

“Who Is My Neighbor?” Catholic Social  
Teaching and the California Housing Crisis

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## Introduction and Background

There are few things that all California politicians can agree on, but one of them is that the state is in the midst of a full-blown housing crisis. More than 40% of California households are “cost-burdened,” meaning that they spend over 30% of their income on housing,<sup>1</sup> and the average price of a home in California has risen above \$700,000 in recent months, more than double the national average.<sup>2</sup> This housing crisis is a major cause of California’s having the highest poverty rate of any state when factors such as cost of living are taken into account.<sup>3</sup>

As such, the housing crisis has become a matter of intense political debate. Many politicians and policymakers agree that increasing housing supply is essential to mitigating the crisis, as California has fewer homes per capita than all but one other state,<sup>4</sup> driving housing prices and rents up. However, efforts to build more housing, particularly more affordable housing, have faced stiff resistance from NIMBY (not in my back yard) activists, who often oppose new housing construction on the grounds that it will alter neighborhood character or lower nearby property values. NIMBYs argue that they do not oppose affordable housing on principle, but they consistently raise objections to new construction in their neighborhoods to the point where it is difficult to build affordable or dense housing *anywhere* in the state. Opponents of the NIMBY movement argue that it is primarily motivated by a thinly veiled fear of having to live near poor and working-class people, and that the desperate need to increase housing supply

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<sup>1</sup> Noah Buhayar and Christopher Cannon, “How California Became America’s Housing Market Nightmare,” *Bloomberg*, November 6, 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2019-california-housing-crisis/>.

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Sheeler and Adam Ashton, “California’s Median Home Price Just Broke a Record. Here’s How Much It Is,” *Sacramento Bee*, September 22, 2020, <https://www.sacbee.com/news/business/article245927860.html#:~:text=The%20report%20stated%20that%20in,according%20to%20the%20department%20report>.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Finch II, “California’s Poverty Rate among Highest in Nation Once Again, New Census Figures Show,” *Sacramento Bee*, September 10, 2019, <https://www.sacbee.com/news/california/article234920662.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Woetzel et al., “A Toolkit to Close California’s Housing Gap: 3.5 Million Homes by 2025,” *McKinsey and Co.*, October 2016, <https://www.mckinsey.com/~media/mckinsey/featured%20insights/Urbanization/Closing%20Californias%20housing%20gap/Closing-Californias-housing-gap-Full-report.ashx>.

and make housing more affordable should take priority over the comfort of wealthy property owners.

I want to use this paper as an opportunity to apply a theological lens to the housing debate in California. My central insight is that the housing crisis is primarily a problem of solidarity. Pope John Paul II describes solidarity as “not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people,” but rather, “a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good...because we are all really responsible for all.”<sup>5</sup> The NIMBY movement is, at its core, a rejection of the very idea of solidarity. The phrase “not in my backyard” itself denies any claim to responsibility for the good of one’s neighbor. The rest of this paper, then, explores what a housing politics that *is* informed by solidarity might look like.

I want to note that I specifically referred to “housing politics” and not “housing policies” in the previous paragraph. Though I will discuss some specific policies that have been proposed as solutions to the housing crisis, this paper is primarily about politics and not policy. More specifically, it discusses who has power in making decisions about housing in California, how Californians frame housing issues in terms of messaging and agenda-setting, whose needs are prioritized and why, and how the principles of Catholic Social Teaching can serve as a blueprint for talking about these issues. Ultimately, this paper develops a six-part framework for considering housing issues in light of Catholic Social Teaching. These six principles are: the recognition of housing as a human right, the option for the poor, a commitment to anti-racism,

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<sup>5</sup> John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 38. All citations of papal encyclicals reference the encyclical’s paragraph number, not page number, and are excerpted from *Catholic Social Thought: A Documentary Heritage*, ed. David J. O’Brien and Thomas A. Shannon (New York: Orbis Books, 2010).

care for Creation, a proper understanding of subsidiarity, and a politics of neighborliness and community-building.

## Discussion

### 1. Housing as a Right

The first step towards a housing politics informed by solidarity is an understanding of housing as a human right, an understanding that has long been present within Catholic Social Teaching. Pope John XXIII, in his 1961 encyclical *Mater et Magistra*,<sup>6</sup> was the first pope to explicitly recognize a right to housing, and the Council Fathers of Vatican II reaffirmed this assertion by including a “right to shelter” in their definition of the common good.<sup>7</sup> The American bishops’ conference has also identified a right to housing in their pastoral letters “Economic Justice for All,”<sup>8</sup> “Homelessness and Housing: A Human Tragedy, A Moral Challenge,”<sup>9</sup> and “The Right to a Decent Home: A Pastoral Response to the Crisis in Housing.”<sup>10</sup> This simple yet profound recognition is essential to improving California’s housing politics—discourse and debate could be improved tremendously if all involved acted on the premise that that housing is a right and that the state has a corresponding duty to ensure that that right is realized. One interesting thing to note here is the difference in wording between a right to *shelter* and a right to *housing*. The American bishops actually go further than the Council Fathers in arguing that a right to housing must go beyond basic shelter; they write: “Shelters

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<sup>6</sup> John XIII, *Mater et Magistra*, 61.

<sup>7</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, 26.

<sup>8</sup> “Economic Justice for All,” *United States Conference of Catholic Bishops*, November 1986, [https://www.usccb.org/upload/economic\\_justice\\_for\\_all.pdf](https://www.usccb.org/upload/economic_justice_for_all.pdf), 17.

<sup>9</sup> “Homelessness and Housing: A Human Tragedy, A Moral Challenge,” *United States Conference of Catholic Bishops*, March 24, 1988, <https://www.usccb.org/resources/homelessness-and-housing-human-tragedy-moral-challenge>, 5.

<sup>10</sup> “The Right to a Decent Home: A Pastoral Response to the Crisis in Housing,” *United States Conference of Catholic Bishops*, November 20, 1975, <https://www.usccb.org/resources/right-decent-home-pastoral-response-crisis-housing>, 7.

cannot substitute for real housing for low-income families and poor individuals. We owe our sisters and brothers more than a cot and a blanket for the night; we owe them a chance for a better life, an opportunity to live a life of dignity in decent housing.”<sup>11</sup> Both the popes and the American bishops have also argued that there are certain groups who should be prioritized in fulfilling a right to housing; specifically mentioned are immigrants and their families,<sup>12</sup> racial and ethnic minorities who have suffered housing discrimination,<sup>13</sup> the elderly,<sup>14</sup> migrant farmworkers,<sup>15</sup> indigenous peoples,<sup>16</sup> and people with disabilities.<sup>17</sup>

The Church has also long recognized that a right to housing should include the possibility of home ownership for a much wider segment of the population than is currently able to access it. In 1891, Pope Leo XIII argued that a minimum wage should be high enough that a worker earning that wage should “not find it difficult, by cutting down expenses, to put by a little property.”<sup>18</sup> This sentiment is echoed by later popes, with Pius XI arguing that a just wage should be enough to “acquire a certain moderate ownership”<sup>19</sup> and John XXIII arguing for “widespread private possession of such things as...homes.”<sup>20</sup> Similarly, the American bishops have lamented that rising housing prices have made homeownership unattainable for many<sup>21</sup> and argued that “the possibility of home ownership for those who desire it should be [an integral

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<sup>11</sup> “Homelessness and Housing,” 11.

<sup>12</sup> John Paul II, *Octogesima Adveniens*, 17.

<sup>13</sup> “The Right to a Decent Home,” 38.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>18</sup> Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, 35.

<sup>19</sup> Pius XI, *Quadragesimo Anno*, 63.

<sup>20</sup> John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra*, 115.

<sup>21</sup> “Solidarity and American Catholics,” *United States Conference of Catholic Bishops*, September 5, 1988, <https://www.usccb.org/resources/labor-day-statement-1988>.

component] of our national housing policy.”<sup>22</sup> In California, where the median home price rose to over \$700,000 in 2020,<sup>23</sup> CST’s ideal of widespread home ownership is far from a reality.

## 2. Option for the Poor

California housing politics suffers from an “option for the wealthy”—that is, the concerns of the wealthy are consistently prioritized over those of other groups. Affordable housing developments are often blocked because wealthy neighbors raise concerns about “neighborhood character” or other coded language that expresses disdain at the prospect of poor people or minorities living in their exclusive neighborhoods. Suburban homeowners’ associations hold outsized influence over the decision-making processes of local governments. Wealthy jurisdictions such as Marin County often lobby for exemptions to state housing laws.<sup>24</sup> Policies such as exclusionary zoning, lot size minimums, and bans on dense housing make it essentially impossible for poor families or individuals to live in certain neighborhoods. One of the most pervasive examples of the “option for the wealthy” in California housing politics is Article 34 of the state constitution, which prohibits the construction of public housing developments unless a majority of voters in the city or county where the proposed development would be located approve it in a referendum. This provision of the constitution has long been a roadblock to the building of state-owned affordable housing.<sup>25</sup> All of this is to say that the desires of the wealthy are given outsized influence in California housing politics.

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<sup>22</sup> “The Right to a Decent Home,” 15.

<sup>23</sup> Sheeler and Ashton, “California’s Median Home Price Just Broke a Record.”

<sup>24</sup> Liam Dillon, “What Housing Crisis? Last-Minute Bill Would Let Wealthy Marin County Limit Home Building,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 22, 2017, <https://www.latimes.com/politics/la-pol-sac-marin-county-housing-cut-20170621-story.html>.

<sup>25</sup> Liam Dillon, “A Dark Side to the California Dream: How the State Constitution Makes Affordable Housing Hard to Build,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 3, 2019, <https://www.latimes.com/politics/la-pol-ca-affordable-housing-constitution-20190203-story.html>.

One potential way that cities in California have addressed the pernicious influence of the option for the wealthy is by changing their zoning laws. Several cities, including Sacramento, Berkeley,<sup>26</sup> Oakland,<sup>27</sup> and South San Francisco,<sup>28</sup> have taken steps to eliminate single-family zoning within the last year. Single-family zoning has historically been used as a way to keep poor people from living in certain neighborhoods, as single-family homes are typically much more expensive to buy or rent than units in multifamily buildings (e.g. duplexes, fourplexes, bungalow courts, or apartments). The vast majority of the land in the Bay Area and other metropolitan areas is zoned for single family housing,<sup>29</sup> which both impedes the construction of new housing to meet California’s supply needs and entrenches existing inequalities among different neighborhoods. Ending single-family zoning is a concrete action that local governments can take to put the needs of lower-income Californians over the comfort of their wealthy neighbors.

Catholic Social Teaching demands that we take seriously the idea that the needs of the poor must be put first in the political process. The option for the poor has deep Scriptural roots and has long been one of the foremost principles of CST. Though I do not have the space to discuss everything that papal encyclicals or bishops conference documents have said about the option for the poor, I do want to draw attention to some excerpts from “Economic Justice for All,” where the American bishops unequivocally declare that “Jesus takes the side of those most in need”<sup>30</sup> and write: “The fulfillment of the basic needs of the poor is of the highest priority.

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<sup>26</sup> Laura Bliss, “The Upzoning Wave Finally Catches Up to California,” *Bloomberg CityLab*, March 1, 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-03-01/california-turns-a-corner-on-single-family-zoning>.

<sup>27</sup> Natalie Orenstein, “Oakland Takes a Step Toward Banning Single-Family Zoning,” *The Oaklandside*, March 17, 2021, <https://oaklandside.org/2021/03/17/oakland-takes-a-step-toward-banning-single-family-zoning/>.

<sup>28</sup> J.K. Dineen, “Bay Area Cities Want to End Single-Family Home Zoning, but Will it Create More Housing?” *San Francisco Chronicle*, February 28, 2021, <https://www.sfchronicle.com/bayarea/article/Bay-Area-cities-want-to-end-single-family-home-15983648.php>.

<sup>29</sup> Bliss, “The Upzoning Wave Finally Catches Up to California.”

<sup>30</sup> “Economic Justice for All,” 16.

Personal decisions, policies of private and public bodies, and power relationships must all be evaluated by their effects on those who lack the minimum necessities of nutrition, housing, education, and health care.”<sup>31</sup> California housing politics must be transformed in such a way that the needs of the poor are prioritized over the profits of developers or the comfort of wealthy residents.

### 3. A Commitment to Anti-Racism in Housing

America has long been plagued with racial discrimination in housing policy and politics, and California is no exception. California voters overwhelmingly voted to repeal the state’s Fair Housing Act, which prohibited discriminatory housing practices, in 1964.<sup>32</sup> California cities were heavily “redlined” during the early 20th century, blocking Black Californians from home ownership.<sup>33</sup> The effects of redlining persist today; residents of formerly redlined neighborhoods suffer from poor health outcomes<sup>34</sup> and intergenerational poverty<sup>35</sup> at higher rates than residents of other neighborhoods.

A truly Catholic housing politics must contain a strong commitment to anti-racism; it must go beyond simply avoiding discrimination and instead work towards actively undoing the harm brought about by generations of systemic racism. The American bishops, in their 1979 pastoral letter “Brothers and Sisters to Us,” recognize the need for affirmatively furthering racial justice and write that “protestations claiming that all persons should be treated equally reflect the

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>32</sup> Ryan Reft, “How Prop 14 Shaped California’s Racial Covenants,” *KCET*, September 20, 2017, <https://www.kcet.org/shows/city-rising/how-prop-14-shaped-californias-racial-covenants>.

<sup>33</sup> Matthew Green, “How Government Redlining Maps Pushed Segregation in California Cities,” *KQED*, April 27, 2016, <https://www.kqed.org/lowdown/18486/redlining>.

<sup>34</sup> Anthony Nardone et al., “Associations Between Historical Residential Redlining and Current Age-Adjusted Rates of Emergency Department Visits Due to Asthma Across Eight Cities in California: An Ecological Study,” *The Lancet Planetary Health* 4, no. 1 (2020), [https://doi.org/10.1016/s2542-5196\(19\)30241-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/s2542-5196(19)30241-4).

<sup>35</sup> Emily Badger, “How Redlining’s Racist Effects Lasted for Decades,” *New York Times*, August 24, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/24/upshot/how-redlinings-racist-effects-lasting-for-decades.html>.



desire to maintain a status quo that favors one race and social group at the expense of the poor and the nonwhite...An honest look at the past makes plain the need for restitution wherever possible - makes evident the justice of restoration and redistribution.”<sup>36</sup> In “The Right to a Decent Home,” they apply this framework to the specific issue of housing and write: “The housing needs of racial minorities remain critical and the unfulfilled dream of open housing cannot be abandoned. An absence of racial discrimination is no longer enough. We must insist upon effective programs to remedy past injustice.”<sup>37</sup> In practice, this would look like an active commitment to decreasing residential segregation, ending exclusionary zoning, and enacting programs that specifically help people of color secure quality, affordable housing.

#### 4. Care for Creation

In recent years, YIMBY (yes in my back yard) organizations have raised awareness of the reality that the housing crisis is also an environmental issue. Decades of suburbanization have increased Californians’ dependence on cars. Transportation, led by passenger vehicles, is now the largest source of carbon emissions in the state, and Californians’ average VMT (vehicle miles traveled) reached an all-time high in 2017.<sup>38</sup> As housing costs rise in central cities, more and more residents are pushed out to cheaper exurbs, where their long commutes by car become a significant source of air pollution.

Those involved in housing policy can combat this pollution and dependence on cars by both increasing housing density in central cities and by incentivizing transit-oriented development. Increasing density in central cities would make it so that more people can live in

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<sup>36</sup> “Brothers and Sisters to Us,” *United States Conference of Catholic Bishops*, 1979, <https://www.usccb.org/committees/african-american-affairs/brothers-and-sisters-us>.

<sup>37</sup> “The Right to a Decent Home,” 38.

<sup>38</sup> “2019 California Green Innovation Index,” *Next 10*, October 8, 2019, <https://www.next10.org/publications/2019-gii>.

walkable neighborhoods and have shorter commutes to work—previous research has shown that central city neighborhoods have significantly lower carbon emissions per capita than suburban neighborhoods.<sup>39</sup> Transit-oriented development, or building dense housing close to train stations and major bus lines, has also been shown to reduce residents' average VMT in studies conducted in the Bay Area.<sup>40</sup> By allowing more people to live closer to public transit, transit-oriented development decreases dependence on cars as a primary method of transportation.

The most comprehensive attempt at increasing transit-oriented development in California was Senator Scott Wiener's (D–San Francisco) Senate Bill 50. SB 50 was introduced in some form for three consecutive years, but the latest version of the bill was voted down in January 2020. SB 50 would have allowed the state to override local zoning ordinances in some cases, allowing the construction of multi-family housing in places that were previously zoned for single-family housing. It would have eliminated single-family zoning and increased height restrictions near public transportation and job centers in large counties, legalized the construction of fourplexes throughout the state, and loosened regulations on the construction of multifamily housing.<sup>41</sup> The bill was voted down by most of the Republican caucus and some of the Democratic caucus. For those who supported attempts to increase housing density and promote transit-oriented development, SB 50's failure was deeply disappointing.

Pope Francis's *Laudato Si* impresses upon Catholics the urgency of confronting the climate crisis. One of Francis's central insights in *Laudato Si* is that the climate crisis is a

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<sup>39</sup> Christopher Jones and Daniel M. Kammen, "Spatial Distribution of U.S. Household Carbon Footprints Reveals Suburbanization Undermines Greenhouse Gas Benefits of Urban Population Density," *Environmental Science and Technology* 48, no. 2 (2014), <https://doi.org/10.1021/es4034364>.

<sup>40</sup> Terry Parker et al., "Statewide Transit-Oriented Development Study: Factors for Success in California," *California Department of Transportation*, 2002, <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/454e/c87efa0b1ae25ed14781aef9776303b57a9e.pdf>.

<sup>41</sup> SB 50 (Wiener): Planning and Zoning: Housing Development: Streamlined Approval: Incentives, California 2019 Session, [https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill\\_id=201920200SB50](https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=201920200SB50).

product of a throwaway culture where human beings and the rest of Creation are treated as disposable, and that trying to address climate change without addressing this underlying problem will ultimately prove futile. The same can be said for the intersection of the climate crisis and the housing crisis. The post-World War II wave of suburbanization was largely brought about because of a throwaway culture—it was rooted in white flight, disdain at the prospect of living near poor people, making an idol of rising property values, and a general attitude of self-interest as opposed to solidarity. Addressing the environmental aspects of housing requires confronting this throwaway culture head-on. A housing politics informed by Catholic Social Teaching recognizes that opposition to environmentally just housing policy is often, though not always, rooted in a mindset of treating poor people and people of color as disposable. Rather than treating racial injustice, the housing crisis, and climate change as completely separate issues, Catholic Social Teaching helps us understand how they are all related and gives us a framework for fighting against the throwaway culture at their source.

#### 5. A Proper Understanding of Subsidiarity

Subsidiarity is the principle of Catholic Social Teaching that holds that those closest to a particular issue of injustice should have a primary role in developing solutions, and that such issues should be addressed locally when possible, rather than by larger institutions. However, CST does not hold this principle as absolute; it recognizes that larger institutions can and often should step in when local institutions have failed to promote the common good. Pope John Paul II articulates a proper understanding of subsidiarity in his encyclical *Centesimus Annus*, writing that “a community of a higher order should not interfere in the internal life of a community of a lower order, depriving the latter of its functions, but rather should support it in case of need and help to coordinate its activity with the activities of the rest of society, always with a view to the

common good”<sup>42</sup> while also recognizing that “the more that individuals are defenseless within a given society, the more they require the care and concern of others, and in particular the intervention of governmental authority.”<sup>43</sup>

NIMBY activists often invoke the idea of “local control” in their arguments against increasing housing density, but their arguments are based on a superficial understanding of subsidiarity that does not acknowledge the right and duty of larger institutions to step in when local institutions have failed to correct an injustice. It is certainly true that in an ideal world, local institutions would be the ones to decide how to increase access to affordable housing in a way that works best for their specific communities, because, for example, an approach that works well at increasing housing affordability in South LA might not work as well in the rural Northstate. However, local governments in wealthy municipalities have so frequently invoked the “local control” argument in bad faith that it now falls upon the state to step in and act as it sees fit. Marin County officials, for instance, have described recent state mandates to increase housing supply as “a frightening situation” that “take[s] local decision-making out of land use planning”<sup>44</sup> even as the average monthly rent for a studio apartment in the county approaches \$2000.<sup>45</sup> “Local control,” in reality, is often about the ability to remain an exclusive community. A housing politics informed by CST would give local jurisdictions the freedom necessary to meet the needs of their unique communities while at the same time giving the state the ability to step in and correct course if those local authorities are not acting according to the option for the poor.

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<sup>42</sup> John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, 48.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>44</sup> Richard Halstead, “Marin Supervisors Push Back Against Huge State Housing Mandate,” *Marin Independent Journal*, January 30, 2021, <https://www.mercurynews.com/2021/01/30/marin-supervisors-push-back-against-huge-state-housing-mandate/>.

<sup>45</sup> Dillon, “What Housing Crisis?”

## 6. A Politics of Neighborliness and Community-Building

The parable of the Good Samaritan places demands on who Christians should consider to be their “neighbors” and how they should treat them. The parable shows us the necessity of expanding our definition of “neighbor” to include the “other,” those who are looked down upon or treated as disposable, and that we should treat those people with the same mercy with which the Samaritan treated the traveler. It is an undeniable truth that some people involved in debates about housing in California are uncomfortable at the idea of considering poor people to be their neighbors. In a literal sense, NIMBYs who are opposed to building affordable housing or homeless shelters in their neighborhoods are motivated by not wanting poor people to physically become their neighbors. In a broader sense, though, California housing politics suffers from a pervasive idea that there are certain categories of people who are not “neighbors” and who do not deserve the same access to quality affordable housing that others do. There is very little sense of shared destiny, interconnectedness, or solidarity, only the pursuit of self-interest. Changing this attitude will require a change of heart on the part of policymakers and citizens alike.

Pope Francis has repeatedly written about the need to consider community-building a primary goal in the areas of housing and urban planning. He points out that “houses and neighbourhoods are more often built to isolate and protect than to connect and integrate,”<sup>46</sup> a criticism of both residential segregation and the general attitudes of “us versus them” that are so prevalent in debates about housing. Francis believes that such attitudes of fear and isolation are not inevitable, but rather, that policymakers and residents can overcome them by considering human connection and relationship in everything that they do, particularly in the context of urban design. He writes: “How beautiful are those cities which overcome paralysing mistrust, integrate

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<sup>46</sup> Francis, *Evangeli Gaudium*, 75.

those who are different and make this very integration a new factor of development! How attractive are those cities which, even in their architectural design, are full of spaces which connect, relate, and favour the recognition of others!”<sup>47</sup> A recognition of “neighborliness” is essential to overcoming the paralyzing mistrust that Francis speaks of, particularly when one considers that neighborhoods that are specifically *not* integrated with the rest of a city are often seen as more desirable due to their exclusivity. Francis also recognizes that, for a politics of neighborliness to develop, residents must practice solidarity with those who are not their physical “neighbors.” He writes: “It is important that the different parts of a city be well integrated and that those who live there have a sense of the whole, rather than being confined to one neighbourhood and failing to see the larger city as space which they share with others...Others will then no longer be seen as strangers, but as part of a ‘we’ which all of us are working to create.”<sup>48</sup>

Pope John Paul II’s writings about solidarity help us to ground these ideas in a theological context of self-sacrificial love for one’s neighbor. He writes that many of the problems in modern society can be traced back to the temptations of profit and power, and that such temptations “are only conquered—presupposing the help of divine grace—by a diametrically opposed attitude: a commitment to the good of one’s neighbor with the readiness, in the Gospel sense, to ‘lose oneself’ for the sake of the other instead of exploiting him.”<sup>49</sup> Recognizing that true solidarity is only present when people acknowledge each other’s inherent dignity and overcome dehumanization, he writes that “Solidarity helps us to see the ‘other’... not just as some kind of instrument, with a work capacity and physical strength to be exploited at a

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 210.

<sup>48</sup> Francis, *Laudato Si*, 151.

<sup>49</sup> John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 38.

low cost and then discarded when no longer useful, but as our ‘neighbor,’ a ‘helper,’ to be made a sharer, on a par with ourselves, in the banquet of life to which all are equally invited by God.”<sup>50</sup> This calls to mind Francis’s condemnation of the “throwaway culture” that exacerbates both the environmental crisis and the housing crisis. John Paul ultimately grounds these concepts of solidarity and neighborliness in Trinitarian love, writing: “One’s neighbor is then not only a human being with his or her own rights and a fundamental equality with everyone else, but becomes the living image of God the Father, redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ, and placed under the permanent action of the Holy Spirit. One’s neighbor must therefore be loved, even if an enemy, with the same love with which the Lord loves him or her.”<sup>51</sup> It is important to notice the use of the word “neighbor” in each of the above passages—while Francis uses this language to discuss how different parts of a city might be integrated with each other, John Paul uses the same language to consider how each of us as individuals can better practice solidarity with those around us. When the insights of both popes are integrated, they provide a framework for a theology that can combat a housing politics based on the option for the wealthy, racial discrimination, and a throwaway culture and move towards a politics based on solidarity, community flourishing, and love for one’s neighbor.

One proposed policy that could promote a politics of neighborliness is the idea of social housing. Broadly speaking, social housing is housing that is funded, built, and maintained by a government agency, but it differs from current models of public housing in one key aspect—it is intended for people of any income level.<sup>52</sup> The mixed-income nature of social housing developments serves multiple purposes. For one, a mixed-income development is more

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>52</sup> Madelyn Reese, “San Jose Lawmaker Proposes Revolutionary Social Housing Policy,” *San Jose Spotlight*, February 6, 2021, <https://sanjosespotlight.com/san-jose-lawmaker-proposes-revolutionary-social-housing-policy/>.

financially stable than one exclusively targeted at low-income renters. In most social housing models, higher-income residents pay higher rents than lower-income ones (a gap sometimes called the “solidarity rent”), which helps cover costs that could not be met if the development were only relying on collecting low rents from poorer residents.<sup>53</sup> The other benefit of mixed-income social housing is that the integration of residents across socio-economic divides can promote a sense of community and solidarity. As Francis notes, neighborhoods today are often defined by exclusion and isolation; social housing developments would be defined by integration. Such integration can foster a spirit of encounter and unity among people of all socio-economic statuses. Earlier in this section I discussed how CST calls us to reconsider who we consider to be our “neighbor,” such that we view the marginalized and excluded as our neighbors and treat them with the self-sacrificial love John Paul describes. It is easier for middle-class and wealthy people to consider marginalized people as neighbors if they are actually living in the same development, as social housing proposes.

California policymakers are just starting to consider how to possibly implement social housing programs in the state. Assemblymembers Alex Lee (D–San Jose) and Buffy Wicks (D–Oakland) introduced a bill earlier this year that would establish a council to study the issue of social housing, but the bill is light on details and the council’s recommendations are not binding. Still, it is a promising start. Advocates often point to the success other countries, particularly Austria and Singapore, have had at implementing social housing programs.<sup>54</sup> Within the U.S., Maryland is likely the furthest along of any state in its attempt to implement social housing—its

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<sup>53</sup> Galen Herz, “Social Housing Is Becoming a Mainstream Policy Goal in the U.S.,” *Jacobin*, February 21, 2021, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2021/02/social-housing-public-affordable-california-maryland>.

<sup>54</sup> Reese, “San Jose Lawmaker Proposes Revolutionary Social Housing Policy.”



state legislature is in its third year of working on a social housing bill, and advocates are hopeful of its chances at success.

### **Conclusion**

The ultimate demand of Catholic Social Teaching with regard to the California housing crisis is that we move from a politics of “us versus them” to a politics of solidarity, a politics informed by love for one’s neighbor rather than by the unbridled pursuit of self-interest. The American bishops reminded us in 1998 that “the first human problem Jesus faced on earth was a lack of shelter”<sup>55</sup> and called us to show neighborly love to those people, created in the image and likeness of God, for whom lack of affordable housing is a source of suffering in their lives. As such, addressing the housing crisis should be a priority for Catholics across the state.

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<sup>55</sup> “Homelessness and Housing,” 14.

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