Cardinal's Statement on Open Housing

I have also requested the General Assembly of Maryland to pass state-wide legislation prohibiting discrimination in housing, and I have given my support to such legislation as House Bill 332 introduced in the last session of the General Assembly, as well as its counterpart in the State Senate.

I am aware that the Baltimore metropolitan community includes more than the geographical confines of Baltimore City. I understand full well that the political subdivisions surrounding Baltimore City should act in a timely fashion to adopt state occupancy legislation such as that which is pending before you, but I am equally aware of the fact that the percentage of the Negro population in these surrounding political subdivisions is so small as to forestall prompt passage of such legislation.

The legislative remedy must be applied in the areas where the social sickness is most apparent. This means, of course, that Baltimore City must take the leadership in providing metropolitan-wide open occupancy legislation. If such political subdivisions were to await the action of the other, the mounting tensions brought about by crowded conditions may possibly explode before a unanimous consensus is arrived at. Accordingly, I call upon this Body to act in accordance with the Fair Housing Ordinance before you. I am mindful of the pressures under which you find yourselves. I know that there exists within your body a desire for statesmanship like leadership.

I pledge you my support and the support of the Archdiocese of Baltimore in seeking and encouraging the passage of similar legislation in the political subdivisions surrounding our beloved City. I am aware of the arguments that are made about the possibilities of a population which may desert our City, and I am equally aware of the inequity that may be visited upon some of those developers who have made their commitments to build within Baltimore City and who may find themselves placed at a great economic disadvantage in the event that some of the dire predictions about urban flight to the suburbs should come to pass.

The heart of the race problem is a moral issue. Even if the percentage of the Negro population in Baltimore City were extremely small, rather than in excess of the one-third figure, the justice of the proposal before you would be unaffected. The argument for justice, however, coupled with the practical consideration of tensions, unrest, and potential massive resort to law-breaking, gives added impetus to the critical nature of the proposal before you.

I pledge you that this fight for social justice will not be placed upon your shoulders alone, but that the teaching and pastoral capacities of the Catholic Church will support you in what I ask you to do.

I call upon you, then, to make this a matter of civic and social responsibility so as to render to the minorities their rights, and to assist Baltimore in the growth which we mutually desire to see.
Backed by Press

Fair Housing Defeated

By NCWC News Service

The Baltimore City fair housing bill backed by Lawrence Cardinal Shehan was defeated this week by the City Council in a 13-8 vote.

Cardinal Shehan was the first speaker at a meeting of the Baltimore City Council.

The Cardinal testified to jitters and qualms from a boisterous minority segment of the audience.

More than 2,000 persons attended the hearing, held in the War Memorial Building, to consider the provisions of a bill introduced by Thomas J. D'Alessandro III, president of the City Council.

Mr. D'Alessandro's bill was designed to forbid discrimination in the sale or rental of housing in Baltimore.

James W. House, chairman of the Greater Baltimore Committee and "floor leader" for the bill's proponents, introduced Cardinal Shehan.

About half the audience rose and clapped as the 67-year-old prelate walked to the microphone. Others booed until the chairman silenced them.

CARDINAL SHEHAN said there is an "overwhelming persuasive moral argument" in support of fair housing legislation. He warned his audience of the "extreme potentialities of the ghettos."

He asked the City Council to give leadership to the country by passing fair housing legislation first. "The legislative remedy," he said, "must be applied in the areas where the social sickness is most apparent."

Cardinal Shehan pledged his personal support and that of the Archdiocese of Baltimore in achieving passage of similar laws throughout the state.

The Cardinal was escorted from the hall by police as the audience once again divided between jitters and cheers.


A speaker among the opponents of the bill was a clergyman. The Rev. Robert T. Woodworth, who described himself as a "humble parish priest," spoke out against the participation of his fellow clergymen in what he termed a "strictly political matter."

Reverend Woodworth said the only moral issue involved was that of "individual property." He organized the clergy to try to "bribe" the people themselves more constructively with such problems as the "scanty of excessive taxation," "ban-the-bitte in schools," "fillth in the mass media," and "protection of communities here at home."

The Cardinal discounted a telephone threat on his life made before he appeared at the hearing.

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The Baltimore Sun, Jan. 14, 1946

Fair Housing

Like many members of the City Council, we are shocked by the hostility which accompanied its appearance before that body this week of Cardinal Shehan.

The Cardinal appeared at the open hearings in the War Memorial Building, dressed in the plain garb of a parish priest, to lend the full weight of his spiritual authority to the fair housing measure which is now under consideration.

Regardless of one's views on this highly controversial measure, it would seem only common decency to give full and open-minded attention to the views of the churchmen.

Cardinal Shehan stated the crux of the issue in a few, brief, well-chosen words when he spoke of the "overwhelming persuasive moral argument" in favor of fair housing legislation, and went on to warn the City Council members against "the explosive potentialities of the ghettos."

"Fair housing, bestial at the last session of the Council, has now gone for it this time—including not only the full weight of the Cardinal's support, but also the courageous leadership of City Council President Thomas J. D'Alessandro III.

It is our hope that they will prevail over the forces of inertia, apathy, and ignorance.

News American, Jan. 15, 1946
The Vote on Open Housing

There's a feeling of sadness, mixed with a feeling of shame, over the failure of the City Council to put Baltimore on the side of human justice. All forms of racial discrimination are less than moral, and to an increasing degree courts and Congress are making them less than legal.

The City Council has turned away from the morality of the issue and it has failed to establish legal protection against the violation of human rights. Given a choice between unrestricted property use and human dignity, the Council has aligned itself with property. This materialistic approach is as disturbing, in some ways, as is the denial of human justice on a broad scale.

Thoughtful citizens are disturbed, too, by the rushing maneuver that caused open housing to be defeated without full discussion. Citizens are disturbed by the failure of some of the Councilmen who voted against the measure to explain their reasons. The atmosphere of cynicism that has enveloped City Hall might have been dissipated by candor.

The casting of a vote, particularly when a grave moral question is at issue, is a matter for the conscience of each member of the City Council. But once he has satisfied his conscience he has a further duty, as a public servant, to give his reasons for resisting the forward movement of charity and human dignity.