



# Monsignor Michael Groden, pastor, fervent facilitator of affordable housing



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**Michael Groden, general director of the Planning Office for Urban Affairs of the Archdiocese, points to a rendering of Rollins Square in the South End.**

By [Bryan Marquard](#)

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The word “mixed” in mixed-income housing should be taken as gospel truth, Monsignor Michael Groden believed. He wanted middle-income homeowners on the same floor as those

paying the full market rate in a development — and he thought the better off and the poorest, subsidized residents should live side-by-side.

During 35 years directing the Boston Archdiocese's Planning Office for Urban Affairs, he helped create some 3,000 units of mixed-income housing in more than two dozen developments — from the inner-city to well-appointed suburbs such as Beverly and Scituate, where subsidized-housing families often weren't welcome. He was a driving force behind Northridge in Beverly, a pioneering development that rose after the Legislature approved Chapter 40B, the so-called anti-snob zoning law that makes it easier for developers to construct affordable housing.

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“When you are building low-income housing in the suburbs, nobody wants to bring ‘those people’ to their community,” he told the Globe in 1998. His work, he added, was “not a popular field to be in, in most cases.”

Monsignor Groden, who also served as the popular pastor of St. Cecilia Church in the Back Bay for 14 years, died in South Shore Hospital on Christmas Day. He was 77 and had collapsed in his Scituate home a week earlier.

“He was a great leader and a true pioneer in the world of affordable housing,” said Lisa Alberghini, who is president of the Planning Office for Urban Affairs and succeeded Monsignor Groden as leader of the archdiocese's housing efforts.

Invoking Pope Paul VI's oft-quoted phrase "if you want peace, work for justice," Alberghini added: "When you hear that, it's Mike through and through. He was committed to social justice more than anyone I've ever known."

On many occasions, his social justice projects took lengthy detours through the secular justice system. A subsidized housing development in Scituate, for example, was built after years of battles that included appeals to the US Supreme Court. "May this beautiful and safe development be a loud and convincing story that housing like this can be provided in our suburbs," Monsignor Groden said in 1983, when the complex was dedicated.

For him, "it was about creating opportunities for people and giving equal access to all, and that included opening up the suburbs to people in need of affordable housing," Alberghini said. "Mike wanted there to be genuine community economic integration. He really believed that no one should be isolated in poverty."

Monsignor Groden's housing work will continue to ripple through Boston and its suburbs in decades to come, said the Rev. J. Bryan Hehir, the archdiocese's secretary for Health and Social Services.

"You have to quantify it not only in terms of units but in generations," said Hehir, who teaches at the Harvard Kennedy School and formerly was dean of Harvard Divinity School.

"Mike always believed that the church couldn't be the answer to the housing problem," Hehir added, "but he felt the church could do selective things, like building mixed-income housing that, hopefully, would be a kind of model for others in the community to do on a larger scale."

The second of four children, Michael F. Groden was the only son born to Dr. Henry Groden, a physician, and the former Ellen Buckley, a homemaker who taught sewing.

He grew up in Belmont, and his family had a summer home in Scituate. Monsignor Groden eventually moved into his family's Scituate house before changing homes to another Scituate residence. "He loved being near the water," said his niece Kristen Webb of Marshfield.

Monsignor Groden graduated from Boston College High School and Boston College and received a master's in theology from St. John's Seminary in Brighton. He was ordained a priest in 1965 by Cardinal Richard Cushing and was assigned to St. Joseph Church in Roxbury, where he helped create more than 100 units of tenant-owned low- and middle-income housing in the neighborhood. For families with the lowest incomes, the down payment was less than \$200.

"He was always trying to provide opportunities for people who might otherwise not get them," his niece said.

He subsequently was a member of what was then the Joint Center for Urban Studies at Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. At the end of the 1960s, Cushing created the Planning Office of Urban Affairs and named Monsignor Groden the director.

Over the years, he held other significant positions as well. In the mid-1970s, he served as staff director for the coordinating council that US District Judge W. Arthur Garrity Jr. appointed to oversee Phase 2 of his school desegregation order. And in 1977, Cardinal Humberto Medeiros appointed Monsignor Groden vicar for urban ministry and director for social development.

In 1989, Monsignor Groden became pastor of St. Cecilia Church, which at the time was foundering. "The place was a shambles. It was dirty, and the finances were a disaster," said Mark Donohoe, pastoral associate at the church.

"His impact was enormous. He just came in like a whirlwind and got things started," Donohoe said. "He put the place back on the map again, to be honest. He was so open and giving and welcoming that people just started coming back. That was really his gift. He was able to bring people together to feel ownership and a sense of belonging to a parish."

In 2003, the archdiocesan leadership forced Monsignor Groden to resign as pastor of St. Cecilia and from running the planning office. Many supporters believed the move was retaliatory. He was the only monsignor among 58 priests to sign a letter calling on Cardinal Bernard Law to resign during the clergy sex abuse scandal.

The archdiocese declined to publicly comment in 2003, but archdiocesan officials privately told the Globe at the time that Monsignor Groden had accepted salaries from the church and planning office, which totaled about \$40,000 a year. Church rules say priests can only receive only one salary. The officials also said he had charged about \$20,000 in personal expenses to the housing office, though he had reimbursed the archdiocese. The personal billings came to light in an audit that began after a 1999 Superior Court ruling that Monsignor Groden had cheated developer Norman Levenson in a real estate deal.

The archdiocese paid \$2 million to settle that case along with \$700,000 in legal fees.

Monsignor Groden's "forced resignation from both positions is a blow to any Catholic who favors an innovative, vibrant church that strives for the inclusion of those on society's margins," the Globe said in a 2003 editorial.

In addition to his niece Kristen and other nieces and nephews, Monsignor Groden leaves his younger twin sisters, Kathleen Meskell of Concord and Ellen Dalton of Hancock, N.H.

Cardinal Sean P. O'Malley will celebrate a funeral Mass at 10 a.m. Wednesday in St. Cecilia Church.

Monsignor Groden "built housing for the elderly, for families — both struggling families and young families — people with HIV and AIDS, the disabled, the homeless," Alberghini said.

"The breadth of his work was so extraordinary," she added. "I don't know of another developer or pastor who had that kind of impact. His was a life very well-lived, and I'm certain that God is very well-pleased."

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