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The Church, the City, and the University

Reflections on Some Challenges and Opportunities

ANTHONY M. PILLA

I grew up in the City of Cleveland during the 1930s and 1940s. My father came to this country from Italy with a nickel in his pocket. Literally one nickel. Growing up in the city, I knew well the struggles he and my mother faced, along with so many others like them—good, hard-working people of all races, religions, and backgrounds. Family, friends, and faith were at the heart of that urban neighborhood world. Despite having to overcome prejudice and poverty, people such as my parents built our cities brick by brick.

I thought of their experience of the city when I read a recent message by Pope John Paul II. “Urbanization,” his exhortation begins, “provides new opportunities, creates new modes of community, stimulates many forms of solidarity.” As bishop of a large urban diocese for almost twenty years, however, I have become all too familiar with the other part of the Pope’s message: “in the struggle against sin, it is often the dark underside of urbanization which occupies your immediate pastoral attention” (31).

It was precisely that kind of pastoral concern about the course of urbanization in our eight-county diocese that led me to issue a statement in November of 1993. What has come to be called The Church in the City Initiative challenged the almost one million Catholics in the Diocese of Cleveland to recognize the fundamental interdependence in their lives as a church and as a metropolitan region. Our Northeast Ohio region, home to nearly two-and-a-half million people, is no exception to the national trend—and the mindset that goes with it—known as out-migration or regional sprawl. Indeed, local and national studies point to our area as a prime example of the dramatic demographic and social shifts occurring in the United States over the past few decades. The Church in the City Initiative seeks to counter the damaging effects of urban disinvestment and sprawl.

I don’t review these trends as an expert. I approach them first and foremost as a pastor. Within our 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 united in mission. In the context of our faith, this call to unity is not an option. It is who we are as a Catholic Church. As I looked at our diocese, I became increasingly worried that development patterns were disconnecting us, were making us more separate instead of more united and interrelated. It was clear to me that we were rapidly becoming a disproportionately suburban diocese: simultaneously isolating the people left behind in our cities, weakening older first-ring suburbs and adversely affecting the character of rural life across Northeast Ohio.

It also became clear to me that the church and its institutions were ill-equipped to handle the ramifications of such an uneven and inequitable approach to development. I thought that the various parts of the overall Church of Cleveland were too often not in touch with one another, not sufficiently aware of the different gifts and needs present in the very diverse people of God living in our region. For me sprawl is not only an economic, social, and political issue. It has profound moral implications. I hoped to spur new cooperative efforts that could bring together very different kinds of people in responding to the human needs of those negatively affected by development patterns, as well as build up the unity of the living Body of Christ.

Such an effort would of course want to take advantage of the many opportunities afforded by our region’s Catholic colleges and universities—John Carroll, Notre Dame College, Ursuline College, and St. Mary Seminary. Part of my intent in The Church in the City Initiative

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was to call attention to what was already going on in the urban centers of the diocese. I wanted to acknowledge, communicate, and celebrate the Good News so often found in urban ministry, and there was a good deal of Good News to tell about the work of Catholic colleges in the Diocese of Cleveland.

As an alumnus of John Carroll University, I have been especially grateful for the good working relationship we have had with John Carroll. Fr. Mike Lavelle, S.J., former president of the University, was not only a valued collaborator, but a friend as well. One of his last official acts as president before his untimely death was to invite me to give the Geller Lecture at John Carroll on the Church in the City Initiative. Unfortunately Mike did not live to be present for that May 3, 1995 talk. I like to think that he, as someone who also grew up in Cleveland and sought ways to connect the university with the city, was pleased with that event and topic. I know how concerned he was personally and professionally about persistent poverty, especially in our urban centers. I know how much he loved the City of Cleveland and the Church of Cleveland.

The focus of that lecture, as well as so much of the Initiative, was on building bridges that could result in more empowerment and more solidarity. I believed then, and still believe, that too many of our brothers and sisters have been left behind and left out in the rush of sprawling, uneven, unfair development. Research done

by the Greater Cleveland Council on Economic Opportunities shows that, as of 1994, one-fifth of Cuyahoga County's population was living in poverty. The number of impoverished residents (280,900) had reached an all-time high, and Cuyahoga had the largest concentration of the poor in the state of Ohio. Summit and Lorain Counties also had experienced increases in their poverty rates. Over forty percent of Cleveland lived in poverty and, reflecting the national trend, children and minorities were disproportionately represented in that disturbing figure. Nearly two-thirds of all preschool children in Cleveland were growing up in households below the poverty line.

From the beginning of the implementation of the Church in the City process, addressing those kinds of injustices and helping people come together across all the lines that so often divide us have been fundamental concerns. As the Bishop of Cleveland, I have reiterated that the moral measure of any community is how the weakest are treated. We are all impoverished when society fails to incorporate into its political and economic policies measures to empower those not participating in the mainstream. We are all diminished when our cities are not vibrant, healthy, creative, just places.

In the Geller Lecture I tried to link those kinds of moral concerns with our experience of development in Northeast Ohio. 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. For much of our national history moving up the socioeconomic ladder has meant moving out. Fear of crime and concern about educational quality are also major concerns.

Nevertheless, a careful study done for the Church and the City project by Dr. Tom Bier at Cleveland State University's Levin College of Urban Affairs indicates the many and powerful ways in which unbalanced public and private investment decisions have accelerated out-migration over the past few decades. 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 seriously strained. Recent data points to the spread of this pattern in our inner ring of suburbs. Support for the maintenance and redevelopment of central cities, and now older suburbs, has simply not been comparable to the underwriting of sprawl. Unbalanced investment promoted housing, highways, water and sewer infrastructure, and economic growth in outlying areas to the detriment of older urban neighborhoods. I believe that such unbalanced investment did not provide people with fair choices, especially if they wanted to remain in more established communities or were unable to relocate. 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.

I am not opposed to new development nor am I anti-growth. I do ask for a greater balance between new development and re-development. Regional sprawl has been subsidized by billions of public dollars. All taxpayers carry the tax burden for the infrastructure that makes such development possible. Such unbalanced public spending has harmed our urban neighborhoods, begun to imperil our first tier of suburbs, and threatens the rural character of many communities within our Northeastern Ohio region. It also aggravates environmental problems. In fact, the well-funded and carefully researched Regional Environmental Priorities Project conducted by the Case Western Reserve University Environmental Center has identified restraining sprawl as our region's number one environmental priority. We cannot continue down a path of unplanned, wasteful,

subsidized development and land use that pits our region's communities against one another without causing even more serious economic, environmental, social, and moral harm.

That trend makes the isolation and alienation of the poor even worse. As the research of sociologists such as Harvard's William Julius Wilson indicates, it further concentrates and deepens poverty. That produces more hopelessness, as does the concomitant exacerbation of racial and class separation.

I also believe our current development patterns contribute to strains on family life, to a frenetic pace and tempo of life that not only spreads us out geographically, but also intensifies feelings of being spread too thin. I find that one of the great struggles for some of our people, especially for many young people, is located in the complexity and rootlessness of contemporary life. Many parents and pastors have told me that it seems to be more difficult for their families to distinguish between what is trivial and what is really important, between what is transitory and what is enduring. A healthy sense of roots, of heritage, of grounding has always been essential for human beings and human communities. I think it is even more necessary in these demanding times when we are going through such enormous social, economic, and technological change.

I hoped that the Church in the City Statement and subsequent implementation process could motivate an attitudinal change that would lead to more effective action responding to those moral implications. I hoped that the Church in the City Initiative could be a lens to look through to see our church, our community, our region, and ourselves in a new and fresh way. That kind of conversion, a change of heart and mind, would help us recognize that we increasingly 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 potential of the region in which we live.

I believe it is foolish to think that we can have a thriving region and a declining urban core. I am convinced that, at this time in American history, and with the emergence of a global economy, regions that are divided against themselves will languish and decline. We miss a crucial opportunity in carrying forth our responsibility to build a good and just society when we do not recognize the practical, as well as spiritual, benefits of

preserving and redeveloping urban communities. The wisdom, talents, and resources of all people in our cities, suburbs, and rural areas need to be appreciated and shared in service to the common good of our region. Too often we isolate rather than share those resources. I believe that the isolation of the poor and more vulnerable members of our community particularly wounds the whole community.

In the Geller lecture I especially called upon our Catholic colleges and universities to enter into new collaborative relationships with the Diocese to help strengthen the common good. The response has been heartening. Much has already happened. Much is in process. Over the past five years we have held numerous forums, lectures, seminars, and workshops on urban redevelopment, regional land use, multi-culturalism and diversity, farmland preservation, and other topics of concern for our whole region. In the Fall of 1999 we completed a funded Church in the City Regional Forum Series featuring national experts. That major year-long undertaking was begun to mark the fifth year of the initiative. It was planned by representatives of the diocese and the colleges, including Dr. Mark Falbo, Director of the John Carroll University Center for Community Service. Fr. Ed Glynn, S.J., the new president of John Carroll, graciously hosted the inaugural forum, on Catholic social teaching. In the keynote address, Fr. Bryan Hehir issued a challenge to Church and university alike, stressing the rich fund of ideas—about the human person, about communities, and about institutions—that the Catholic intellectual tradition has to offer in helping policy makers to think creatively across what he calls the “fault line” between public and private, governmental and religious institutions in this country.

Joint programs between the diocese and Carroll are nothing new, especially when it comes to matters of social justice. I am pleased that they have been expanded in relation to the Church in the City Initiative. In particular, I was glad that Church in the City documents were used in a new inter-disciplinary course on “The City” for all freshmen. I was even more delighted that I was able to participate personally. I enjoyed the stimulating dialogue with students and faculty. The interchange seemed to reassure the over eight hundred participants that my intent with Church in the City was not to induce guilt or assign blame. Rather, I seek to identify and build upon assets, especially in our church, college, and civic communities. The initiative is about good

stewardship and sharing our giftedness for the common good. It is about effective engagement by Catholics out of our social teaching in the public policy debates so vital to the future of our region and society.

That kind of advocacy is another major priority area in our Church in the City strategic action plan. Our diocesan Faith and Justice Leadership Institute has already trained several hundred people in advocacy related to regional development patterns. Out of our Social Action Office we have formed a Land Use Task Force to promote and advocate public and private policies that are economically, environmentally, socially, and morally responsible. The first major action of that Task Force has been the drafting of ethical principles for regional land use decision-making. I am grateful to Fr. Tom Schubeck, S.J., then the chair of John Carroll’s religious studies department, who generously gave of his time and talent as a member of that Task Force. He not only provided leadership to that significant undertaking, but his expertise in ethics was indispensable for the depth and richness of the formulation.

Much has been done. Much remains to be done. In the past five years we have made a significant investment of time, talent, and treasure to work for a more united diocese and for more just public policies across our region. We have grappled with a litany of practical and theoretical questions. How do we bring our lived reality into closer identity with the religious faith and values we profess? How do we better come together to find common ground and advance the common good in a diocese and region as diverse as Greater Cleveland? How do we ensure a more equitable and sustainable approach to our region’s rich resources? How do we repair our too-frayed social fabric? How do we open up more opportunities, especially for those historically excluded and at risk? How do we build on our assets so we can help create a more hopeful future? How do we exercise our rights and responsibilities as citizens in the richest, most powerful nation on earth as we enter a new millennium? How do we live faithful to the Gospel of Jesus Christ in a culture that is so often bewildering, challenging, and even antithetical to our values?

The challenge to work for urban redevelopment, to embrace our diversity, and to protect the human dignity of all, especially those most in need, is not just a task for those in our region who live in the cities of Akron, Cleveland, or Lorain. Those are challenges for the whole of our metropolitan region. The wisdom, talents, and resources of all the people of our cities, suburbs, and



Photo courtesy Saint Louis University, University Publications

rural areas must be appreciated and shared in a spirit of mutuality and service to the whole of our regional community, especially to those parts that are currently most neglected. I believe faith leaders need to be in the forefront of helping that to happen.

We, more than anyone else, know the gifts that are in our congregations. We need to bear in mind that our religious institutions are not only important for our members, but that they are also noteworthy community anchors, hubs of activity and resources. They are not only buildings, but networks of gifted lay people that sociologists refer to as “social capital.” Volunteerism is not a new approach for faith communities. What may be new is the emerging recognition by scholars such as John Coleman, S.J., that no institution in the United States produces as much social capital as churches, synagogues, and mosques. People who are active in religious institutions are far more likely than others to volunteer time and money to community and civic activities. Religious networks contribute to democratic skills and enhance participation in the civic arena. Further, they serve bridging and communication functions that span social cleavages and divisions. They are tremendous assets.

The implementation of Church in the City has depended on trying to mobilize that kind of social capital. It is very much an initiative of the laity. Frankly, I never expected as much to happen as has already taken place. The progress we have made I attribute to very

diverse kinds of lay people coming together out of their faith commitment in response to a vision that resonated with them.

I think many people have a real sense that something is wrong, something is awry, in how we live in our society today. Despite impressive advances on many fronts, I think many are hungry for more genuine expressions of community. We have found that many are not only ready for, but yearn for richer and truly mutual experiences of diversity. I have been impressed with how many want to get beyond all the boxes and compartmentalizations in our complex social arrangements. People are longing, I believe, for more holistic, better integrated lives and relationships, especially in regard to where they live and work. So many have told us: “Thank you for inviting me to be involved in something like the Church in the City Initiative where I can use my skills, practice my faith, and interact with others. I feel my church really needs me.” That is not happening because of some mandate, but because all kinds of different people have made a commitment and taken action in a variety of meaningful ways. 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 and civic life that is healthier, sounder, fairer, and wiser.

I am also encouraged that what started as a diocesan vision and process seems to resonate with the major faiths in our region. Two years ago I was invited to

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address a gathering of Protestant, Jewish, Muslim, and Catholic leaders from across Northeast Ohio. That group of interfaith leaders has continued to meet and assess the best ways we can work together regionally. What has really heartened me is that we have identified substantial common ground as we grapple with the challenges before us, especially in regard to a commitment thirteen of us made on May 19, 1999 to work together more intentionally to address regional needs. We identified overcoming poverty in the region and addressing welfare reform as the most immediate issues where cooperation among Jews, Muslims, and Christians could make a positive difference that would advance the common good.

All of the partnerships that have been undertaken out of the Church in the City Initiative really excite me. Over one hundred partnerships currently exist across the diocese. Most are parish-to-parish partnerships that bring together urban, suburban, and rural parishes. I think it is a sign of hope that people from very different realities have begun to gather together regularly for prayer and dialogue, as well as for common action that serves the wider community. There are school-to-school partnerships; and economic redevelopment partnerships where we as church act as an honest broker convening business, labor, service agencies, government, and neighborhood groups. Several have already met tangible success in building new affordable housing, providing job training and job placement, catalyzing industrial redevelopment of abandoned brownfield sites, and responding to refugees. One of the most striking involves the largest mortgage bank in Ohio. Its president decided, in response to Church in the City, not only to build his bank's new headquarters in the old ethnic neighborhood where his father started the business, but to do that as part of a more comprehensive, community-based urban revitalization plan.

All of these partnerships stress mutuality and respect for the wisdom and gifts which each person has to offer. I think they are wonderful examples of solidarity being enfolded in fresh ways that have come from the people. No one is too poor to contribute, no one too rich to receive. The focus is on learning more about one another and on what we can accomplish together. There is no cookie-cutter approach or top-down model. If we know each other, and especially if we are friends, a great deal of good is possible.

The same is true of the relationship between the academy and the church. As Fr. General Kolvenbach, S.J., observed in his June 7, 1989 talk to the Assembly

on Jesuit Ministry in Higher Education, institutions of higher education, especially Jesuit ones in the United States, can be “a massive resource for building the kingdom of God on earth.” He goes on to cite the power of the educational apostolate, pointing out that “education can be a powerful leaven for the transformation of attitudes, humanizing the social climate.”

The intellectual resources of the university can contribute much to an initiative such as the Church in the City. At the same time, the perspectives of academics can be stretched and enriched by the scope and diversity of such a venture, as well as by its grassroots involvement. So benefits can be mutual. Significant opportunities exist for simultaneously strengthening the outlook and range of the university as a university while working to discharge its special charism as a Jesuit university. As the late Fr. Pedro Arrupe, S.J., so succinctly and memorably described it, the task of the educational apostolate is to produce “men [and women] for others.” “We have to be the voice of those who have no voice,” he told his fellow Jesuits. “We have to strive to transform the mentality of society, not only among those in power but also among the middle classes.”

Fr. Ignacio Ellacuria, S.J., the slain rector of the Central American University in San Salvador, put similar sentiments this way in 1982: “A Christian university must take into account the gospel preference for the poor. This does not mean that only the poor study at the university; it does not mean that the university should abdicate its mission of academic excellence—excellence needed in order to solve complex social problems. It does mean that the university should be present intellectually where it is needed” (Sobrino 150). I believe our cities need the strengths and resources of universities, especially Catholic universities.

There are different ways to be present. Fr. Xabier Gorostiaga, S.J., the former rector of the Central American University in Managua, outlined one way when he delivered the Annual Segundo Montes, S.J., Lecture (co-sponsored by Carroll’s Sociology Department and our diocesan Commission on Catholic Community Action) in November of 1998. He summarized how his university utilized various institutes involved in social and economic development work across Nicaragua. This not only helped them fulfill their institutional mission and their Jesuit charism, but also provided the university with invaluable field research, scholarly insights, and service opportunities otherwise unavailable to it.

Such possibilities exist in our cities. We are currently exploring how local Catholic colleges can become appropriately part of Church in the City partnerships. Fruitful conversations have proceeded with John Carroll’s Boler School of Business about feasible, practical ways they can work with us on economic redevelopment projects. Dean Frank Navratil and members of my staff have been meeting to plan a joint Conference in 2000 looking at new redevelopment opportunities in Cleveland and Northeast Ohio. We are also talking about a business advisory council that would draw on the professional competence of Business School Faculty and Alumni, as well as our diocesan network.

We are finding more and more that redeveloping our urban core is not only the morally right thing to do, but also the smart thing to do for businesses, institutions, and persons. We already have several successful Church in the City job training and job placement programs that are helping to meet the workforce needs of area businesses while contributing to the empowerment of inner city residents often cut off from access to such opportunities.

Imagine what we could do with the participation of more university faculty and students. Imagine what we could do with the involvement of our colleges’ lay boards and alumni associations. Imagine what we could do if even part of the Jesuit alumni network in Northeast Ohio volunteered their time and talent to a Church in the City partnership committed to urban redevelopment and empowerment.

What an impressive application of social capital that would be and what a channel for the lay apostolate. I think that kind of service, that kind of being “men and women for others” would also redound to the benefit of Jesuit institutions, since those volunteers I’m sure would appreciate the opportunity to use their expertise in such a socially responsible and satisfying manner. What a marvelous witness to faith in God it would be if Catholics, together with other believers, pledged to work together for the economic, social, and spiritual renewal of our region, especially with the most vulnerable of our sisters and brothers. What a difference that would make for the future of our cities and for our whole region.

What a significant contribution it would be for the whole Church if, as we enter a new millennium, an age of the global village when more people live in cities than ever before, Jesuit universities would foster serious theological reflection about the intersections of urban living

and the development of our faith. The 1997 book *Landmarking: City, Church, and Jesuit Urban Strategy* by Fr. Thomas Lucas, S.J. is a splendid example of how stimulating such scholarship can be.

I believe Jesuits in particular have much to share in an articulation of an urban spirituality for our time. After all, as Fr. Lucas writes, “[i]n Ignatius Loyola, the Church in the city found a champion and a conceptual genius, a man who was fully attuned to his urban culture” (22). And the Thirty-fourth General Congregation of the Society of Jesus states in the document called “Our Mission and Culture”:

“Ignatius loved the great cities”; they were where this transformation of the human community was taking place, and he wanted Jesuits

to be involved in the process. The “city” can be for us the symbol of our current efforts to bring fulfillment to human culture . . . [O]ur aim is the confused but inescapable attempt to cooperate in the creation of that community which, according to the Book of Revelation, God will bring about—and God will bring it about—in the form of the holy city, the radiant New Jerusalem. (61)

That New Jerusalem, as I say at the end of my Church in the City Statement, is both a promise and a challenge. Even as we wait for the new heaven and the new earth, we can begin to build new cities of justice and peace.

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