

# EDITORIAL

## ADDRESSING THE HUMAN ENVIRONMENT

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A British friend of ours once found herself living in a suburb in New Jersey, after emigrating with her husband when he landed an academic job in the area. During the day her spouse drove into the office and learned to adapt himself to a new work environment. She meanwhile remained at home with their four young children, unable to travel anywhere except on foot, as they could not afford a second car. Thus she confronted the awful isolation of living in an environment which during the day was completely devoid of human contact. Literally everyone in her immediate neighborhood commuted into work. Those with children left them in daycare centers. The elderly were in nursing homes, since their relatives could not spare the time to care for them.

The theme of “Home and Neighborhood” touches on, among other things, the limitations of the nuclear family in an economic environment which has undermined the meaning of the human home. Extended family members, such as grandparents and aunts and cousins, are inevitably left behind in a society as mobile as ours (and of course even the “nuclear family” has today been largely dissolved by divorce and unmarried parenthood). It also refers to the surrounding community of neighbors and friends. This wider community is traditionally part of what we mean by “home.” Writing as a Brit, I have always seen it as something that Americans are particularly good at. Englishmen seal themselves away behind high hedges and fences. I realize it is largely an illusion, but American suburbs look to us like parks, with their large, welcoming houses set amidst extensive lawns, the boundaries between each person’s property barely marked, as if privacy and even ownership mattered little. Until you confront, as our friend did, the reality of suburban living devoid of human contact.

More generally, the issues raised by urban living, whether in the centers of great cities, or in the “suburbs” that grow around them, or (alternatively) the shanty-towns, ghettos, favelas, and slums, are increasingly important now that, for the first time in human history, more than half of the world’s population dwells in cities. And as we know, that population is growing rapidly, as are the problems of extreme poverty in parts of the world threatened by war, political instability, economic debt, and environmental disaster. Any existing social problems are inevitably multiplied by the kind of magnification we are now seeing in our urban environments.

It is easy to lose sight of one’s priorities, and every generalization will obscure a great deal of importance. Nevertheless, Pope Francis has picked out two aspects of the problem that may help us to narrow the compass of this particular issue and find some themes we can at least begin to confront.

In a long interview with Eugenio Scalfari,<sup>1</sup> the Pope spoke as follows. “The most serious evils currently afflicting the world are unemployment among the young and the solitude in which the elderly are left. The elderly need care and companionship; the young need work and hope. However, they have neither the one nor the other, and

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<sup>1</sup> Published Tuesday, October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2013, in the Italian daily *La Repubblica* and republished by *L’Osservatore Romano*.

the trouble is that they no longer looking for them. They have been enslaved by the present.”

Youth unemployment, solitude of the elderly: two problems in search of a connection, which he identifies as “enslavement to the present.” It is a profound intuition, to which we will return. It links the young and the old, and the present moment in which they both dwell but which has become for them a form of slavery. This is not the “present” of our encounter with God in his *nunc stans*, his eternal presence. It is the false present that has shrunk down to nothing, and been rendered meaningless. In such a present nothing is really possible, no creativity can find an aperture. The present has become a closed box, or, worse, a solid particle inside which we are trapped, unable to move or breathe.

How did this happen? To whom are we enslaved? Who has taken away our liberty to love and to work? How do we break free?

### **Submerged in Suburbia**

The “suburbs” originated as planned urban development. Not everyone could live in the center of town. Not everyone would want to. The center is, perhaps, the place you might go to work at the palace or court or main squares, or at the harbor perhaps, only to retreat whenever possible back to a comfortable villa and the delights of family life. It happened a long time ago, as a letter from a suburbanite to the King of Persia testifies in cuneiform in 539 BC. “Our property seems to me the most beautiful in the world. It is so close to Babylon that we enjoy all the advantages of the city, and yet when we come home we stay away from all the noise and dust.”

Suburbs surrounding cities are today increasingly dominated by malls, gas stations, fast food outlets, entertainment complexes, and even office buildings. City centers have languished, high streets have suffered from the impact of the economic crisis, while information technology makes it possible for more people to work from home. By 2000, about half the population of the United States was already living in suburbs. But the suburbs themselves are being submerged by the forces that threaten even this ancient way of life: the forces of the megacity. Globally, whether in Tokyo or Mumbai or Rio, complex cities floating in sprawling slums are on the rise,<sup>2</sup> though the possible effects of rising sea levels and changing economic circumstances remain to be seen. In fact the whole direction of this trend is hard to predict, and so in our work we want to concentrate not on these but on some underlying principles that might guide our policies and responses.<sup>3</sup>

Concerns for the welfare of the people in search of work, but crammed into cities where neighborhood and the bonds of the extended family are easily dissolved, are reflected in the “New Urbanist” movement that developed in the US from the mid-1980s, inspired by earlier works by Jane Jacobs (*The Death and Life of Great*

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<sup>2</sup> Smaller, more concentrated, efficient cities like Singapore or Dubai do better in economic and perhaps social justice terms, but their success is often due to particular and sometimes fragile circumstances such as oil wealth. And where the population has a choice, other trends reveal themselves – towards dispersion again, into “garden cities” and “new towns” that offer a refuge from the worst crowding, pollution, and crime.

<sup>3</sup> See [www.newgeography.com/content/001722-urban-legends-why-suburbs-not-dense-cities-are-future](http://www.newgeography.com/content/001722-urban-legends-why-suburbs-not-dense-cities-are-future).

*American Cities*) and others including Christopher Alexander and Leon Krier. The 1993 *Charter of the New Urbanism* states: “We advocate the restructuring of public policy and development practices to support the following principles: neighborhoods should be diverse in use and population; communities should be designed for the pedestrian and transit as well as the car; cities and towns should be shaped by physically defined and universally accessible public spaces and community institutions; urban places should be framed by architecture and landscape design that celebrate local history, climate, ecology, and building practice.”

Many of the books reviewed in the current issue of *Humanum* are influenced by this movement, which in places has been hugely successful and has undoubtedly contributed to the improvement of many lives. In England I will only mention one rather instructive example, sponsored by Prince Charles, the heir to the throne, whose advocacy of many of these principles and ideas (sustainability, community, tradition, along with organic farming and alternative medicine) is well known to those who have studied his charitable activities. What the Prince commissioned in this case, from Leon Krier and others of the New Urbanist circle, was an artificial village. But Poundbury in Dorset, near Dorchester, founded in 1993, is not an unmixed success. One should really call it an experiment, not least because it is still incomplete.<sup>4</sup>

Poundbury’s critics can be unkind. One of them writes: “You know where this falls apart. The heart of every English village is the church, the churchyard, the mossy gravestones. In Poundbury there are vicarages, alms houses, manor houses, but no churches. No church towers, no lead to nick [steal], no wilting flowers in jamjars, no Eleanor Rigby. It is a cynical attempt to recreate a new class structure, a new them and us, and if it succeeds it will be the end of England.”<sup>5</sup>

This plays on the very real resentment some people feel towards the Royal Family and the remains of the English class structure, but it makes a particularly perceptive point. Though the Prince is well known for his advocacy of faith traditions, including Christianity, Poundbury is so far churchless and in a sense therefore soulless. You cannot create community merely by arranging spaces and access points and regulating the flow of traffic, if there is nothing to bring people together except shopping, or socializing with the class of person you aspire to be, whether in well-heeled gastropubs or on hoodie-haunted street corners. You need common projects, common aims, and in the end, common worship.

### **A Culture of Encounter**

In an important article for *Nuntium* (the journal of the Pontifical Lateran University), written when he was Archbishop of Buenos Aires, Jorge Bergoglio addressed the cultural crisis of Latin America. In it he referred to a phenomenon he called “orphanage,” which I think applies far beyond the American continent to the entire modern world – and has particular relevance to the theme of the present issue of *Humanum*. It lies behind the comments made in the interview cited earlier.

“Uprooting has also grown along with discontinuity. We can place this in three areas: spatial, existential, and spiritual. The relationship between man and his

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<sup>4</sup> See [www.livablecities.org/node/541](http://www.livablecities.org/node/541) and [www.poundbury.info](http://www.poundbury.info).

<sup>5</sup> [www.savetruro.co.uk/2011/10/29/poundbury-where-the-past-is-waiting-in-the-future](http://www.savetruro.co.uk/2011/10/29/poundbury-where-the-past-is-waiting-in-the-future).

vital space has been broken, as a result of the current dynamic of fragmentation and the segmentation of human groups. The identity dimension of man with his environment, with his land, with his community is lost. The city is being populated by ‘non-places,’ void spaces exclusively submitted to instrumental logic, deprived of symbols and references that contribute to the construction of communal identities.”<sup>6</sup>

The future pope goes on to emphasize the loss of spatial and temporal “belonging,” normally expressed in a shared memory and a common project, which help to establish a sense of identity as part of the community – cutting out at the same time those symbolic references or windows towards the transcendent that used to be present and without which there can be no sense of unifying truth, or a common search for some underlying reality. “With the experience of orphanage and uprooting, women and men lose their points of reference within their place and time, the root from which they stand and observe their reality. Relativism emerges as the outlook of social life and political work.”<sup>7</sup>

The effect of this relativism is to intensify the individualism that already fragments us. “Individual interests have priority over common interests, the common good. Then they are divided into the various private interests that arise from a bad analysis of the reality in which they are living.”<sup>8</sup> At the same time, paradoxically, it homogenizes thought and eliminates diversity. Its disintegrating power “reduces people to their economic dimension, and the capacity for transformative action is reduced to the roles of consumers of merchandise.”<sup>9</sup> Here “transformative action” can stand also for cultural creativity. The underlying thought is that by being cut off from others, the essential relationality of the person is being attacked at root, along with our essential humanity, manifested in receiving and self-giving and therefore as creative participation in tradition.

From here Bergoglio moves to propose a “culture of encounter.” He is thinking globally, but what he says is directly applicable at the local level – not least because most encounters happen locally! What is required for a true encounter, apart from proximity? For Bergoglio it is essential to share a common ethics or at least a moral dimension, plus “the openness towards a destiny of plenitude that defines man as a spiritual being.” In other words, we need to be open to a relationship with our fellow man in charity and in hope.

This relationship is under attack whenever we pay more attention to our TV or computer than to our neighbor across the way, or when we move house so often we never have time to form a community. Today, there are still many places where the word “neighborhood” means yard sales and lemonade stands and barbecues. But elsewhere, many of us live in such a state of fear that our children are increasingly forbidden to walk to school or to play outside without supervision.

## **Liberation in the Moment**

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<sup>6</sup> From the English translation in *Humanitas: Christian Anthropological and Cultural Review*, No. 4 (Santiago: Pontifical Catholic University of Chile, 2013), p. 259.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 260.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 265.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 260.

The key to liberation from the “slavery” imposed on both young and old is the same: a bursting open of the trap – which can only be done by the creative spirit of charity and mercy. It is not enough to “create jobs” in order to ensure that young people are able to preoccupy themselves peacefully with the enjoyment of consumer goods into the indefinite future. Nor is it enough to insist on better care – and more home-based care – of the elderly, whether controlled by the family (with the government in the background keeping an eye on things) or directly by the State. In any case, falling birthrates in some parts of the world suggest there will not be enough young people to support an economy that bears the burden of an ageing population. These things cannot be forced, but must emerge spontaneously from the love within families, a love that does not count the cost, and simply responds to personal need in the moment itself.

If young and old are suffering, because through lack of meaningful work and meaningful relationships they both receive the message that human life itself lacks all meaning other than the pleasure we can take from it, then we are on the road to civilizational suicide. That is surely not the case, for we have not been abandoned completely to our own devices. It is, however, one wake-up call among many others that have been given in recent years. And our built environment not only conditions our human interactions, but expresses, physically, the way that we as human beings are interacting. It is therefore up to us to make sure it expresses human solidarity, rather than inhuman fragmentation.