The Moral Challenge of Regional Sprawl
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I would like to start with a quote from the famous Athenian statesman Pericles: "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 today. 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 mind set so wrapped up in the pattern of development described as out migration or sprawl. Indeed 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.

This 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 out migration.

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 socioeconomic 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 older 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 multicultural 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 and the common good? I don't think so.

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, as you can well imagine.
One reason the Church in the City statement was issued was to try and 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.

For example, a growing body of scholarly literature shows that regions where the income of suburban 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, as well as the serious issue of prime farm land being lost for agricultural use.

The challenge to stem sprawl and redevelop 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. 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.

Creating those kinds of empowering partnerships and advocating for more rational, 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. A few 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 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, as well as school-to-school 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 have established a
new church in the city grants program to assist parish and school partnerships of that type. I am very en-
couraged by these steps because if we know each other, and especially if we are friends, a great deal is pos-
sible. If we are strangers, little is possible.

Another major priority area involves ongoing education, prayer and leadership training that empha-
sizes "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 divide us.
We will also continue educational forums about the church in the city vision with special attention to the
complex, multifaceted nature of regional sprawl. We hope to further understanding about how we already
are interdependent in Northeast Ohio, as well as help create more common ground for unified, coopera-
tive responses. Regions that are divided against themselves will languish and decline.

Redevelopment of our central cities is a third major priority area. For us as church, 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. Nor do we want to. We are com-
mitted 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 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 exten-
sive 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 eco-
nomically, environmentally, socially and morally responsible. This is not only a new advocacy arena for the
Cleveland Diocese, but the first such 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 chal-
lenging 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 ac-
tion.

I believe that each one of us can make a difference. Our choices and actions can help lead to a differ-
ent future. We can create new cities, the kind our society longs for. Cities where people of different in-
comes, races and cultures can live together and be enriched by each others presence. We can begin to build
a new city of justice and peace, if we really commit ourselves to that noble task. If we undertake that chal-
lenge, we will also reclaim Pericles' vision of the polis as a community of citizens with a full, rich, dynamic
understanding of the responsibilities of citizenship. The polis referred to more than a place; it referred to a
way of behaving and living in community.

Too many in our society today feel outside the polis, feel alienated and cut off from even thinking
about full participation and mutual responsibility. Let me be clear: this is not only an inner city issue. Disaf-
fecation with the civic arena and the political process, as well as social irresponsibility, is rife all across our
society, across all kinds of locations and backgrounds. I believe we have to rediscover that older meaning
of citizenship as an everyday activity and common responsibility. It means much more than voting, and we
know it's not even that for more and more Americans. I fear we are losing the sense that our society is built
by and rooted in ordinary citizens who day in and day out lead their private lives and make public contrib-
utions in the polis with integrity, commitment and pride. Citizenship should once again be a badge of
honor, a cherished title, an emblem of hard work and dedication to social justice. Our ancestors did it. Why
can't we?
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 not knowing the language and 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.

I believe that together we can meet that challenge; 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 region and revive our city, 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.” That is our challenge; that is our responsibility; and that is our opportunity.