**The Right to Housing and Catholic Moral Discernment**

By Greg Colley OFS

As Concord Catholics, we have a very local and immediate moral choice to discern.

In our City of Concord, there are both homeless and those who are struggling to retain their housing in the face of rapidly escalating demands for much higher rent made by landlords. The residents of an apartment complex on Virginia Lane—people who often must choose between paying rent and buying food for their families—are working to seek justice for themselves. They are trying to avoid becoming homeless because of large rent increases. Their repeated requests for dialogue with landlord representatives have not been fruitful, and so they have initiated legal action.

This is not a situation on which Catholic teaching is silent.

In November of 1975, the Catholic Bishops of the United States declared this country to be in the midst of a severe housing crisis - "that millions of American families are condemned to live in poor housing or unsuitable environments unless dramatic action is taken." Last year while Pope Francis was in Washington DC he repeatedly emphasized the needs of the poor and our national obligation to do something in response. Immediately after addressing Congress he spent lunchtime with DC residents experiencing homelessness. The Pope said to all, "we can find no social or moral justification, no justification whatsoever, for lack of housing." And he reminded everyone that Jesus entered the world as a homeless person.

In the 40 years separating these two observations, it is unfortunate that insufficient progress has been made towards addressing the housing plight of the poorest in this country. According to the social and moral teaching of the Church, the poor have a right to housing. And so the bishops stated unequivocally, "In the face of this cruel and discouraging condition, we…cannot remain silent." They observed that the inherent dignity of all people and their moral right to grow and develop their potential compels a response from Catholics "whenever social and economic forces imprison or degrade people." They described poor or no housing as one of these debilitating conditions.

It is frequently observed that these rights of the poor exist in tension with the rights of property owners. Church teaching guides us clearly on this as well. In his 1967 encyclical *Populorum Progressio*, Pope Paul VI articulated the ancient position of the Church: "The recent Council reminded us of this: 'God intended the earth and all that it contains for the use of every human being and people…' All other rights whatsoever, including those of property and free commerce, are to be subordinated to this principle." This teaching is known as the "universal destination of material goods," or the social function of property. It is a long standing tenet of Christian thought. It establishes clear moral priorities, ones repeated by Pope Saint John Paul II.

Solutions to housing problems are neither simple nor easily agreed upon. It is precisely because Catholic teaching provides guidance, however, that Catholics in and around Concord have created a movement for action – Catholics United for Justice. Ethics are crucial in guiding the economic and social choices which determine how various rights are to be balanced. Adequate solutions will be found only in ethical choices made by individuals, groups, and even governments. Catholic teaching is also clear that government has an important role to play in ensuring that material possessions are used in ways which will benefit the greatest number of people.

The challenges of the most vulnerable among us present complex moral challenges to those of us who are Catholic. Prayerful consideration of the teaching of the Church on the right to housing will help guide us to choices and actions that will benefit our neighbors, and help us to live out our calling as disciples of Jesus Christ.

Greg Colley is a parishioner at St Bonaventure. After completing graduate degrees at the Franciscan School of Theology in Divinity and Theology, he now works in social justice and as a chaplain. He is a professed member of the *ordo franciscanus saecularis*, the Franciscan third order. He can be reached at [gregcolleyofs@gmail.com](mailto:gregcolleyofs@gmail.com).