



Catholic Social Thought and Housing

1983 CHARTER ON THE RIGHTS OF THE FAMILY

“The family has the right to decent housing, fitting for family life and commensurate to the number of the members, in a physical environment that provides the basic services for the life of the family and the community.”

Beginning from the foundation of the dignity and sanctity of human life, Catholic social thought holds that human persons have a natural and universal right to decent housing. In the words of the Second Vatican Council, “There must be made available to all people everything necessary for leading a life truly human, such as food, clothing, and shelter...”¹ The council was following the teaching of St. Pope John XXIII that shelter was one of the key “means which are suitable for the proper development of life...”²

In the following decades, the Church expanded its understanding of the right to housing. In the words of St. Pope John Paul II,

We are convinced that a house is much more than a simple roof over one’s head. The place where a person creates and lives out his or her life, also serves to found, in some way, that person’s deepest identity and his or her relations with others.³

This right to housing also has been enumerated in international documents, including the 1948 U.N. *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (Article 25, 1). In 1949, the U.S. Housing Act declared a national goal of a decent home and suitable living environment for every American family.

Housing and Family Life

The Church’s understanding that human persons are essentially social and that the family is the primary unit of society gave rise to a direct connection between housing

and family life; in fact, in the Jewish and Christian scriptures, the term “house” often signified “family.”⁴ In its 1983 *Charter on the Rights of the Family*, the Vatican specifically enumerated the following:

The family has the right to decent housing, fitting for family life and commensurate to the number of the members, in a physical environment that provides the basic services for the life of the family and the community.⁵

St. Pope John Paul II also underscored the importance of housing as critical to human and family *security*, one of the three essential elements of the ancient and current concept of the common good.⁶

Housing and Justice

With the right to decent housing—based upon human life, dignity, family, and security—the Vatican underscores that, “Any person or family that, without any direct fault on his or her part, does not have suitable housing is the *victim of an injustice*.”⁷ This failure of society to ensure decent living conditions is seen as a structural injustice preventing an individual or family from living a dignified life. The Church has stressed repeatedly the obligation of society, as well as the state, to guarantee for all its members those living conditions without which they cannot achieve human fulfillment. How those on the fringes of society fare is one of the fundamental tests for judging the justice or injustice of political and

economic decisions.

In the Church, we then have at least three avenues for addressing injustice in the realm of the basic right to decent housing: first, provide rental assistance, housing construction, emergency shelter, and/or community centers for those without decent housing; second, sponsor or support education and community development programs that promote local housing techniques and resources, systems of mutual help and collective labor, and supportive family and social services; and, third, promote dialogue with public officials and advocacy for political and economic initiatives to house the homeless and develop low-cost housing.⁸

ENDNOTES

- 1 Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes (The Church in the Modern World)*, 1965, no. 26.
- 2 Saint Pope John XXIII, *Peace on Earth*, 1963, no. 11.
- 3 Saint Pope John Paul II, *What Have You Done to Your Homeless Brother? The Church and the Housing Problem*, Pontifical Commission “Justitia et Pax,” Introductory Letter, Vatican City 1987.
- 4 *What Have You Done to Your Homeless Brother?*, *op. cit.*, p. 23.
- 5 The Holy See, *Charter on the Rights of the Family*, October 22, 1983, art. 11.
- 6 Cf. *What Have You Done to Your Homeless Brother?*, *op. cit.*, p. 20; and *Catholic Social Thought and the Common Good*, Kammer, *JustSouth Quarterly*, Fall 2012, p. 3.
- 7 *What have You Done to Your Homeless Brother?*, *op. cit.*, p. 18.
- 8 *Ibid.*, pp. 26-28.