

The Moral Implications of Regional Sprawl: *The Cleveland Catholic Diocese's Church in the City Vision & Process*

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The famous Athenian statesman Pericles said: "*All things good on this earth flow into the city because of the city's greatness.*"

What a contrast such a view provides with what we so often hear, see and perceive about American cities. I believe it is a major sign of our times that such a venerable perspective can sound incongruous or even jarring to so many across our country. Our region, Northeast Ohio, home to nearly two and a half million people, is no exception to the national mindset so wrapped up in the pattern of development described as out-migration, or sprawl. Indeed several local and national studies point to our area as a prime example of the dramatic demographic and social shifts that have occurred in the United States over the past decades.

In November of 1993, I issued a statement which tried to analyze and address the challenge of sprawl in Northeast Ohio from my vantage point as Bishop of the Cleveland Catholic Diocese. What has come to be called "The Church in the City" vision challenged the almost one million Catholics who live in the eight counties of our diocese to recognize the fundamental interdependence in our lives as a church and as a metropolitan community.

The Church in the City vision is a call to ongoing conversion which acknowledges the years of out-migration from our central cities. Next year we celebrate our 150th year as a diocese. Over that time span I believe we have made remarkable contributions to the three central cities of our diocese and region. Catholic parishes, schools, social services and social action have enriched the Akron, Cleveland, Lorain/Elyria urban centers through the ministries of dedicated women and men. Those contributions must continue. But they are seriously affected by years of unbalanced investment.

Public policies and subsidies have aggravated urban problems by facilitating and encouraging the development of new, more distant suburbs. Many factors have fueled the complex phenomenon of out-migration. No doubt deep societal issues of color, class and culture have been and continue to be powerful influences. Surveys note the importance of fear of crime and concern about educational quality. For much of our national history moving up the socio-economic ladder has meant moving out. Nevertheless, careful study indicates that over the past few decades unbalanced public and private investment decisions have accelerated out-migration. Not too long ago some 900,000 people lived in Cleveland while approximately 450,000 lived in the suburban parts of the diocese. Now the numbers are virtually reversed. As population has changed, so too have the tax bases of our cities. At a time when there are growing concentrations of poverty in our urban cores, fiscal resources are strained, if not scarce. Recent research points to the spread of this pattern in our inner ring of suburbs.

Support for the maintenance and redevelopment of central cities, and now inner ring suburbs, has simply not been comparable to the underwriting of sprawl. Unbalanced investment promoted housing and economic growth in outlying areas to the detriment of older urban neighborhoods. That kind of unbalanced investment did not provide people with fair choices if they wanted to remain in more established neighborhoods. That pattern of unbalanced investment has brought us to an anomalous situation in Northeast Ohio – we basically have flat regional population growth yet we spread out over more and more land. We have sprawl without growth.

Does this well-established trend represent good stewardship of our valuable agricultural lands? Does it lead to a cleaner environment? Does it strengthen the social fabric of our communities? Does it make

cohesive, vibrant family life easier? Does it foster greater civic participation? Does it wisely utilize our fiscal resources? Does it increase our economic competitiveness? Does it further a healthy appreciation of multi-cultural diversity? Does it better ground our young people in a rooted, meaningful sense of identity marked by solid values? Does it help break down the isolation of people by race, income and culture? Does it help bridge the widening gaps that separate rich, poor and middle class? Does it advance social justice? I don't think so.

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residents has been growing the least are areas where the income of city residents has grown the least. Suburbs and cities are linked in a single economy. Employers will invest where negatives are fewer. The negatives that have resulted in our region from over forty years of building new suburbs while abandoning older cities have accumulated to where they are serious obstacles to economic growth. All of us are

paying a price for sprawl.

Our social and economic separation is problematic not only because of its personal and social destructiveness, but also because it is costly. Communities in the urban centers – including inner ring suburbs as well as the central city – struggle with out-migration. They face aging infrastructures, declining revenue bases and growing concentrations of people with reduced income. At the same time, previously rural communities struggle with rapid population growth, increasing demand for expensive services and infrastructures, and an often disruptive pace of social change.

Within our Catholic diocese, we have 237 parishes. But whether people belong to an urban, suburban, exurban or rural parish, we are all called to be one body with one mission. In the context of our faith, this call to unity is not an option. It is who we are as a Catholic Church. We are called to be a single faith community, respecting our diversity but united in solidarity with the whole human family. No matter where we live or who we are, we have gifts and talents to build upon and share with others. We also all have needs and challenges to face. We need each other to grow and develop into the fullness of who we can be as individuals, as families, as communities and as a people. That is all rather easy to say, but much harder to translate into reality.

One reason I issued *The Church in the City* statement was to try to motivate an attitudinal change that could help people take different steps in the personal, public and social arenas of their lives. As a pastor and teacher, I hoped it could be a lens to look through to see our church, our community, our region and ourselves in a new and fresh way. We are far more interdependent than our many civic or organizational boundaries would lead us to believe. Increasingly, we share one economy and one environment. Whether we live in city, suburb or country, we are one metropolitan society. Our fates are intertwined economically, socially and spiritually. Our geographic boundaries can be illusions that distract us from the real needs and the real capabilities of the region in which we live.

The challenge of stemming sprawl and redeveloping our urban centers is not simply a task for the people of Cleveland or Akron or Lorain. It is a challenge and task for the whole metropolitan region. It's foolish to think that we can have a thriving region and a continually declining urban core at the same time. We miss a crucial opportunity in carrying forth our responsibility to build a good and just society when we do not recognize this common responsibility. The wisdom, talents and resources of all the people of our cities, suburbs and rural areas are to be appreciated and shared in service to the whole of our regional community. Too often we isolate rather than share these resources. I believe that the isolation of the poor and vulnerable members of our community particularly wounds the whole community. We are all impoverished when society fails to incorporate into its political and economic policies measures to empower those left out of the mainstream. At the same time, no public policy can totally rebuild what is broken in our families and communities. We must rebuild the moral fiber of neighborhoods as we rebuild the economic and social fiber. That will take new partnerships as well as new policies.

For example, a growing body of scholarly literature shows that regions where the income of suburban

Creating those kinds of empowering partnerships and advocating more rational and just public policies are key components of the ongoing implementation of The Church in the City vision. The people of our diocese were asked to submit recommendations for an implementation plan through the first half of 1994. A task force was then formed to develop that plan. A broad consultative process took place through 1995 across the eight counties of the diocese. Parishes, schools, colleges, religious congregations, interfaith gatherings, civic and business groups came together in various formats to discuss The Church in the City vision and plan. Less than two months ago we announced the completed plan.

At the heart of the implementation plan is a deeper call to a change of heart that recognizes the reality of interdependence in all areas of our lives as residents of Northeast Ohio. As might be expected, some are not comfortable with that challenge. For some the image of our cities is based on flight and fear rather than solidarity and compassion. Some feel overwhelmed with the stresses and strains of their own lives. But we have also heard a multitude of voices from all around the diocese that give me great hope. Overall the responses indicate basic acceptance and support for our implementation plan as a guiding framework for what we can do as a Church over the next five to ten years. I believe that more people than ever are asking the right questions and are more willing than ever to reflect on our responsibilities as believers and as citizens. What does it mean to be a Church in our time? What does it mean to be an active citizen in Northeast Ohio? What does it mean to work for the common good?

Many people evinced an openness to exploring new kinds of partnerships. One of the major action priorities relates to developing parish-to-parish partnerships. I am especially pleased with some of the new, emerging models of urban-suburban parish partnerships. These involve relationships that reflect a true sense of mutuality, of respecting each other's gifts, of listening and learning from each other, no matter where people live or what their background is. We

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have established a new Church in the City grants program to assist parish and school partnerships of that type. People from very different realities have begun to gather together regularly. I am very encouraged by these steps because if we know each other, and especially if we are friends, a great deal is possible and can be accomplished. If we are strangers, little is possible.

Another major priority area involves ongoing education, prayer and leadership training that emphasizes the sense that "we are all in this together." We will give special attention to experiences that bring people together, bridge the gaps that separate us and transcend the racial and economic tensions that too often sharply divide us. We will also continue educational forums about The Church in the City vision with special attention to the complex, multi-faceted nature of regional sprawl. We hope to advance understanding about how we already are interdependent in Northeast Ohio, as well as help to create more common ground for unified, cooperative responses. Regions that are divided against themselves will languish and decline.

Redevelopment of our central cities is a third major priority area. Redevelopment means joining with a wide range of partners – neighborhood groups, business, labor, government – to create greater housing and job opportunities. It means acting as conveners, catalysts and anchors for community-based economic development initiatives. We cannot do such work alone. We are committed to collaboration. Our mission and work in the revitalization of our urban communities is paralleled in significant ways by the commitments of other faith traditions. Our common mission as people of faith and our mutual concern for those most at risk challenge us to cooperate rather than compete with each other. I welcome opportunities for interfaith dialogues and partnerships. Similarly, I hope that we can do much more to create a respectful and cooperative spirit between Catholic and public schools so that we can provide the best possible educational opportunities for all children, especially those in the poorest and most disadvantaged situations.

The fourth and final priority area I want to touch on is advocacy. We are building on our already extensive advocacy efforts for social justice based on the substantial body of Catholic social teaching by forming a new diocesan regional land use committee. It will promote and advocate public policies that are economically, environmentally, socially and morally responsible. This is not only a new advocacy arena for the Cleveland Diocese, but the first such step nationally.

I am very pleased with what is happening with The Church in the City process. I know that we have a long, long way to go. But in the early days of this journey, it is clear that this initiative continues to be challenging and inspiring. In the public sphere, both locally and nationally, it has received remarkable attention. That says to me that we have touched a real chord in people's lives, one that seems to resonate with their hopes for a future pattern of development that is healthier, sounder, fairer, and wiser.

Nurturing that kind of hope is extremely important. Some studies have shown that today we live in one of the most cynical of times. Negativity, criticism and disrespect seem to have no boundaries. Cynicism runs so deep that it appears to choke the hope and life from many of our youth, especially in our cities. I believe the loss of hope is a major societal problem today. It paralyzes rather than catalyzes effective action.

How we live proclaims what we believe. The deeper commitments people make to neighborhoods, communities and organizations are based upon the good that they see and believe in. If we want more commitment, we need to live and proclaim more Good News. In the history of the world's religions we find remembered the stories of great leaders who believed in, lived and held up the Good News of their beliefs. And they did so in whatever difficult times may have confronted them.

Can we really say that our times today are more difficult than those faced by our forbearers? Are they more difficult than those faced by African Americans who survived slavery and segregation? Are they more difficult than those faced by Hispanics who survived colonization and discrimination? Are they more difficult than European immigrants who survived poverty and prejudice? My own father came to this country with a nickel in his pocket. Literally one nickel. Growing up in the city, I know well the struggles he faced and so many others like him and my mother – good, hard-working people of all races, religions and backgrounds. They built our cities brick by brick. Today we, their sons and daughters, are called to build and re-build - not so much buildings and streets as lives and relationships, one by one.

Leaders today must remember those who have gone before us. As the Hasidic master said, "Memory is the beginning of redemption." We must never cease to remember, to proclaim and to listen. In particular we need to listen with a spirit of compassion to the deeper experiences, feelings and wisdom of our people. And we must strive to translate what we hear into guiding images and visions that provide hope and meaning for people's lives.

I believe that together we can plant more seeds and lay more of the right foundations for a better future; one marked by more peace, harmony and justice for all the people of our metropolitan community. Then we will truly be able to reclaim the view of cities set forth by Pericles for our time and place. In so doing we will not only strengthen our regions and revive our cities, but we will also enliven democracy and advance justice. Finally, we will then be coming closer to the biblical vision of "the Holy City, the place where God is encountered, the promise of the city which comes from on high." [Pope Paul VI in his 1971 Apostolic Letter *Octagesima Adveniens*] That is our challenge and our opportunity. ■

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