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"No Room at the Inn"

# Christmas pastoral: a consideration

By ARCHBISHOP WILLIAM D. BORDERS

My dear friends in Christ:

The history recorded in the Old Testament is a prelude to the Good News of salvation contained in the New. In the same way the four weeks of Advent are a prelude to the joy that irradiates the whole world at Christmastime.

During these weeks a sense of happy expectancy builds up, at first slowly and then with ever-increasing momentum, until at last it bursts forth full-throated and complete in that song of the angel to the shepherds which is proclaimed anew at the Christmas Midnight Mass: *Listen, I bring you tidings of great joy, a joy to be shared by the whole people. Today in the town of David a saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord (Luke 2:10-11).*

No other feast in the Church's calendar brings with it quite the same feeling of happiness, warmth, generosity and good-fellowship that Christmas does. At Easter we rejoice in the risen Lord's triumph over death. At Pentecost we find a fresh joy in the Holy Spirit who is sent to us. These feasts are in no way of lesser significance than Christmas — in fact, they are more important.

But the joy of Christmas is so universal and all-pervading that even many who do not share our Christian faith, or who are without any religious belief at all, are caught up in the general atmosphere of good cheer and join us to celebrate the "Christmas spirit."

## RECOGNIZING 'GOD WITH US'

It is altogether fitting that this should be so. Christmas, after all, is the time of Emmanuel — "God with us." It is the time when the infinite and transcendent God enters into human history as the infant born of Mary at Bethlehem, so that henceforth he may gently guide that history to its fulfillment.

Not without reason do the sacred writers use the imagery of darkness and light to refer to these events.

Isaiah, for example, foretelling it long centuries before it came about, says that *the people that walked in darkness has seen a great light (9:1)*. St. Luke puts into the mouth of Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, a canticle to *the tender mercy of our God who from on high will bring the rising Sun to visit us, to give light to those who live in darkness and the shadow of death (1:78-79)*.

Perhaps its most sublime expression is to be found in the prologue to St. John's Gospel, which speaks of the Word as *the light of men, a light that shines in the dark, a light that darkness could not overpower (1:4-5)*.

And yet — such is the timelessness and universal application of the Gospel message — even that first Christmas was not without its shadows and its forebodings. We are told that Mary gave birth to Jesus in a stable because *'there was no room for them at the inn'* — in other words, they experienced a severe housing shortage.

Because the date on which we celebrate his birth falls in the dead of winter, we have come to visualize the landscape as bleak and snow-covered — in other words, they were cold. Within a very short time, according to St. Matthew, Mary and Joseph were forced to take the child and flee from their homeland into Egypt — in other words, they were victims of political oppression.

Most of us are going to spend Christmas this year, as we have in the past, in cheerful and comfortable homes. We will be surrounded by family and friends, enriched with gifts, enjoying the special dinner that the occasion always brings forth.

This, too, is as it should be — these things are part of the holiday tradition. But because we always tend to perceive reality and the human condition in terms of our own experience do we assume that everybody else is enjoying Christmas in the same way that we are?

There are many — all too many — who will not know any joy this Christmas, and in the months ahead, because they are homeless, or because they live in dwellings that are wretched and grossly inadequate, or because they simply do not have the means to purchase the energy that would keep those dwellings warm.

For these people, unless they have deep faith, Christmas Day may be just one more day of misery and hopelessness like any other.

It is this subject of housing and shelter that I would like you to consider with me briefly as we prepare ourselves for Christmas once again. And in order that we may not consider it in a vacuum, let me begin by giving you some factual background on housing conditions and problems right here in the city of Baltimore.

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not consider it in a vacuum, let me begin by giving you some factual background on housing conditions and problems right here in the city of Baltimore.

Baltimore has in many respects been a model for other American cities in its programs of urban renewal, neighborhood rehabilitation, and public housing, and our local government may justly be proud of its accomplishments in these fields.

**SITUATION FAR FROM IDEAL**

Yet despite all that has been done the situation is very far from being ideal, or even minimally acceptable. For example, there are presently 36,000 people on the city's public-housing waiting list. By 1983 — still four years off — authorities hope to provide housing assistance to an additional 15,560 households, but this is still far short of the number in need of such assistance and it is by no means certain that even this goal can be attained.

Bearing in mind that statistics not only vary but also change, I would point out that in 1978 there were about 291,000 households in Baltimore. Of these, 155,000 — well over half — were lower-income households at or near the recognized poverty level. Some 74,000 of these households were rented; 41,000 were single-parent families; 47,000 were minority households; 98 per cent were black; and 43 per cent of them were inadequately housed by any kind of reasonable minimum standards. It is estimated that at any given time approximately 4,000 people may literally have no shelter at all.

I am giving you statistics, and the worst thing about statistics is that often they mean little in terms of human persons and of their feelings and sufferings. These people are not only poor — many are unemployed, many are ill, many are old, many are small children.

Most of them are living on a minimal fixed income of public assistance in a time of staggering inflation. Despite the mild weather conditions of early winter, experts tell us that the cost of heating oil this year will be at least 80 per cent higher than it was last winter. Most poor people are obviously going to be faced with the bitter choice of using what funds they have either to pay their rent, to buy food, or to keep warm. They cannot possibly do all three, and it is unlikely that they can even afford any two of them.

**TRAPPED BY POVERTY**

The very poor are caught in a vicious cycle from which there does not seem to be any means of escape. As we all know, property values have skyrocketed and high interest rates have made mortgage money virtually unobtainable. These things affect everybody, of course, but nowhere do they impact more starkly than upon the poor.

In such a market they cannot afford to buy homes, and a family driven from its rental unit either by its inadequacy of conditions or by their own failure to pay the rent has nowhere to go but down. Assuming that they can find another rental unit at all, the chances are that it is going to be even worse than the one they left.

This, basically, is what poverty is. Poverty is not just lack of money and of the things that money can buy. At root, it is powerlessness, a lack of options, the inability to make choices. To be poor is to be trapped in a system over which one has no control.

And such a thing is an intolerable affront not only to human dignity, but to any system of Christian values and to any form of government founded on the proposition that all persons are equal and that all have the same inalienable right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Shelter, clothing, food and warmth are not only the most fundamental of human needs — they are essential if human freedom is to be assured. They are owed to every person by the mere fact of humanness and position, however humble that position may be, in society. To the extent that society fails to provide these rights it is falling short of its obligation to those who make it up.

**CONSIDERING GOSPEL PERSPECTIVES**

Now, let us consider this matter in the perspective of the Gospel message. Here I cannot do better than quote the words of our Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, in the homily which he gave at his Mass in Yankee Stadium on Oct. 2, during the course of his visit to this country.

"Social thinking and social practice inspired by the Gospel," the pope said, "must always be marked by a special sensitivity toward those who are most in distress, those who are extremely poor, those suffering from all the physical, mental and moral ills that afflict humanity including hunger, neglect, unemployment and despair. There are many poor people of this sort around the world. There are many in your own midst."

A little later he added, "We cannot stand idly by, enjoying our own riches and freedom if, in any place, the Lazarus of the 20th century stands at our doors. In the light of the parable of Christ, riches and freedom mean a special responsibility. Riches and freedom create a special obligation."

"And so, in the name of the solidarity that binds all together in a common humanity, I again proclaim the dignity of every human person; the rich man and Lazarus are both human beings, both of them equally created in the image and likeness of God,

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## ion of community's shelter needs

both of them equally redeemed by Christ; at a great price, the price of "the precious blood of Christ."

Seldom has the issue been stated more clearly and boldly. Seldom has it been made more binding upon all.

### RICHES AND OBLIGATIONS

When the Holy Father says that "riches and freedom create a special obligation," he does not mean riches in the sense of immense wealth; after all, only a relatively small number of people would fall within that category, and the rest of us could excuse ourselves from the obligation.

What he meant, quite simply, is that I am called upon to share my portion of this world's goods with anyone who has less than I have, or none at all.

To the extent that any one of my brothers and sisters lacks adequate shelter, then we who are one with Jesus in his mystical body, also lack shelter; to the extent that anyone cannot afford to buy fuel oil, then Christ is cold; to the extent that any man or woman has to go without nutritious food, then it is Christ who has to go hungry — and many are familiar with the words which he threatened to speak at the Last Judgment to those who failed to respond to the needs of the least of his brethren. (Matt. 25, 41-46).

It may be argued that he also said, "You have the poor with you always," and that the problem is thus beyond human solution. Even if this were true it would in no sense diminish the obligation we have to share what we have with those who have less. But the words cannot be taken to mean that we simply resign ourselves to the presence of the poor in our midst and do nothing to alleviate their situation.

Christ came to establish his kingdom — yes; but he did not establish it immediately with everything neatly in place and nothing more to be done by anybody else. The kingdom is something we move towards. It culminates in eternity. Meanwhile, we all have the sacred duty to contribute something, each in his or her own way, to bring it about; one of the necessary ways to do this is to express the charity of Christ in a concrete manner to those who are in need of it.

Unfortunately, we live in a culture that cares very little about establishing the kingdom of Christ because it is all too concerned with establishing worldly kingdoms of its own.

### CLASHING OF IDEALS

Often, society measures success by money and power and influence (which are precisely the things that the poor do not have), and unfortunately many look cynically at such old-fashioned virtues as charity, justice, mercy and love. Within our society standards of living seem to be set by television commercials, and our sense of justice seems to be based upon legal — or rather legalistic — interpretation. In such a society, no wonder the poor have no one to speak for them or hear them!

What is needed, therefore, is a complete *metanoia* — a conversion, a radical change in our way of thinking and our life, a return to the basic values of the Gospel. Only then will we begin to see Christ in the poor, and only then will we realize that in serving them we are also serving him.

Such a conversion would transform society in its individual members, and thus have an inevitable effect upon society as a whole.

And this brings me to the other facet of our topic, which is the role that the body politic, or government, is called upon to play in this matter of housing and shelter.

Of course the problem is too big for any individual, or even for any group of individuals. With the best will in the world, and guided by the very loftiest of Christian values, each of us can do only a minimum to help. But each of us must as individuals witness to those fundamental rights and values as expressed in the Gospels.

Beyond individual and private cooperative efforts, government — local, state and federal — must insure that no one of its members is without shelter, and that that shelter is decent and dignified, and that it has whatever adjuncts are needed so that people and families may live in it in safety and reasonable comfort.

### HOUSING CRISIS AT HAND

We face a housing shortage of monumental proportions. I have spoken of Baltimore, but I repeat that Baltimore has done more than most cities, and it should be obvious that the problem is national in scope. In fact evidence indicates that many rural areas are in worse condition than are the cities.

An insufficient supply of shelter units creates crowding — two and three families living in a space sufficient for one. This in turn often leads to unsanitary conditions, illness, disease, the breakdown of family relations, drug addiction, and crime.

Thus while insufficient housing is only one in a large area of problems, there is a sense in which it may be said to be at the root of many others.

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### THREE WAYS TO GO

There are three basic ways to provide shelter for people:

(1) The one which in prior generations was far and away the most common, is home ownership. This is obviously the most beneficial mode, in that it carries with it a sense of personal investment in the community, security, personal responsibility for one's own property, and a feeling of pride.

Home ownership, requires stable employment and an income sufficient to meet the down payment and the obligation of a mortgage extending over a good many years. This mode of shelter has seldom been a viable option for the poor and less fortunate, and it is less so now than ever. What is needed is some assurance of adequate financial well-being or some form of reduced home ownership loan program.

(2) Housing can be constructed, maintained and managed by the public itself, through its government, in the form of public housing. There has always been some criticism of this form of shelter, but the mere fact that 6,000 people here in Baltimore are currently waiting for public housing speaks for itself. It is warm, secure, and it is better maintained than much of the available rental property in our urban areas.

Unfortunately, most public advocacy in the past has been focused on criticizing the administration of existing programs rather than on finding ways to convince our government of the need for greater public housing funds. Without substantial national funding for public housing programs, our cities simply do not have a source of funds with which to undertake such housing projects.

### MORE PUBLIC HOUSING FUNDS

It is highly important that we urge city, state and Federal officials to place a much greater concentration of funds on public housing, since there is little hope that within the next 20 years persons needing public housing will move to a financial level where they will be able to afford homes of their own.

Also, there should be encouragement for public housing to take different forms. For example, here in Baltimore there are some 7,000 vacant houses scattered throughout various parts of the city. If these houses were rehabilitated as individual homes and made part of the city's public housing inventory, they could serve many of the people now on the waiting list without creating the dense concentration of public housing families in one area.

A program might even be developed whereby, if a family was successful enough to exceed public housing income limits, it would have the right to purchase the property under some form of subsidized home ownership loan program.

(3) Finally, shelter can be provided not by private purchase or public funding but by living in a home which is owned by someone else — namely, a "landlord."

In recent years there has been growing antagonism toward the landlord, based in large measure upon very real abuses in the form of poor maintenance and high rents. But it does no good to paint this picture in stark black and white, to portray the landlord always as an unconscionable villain and his tenant as the helpless victim of his greed. Things are not that simple.

Because of the large numbers of people who cannot afford to purchase homes, the

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plain fact of the matter is that we need more rather than less investor housing, and we need more landlords who are decent people seeking reasonable profits.

The role of the landlord cannot be made intolerable. If we do this, we create an atmosphere that will cause lasting damage to the least fortunate members of our community. If the situation of the landlord is intolerable, the housing market for the poor will be further reduced, and the security needed if rental housing is to succeed, will be lost.

We need to encourage decent, reasonable people to be landlords and to invest and maintain properties in the city, so that the housing inventory is increased.

Finally and more immediately, we must take all necessary steps to insure that no member of our community has to be cold this winter because of an inability to purchase energy in whatever form. As I have said, the winter thus far has been a relatively mild one, but past experience indicates that the worst months of the season still lie ahead.

No family unable to afford fuel oil, gas and electricity can be permitted to go without them. Such a failure would imperil health and indeed lives and its most pernicious affect would be on the very old, the very young, and those who are already ill.

#### **PRIVATE AGENCIES HELPING**

Our government is aware of this situation and is taking steps to make considerable public assistance available. Private agencies have also set aside funds to help.

As long as people have no form of payment available, the utility companies have shown a spirit of cooperation in promising that no one's source of energy will be cut off.

But even with all this, the possibility still exists that some families whose incomes are just above the poverty level may not qualify for public assistance and still not be able to afford energy at today's costs.

Here the role of the private agency becomes paramount, and every effort must be made by agencies such as Associated Catholic Charities to see to it that assistance is available and that any family in need can receive help.

When I first learned that I was going to become Archbishop of Baltimore, I naturally spent a considerable amount of time familiarizing myself with the history and traditions, the customs and culture of the city that would henceforth be my adopted home. I learned, of course, what Baltimoreans themselves have known for generations—namely, that it is a city of homes, of blocks of neat row houses with red-brick fronts and white steps, of owners who took solid pride in their property and their neighborhoods.

Historically, the man of the house made sure that it was "kept up," and the housewife scrubbed those white front steps until they fairly glistened in the sunlight. But just as this chauvinistic tradition has changed so too have other changes occurred.

**NEIGHBORHOODS IN DECAY**

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#### NEIGHBORHOODS IN DECAY

Baltimore has seen many of its once prosperous neighborhoods fall into decay. The families that had once occupied those modest but on the whole substantial dwellings had been attracted to the suburbs, or — let us be honest about it — had fled there.

As the city's tax base eroded, essential services were cut back or even cut off. The homes came to be occupied by minority groups and disadvantaged persons who did not have the same financial opportunities as the persons who had lived in them formerly. These new owners and renters were often denied gainful employment, and were thus without the means or even the incentive to keep up their properties in the same way. Thus the process of deterioration kept accelerating, and as the Gospel parable has it, the last state of the house was worse than the first (Matthew 12:43).

When I arrived I naturally had to find a residence, and quite apart from the matter of convenient access to my office, I chose to live in the heart of the city. I chose to live there, so that I could share in the risk and the hope of a city in process of rejuvenating its business and commercial sections and rebuilding its great inner harbor.

#### 'HOPEFUL' FOR RENEWAL

I was hopeful that its neighborhoods could be rescued from the blight that had fallen upon them, so that once again the entire city of Baltimore would be a "city of homes." I still have that hope. I am happy to be a resident of this city, and happy, too, that the archdiocese has been able to play some part in the work of rehabilitation.

I have faith that every house in the city and in the rural areas which are part of the Church of Baltimore can also be a home and a shelter, where people can live in dignity and comfort.

I do not think that this faith is mere blind optimism. It is founded upon the courageous human efforts that we see going on about us all the time, and it has its ultimate roots in that loving Father Who knows all our needs and Who gives us the spiritual resources to cope with them.

From the stable in Bethlehem which was the rudest and least adequate of human shelters, the light of Christ dawned upon the world that first Christmas Day. It has never been extinguished since, and despite all the vicissitudes and setbacks of history, the light of Christ beckons all people for all times.

When it reaches its fullness the Kingdom of Christ will be at hand. In God's Providence it is given to each of us to add some tiny spark to it and thus hasten that day.