The Church and Neighborhood Conservation in Chicago

The Experience of a Group
of Chicago Pastors

National Conference of Catholic Charities
1346 Connecticut Avenue, N. W.
Washington 6, D. C.
1955

The Church and Neighborhood Conservation in Chicago

This statement fairly well represents the thinking of the pastors in Chicago as expressed in their meetings over a period of two years. It indicates the type of progress that has been made in building neighborhood organization in many parishes in the Archdiocese. There was a feeling that this material would be helpful to the Chicago pastors and to many others throughout the country.

—Rt. Rev. Msgr. John O'Grady.

About two years ago some 150 pastors of the Archdiocese of Chicago were called together by His Eminence Cardinal Stritch to discuss the place of the Church in neighborhood conservation in Chicago. At this meeting Cardinal Stritch pointed the way ahead for his priests and his people. "There are," he said, "in our city certain areas that are called 'near-blight areas.' The experts have studied them and they have marked them out on the map. . . . The realization that they can be saved has to be infused into these neighborhoods. Then, if the people of these areas work together under proper guidance, doing many rather simple things, and if public authority enforces the law, blight in these areas can be prevented." In these few sentences the Cardinal has said a great deal. The people can conserve their neighborhoods if they are so minded and if they have the proper inspiration and leadership. Those who are inspired by the ideals of neighborhood conservation must work together. It is a matter that concerns everyone in the block. When one house begins to show signs of deterioration, when one house is converted from a single-family house to a multi-family dwelling, it will not be long before blight sets in and extends to other homes.

In his talk to the Chicago pastors, Cardinal Stritch said: "I would like to have you consider this problem very thoroughly. We are in a position to do a great deal toward building up neighborliness and self-help in our neigh-

borhoods." This too is a significant statement. Building up neighborliness and self-help means alerting the people to things that make for dissatisfaction in the individual blocks. Why do people move away from these neighborhoods? Because they become concerned about the lack of law enforcement. They will tell you it is not safe to be on the streets at night. The natural thing is to complain about the police. It is a fact, however, that the police will be alerted if the people are alerted. If the people want law enforcement, the police will give it to them.

Cardinal Stritch has emphasized the importance of doing simple things in the neighborhood. It is surprising what the multiplication of simple things will do. A negro family had moved into a certain block in a Chicago parish. One man on the block called on the pastor. The pastor suggested that he talk over the matter with his neighbors and try to convince them that the presence of a negro family would not necessarily blight the block. At the suggestion of the pastor a small committee called on the negro family and welcomed them to the neighborhood. They emphasized that the people in the block were pledged to do everything possible for the conservation of their homes and invited the negro family to join with them. They explained their attitude toward converting single-family houses into multi-family houses. They emphasized their basic ideas on block conservation, their desire to preserve in the block a proper environment for the maintenance and building up of family life, in which neighbors would join together in a program of self-help and in the spirit and practice of Christian charity.

The people in this block began their program in a simple way. Each one agreed to keep his own home in good condition, and to maintain attractive lawns and yards. They agreed to help one another in repairing their homes. One older worker in the block who could no longer maintain the pace demanded by the contractors, agreed to take on odd jobs that he could do on his own time and at his own pace. This was much less expensive for the neighbors than the use of a contractor.

What was done on this block soon spread to other blocks. The pastor served as the inspirer. As people from different blocks came to see him he encouraged them to join with their neighbors in conserving their homes and maintaining a proper environment for family life.

Abandoning the Old Homes

In speaking to the Chicago pastors at the meeting previously mentioned, Cardinal Stritch emphasized another salient point. "Naturally," he said, "there is another phase to our pastoral problem. As things are going now, we are building a new Archdiocese on the perimeter of Chicago. This is a very heavy burden. It would not be so great, if we would only try to save Chicago —save Chicago from itself, save Chicago from some of its greedy citizens . . . We can not only reclaim some of the blighted areas . . . but we can prevent other areas from becoming blighted." People in Chicago have often asked: Why do so many families run away from their old homes, from their old churches, from their old neighborhoods and find their way out into the suburbs where they buy homes of inferior quality? They do not take into consideration the additional costs involved in suburban living. They forget the long distances that must be travelled to and from work. They forget that they must pay their share of the cost of new sewerage systems, new electric light installations, new streets and sidewalks, new schools, new churches.

The factors that enter into this flight from the city are by no means simple. The people have a feeling that the old neighborhood is beginning to deteriorate. They talk about lack of law enforcement. There is no real discussion of these problems among the neighbors. There is no discussion of what they can do to control the flight from the old neighborhood. No positive effort is made to develop a feeling of pride in their old neighborhood, in the old Church in which they were baptized, in which they were married and which enshrines so many of their sacred memories.

Flight from the old Chicago neighborhoods is not inevitable. The experience of a number of pastors has already demonstrated that something can be done about it. Many of them have profited by the experience of the older parishes. They have had the vision to look ahead and to prepare their people by a positive educational program. They have come to regard this educational program of equal importance with their school program, as something in which every organization of the parish should participate, including the Holy Name Society, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, the Legion of Mary, the Christian Family Movement. This program, they feel, must be a positive one. They regard it as a challenge to the development of a new and more positive type of social organization in their parishes.

Monsignor McMahon, pastor of St. Sabina's Church in Chicago, has aptly summed up his own thinking and the thinking of other pastors when he says, "We should aim to give our people every type of service—religious, civic and recreational. . . . By education and especially by example we should sell our people the idea that 'nowhere else can you find the service and conveniences that our particular parish can give you.' Since it is impossible for the priests themselves to give this service to their people, it is necessary to organize lay units which will be an extension of their zeal and their charity." One can readily see from this statement that Monsignor McMahon is pointing to a new day in parish organization. He is pointing to the time when parish organizations will be a new social force in the American community. But Monsignor McMahon is not thinking about Catholic organizations working single-handed and alone. He thinks of them as a force working side by side with the forces that are thrown up by other religious and civic groups. He regards the conservation of the neighborhood and the community as a challenge to all the people, not only to organizations but to each individual. He is thinking not merely of maintaining buildings and property. He is thinking about the upbuilding of people, about the strengthening of family life, about the social upbuilding of neighborhoods. In other words, he would like to see a new program of Christian neighborliness in every block and in every community. He does not think of such a program as something that can be developed by government, but rather as something that must grow out of the deepest convictions of all the people. Such a program, of course, will call for inspired leaders here and there throughout our communities—for people who can stimulate self-help, who can plumb the enormous possibilities of the individual and the possibilities for self-help and mutual aid that are to be found in every block and in every neighborhood.

How Does One Begin?

One of the questions most frequently asked about programs of neighborhood conservation is, how does one begin? The Chicago pastors have learned a good deal through the exchange of experiences at their meetings during the past two years. This does not mean that each pastor has slavishly followed the others. The meetings have stimulated each pastor to do his own thinking and to apply the ideas that he has gathered from the meetings to the peculiar

problems of his own parish and his own neighborhood. The time has come, however, to set down in writing certain ideas or guides that may be useful in a broad educational program at the parish, neighborhood and community levels.

We should begin by saying that the pastor's best approach is discussion with other pastors who have had some experience in neighborhood conservation. There are some pastors, of course, who feel that this problem does not affect them. Their parishes have not been threatened. They are living in new neighborhoods; they have new parishes, new congregations. But more and more pastors are beginning to feel that no neighborhood is immune. If blight is allowed to spread without any controls, there is no stopping it. It will soon reach new areas of the city. On the other side there are the pastors who say that their parishes are already gone, that there is nothing to be saved except a few boarding houses. To these pastors it might be said that many of the old downtown and near downtown areas will have to be rebuilt. They will have to be rebuilt in such a way as to provide housing accommodations for large numbers of families that do not come within the purview of existing housing programs. Housing in the suburban areas is being built largely for families with young children. Older families, for the most part, are still living in blighted areas. If these areas have to be cleared, some provision must be made for these families through private housing of one kind or another. Only a limited number can be accommodated in public housing. In the first place, they do not qualify for public housing and secondly, the number of public housing units will be quite limited in the foreseeable future. In other words, the pastors and the people in these old downtown parishes cannot abandon all hope for their restoration. The land that they now occupy cannot be used exclusively for industrial, commercial, health and educational programs. A very large part of it will still have to be used for housing. Another point to be remembered is that the people themselves will have some say as to what use is going to be made of this land. We need more public discussion of what will happen to the families whose homes are demolished by the clearing of the downtown or near-downtown areas.

The Chicago pastors have begun their work of neighborhood conservation in a very informal way. Some of them have begun by participating in neighhood conservation movements organized by other groups. They have en-

couraged their parishioners to attend the meetings of the different groups and to participate actively with them. In fact in many instances their own work has grown out of the experience they have acquired through such participation.

From their participation in the work of other groups some pastors have decided to begin with a complete census of their parishes. This has given them a chance of studying the problems of their families and of the neighborhoods. It has provided a good opportunity of studying the housing problems and of encouraging their own people to keep their homes in good condition. It has also given them a chance of encouraging their parishioners to join with other groups in neighborhood conservation movements.

Place of the Laity in Conservation Movement

As neighborhood conservation has been developed, the priests have come to see more clearly the place of the laity in this work. Some of the pastors regard it as fundamentally a lay program calling for lay leadership. They regard themselves as inspirers of the movement. They feel that it is an opportunity for developing lay leadership in their parishes. They feel that the laity can frequently deal more effectively with other groups than the priest. Other pastors assume a considerable amount of leadership. They feel that they ought to be in the program with the lay people all the time.

Some Beginnings

It has been the experience of people interested in genuine neighborhood and block organization that the groups or individuals participating in it should learn by doing simple things. There are many simple things that people can do in their own neighborhoods. For example, the pastor can begin by keeping the parish property in good condition; others will follow his example. People can get together for the purpose of discussing ways and means of keeping their own homes in good repair. They can discuss the question of garbage disposal. They can discuss complaints in regard to law enforcement. They can discuss ways and means of getting rid of unsightly buildings. They can discuss ways and means of making the neighborhood

a proper place for the maintenance of family life. These simple things do not require elaborate organization and yet they help people to grow up; they give them an appreciation of their own strengths. As they gain strength by doing simple things they will be ready to face new problems. They will want to discuss what can be done in an over-all program for housing in their district or neighborhood.

A writer in the Louisville *Courier-Journal* for May 23, 1954 thus describes the conservation movement in the "Back of the Yards" neighborhood in Chicago in which the Catholic priests have joined together with other groups: "Thousands of families in this once-underprivileged and run-down area have teamed together to produce an amazing rejuvenation.

"Driven by a fierce pride in their homes, churches, families and old associations, they've abandoned the practice of 'letting George do it.'

"For the first time in a generation, new homes are being built on old vacant lots. There's the gleam of new white paint on once-rundown houses. Local banks are beginning to increase the dollars available for home-improvement loans."

What are Our Housing Needs?

Our pastors and neighborhood leaders have learned that they must know the needs of their own communities before they can agree upon housing or neighborhood betterment goals. In this area, neighborhood leaders may bring an important influence to bear on city and national planning.

No matter how successfully the neighborhood rehabilitation and renewal program may be carried out, it cannot possibly meet the total needs of the people without significant additions to the housing supply. Neighborhood leaders should know that there were 15 million substandard homes in the United States as disclosed by the 1950 Census, and that 10 million of these homes were located in urban centers. These homes must be replaced in the years ahead, and families living in them must be rehoused. National housing experts estimate that if in the next 20 or 30 years we are to replace bad housing, keep abreast of current obsolescence, replace homes destroyed by disaster or demolished for some public purpose and at the same time provide decent

housing for new families, we must provide at least 2,000,000 new homes each year. This is twice as many new homes as are included in present estimates, even with the aids provided in the Housing Act of 1954. In 1950 there were 1,106,119 dwellings in the city of Chicago, as shown by the Census; 23% of these, or more than 250,000, were substandard, that is, they were dilapidated, lacked inside hot running water or bathing or toilet facilities.

It is doubtful if the nation will plan for its actual needs, until neighborhoods and larger communities survey their own housing requirements and insist that they be met. Neighborhood leaders in Chicago can insist upon a survey of the facts; they can insist that planning, redevelopment and housing officials cooperate in the discovery and publication of those facts. Neighborhood leaders and their associates can start with a survey of housing needs in their own immediate neighborhoods. A realistic housing program can be built more effectively from the neighborhood up than from the Federal Government down.

On the basis of need it will be discovered that new homes must be provided for many groups—families with children, families whose members are older, and single people. Housing must be provided for people of different income levels. For years we have estimated that at least ten percent of our new homes must be allocated for families of very low income, through low-rent public housing. Those families cannot afford to pay the rents that private enterprise is compelled to charge. The upper-middle-income groups as well as those in the highest brackets can and must be taken care of by private enterprise.

Thus, we have the great challenge of providing decent shelter for nearly one-third of our families who fall within the lower middle-income group, and are not eligible for public housing. They also must have adequate shelter at a price they can afford to pay. One of our best hopes to meet this need is cooperative housing. A number of Chicago pastors are giving serious consideration to cooperative housing. It presents a serious challenge to them. While we do not have many illustrations of cooperative housing under Church auspices in the United States, we have many outstanding examples in Canada, Germany, Belgium and Holland. In this country cooperative housing has had limited success under labor union, veteran and non-profit foundation sponsorship. We must also explore ways and means of providing better credit facili-

ties, lower interest rates, and longer amortization terms for families of middle income. Private enterprise, if it will, can do much to pioneer in this field.

While we have real hopes for cooperative housing, we question whether this implement can provide housing on the scale needed by our lower-middle-income families. FHA can reach the upper middle-income groups, including those who can afford to pay over $85 a month but it certainly cannot reach those who can pay a maximum of $65 a month. A new type of government assistance is needed to enable this group to meet the service charges on their own homes.

Progress During the Past Two Years

The priests of Chicago have made real progress in the promotion of neighborhood and parish conservation groups during the past two years. They have really led the way in the United States in pioneering in neighborhood self-help organization. They have given us a new picture of the potentialities of Catholic organization on a parish basis. Under their leadership, we have witnessed a new type of Catholic organization that expresses the best in our Catholic life. Under their leadership, we find the people working together as neighbors in their common interests. We see them spreading the practice of personal service in the block and in the neighborhood. We see a spirit growing up that represents a truly Christian revival, often reaching out and embracing groups of other religious faiths, so that the whole community moves as one towards the basic objective not merely of conserving the physical properties of the neighborhood, but of promoting the growth of the individual, and the development of a sense of community responsibility for the building of neighborhoods in which the finest ideals of family and religious life can be realized.

One of the many significant things about this new type of parish organization in Chicago is the recognition on the part of the priests that they cannot work alone, that they need lay leadership and close working relationships with other religious and civic groups.

It has been encouraging to note the extent to which members of the different parishes have been working with other groups, trying to learn from them as

well as to give them an understanding of their own ideals, their own philosophy and their own objectives. This is really a new phase in the development of Catholic life and in the development of neighborhood leadership in the community as a whole.

Relationships with Governmental Organizations

It is now generally recognized in Chicago that the vast programs of neighborhood conservation that are being developed cannot possibly succeed without the participation and the leadership of voluntary groups, and without independent thinking on the part of these groups, especially those organized on a neighborbood and parish basis. Such leadership on the part of the citizens is necessary to put the program on a high plane. It is necessary in order to lift it above the selfish interests of the different groups involved. It is necessary in order to lift it above the thinking and planning of highly specialized groups. Enlightened lay people will recognize the contribution of these specialized groups, but as they study the problems in their own neighborhood, they will recognize more and more that plans for Chicago cannot be made by specialized groups, that they must be made by an enlightened citizenry organized in the neighborhood and in the parish and inspired by the highest ideals of Christian neighborhood service.

Steps Ahead

The conferences held by the priests in the different sections of Chicago during the past two years should be continued and at the same time an effort should be made to include other priests in the discussions. This is a practical method of further utilizing the experience that has already been acquired.

Another important step for the future is the development of a literature that will make the experience of the Chicago parishes better known to the Catholic people as a whole in the Archdiocese and throughout the country. Some beginnings have been made in the development of such a literature, but much more needs to be done. The priests in Chicago have been somewhat timid about publicizing their experience. They have felt that they were struggling with difficult problems and were gradually finding their way. They

were also afraid that too much publicity might not help them. Their note of caution, however, must be recognized in any of the literature that is developed. In the development of the literature, one must always keep in mind the positive side of neighborhood conservation. What the priests have been thinking about is the conservation of family life, the building of neighborhoods in which the finest ideals of Catholic family life will be possible. They are experimenting with a type of organization that would be of value in all parishes, not merely those that are stricken with blight, but also parishes that are struggling for the development of programs that will bring new life to their people.

There is much that the schools—grade schools, high schools and colleges—can do in the development of the new type of parish organization and programs that are being envisaged by the priests of Chicago. Some of the high schools have already sponsored contests designed to improve neighborhood life. They are talking about the extent to which high school children can contribute to the beautification of their own homes and their gardens. This is bound to give the young people a pride in making their neighborhoods a better place in which to live. What has been done in the high schools might be followed in the higher grades in the grammar schools. It should also be possible for colleges to relate their teaching to ways and means in which the students can participate in programs for the improvements of their own neighborhoods.