil extraction had destroyed the drinking water and fishing in his home and spoke of a mining project that made water undrinkable and killed the fish in the river his people relied on. He has received death threats because of his work.

“We see that not only in our own backyard are people facing environmental degradation and struggling for access to clean water, but around the world this is multiplied,” said Ms. Calvo, who in early May attended the Pan-Amazonian Social Forum in Peru, which brought together people working on water and other environmental and social issues across the region. The threats to water “are a call to examine our own economy, our lifestyle and what path do we want to be on,” Ms. Calvo said. Those issues animate the Jesuit Conference’s work in the United States as well. In the past few months, they have signed on to letters urging the Trump administration not to weaken elements of the Clean Water Act that regulate surface mining rules, to commit to the Paris climate agreement and to continue the Green Climate Fund, which helps the developing countries most affected by climate change. “We recognize that water is a fundamental component of all life and that stewardship of water is part of our call to care for God’s creation,” they wrote in a letter opposing an executive order that directed the Environmental Protection Agency and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to withdraw from an aspect of the Clean Water Act which protects waterways and fish habitats.

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Religious work on water moves in many streams, from the Religious Organizations Along the River, a coalition of groups in New York’s Hudson Valley advocating against fracking and for Hudson River cleanup, to WaterSpirit, a retreat center on a bluff overlooking the Atlantic run by the Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace on the New Jersey shore. There, laypeople, Catholic and not, visit to deepen their connection to the most basic of elements, the water that flows through their bodies, washes the shore, bathes them in baptism and made possible the emergence of their earliest single-celled ancestors. WaterSpirit endeavors to link the spiritual aspect of water with the practical, corporeal concerns of caring for creation. The center has led group study workshops on “Laudato Si’” and brought high school students to the shore to pray and catalog the plastic debris they find on the beach. The message is a mystical one, with its feet planted in the sand: You are part of this water of life.

In Pennsylvania, the Adorers of the Blood of Christ, an order of sisters, have for several years been resisting the efforts of Williams Transco, a natural gas company that plans to drill through their land in West Hempfield Township in Lancaster County. In February, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission gave the company final approval to build on private land, including that of the Adorers. The sisters “vehemently denounce” the decision, said Sister Janet McCann, the U.S. regional councilor for the order. The pipeline would be a violation of the congregation’s land ethic. explained Sister Sara Dwver. peace and iustice coordinator for the community. The land

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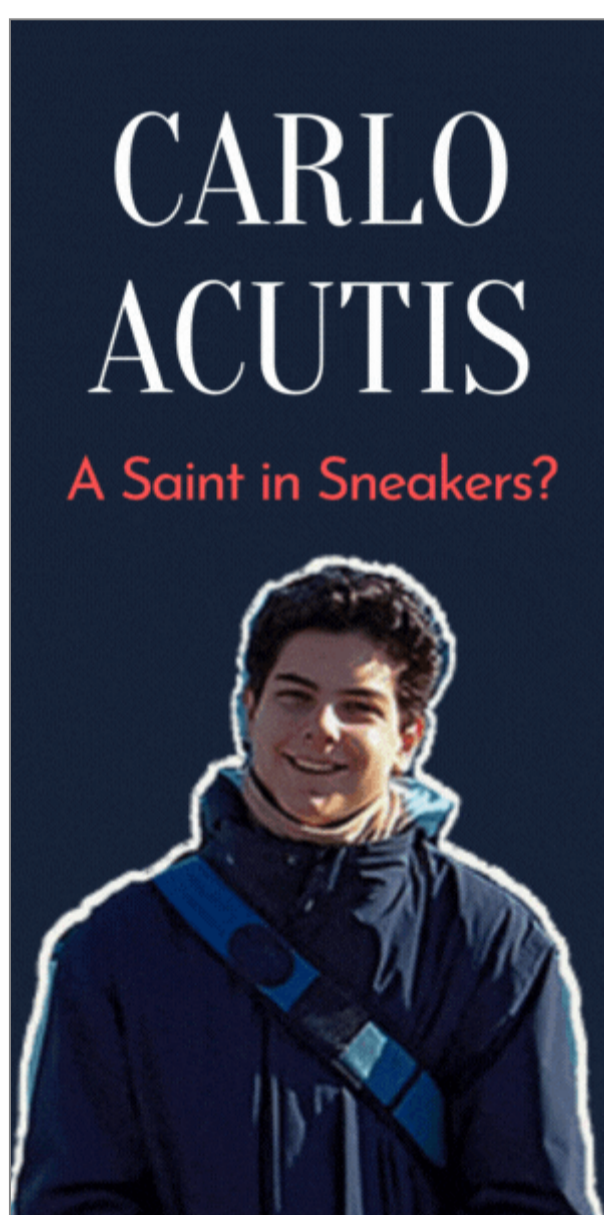


It is in fealty to that statement that the Adorers have decided to put their prayers where their feet stand. Their neighbors at Lancaster Against Pipelines, the people praying and building community in Conestoga, asked to erect an open-air chapel on the Adorers' field that the gas company covets. It will serve as a place of prayer for people of any faith, a physical mark linking spiritual and physical resistance to industry that threatens water and earth. The chapel will be dedicated at a ceremony July 9, attended by leadership of the Adorers, Lancaster Against Pipelines and supporters. It may not stand for long—the laws favor the energy company's right to take what land it wants—but for Sister Dwyer and others, "tireless, prayer-filled and fearless nonviolent struggle" is worth standing for.

Eileen Markey is an independent reporter and the author of *A Radical Faith: The Assassination of Sr. Maura* (Nation Books). She lives in the Bronx.



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