

working notes

*facts and analysis of social
and economic issues*

Policies After a Pandemic

Confines, Wards and
Dungeons: Some Reflections
on Crime and Society in
Times of Covid-19

“Family Hubs”: Lives on Hold

Do We Really Feel Fine?
Towards an Irish Green
New Deal

Any Light in Darkness?
A Theological Reflection
on Covid-19

COVID-19

Working Notes

Facts and analysis of social and economic issues
Volume 34, Issue 87, October 2020

Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice

54–72 Gardiner Street Upper, Dublin 1, D01 TX23

Phone: 01 855 6814

Email: info@jcfj.ie

Web: www.jcfj.ie

Editor: Keith Adams

Layout: Karl O'Sullivan, Pixelpress.ie

Artwork: Shutterstock, iStock Photo, Inner City Helping Homeless,
Wikimedia, Unsplash

Printed by: Colorman Ireland

Design: myahdesigns.com

© Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice, 2020

Articles may not be reproduced without permission. The views expressed in articles are those of the authors, and do not necessarily represent the views of the Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice.

The Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice is an agency of the Irish Jesuit Province. The Centre undertakes social analysis and theological reflection in relation to issues of social justice, including housing and homelessness, penal policy, economic ethics and environmental justice.

Subscriptions to *Working Notes* are free and can be established and maintained at www.jcfj.ie. Contributions to the costs of *Working Notes* or the work of the Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice can be made at www.jcfj.ie

An archive of *Working Notes* is available on the website of the Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice: www.jcfj.ie Article pitches or submissions are welcome; please direct them to the JCFJ Director, Kevin Hargaden, at khargaden@jcfj.ie

working notes

*facts and analysis of social
and economic issues*

Letter from the Director of the Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice	2
Editorial	3
<i>Keith Adams</i>	
Confines, Wards and Dungeons: Some Reflections on Crime and Society in Times of Covid-19	7
<i>Pieter De Witte & Geertjan Zuijdwegt</i>	
“Family Hubs”: Lives on Hold	15
<i>Rebecca Keatinge</i>	
Do We Really Feel Fine? Towards an Irish Green New Deal	24
Any Light in Darkness? A Theological Reflection on Covid-19	49
<i>Gerry O’Hanlon SJ</i>	

Letter from the Director of the Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice

This is the first letter of introduction I have written for *Working Notes*, because it goes to press just a few weeks after I have been made Director of the Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice. I received this baton from the out-going Director, John Guiney SJ, in August. John has been at the helm for almost a decade and felt that the time was now right, as we approach the fortieth anniversary of the founding of the Centre, to leave it in our hands.

As a team, we thank John for all the years he has served in that role. The Centre has gone through great change under his leadership and those who have followed our work cannot fail to have noticed the advances that have been made.

There is something fitting about this handover occurring in the summer months of 2020. Everything appears to be in transition. But one of the gifts John has left us is a very clear sense of our identity and our reason for being. The Centre arose initially out of conversations led by Frank Sammon SJ and John Sweeney about how to adapt to the modern world with a faith that was authentic. Inspired by a global movement within the Jesuits which

understood that living the values of the Gospel meant striving for justice, discussion began about a social research centre that would not settle for ivory-tower theorising.

Those involved in that early experiment did not imagine that their work would bear fruit well into the next century. Now, on the cusp of the Centre's fifth decade of research and activism, the intention to integrate social questions and spiritual practices persists. We hope that can be glimpsed in this issue in which Keith Adams, as editor, has curated a diverse range of essays to add insight to each of the areas the Centre is called to address: penal policy, environmental care, economic ethics, the housing and homelessness crisis, and theological reflection. Each, in its own way, contributes to the emerging and vital conversation about policies for after the pandemic.

The pandemic is not yet ended. The work to build policies that will leave a more just society in its wake has already begun.

Dr Kevin Hargaden, JCFJ Director

Editorial

A TRANSFORMED CONTEXT

In March, our world crawled to a halt in ways which were previously unimaginable. The slow emergence and then rapid proliferation of the coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 cast doubt on many strongly held certainties and loosened societal touchstones. Much is still uncertain as we attempt to restart our day-to-day lives under the rules of social distancing, wrestle with the public health and economic trade-offs, or await a vaccine which may ultimately fail to meet our growing expectations. As we look to the future, our vision is more opaque than usual.

Yet, while we may only see forwards dimly, Covid-19 has had a sharpening effect as we look backwards. Like the optician slotting the correct lens in front of our eye, clarity is swift as the corners recede and the blurriness dissipates. Little within our society has remained untouched by the pandemic. Suddenly, economic, social and penal policies, which made sense within the globalised neoliberal story we shared, were revealed as woefully inadequate, and in many cases, lethal. Past decisions by politicians and policymakers which we assumed

were just the ways things were – the proverbial cost of doing business – were, in the midst of a pandemic, exposed by an unyielding light.

From the beginning of Ireland's response, the inadequacies of social provision were obvious and the source of much societal fear. Our public hospitals, with some of the lowest number of intensive care beds in Europe, and the wider care system, teetered on the precipice of being overwhelmed. At a time when a secure home or suitable accommodation was central to responding to virus transmission, 10,000 adults and children were homeless and in emergency accommodation. Institutions such as prisons and direct provision centres were painfully overcrowded. For the vulnerable and those on the periphery of society – the homeless, the imprisoned, and the refugee – space is a luxury society does not afford them. As the refrain of “keep your distance” rang in our ears, many who wanted to, simply could not.

Positive steps were taken during the early response. People recently unemployed or furloughed had their income maintained on



Photo by Noah Berger/AP/Shutterstock (10748563h)

an almost universal basis. An eviction ban, denied for years as unconstitutional, ensured many people could remain in their rented homes. Prison numbers were reduced through structured temporary release. Though much needed interventions, these were fleeting and more revealing of the previous low levels of income support, tenant protections, and non-custodial sanctions.

Some of what was previously hidden was revealed in the starkest ways. Absence of mandatory sick pay and dubious contractual obligations forced many precarious workers, typically migrants, to turn up for work in meat processing plants, day in and day out. As regional lockdowns occurred due largely to rising infection rates in meat plants and direct provision centres, the overlap of people who worked in the former and lived in the latter became visible. At the centre of this viral Venn diagram, we saw for the first time, people who moved to Ireland seeking refuge and a better life, who have instead received institutionalisation and labour exploitation. May we continue to see clearly what lies beneath the lustre of Irish society!

MAPPING THE NEW POLICY SPACES

Any aspect of social, economic or welfare policy could be examined in great detail and much has already been written. We will not seek to replicate this more granular and key work. Yet stepping back for a moment to consider a wider sweep of events, common threads emerge demanding a coherent response. In this issue of *Working Notes*, *Policies After a Pandemic*, we have drawn together a selection of four carefully considered essays to attempt this more integrative work.

For the first time, the essays will now be available online as audio files.¹ This forms part of the Centre's commitments to walk with the marginalised, by making our materials available for those who do not have the capacity to read or are visually impaired, and to keep developing *Working Notes* and its accompanying features. If you are tired of staring at a screen or would just prefer to listen to our social analysis, I heartily recommend this new addition to our website.

¹ Audio files can be streamed at: <https://soundcloud.com/jcfj>

In “*Confines, Wards and Dungeons*”, Pieter De Witte and Geertjan Zuijdwegt, theologians at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven in Belgium and prison chaplains, tease apart how lockdown and prison have been compared and contrasted by considering the social meaning of detention. As the similarities start to readily disintegrate, the authors reveal more consequential analogies between how our society responds to crime and to a novel coronavirus. Rebecca Keatinge, Managing Solicitor at Mercy Law Resource Centre, follows with an essay about family hubs which draws on her professional experience to describe how current policy responses to homelessness in Ireland have consciously shifted further into the institutionalised space. In “*Lives On Hold*”, Keatinge outlines the debilitating, and relatively unmapped, effect which family hubs have on families who were previously independent, and argues that the creation of an institutionalised space for homeless families is both short-sighted and unjust.

Both essays ask us to consider what constitutes a meaningful life and to reconsider both homelessness policy and prison policy with a more ambitious standard than mere continuation of life. De Witte and Zuijdwegt rightfully conclude that prisoners are generally ensured of a “continuation of life but a life stripped of all meaningfulness.” In a similar vein, Keatinge shows that, in spite of family hubs being presented as a short-term solution, families are remaining in homelessness for years, existing in a form of stasis, unable to move on with their lives.

Our third essay “*Do we really feel fine? Towards an Irish Green New Deal*,” written collectively by the Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice team, considers what meaningful life is possible without the preservation of an environment to allow the continuation of life. Taking for granted the reader does not need to be convinced of accelerating climate and biodiversity breakdown, this longform essay uses as its jumping off point the concept of integral ecology.

The essay seeks to dispel, once and for all, the bifurcation which exists within Irish policymaking that our ecological crisis is separable from our social crises – an insight we describe as “integral ecology”. Having offered

a diagnosis of our political impasse, we present a roadmap to a reorganisation of society and the economy which does not separate our care for the environment with our care for our neighbour. Deliberative democracy with diverse and disagreeing people is concretely proposed as a method to forge a genuinely new politics. Ireland requires a transformative green new deal as the means to recover from the economic and social damage done by the pandemic. Our hope is that this essay will constitute a valuable contribution – intellectually and practically – towards that goal.

Finally, sensitive to both the trauma of current times and the importance of not neglecting our inner lives, Gerry O’Hanlon SJ, theologian and former staff member of the Centre of Faith and Justice, prompts us to ask what is an appropriate response or disposition to live with in the world today; a world which is being irreversibly changed by Covid-19 and a climate and biodiversity crisis. In “*Any Light in Darkness?*”, O’Hanlon considers the reality of illness, death and our sense of life being suspended and guides us towards lament as a restorative response for people who are suffering or disorientated. Lament will naturally lead us to the rudimentary questions of ‘why?’ and ‘for how long?’. But by being comfortable in the place of lament – distinct from despair or nihilistic leanings – deeper insights about meaning, love or, in some cases, the presence of a loving God will emerge. Out of these questions, a wellspring for hope and joy can be divined but also an enduring enthusiasm for a better, more just world.

POLICIES FOR AFTER THE PANDEMIC

Our world has changed and is changing. At a simple level, Covid-19 is a zoonotic disease.² Considering this fact more deeply, the virus could be also understood as a natural consequence of humanity’s unsatiated and unquenchable desire to commodify our environment and the inexorable encroachment

² A zoonosis is an infectious disease—bacterial, viral, or parasitic—that has transmitted from a non-human animal to humans. It is likely that Covid-19 originated in bats but due to the typically limited close contact between humans and bats, it is more likely that the transmission occurred through another animal species such as domestic animal, a wild animal, or a domesticated wild animal. See: World Health Organisation, ‘Coronavirus Disease 2019 (Covid-19) - Situation Report 94’ (Geneva, 23 April 2020), <https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200423-sitrep-94-covid-19.pdf>.

of people into animal habitats. This is simply to say, that policy areas are connected. Our response to environmental policy will impact upon the likelihood of future pandemics which will be exacerbated or mitigated by the economic and social policy we put in place now. We must see the coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 as a portent, not a problem which, once solved, will allow life as we knew it to resume.

A return to a more burnished normal is not an option. Positive changes which occurred in Ireland during the early response were temporary, neither permanent or structural in nature. Nascent social solidarity was quickly spent, and old habits are quickly reemerging. Alongside the individual and communal suffering caused by the pandemic, we must treat the revelatory aspect of the coronavirus as a gift, to reimagine and reshape our society. Pope Francis extols us to “not lose our memory once all this is past, let us not file it away and go back to where we were. This is the time to take the decisive step, to move from using and misusing nature to contemplating it.”³

We should take seriously the knowledge that a global pandemic will pale in comparison to accelerating climate breakdown and its much higher human cost. Many of the policies and investments in universal basic services which are vital during a pandemic will be needed even more in the future. Like any virtue, solidarity with each other and care of our environment are not switched on but practised. Now is the time to practise.

Keith Adams, JCFJ Social Policy Advocate

³ Austin Ivereigh, ‘Pope Francis Says Pandemic Can Be a “Place of Conversion”’, *The Tablet*, 8 April 2020, <https://www.thetablet.co.uk/features/2/17845/pope-francis-says-pandemic-can-be-a-place-of-conversion->.

Confines, Wards and Dungeons: Some Reflections on Crime and Society in Times of Covid-19

Pieter De Witte & Geertjan Zijdweght

Pieter De Witte and Geertjan Zijdweght are prison chaplains and Catholic theologians, who work at the Centre for Religion, Ethics and Detention and teach at the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Belgium.

“Denmark’s a prison”, says Hamlet in Shakespeare’s play. “Then is the world one”, Rosencrantz responds. To which Hamlet replies: “A goodly one; in which there are many confines, wards and dungeons.”¹ The analogy between a given society – or even the world – and prison has gained new currency during the global Covid-19 pandemic. In the spring of 2020, the new coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 quickly spread across Western Europe, and many of us experienced governmental restrictions of freedom unprecedented in modern history. States shut down entire economies and entire educational systems. They suspended our right to movement, to communal worship and to communal drinking. In many places, people were shut up in their homes with no legal right to leave except for essential travel. Few movements, we soon learned, were deemed essential. Unsurprisingly, the experience of being confined to our homes was often compared to being in prison. Suddenly, we seemed to find ourselves in confines, wards and dungeons everywhere. This article sets out to investigate the parallel between being in lockdown and being in prison. Although we argue that the parallel soon breaks down, we also uncover deeper, more meaningful analogies between our society’s response to crime and its response to the Covid-19 pandemic; analogies that should truly give us pause.

LOCKDOWNS, RESTRICTIONS OF FREEDOM AND THE SOCIAL MEANING OF INCARCERATION

It makes sense that people whose freedom was restricted to an unprecedented degree felt imprisoned. In fact, the comparison is so evident that it seems to merit little reflection. All around us, we heard people draw the parallel. And even activists, journalists and academics concerned with criminal justice reform used the comparison in op-eds and other media contributions to engender sympathy for incarcerated people.² Such contributions usually ran along the lines of,

“Now you can begin to feel what it’s like to be locked up, and now you can see for yourself it’s no fun, even if you have a television in your room.” The idea often was to provoke sympathy for the imprisoned in order to then pitch the specific brand of prison reform of the author in question. It is hard to tell whether these strategies paid off, but for some of us the design was presumably a little too transparent.

Other activists, journalists and academics criticised such use of the parallel.³ Without denying superficial similarities, they insisted that the restrictions on freedom in society were not like those in prison. Societal deprivations of liberty take place in much better conditions and are far less absolute. The reality of prison, they argued, is so much harsher than being in lockdown that the parallel is simply not appropriate. Such criticisms have a point. If anything, lockdowns were more like an electronic monitoring sanction than like prison. And electronic monitoring is usually deemed a less invasive and restrictive measure than imprisonment. Lockdowns, then, are not quite like imprisonment. But there is another way of considering the parallel between prison and lockdown, which makes it seem even less apposite.

To compare incarceration with being in lockdown in terms of restrictions of freedom implies a continuum on which both can be located. The parallel only breaks down because freedom is restricted so much more severely in prison than when ordered to stay home that drawing the parallel becomes inappropriate (an analogous case would be certain off-hand comparisons between some of today’s populist right-wing leaders and Adolf Hitler). But perhaps the idea of a continuum is mistaken. This becomes clear when you look at the parallel not from the angle of restrictions of freedom but from that of the social meaning of detention. To put it bluntly, imprisonment means utter rejection, lockdown means heroic solidarity. Let’s start with the latter.

¹ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. GR Hibbard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), II.2.

² See, for example: Jim Duffy, ‘Covid Lockdown Is Helping Us to Understand How Hard Prison Actually Is’, *The Scotman*, 30 April 2020, <https://www.scotsmen.com/news/opinion/columnists/covid-lockdown-helping-us-understand-how-hard-prison-actually-jim-duffy-2595771>.

³ Consider the incarcerated author Jerry Metcalf’s op-ed: Jerry Metcalf, ‘No, Your Coronavirus Quarantine Is Not Just Like Being in Prison’, *The Marshall Project*, 25 March 2020, <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2020/03/25/no-your-coronavirus-quarantine-is-not-just-like-being-in-prison>. Also, Thomas Ugelvik, Yvonne Jewkes, and Ben Crewe, ‘Editorial: Why Incarceration?’, *Incarceration* 1, no. 1 (2020): 1–5.



In many European countries, the beginning of March heralded a quick succession of ever more restrictive measures. The message accompanying these measures was twofold. On the one hand, it was a message of fear. ‘These measures are necessary, because this virus is very, very scary’. We all remember the videos from intensive care wards and the testimonies of wheezing patients, even young ones. We might also remember feeling short of breath and tight in the chest in those first weeks, and thinking we had the coronavirus. Well, most of us didn’t. Most of us were just afraid. On the other hand, the measures were presented as an opportunity for heroic solidarity. Suddenly the people we usually ignore and defund became heroes. Not only doctors, nurses and teachers, but also bus drivers and refuse collectors were providers of essential services without which society could not go on, who risked their lives on the job to keep us safe and sound. Many people might already have a hard time to recall the sentiment. But it was there, and it was everywhere. Even we were heroes. By staying at home, we were saving lives. In sacrificial solidarity, we gave up our own freedom to keep others safe. Others we didn’t even know. Watching Netflix on the couch suddenly equalled heroic virtue. We were suffering, but we did it for humankind.

Something of that sentiment was captured by the Belgian city of Leuven, where we live. The city distributed posters that appeared everywhere behind windows and that read “Even apart, altijd samen”; “Apart for a while, forever together.” To evoke the contrast between being in lockdown and being in prison, try to visualise these posters. “Apart for a while, forever together.” Now imagine these posters behind the barred windows of your local prison: “Apart for a while, forever together.” And now imagine the responses. “Apart for a while? For as long as possible!” ‘Forever together? Please no! Not together at all! You can come back to society if you must, but not in my backyard!’ Imprisonment, as a state reaction to criminalised behavior, is intended to – and does – convey censure. If you are in prison, you should be ashamed of yourself. We literally do not want to see your face anymore. In modern societies, prison is the ultimate symbol of societal rejection and it is felt that way by the imprisoned.⁴ This, of course, is the crucial difference between the social meaning of being in prison and being in lockdown. One is a symbol of solidarity lost. The other of solidarity regained.

⁴ Gresham Sykes already perceptively pointed this out in his famous study *The Society of Captives*. Gresham M. Sykes, *The Society of Captives* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1958), 65–67.



©iStock photo ID: 1158779001

But this is not yet the whole story. People in society presumably did not think much kinder of people in prison during the lockdowns. But many people in prison did feel more attuned to society. For one, there was a sense of confronting a common enemy. Covid-19 is dangerous for all, and many people we spoke with in prison felt a bond between themselves and their families, friends and wider society facing that common enemy.⁵ People in prison even looked for ways to help out. In Belgium, people in prison sewed loads and loads of face masks, not just for use in the prison, but for outside use as well. Even though work conditions were often poor, and despite disturbingly self-congratulatory communications of the penal administration, the effort shows a desire to make good on the part of people in prison. It illustrates, at the very least, that some people in prison experienced a sense of solidarity with the rest of society, even though such solidarity might not have been reciprocal.

It is clear that the analogy between being in lockdown and being in prison breaks down at crucial points. Although both entail restrictions of freedom, their social meaning is radically

opposed, even though many people in prison experience solidarity with society and desire to make good. Still, there is more to reap from the analogy than would appear from this bleak appraisal. Not so much in terms of the experience of individuals, but in terms of society's response to problems. There are uncanny structural similarities between the ways Western societies deal with crime and criminals and how they have dealt with the coronavirus.

COVID-19, CRIME AND THE CULTURE OF RISK

The first of these similarities brings us back to a collective emotion we already mentioned but did not yet explore. Fear. The imprisonment of people who commit a criminal offence is not just about censure and proportional response. In most Western societies, it is increasingly about risk. The assumption is that people who offend are dangerous. High recidivism rates show that many offenders go on to commit further crimes, and this is supposed to justify viewing them primarily as bearers of risk. This image is aggravated by excessive media focus on parole gone wrong. When a formerly incarcerated person commits another heinous crime, all the cases where parole went well are forgotten. As a result of such developments, evaluating and constructing tools for risk assessment has almost become a subfield of criminology; as it

⁵ The recent Irish Inspector of Prisons' journal project indicates that there was also a feeling of even deeper alienation for some prisoners. See Patricia Gilheaney, Joe Garrihy, and Ian Marder, 'Ameliorating the Impact of Cocooning on People in Custody - a Briefing' (Dublin: Office of the Inspector of Prisons, 20 July 2020), <https://www.oip.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Ameliorating-the-impact-of-cocooning-on-people-in-custody-a-briefing.pdf>.

has also become a large and profitable industry. Of course, such tools are fallible, many people are identified as dangerous who are not, but the continued incarceration of such false positives is collateral damage. The security of society is paramount.⁶

This increased focus on risk and security in the field of criminal justice is mirrored in the recent response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Suddenly we all learned to view each other as bearers of risk. Something of the fear that grasps people when they think of crime and criminals grasped us all in those first months of lockdown. Everyone around us might carry this potentially lethal disease. What happened, in short, is that we began to identify other people primarily, or even solely, by the danger they pose. We even began to identify ourselves as bearers of risk – a tendency that is observable in prisons as well. So, we kept distant from one another, because we feared to be infected, or feared to infect. Often, of course, for no reason. False positives abounded. But security trumps all. Better safe than sorry. Here too, media played a questionable role. Just as in the cases of parole gone wrong, many media outlets focused on extreme cases – deaths of young people or even children, which are very rare with Covid-19, but also quite spectacular. Just as with reports on high profile crime cases, the subtext of such messages is: be afraid, be very afraid.

Viewing people as bearers of risk is a dangerous business. It inevitably entails objectivation, depersonification or dehumanisation – however you want to call it. It is the process of no longer seeing persons for who they are but only seeing a single feature that dominates all others: potential coronavirus bearer, potential criminal. The same logic that keeps people in prison indefinitely, keeps the elderly from seeing their kin or dying in their company. Still, risk is no chimera. People do reoffend, and people do spread the coronavirus. Risk can justify restrictive measures, but the ways in which such measures impinge on fundamental rights are easily overlooked.

SAFETY, HUMAN RIGHTS AND STATES OF EXCEPTION

The insight that risk or danger are a primary driver of societal responses to crime and Covid-19 reveals something about the status of human rights in liberal democracies. In liberal societies citizens are supposed to be protected against coercion. In cases where the government itself needs to take coercive measures governmental power has to be kept in check by the law. Human rights play an important role here, in that they delineate a domain of the life of the citizen that is legally protected. This is, of course, very relevant in the context of detention. Our liberal societies pride themselves on their ability to guarantee the basic rights of even its incarcerated citizens. This concern for the rights of offenders might seem to be engrained in the development of modern prison systems and their abandonment of cruel corporal punishments expressive of unbridled sovereign state power. But on closer inspection, the rise of the modern prison was primarily the outcome of a naïve utilitarianism that sought to reform the offender and thus protect society, rather than of a genuine concern for prisoners' rights. It is only when the harmful effects of "well-intended" incarceration on the life of inmates gradually came to light that the urgency of the protection of prisoners' rights became fully manifest.

In Belgium, the rights of prisoners are spelled out in the 2005 Prison Act. The law was written in the full awareness that the prison, as a total institution has detrimental effects on inmates. The final report of the drafting committee declares that the law seeks to reduce the totalitarian character of prisons, to minimise their harmful consequences and to make prison life resemble life in the free world as closely as possible. Still, persistent problems in the Belgian prison system, exemplified by countless negative reports of the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, show the impotence of human rights discourse vis-à-vis prison's rigid institutional logic. This powerlessness of rights-talk (and of its incarnation in law and international monitoring systems) can indeed be explained in sociological terms by referring to the internal processes

⁶ For an accessible explanation of risk assessment practices and helpful visuals, see Anna Maria Barry-Jester, Ben Casselman, and Dana Goldstein, 'Should Prison Sentences Be Based On Crimes That Haven't Been Committed Yet?', *FiveThirtyEight*, 4 August 2015, <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/prison-reform-risk-assessment/>.

of total institutions.⁷ But there is also a more extrinsic reason why the prison system tends to disregard human rights. Even though rehabilitative understandings of imprisonment have lost some of their credibility, prison is still considered a useful instrument to keep large groups of “dangerous” people off the streets. In this logic of incapacitation, the old utilitarian approach to prison is still seen to be alive and kicking. Incapacitation is no less naïve than the older idea that totalitarian institutions would breed morally better persons. Perhaps it is even more naïve, in its off-hand assumption that the sheer (temporary) expulsion of offenders from society – even without expensive “rehabilitative” interventions – will contribute to a safer world.

The weakness of human rights claims is inscribed in the text of the 2005 Belgian Prison Act. Time and again, prisoners’ rights are asserted with the provision that exceptions can be made for the sake of order and security. Whether this concern for safety relates to life within the prison or to society at large, the basic message is that concrete arrangements made to guarantee fundamental rights and liberties in prisons can be suspended whenever order and security are at stake. If human rights are trump cards, as some philosophers would have it, then the prison system makes it clear that rights can be overtrumped at any time by security considerations. Rights are fine, but they are no match for social utility.

A similar mechanism is at work in the management of the Covid-19 crisis. None of us would have expected in January 2020 that within a few months you could find yourself being stopped at a police roadblock during the daytime having to answer the question where you are heading. Everybody can see the rationale behind the measures that are taken by our governments. At the same time, there is something frightening about the smoothness and swiftness of the suspension of rights and liberties that we had always considered inalienable. The Dutch author Ilja Leonard

Pfeijffer, who lives in Italy and regularly wrote for the Belgian newspaper *De Standaard* during lockdown, expressed it like this: “There are good reasons to suspend fundamental liberties such as the freedom of movement and of assembly. I can see that, but I also realize that every totalitarian regime in the past could only have dreamt of such good reasons.”⁸ These words seem to reiterate the analysis of the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben who wrote a piece in *Il Manifesto* in the early days of local Italian lockdowns in which he warned that the measures taken by the government exemplify an extended “state of exception”.⁹ According to Agamben, the recurring reference to exceptional situations of crisis (terrorism, pandemic) is the typical way governments nowadays attempt to exercise sovereign power. Undoubtedly, Agamben underestimated the seriousness of the pandemic at the time of his article and his analysis clearly has paranoid overtones. Still, it is not inappropriate to be troubled by the ease with which large parts of society could be convinced (with a little help from the media) of the exceptional danger of the situation and of the corresponding necessity to give up basic rights. It underlines the vulnerability of these rights and the fact that whenever we can be convinced of the urgency of some threat, we will gladly sacrifice them for the sake of order and security.

LIFE, THE CONTINUATION OF LIFE AND THE MEANING OF LIFE

Recently, the province of Antwerp introduced a curfew in response to the rising number of Covid-19 infections in that part of Belgium. It was the first curfew in Belgium since the end of the Second World War. Antwerp governor Cathy Berx defended the seemingly disproportionate decision by stating that “You have only one fundamental right that is absolute: the right to live.”¹⁰ There is more to this statement than the point that was already made, namely that the right to security (and so

⁷ For what is still the best treatment on the internal dynamics of total institutions, see Erving Goffman, ‘On the Characteristics of Total Institutions’, in *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1961), 1–125. On the precariousness of rights in such contexts, see Dirk Van Zyl Smit and Sonja Snacken, *Principles of European Prison Law and Policy: Penology and Human Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁸ Ilja Leonard Pfeijffer, ‘Gezondheidsdictatuur’, *De Standaard*, 14 April 2020, https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20200413_04921480.

⁹ For an English translation, see Giorgio Agamben at the *Positions* website: Giorgio Agamben, ‘The State of Exception Provoked by an Unmotivated Emergency’, *Positions*, 26 February 2020, <http://positionspolitics.org/giorgio-agamben-the-state-of-exception-provoked-by-an-unmotivated-emergency/>.

¹⁰ Stijn Cools and Bart Brinckman, ‘Cathy Berx: “De avondklok ondemocratisch? Je hebt maar één absoluut grondrecht: het recht op leven”’, *De Standaard*, 1 August 2020, https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20200731_97311771.

to the protection of life) will always overrule all other rights when the chips are down. On a more fundamental level, the words of the governor raise the question what we as a society consider valuable. What in life is so significant that we are willing to make sacrifices for it? There is a widespread political theory that says that in our liberal societies it is not up to the government to answer this question. People should decide for themselves what they value most in their own lives and which sacrifices they are willing to make for those values. Governments are only there to provide the basic conditions for a meaningful life and to protect citizens against internal and external sources of harm. The Covid-19 crisis reveals that this theory is flawed. Clearly, there is a central value that is supposed to govern our lives collectively and serve as guideline and justification for state interventions and even for the propagation of a collective morality. This central value seems to be *life itself*, in the very basic sense of the continuation of physical existence. When the prolongation of biological life is threatened, people are called or forced to abstain from the very things that make their lives meaningful (mostly things that involve the physical proximity of others) and to consider these things as mere embellishments of the one and only essential thing: that life goes on, whatever it takes.

One could argue that this continuation-of-life morality is a very reasonable thing. After all, life's meaningfulness does presuppose biological existence. Hence, if the latter is endangered, it seems fair to partly or temporarily suspend,

for the sake of survival, some of the activities that give meaning to our lives. Although this argument has a commonsense ring to it, it may, in fact, bear witness to a profound spiritual crisis in our society. It is in any case a dramatic break with nearly all the spiritual and moral traditions that have hitherto spoken about the meaning of human existence. In the vast majority of these traditions, the meaning of life is constituted by a relation to something that is more important than one's own physical survival. One concrete implication of this conviction is that when push comes to shove, someone would be prepared to put his or her life at stake for what is of ultimate value in life. Every individual with children or some other all-embracing vocation in life intuitively understands what is meant.

In the current Covid-19 crisis, something remarkable is happening to this traditional 'self-sacrificial' structure of human meaningfulness. For some people, it is the crisis itself, along with the governmental response to it, that becomes a source of meaning. Such people are convinced – and announce this on Facebook – that it is eminently meaningful to make all the small, but slightly heroic sacrifices (wearing face masks, enduring decreased mobility, attending energy-draining Zoom meetings) that are needed to flatten the curve. In a secularised version of the view that suffering may bring one closer to God, people declare that the crisis has taught them so much about what is really important and valuable in life. What hasn't killed them has clearly made them stronger.



But this is a mere prosperity gospel. In most cases, the experience of finding meaning in the crisis presupposes strong social bonds, a fairly stable financial situation (so that self-sacrifice does not really cut to the quick), an acquired capability to find purpose in abstract things (such as medical statistics) and, usually, a sufficiently large garden. For a considerable part of society – whose dimensions still have to become clear – the crisis means that they are simply deprived of meaning and reduced to bare existence (without the resources of the more fortunate to turn this deprivation into a new source of meaning). People in homes for the elderly are, of course, the most striking examples. If they do not experience the physical horror of a local corona-outbreak, they suffer the spiritual horror of a life stripped of all that makes it worth living.

The analogy with prison is obvious. Prison guarantees life as continued physical existence – leaving aside, that is, the cases where prison does bring death upon its inmates through neglect, blatant medical errors and poor suicide prevention – but it is a brutal assault on everything that makes life meaningful: work, family, social life, autonomy and public recognition. The modern cellular prison was designed with a certain type of person in mind: the monk-like, introspective individualist for whom forced seclusion and all that comes with it would be the source of new meaning in life. We know now that for the vast majority of detainees, prison is not the cradle of a new, crime-free and fulfilling life, but rather a place where they are buried alive and where they experience the horror of sheer physical existence deprived of all meaning. What does not kill them instantly, kills them slowly.

WHAT CAN WE HOPE?

Did we paint too grim a picture both of life in prison and of the well-intended attempts of governments to manage the Covid-19 crisis? Are we too like Hamlet, with his confines, wards and dungeons? Perhaps we are. But we are so for a reason. We are deeply convinced that an excessive concern for security will always have destructive effects on other crucial imperatives: treating humans as persons, respecting their rights, allowing them to have a meaningful existence. The apparent pessimism of our story stems, in part, from a recognition that far-

reaching security measures are inevitable, both in the criminal justice system and in attempts to control a pandemic. Such indispensable and legitimate measures necessarily clash with human dignity. We do not share the naïve optimism that more sophisticated institutional procedures and more advanced technologies will allow us to overcome this tragic situation in which one set of essential moral goals can only be achieved at the expense of another. And yet, there is hope.

Hope in times of Covid-19 appears to reside in the expectation that together we will flatten the curve so that soon all this will be over. Together, we engage in ascetic practice awaiting the triumphant arrival vaccine or cure. We might well be deceived in this expectation, for it is far from clear whether a final solution for this pandemic is within our reach. We may just as well have entered a new and enduring era of virus-control, where things that once were normal, such as shaking hands, will never be normal again. The expectation of rooting out this new coronavirus may be as dangerously illusory as the vain dreams about a crime-free society. In both cases the chimera of a risk-free world inspires society to ruthlessly blot out the last remnants of the thing that threatens its security. In order to avoid this latter-day violence of purification, we would do well to follow Ivan Illich's sharp distinctions between expectation and hope. "Hope", he argues, "centers desire on a person from whom we await a gift. Expectation looks forward to satisfaction from a predictable process which will produce what we have the right to claim."¹¹ Hope dwells in personal encounters between people. We await gifts from each other. Therefore, these encounters can go horribly wrong, for we may not get what we had hoped for, or we may get what we had feared (a virus). Some gifts are poisoned gifts. Still, our only sources of hope are those ever-risky personal encounters and our indestructible desire for them. It is true that all ills can come out of Pandora's box. But Illich reminds us that *Pan-dora*, means "All-giver"; the giver of all. If we keep her box closed, wanting to avoid all ills, we end up getting nothing – not even hope. A closed box is very like a prison indeed.

¹¹ Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society* (London: Marion Boyer, 1972), 105.

“Family Hubs”: Lives on Hold

Rebecca Keatinge

Rebecca Keatinge is Managing Solicitor at Mercy Law Resource Centre (MLRC), which provides free legal advice and representation to people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. She has wide-ranging experience in human rights law and practice, and previously held various roles in the area of immigration and asylum in the UK and Cambodia.

INTRODUCTION

Many policy changes in Ireland in recent years have been launched and branded in terms of “hubs”. The language and proximate adjectives are attractive to policymakers. Hubs are innovative, dynamic, and quick to change and adapt to new opportunities and potential. Yet, not all hubs are alike and some do not have accompanying positive implications or effects.

Ireland has seen a growing and distressing occurrence of family homelessness. Policy responses have exposed a tendency towards institution-based solutions for homeless families. These have been introduced without a clear evidence base that they are appropriate to support the needs of these families, who are often in homelessness for a long period. Mercy Law Resource Centre (MLRC) has worked with over 1,000 homeless families in the last two years alone. Our clients’ experiences show the State’s abject failure to properly respond to the needs of vulnerable homeless families and even to meet its own stated policy objectives.

This essay will outline how policy responses to homelessness have shifted further into the institutionalised space and, drawing on our recent experiences at MLRC, demonstrate how this has stifled the development and independence of many families who find themselves without a secure home. The current pandemic underlines the need for evidence-based and informed responses to homelessness that put a safe home at the centre of any policy response. I will close with the argument that, entering into the first winter of a global pandemic, a policy which puts families, who were previously living independently, into an institutionalised space is short-sighted and potentially unjust, and contrary to the most basic public health recommendations.

GROWTH IN FAMILY HOMELESSNESS

In October last year, following eight consecutive months of homeless figures surpassing 10,000, the number of people

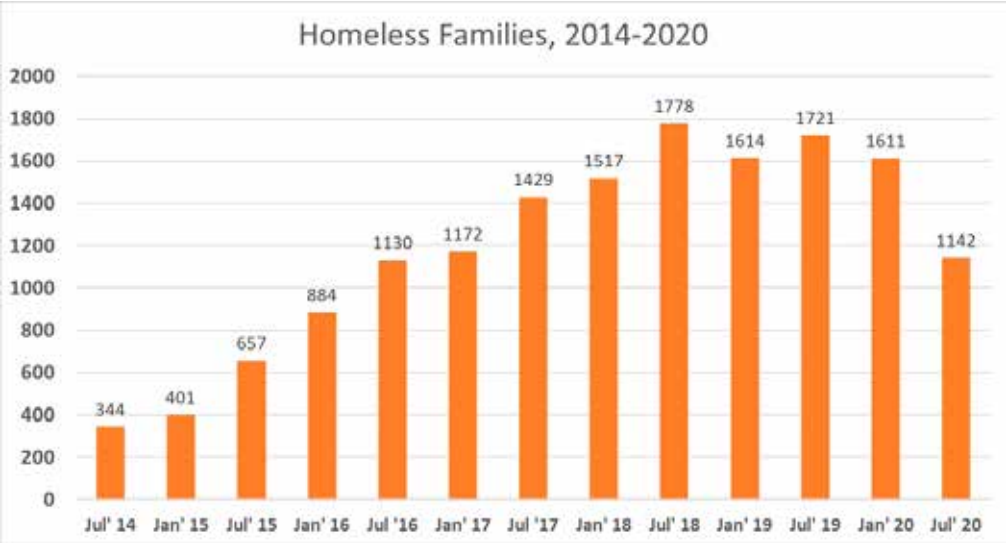


Figure 1: Homeless Families, 2014 to 2020

“What we will see also in the experience of the many families supported by MLRC is the suffering that has been caused by somewhat ad hoc and ill-informed approaches in relation to homeless accommodation provision.”

homeless in Ireland peaked at 10,514.¹ This constituted the highest number since the Department started recording these figures. It should be noted that these figures do not include individuals who were removed from the homeless figures following a reclassification undertaken in 2018, despite those individuals accessing what is known as Section 10 funded accommodation.² Many of those taken out of the figures were individuals and families in supported temporary homeless accommodation, which is in part the subject matter of this article. The figures also exclude people sleeping rough, people couch surfing, homeless people in hospitals and prisons, those in direct provision centres or emergency reception centres/hotels, and homeless households in domestic violence refuges.³

Family homelessness has been increasing in Ireland since 2014. As of July 2020, of those recorded as officially homeless, there were 1,142 families (see figure 1 above) including 2,651 children.⁴

In July 2014, the number of homeless families across Ireland totalled 344; by July 2018, this had increased more than five-fold, with a total of 1,778 families recorded as homeless in the State.⁵

Children aged four and younger were the largest single age group experiencing homelessness, according to the last census.⁶ Children remain the single largest group within the homeless population and accounted for a third of those who were homeless last year.⁷

Figures alone cannot convey, or do justice to, the experience and the trauma of homelessness, particularly for children.⁸ The figures, even obfuscated, do however clearly evidence the failure of the State to implement robust policy responses to effectively reduce family homelessness. What we will see also in the experience of the many families supported by MLRC is the suffering that has been caused by somewhat ad hoc and ill-informed approaches in relation to homeless accommodation provision.

PROVISION OF EMERGENCY ACCOMMODATION

There is no strict legal obligation on local authorities to provide emergency accommodation to a family that is presenting as homeless. There is a discretion, but no duty to provide such accommodation.⁹ A series of decisions of the High Court concerning local authorities and their statutory obligations towards homeless individuals, including

¹ Department of Housing, Planning & Local Government, 'Homelessness Report October 2019' (Dublin: Department of Housing, Planning & Local Government, November 2019), https://www.housing.gov.ie/sites/default/files/publications/files/homeless_report_-_october_2019.pdf

² A European Commission Report, authored by Prof. Mary Daly, issued a stinging rebuke of how the Irish Government calculates and presents its monthly data on homelessness. With 1,600 people vanishing from the homelessness count as those in "turn-key" homeless accommodation were no longer considered homeless, Daly concludes that the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government were engaged in "statistical obfuscation, if not corruption." See Mary Daly, 'National Strategies to Fight Homelessness and Housing Exclusion: Ireland' (Brussels: European Commission, 2019), <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=738&langId=en&pubId=8243&furtherPubs=yes>.

³ Most European member states use the ETHOS Light classification of homelessness which has six operational categories: people living rough; emergency accommodation; homeless accommodation; those in institutions due to lack of housing; those in non-conventional dwellings; and those with family and friends due to lack of housing. The Department of Housing, Planning, and Local Government has a narrow operational definition of homelessness. Of the six categories used by other member states, Ireland only calculates its homelessness figure based on two categories; those in emergency accommodation and homeless accommodation such as homeless hubs. As an example of the exclusionary nature of this definition, those in women's shelters or refuge accommodation are not counted.

⁴ Department of Housing, Planning & Local Government, 'Homelessness Report July 2020' (Dublin: Department of Housing, Planning & Local Government, August 2020), https://www.housing.gov.ie/sites/default/files/publications/files/homeless_report_-_july_2020.pdf.

⁵ Department of Housing, Planning & Local Government, 'Homelessness Report July 2019' (Dublin: Department of Housing, Planning & Local Government, August 2019), https://www.housing.gov.ie/sites/default/files/publications/files/homelessness_report_-_july_2019.pdf.

⁶ Marie O'Halloran, 'Young Children Largest Homeless Age Group, Census Figures Show', *The Irish Times*, 11 August 2017, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/young-children-largest-homeless-age-group-census-figures-show-1.3182975>.

⁷ Children's Rights Alliance, 'Report Card 2020: Is Government Keeping Its Promises to Children?' (Dublin: Children's Rights Alliance, 2 March 2020), 36–45, <https://www.childrensrighs.ie/sites/default/files/CRA-Report%20Card%202020-Final.pdf>.

⁸ In a previous article for Working Notes, Dalma Fabian suggests that trauma and homelessness are connected in at least three ways. Trauma is often experienced as part of the pathway into homelessness. However, Fabian argues that the loss of a home coincides with other losses such as loss of family connections and social interactions. Social exclusion can activate the same neurological response as physical trauma, with a similar effect on people's lives. See Fabian.

⁹ Mercy Law Resource Centre, 'Third Right to Housing Report: Children & Homelessness: A Gap in Legal Protection' (Dublin: Mercy Law Resource Centre, May 2019), <https://mercylaw.ie/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Children-and-Homelessness-A-Gap-in-Legal-Protection.pdf>.



Children Sleeping at Tallaght Garda Station, Dublin. Photo by Inner City Helping Homeless

families, confirm that the local authorities enjoy broad discretion with respect of the homeless assessment. Past decisions indicate that the Courts will be extremely reluctant to interfere with the statutory discretion enjoyed by local authorities unless a decision is manifestly unreasonable or taken in bad faith.¹⁰

The wide margin of discretion afforded to the local authority within the current legal framework on provision of emergency accommodation does not properly protect homeless families. MLRC frequently intervenes in cases where families have been refused emergency accommodation and have resorted to sleeping in their cars, in parks, in uninhabitable caravans. As this article is being drafted, MLRC is supporting vulnerable families in the context of the pandemic, who have been refused homeless accommodation and who are having to sleep in such situations, in the absence of anywhere else to go. It is a truly shameful situation.

Families in need of homeless accommodation ordinarily present at, and are assessed by, the relevant local authority. If they are deemed to be homeless – that is, if they have established to the satisfaction of the local authority that

“There is no strict legal obligation on local authorities to provide emergency accommodation to a family that is presenting as homeless.”

they have no alternative accommodation available to them and cannot finance their own accommodation – they will be eligible for homeless accommodation which can be provided in a number of different forms.

Under Section 10 of the Housing Act 1988, the local authority has broad flexibility in relation to the manner in which homeless accommodation is provided. It is ordinarily provided indirectly, through non-governmental organisations, or commercial providers, for example a B&B or a hotel. Frequently, families will be obliged to source their own emergency accommodation, particularly at the start of their period of homelessness. This form is known as ‘self-accommodation’. For any homeless family, being put on ‘self-accommodation’ shifts the burden of sourcing homeless accommodation on to the family itself. The family must then call around to local B&Bs and hotels to source a booking, which at busy holiday times or for larger families or non-Irish national families can be impossible.

¹⁰. Three relevant High Court cases are explored by the Mercy Law Resource Centre in the Third Right to Housing Report: Children & Homelessness. Each case involved homeless families with minor children and in two of the cases, there was undisputed evidence before the Court that one family had been sleeping in a tent and another family had repeatedly presented to Garda stations in the absence of any alternative. See Mercy Law Resource Centre, 9–12.

MLRC has been engaged in a small number of cases where families are provided with emergency homeless accommodation just for one night at a time. This means that they must check out of their B&B or hotel each morning and cannot access the accommodation until the evening. Following advocacy by MLRC and other groups, a recommendation was made to cease provision of such chronically unstable and highly unsuitable accommodation, and it appears that this “one night only” form of emergency accommodation has been phased out.¹¹

RECENT POLICY RESPONSES

In recognition of the unsuitability of self-accommodation of homeless families in hotels and B&Bs, the last Government sought alternative approaches to homeless provision for families. In so doing, we saw a shift towards a provision of emergency accommodation through a more institutionalised form, by way of “family hubs”.¹²

The Government’s policy statement on family homelessness was included in *Rebuilding Ireland: Action Plan on Housing and Homelessness*. Published in June 2016, and due to remain in effect until 2021, the plan articulated the policy priority of reconfiguring emergency homeless accommodation to provide “supported temporary accommodation arrangements such as family hubs” in place of homeless accommodation provision in hotels and B&Bs.¹³ The stated aim of family hubs was to provide a form of emergency accommodation that offered greater stability for homeless families, facilitated more coordinated needs assessment and support planning including on-site access to required services such as welfare, health, and housing services, and provided appropriate family

supports and surroundings.¹⁴ Family hub accommodation was proposed to be a “short-term” measure with wraparound supports to assist families in accessing long-term housing, often in the private rented market assisted by the Housing Assistance Payment, and it was envisaged that placement in such hubs would be for a six month period. This may have been the intended dynamism of family hubs as families only remained in hubs for a short period before re-entering the precariousness of the private rental market.

Through 2018 and 2019, family hubs were rolled out as an alternative to commercial hotels and B&Bs for homeless families. At the beginning of 2020, there were 32 family hubs in operation, providing almost 720 units of accommodation for homeless families.¹⁵ Twenty-five of these are located in Dublin, two in Kildare and one each in Clare, Cork, Galway, Limerick and Louth. Substantial funding has been allocated to the family hub programme.¹⁶

The prioritisation of hubs, receiving much more Departmental focus and attention, has been at the expense of a Rapid Build Programme. This programme had greater prominence in the early years of *Rebuilding Ireland* and was designed to deliver housing for homeless families by way of modular homes placed on council lands. These would have been self-contained units where families would reside temporarily while they secured a long-term housing solution. The Rapid Build Programme has so far delivered just 423 homes out of a planned 1,500¹⁷ and was recently described as a “dismal failure”.¹⁸

¹¹ Dublin Region Homeless Executive, ‘Report to Housing Strategic Policy Committee’ (Dublin: Dublin Region Homeless Executive, March 2020), <https://www.homelessdublin.ie/content/files/Homelessness-SPC-Report-March-2020.pdf>.

¹² Family hubs are also sometimes referred to as “family accommodation hubs” in official communication or as “homeless hubs” by media outlets or civil society. ‘Accommodation for Families - Dublin Region Homeless Executive’, accessed 7 September 2020, <https://www.homelessdublin.ie/solutions/family-accommodation>; Evelyn Ring, ‘Fears Homeless Hubs May Have to Be Built for Elderly’, *Irish Examiner*, 23 December 2019, <https://www.irishexaminer.com/news/arid-30971906.html>.

¹³ Department of Housing, Planning, Community & Local Government, ‘Rebuilding Ireland: Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness’ (Dublin: Department of Housing, Planning, Community & Local Government, July 2016), 13, https://rebuildingireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Rebuilding-Ireland_Action-Plan.pdf.

¹⁴ Department of Housing, Planning & Local Government, ‘Homeless Quarterly Progress Report - Quarter 2 2020’ (Dublin: Department of Housing, Planning & Local Government, 2020), 13, https://www.housing.gov.ie/sites/default/files/publications/files/homeless_quarterly_progress_report_q2_2020.pdf.

¹⁵ Children’s Rights Alliance, ‘Report Card 2020: Is Government Keeping Its Promises to Children?’, 36–45.

¹⁶ Children’s Rights Alliance, ‘Report Card 2019: Is Government Keeping Its Promises to Children?’ (Dublin: Children’s Rights Alliance, 25 February 2019), 34, https://www.childrensrights.ie/sites/default/files/submissions_reports/files/CRA-Report-Card-2019.pdf.

¹⁷ Children’s Rights Alliance, ‘Report Card 2020: Is Government Keeping Its Promises to Children?’, 36–45.

¹⁸ Michael Brennan, ‘Rapid-Build House Scheme for Homeless “a Dismal Failure”’, *Business Post*, 27 October 2019, <https://www.businesspost.ie/news-focus/rapid-build-house-scheme-for-homeless-a-dismal-failure-92928f3c>.

LIVES ON HOLD

For some families, placement in a family hub is initially a most welcome and much needed improvement on a room in a commercial hotel or B&B, or, at worst, rough sleeping. MLRC has worked with over 1,000 homeless families in the last two years. Many of these families have been placed in family hubs so we have heard first-hand their experiences in this form of accommodation. We recently documented many experiences of these families in a report titled “Lived Experiences of Homeless Families”.¹⁹

Unfortunately, for many of the families we have worked with, the relief that a family feels when moved into a hub is often short lived and gives way to a range of serious difficulties and concerns once the initial settling in period has lapsed. The concerns are centred on the limitations and controls placed on their day to day life within the hub and the major challenges of residing in a congregated setting.

It is important to acknowledge the very wide range in standard of family hubs. MLRC has observed several former commercial hotels and B&Bs being essentially re-branded as “family hubs”, with the same staff and core facilities in place. Such hubs fall short of providing the appropriate facilities and standards articulated in Government policy; in the experience of MLRC, these placements do not provide an appropriate setting for homeless families to live, albeit temporarily, in safety and dignity. Both the Office of the Ombudsman for Children and the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission have also expressed concerns about the wide variation in standards of family hubs.²⁰

Family hubs that are operated in former commercial hotels in many instances lack the facilities, policies and appropriately qualified staff to properly support and meet the needs of vulnerable homeless families. Several families with whom MLRC has worked with

have described the “hubs” as little better than the commercial hotel or B&B they have moved from. Particular concerns include: restrictions on family life and on the lives of children in particular; invasions into family life and privacy; absence of facilities and space; limitations on cooking and laundry facilities; and poor attitude and expertise of staff. Such concerns are exacerbated when families spent excessive periods in such hubs, well outside the six months envisaged in *Rebuilding Ireland*.

One family MLRC worked with spent over two years in a family hub, which itself was a former commercial hotel. The family’s experience illustrated how completely unsuitable this congregated living situation was, with negative impacts on all members of the family, including young children. There were serious encroachments on the family’s privacy and dignity and their functioning as a family was seriously weakened. Such negative impacts were detailed in an extensive social worker report.

Particular aspects of their concerns bring the experience of congregated living into sharp focus. The family said that camera surveillance throughout the hub left them feeling constantly monitored. They felt further monitored by the requirement to sign in and out every time they came and went from the premises. The family had no one room big enough to allow them to eat together alone as a family and had limited access to cooking space and facilities. Strict rules that applied to hub residents resulted in the children being limited in their ability to interact or socialise with others. The children could not, for example, go into the rooms of other residents to play; they could not have friends over. Rules which existed to ensure the untroubled operation of a family hub placed active barriers to children developing creativity through play and having the nurturing role of peer friendships in their lives.

The imposition of house rules in family hubs, as experienced by that family, is a concern frequently articulated by the homeless families MLRC has assisted. These rules regulate the movement of families and place restrictions on their activities and use of the accommodation. MLRC is aware of

¹⁹ Mercy Law Resource Centre, ‘Report on the Lived Experiences of Homeless Families’ (Dublin: Mercy Law Resource Centre, December 2019), <https://mercy.law.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/MLRC-Child-and-Family-Homelessness-Report-5.pdf>.

²⁰ Ombudsman for Children’s Office, ‘No Place Like Home: Children’s Views and Experiences of Living in Family Hubs’ (Dublin: Ombudsman for Children’s Office, April 2019), 7, <https://www.oco.ie/app/uploads/2019/04/No-Place-Like-Home.pdf>.



©iStock photo ID: 828368186

some cases where alleged infringements of such house rules have been used as a basis for “evicting” families from their placement, exposing them to a precarious housing situation and a further period of instability.

These physical limitations and restrictions have had a marked emotional impact on families living in hub settings. A common theme for the families MLRC has engaged with who have lived in family hubs is the feeling of stigma and inertia. Several of the children expressed embarrassment at their homelessness and chose to hide it from their peers. Their social skills deteriorated. According to school and social worker reports, they were unable to maintain normal relationships with their school friends.

These experiences of children residing in family hubs were also expressed in a report by the Office of the Ombudsman for Children released last year.²¹ The report was based on the experiences of 80 children living in family hubs across the country and found the children in these settings expressed feelings of sadness, confusion and anger in relation to their housing situation.

²¹ Ombudsman for Children’s Office, ‘No Place Like Home: Children’s Views and Experiences of Living in Family Hubs’.

Alongside the corrosive impact on children, parents expressed feelings of guilt at somehow being responsible for the family’s stay in the hub. Parents frequently articulated their concerns to MLRC over the challenges they encountered in looking after their children when surrounded by other families. They struggled to assert their own parenting methods and to maintain family spirit and cohesion in the congregated setting. The sense of normality slipped away.

MLRC’s experience of working with homeless families residing in family hubs clearly shows the debilitating and negative impacts on family functioning, brought about by living in a congregated setting in an institutional environment. The longer families remain in these settings, the greater the negative impact that can be observed. We know from recent reports, that 62% of those experiencing homelessness have been

“Alongside the corrosive impact on children, parents expressed feelings of guilt at somehow being responsible for the family’s stay in the hub.”

accessing emergency accommodation for more than six months.²² Several families that MLRC has worked with have lived in family hub placements far in excess of the six months envisaged by *Rebuilding Ireland*.

Of particular concern is the complete absence of research and consultation that preceded the rapid expansion of family hubs as a policy response to the increase in family homelessness. There was also a lack of rationale for their introduction expressed in the originating policy statement, *Rebuilding Ireland*. Academics researching the genesis of housing hubs concluded that “we find no international research or evidence base to justify the emerging family hubs model and note there have been no pilots to demonstrate how they might work. The danger with ‘hubs’ is that they both institutionalise and reduce the functioning capacity of families.”²³

Family hubs were presented as a “temporary” solution to what was believed to be a short-term problem of family homelessness. Yet, family homelessness has not reduced in any meaningful sense. Families are remaining in homelessness for years, not months. In this context, family hubs as a policy response is fast becoming a permanent feature of homeless policy. Despite calls by the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission and others, there has been little consideration as to whether or not this form of emergency accommodation truly provides for basic family needs.

WHERE TO NEXT?

It is unclear whether or not the new Government will pursue any alternative strategy specifically in relation to emergency accommodation provision for homeless families. The recent Programme for Government commits to tackling homelessness,²⁴ which is a noteworthy deviation from previous Governments who at least pledged to end homelessness. In relation

to family homelessness, the focus is on reducing the numbers of families entering homelessness and prioritising long-term sustainable accommodation for those who are already homeless. There is no consideration or mention of addressing issues in homeless accommodation provision to this group.

Covid-19 brought short-comings in homeless accommodation provision into sharp focus. The system of accommodating homeless individuals in overcrowded and insecure hostel accommodation was shown to be completely inadequate. The pandemic prompted responsive measures to protect vulnerable families and individuals residing in unsuitable homeless accommodation. Capacity was increased and new solutions were brought on stream in a relatively short period.

Several families MLRC were supporting were moved from overcrowded and highly unsuitable B&B accommodation into self-contained temporary accommodation. Those in family hubs generally stayed in their placements, with increased regulation around movement and procedures in order to manage the risks posed by Covid-19. One MLRC client told us that she was terrified of contracting the illness in the shared kitchen and that the sanitiser in the hub kept going missing.

The pandemic has the potential to refocus attention on the suitability of family hubs. They are congregated settings on a parallel with direct provision centres. They share similar characteristics: limited space, shared cooking and laundry facilities, communal living areas, and wide-ranging restrictions on movement and rules on all aspects of residence. They also share similar risks: the onset of the pandemic has created very serious health and welfare risks for the residents who cannot socially distance or separate themselves from other households. A home, or the concept of a home, is central to public health advice on safely managing Covid-19.²⁵

²² Department of Housing, Planning & Local Government, ‘Homeless Quarterly Progress Report - Quarter 2 2020’.

²³ Rory Hearne and Mary P. Murphy, ‘Investing in the Right to a Home: Housing, HAPs and Hubs’ (Maynooth: Maynooth University, 12 July 2017), 32, <https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/sites/default/files/assets/document/Investing%20in%20the%20Right%20to%20a%20Home%20Full1.pdf>.

²⁴ Government of Ireland, ‘Programme for Government - Our Shared Future’ (Dublin: Government of Ireland, June 2020), <https://static.rasnet.ie/documents/news/2020/06/draft-programme-for-govt.pdf>.

²⁵ Health Service Executive, ‘Self-Isolation: Managing Coronavirus at Home’, 7 August 2020, <https://www2.hse.ie/conditions/coronavirus/managing-coronavirus-at-home/self-isolation.html>.

Covid-19 has shown very clearly that hostels, hubs and hotels are not homes.

In June 2019, MLRC was before the Oireachtas Committee on Housing, Planning and Local Government to make a submission in relation to family and child homelessness. That Committee published a report and made a number of significant recommendations in November 2019.²⁶ Amongst those was a recommendation that there be an independent, formal evaluation of the suitability of all family emergency accommodation including hubs and that this be done “as soon as is practicable”. We are not aware of any such evaluation being initiated as yet. It is now most urgently needed.

CONCLUSION

MLRC has persistently highlighted the failure of the Government to provide safe, secure and dignified homeless accommodation to vulnerable families. The policy shift towards provision of homeless accommodation to families in family hub accommodation as articulated in *Rebuilding Ireland* came about without a proper evidence base in relation to the suitability and long-term impacts of family hubs.

Such an approach seriously risks normalising homelessness by creating institutions where families are contained and supported. It ultimately risks putting them out of sight and out of mind.

Covid-19 has shown very clearly that hostels, hubs and hotels are not homes. They offer no security or privacy to homeless families. They are not an environment in which to live safely, in dignity and freely. Only a home can do that. Since our collective well-being now relies on each person being able to be safe in their own home and their own private space, we now more than ever need to put home at the centre of our thinking.

²⁶ Joint Committee on Children and Youth Affairs, 'Report on the Impact of Homelessness on Children' (Dublin: Houses of the Oireachtas, November 2019), 15, https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/committee/dail/32/joint_committee_on_children_and_youth_affairs/reports/2019/2019-11-14_report-on-the-impact-of-homelessness-on-children_en.pdf; Joint Committee on Housing, Planning & Local Government, 'Family and Child Homelessness' (Dublin: Houses of the Oireachtas, November 2019), 6, https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/committee/dail/32/joint_committee_on_housing_planning_and_local_government/reports/2019/2019-11-14_report-on-family-and-child-homelessness_en.pdf.

Do We Really Feel Fine?

Towards an Irish Green New Deal

A Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice
collaboration between Keith Adams, Social
Policy Advocate; Kevin Hargaden, Director
and Social Theologian; Martina Madden,
Communications Coordinator and Ciara
Murphy, Environmental Policy Advocate.



©iStock photo ID: 1197940874

THE PROBLEM: THE CENTRE CANNOT HOLD

The world as we know it is falling apart, but in a thousand different ways. A pandemic rages, but contrary to what the dystopian movies taught us, society is intact. Climate stability is disintegrating, and the delicate ecological balance that allows life to flourish on Earth is severely compromised. But mostly, it's business as usual. Those willing to look could not fail to notice the marked decline in biodiversity, but we still use toxic weed killer to ensure the verges between our motorways look neat to us as we sit in gridlocked traffic.

The political theorist Frederic Jameson famously mused that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism. Even as we live through the former, we prefer not to muse on the possible death of the latter. Writing in the summer of 2020, our airwaves, newspapers and social media feeds are full of talk about getting back to normal – meaning escaping the lethal threat posed by SARS-COV-2 – even though our old normal was propelling us deeper into a mass extinction event that will, within a few decades, threaten the very existence of civilisation. “Imagining the end of capitalism” feels like an idea from the 19th Century we forgot to update; another

grand utopian vision destined to never get going or to quickly go off the rails.

Our political culture lurches from crisis to crisis. With our memories truncated by a constant stream of data reduced to 280 characters, we must reach back to remember what life was like before the planes hit the Twin Towers, before the Credit Default Swaps collapsed, or before we first heard about a sickness afflicting people in Hubei Province. We can weave a narrative that includes the disparate pieces of recent history, but the story does not make much sense.

Public exhaustion with political programmes has generated a dangerous cynicism. What can we expect when political campaigns triumph with slogans about “Change” or “The Republic on the Move!” or “A New Politics” and then go on to intensify the policies that have left people so alienated in the first place. We fixate on individuals or lose ourselves in data analysis while the climate and biodiversity crisis accelerates. We label everything we don't like as “populism” while vast swathes of the population remain disconnected from the political process. We index all our political decisions towards economic growth using a measurement that cannot track what the growth is for or how its bounty is distributed.

A Global Jesuit Vision



As an initiative of the Irish Jesuit Province, the Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice is part of a global network of initiatives that hope to educate, serve justice, encourage reconciliation, and bring about spiritual growth. We are guided by the Society's Universal Apostolic Principles, the four cardinal orientations which provide a blueprint for our work for the next decade: Showing the way to God, Walking with the Excluded, Journeying with Youth, and Caring for our Common Home. In particular, we are inspired by the call to "Care for our Common Home",¹ which has its basis in *Laudato Si'*.

Through our collaboration and identification with this genuinely global movement, we offer a distinct vision within Irish environmentalism which resists the sterile and misleading dichotomies that constrain our discourse. The line between spirituality and activism is porous. The secularist impulse that often characterises contemporary Irish political discourse may be explicable in terms of our recent history, but it comes across as inescapably parochial when we look around the world, especially to the Global South, and see how religious commitment, spiritual practice, and a holistic appreciation of all the different ways human beings discover and construct meaning are at play. We are unapologetically presenting a Christian – specifically an Ignatian – vision of environmental and political care, but this is explicitly and intentionally inclusive of those who do not share such convictions. The Jesuit preferences call us "collaborate with Gospel depth, for the protection and renewal of God's creation" and, as such, we will make common cause with anyone and everyone who shares that vision. ■

The environment cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on it but we do not – we cannot – heed the warning because the system we have designed drowns out all objections. How can infinite growth come from finite resources? How can we be generating real wealth if we are impoverishing the very soil on which we stand? What's the point of increasing numbers on balance sheets if the gap between the winners and losers in our society grows ever greater? These are not the complaints of idealists; this is the only realistic position left. To seek to return to the old normal is not just depressing. It is utterly delusional.

We can only understand the world we describe and precision in speech generates possibility in action but our political culture reaches in vain for metaphors or frameworks to help navigate this chaos. The great challenges of the last century – defeating fascism or exploring space – fall short in different ways. The threat of climate and biodiversity catastrophe is greater than fascism, and the challenge is almost the opposite of a war – seeing people as expendable to achieve our goals means we have already lost. The problem is more complex than putting a man on the moon because there are cultural factors at play more intricate than any technological issue and the benefits to be gained are much more profound. It is simply the case that climate and biodiversity breakdown is the biggest problem humanity has ever faced. Beginning by stating that we don't have all the answers is worse than banal – it is as useless as someone intruding on an Allied planning meeting in 1940 to point out that no one knew how to get an army of men on to the beaches of northern France. If the threat is genuinely real, then it demands that we focus our resources, attention, and creativity in response. D-Day took longer than 24 hours and we won't have a carbon-free (and nuclear-free) electricity system in the lifetime of this parliament. But as the current pandemic demonstrates, there are capacities for collective collaboration and massive, dramatic policy developments when we agree they are warranted.

The pedant contrarian can score points on prime-time radio programs by rephrasing the existence of this crisis as an excuse to not act against this crisis, but the more

¹ The Society of Jesus, 'Caring for Our Common Home', <https://www.jesuits.global/uap/caring-for-our-common-home/>.

fundamental obstacle may be the categories of “environmentalism” itself. Easily maligned as a bourgeois movement, it has failed to make the case that the situation warrants dramatic intervention. Whether in thrall to the myths of capitalism or the utopian dreams of socialist revolution, Irish environmentalism, despite its very best efforts, has failed to connect the crisis now upon us with the lives and hopes of the fabled “ordinary person”. We do not point the finger at others, but include ourselves in this critique. Whether railroaded by sloppy philosophy, the savvy of our opponents, or the conformism of our own communities, it remains the case that a coherent narrative is rarely expounded. Whatever the “Green movement” has been doing has produced a situation where we are associated with urban elites and it is widely assumed are antagonistic towards rural Ireland. Whatever we have been doing needs to stop. It is not working.

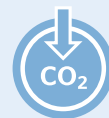
The hunger to replace the politics of crisis with something genuinely new – not just the tired old dreams of the 1800s – grows daily. Around the edges we see how the assumptions of Modernity are already fraying: in a public health crisis, many people do not trust the health advice; in elections, many people do not use their voice; in the face of an ecological cataclysm in the physical world, people retreat to virtual entertainment. This is a system that benefits the very few at the expense of the very many. This is a system that is hurtling towards disaster, but the suffering will not be shared equally. Already it is the poor and the marginalised who suffer the most. Whatever we call this system – capitalism or neoliberalism or business as usual – is a zombie slouching towards total chaos. Our prophets speak in unison – our house is on fire,¹ the earth is in a death spiral,² and the human environment and the natural environment deteriorate together.³ Almost everyone agrees. The centre cannot hold. Yet no one can act.

¹ Greta Thunberg, ‘Our House Is Still on Fire and You’re Fuelling the Flames’, World Economic Forum, 21 January 2020, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/01/greta-speech-our-house-is-still-on-fire-davos-2020/>.

² David Wallace-Wells, *The Uninhabitable Earth: A Story of the Future* (London: Penguin, 2019).

³ Naomi Klein, *On Fire: The Burning Case for a Green New Deal* (London: Allen Lane, 2019); George Monbiot, *How Did We Get Into This Mess?: Politics, Equality, Nature* (London: Verso Books, 2016); Pope Francis, ‘Laudato Si’: Encyclical Letter on Care for Our Common Home (Vatican, May 2015), http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_encyclica-laudato-si.html.

Carbon Capture: Storing Up False Hope



While not currently available at scale, carbon capture and storage is stubbornly viewed by policymakers as a viable option for reducing carbon emissions. This awaited future emergence of scalable technology undergirds the argument for the present continued use of fossil fuels. Ireland’s current plan for achieving the 2050 targets relies on the emergence of this not-yet-existing technology. That is not policy; as it stands, it is fantasy.

The process involves separating carbon dioxide from industrial sources,¹ transporting it by pipeline, injecting it deep underground where it would be stored in geological reservoirs including depleted oil and gas fields. While it can be human nature to place hope on this ostensibly simple solution, there are several issues associated with this plan.² Carbon capture is a risky and expensive technology with many gaps in knowledge remaining and scant demonstration of the long-term safe storage of the captured carbon.

It is simply not a substitute for drastic emissions reduction.

Ervia, the company that manages Ireland’s gas and water network, is particularly interested in new iterations of carbon capture for the role it could play in ‘carbon-neutral’ gas powered electricity generation. As this technology would be utilised at point of combustion to capture carbon dioxide it would do nothing for the associated methane leaks³ that occur during extraction and transportation. ➤

¹ This can include coal, biomass or gas fired power plants or any other large industries such as cement production.

² Haroon Kheshgi, Heleen de Coninck, and John Kessels, ‘Carbon Dioxide Capture and Storage: Seven Years after the IPCC Special Report’, *Mitigation and Adaptation Strategies for Global Change* 17, no. 6 (2012): 563–567.

³ Methane is a greenhouse gas almost 90 times more efficient at trapping heat than carbon dioxide in a 20-year period. For a more detailed account, see: Clodagh Daly, ‘Meet the New Boss; Same as the Old Boss – The Subsidisation of Natural Gas as a Decarbonisation Pathway in Ireland’, *Working Notes* 34, no. 86 (June 2020), <https://www.jcfj.ie/article/meet-the-new-boss-same-as-the-old-boss-the-subsidisation-of-natural-gas-as-a-decarbonisation-pathway-in-ireland/>.

Simplified solutions often betray a simplified understanding of the problems. The environmental crisis is not associated with carbon dioxide emissions alone. By hailing carbon capture and storage as the silver bullet solution to the climate crisis we run the risk of ignoring the other issues such as air pollution, environmental destruction from extraction and transportation of fossil fuels.

As it is for carbon capture and storage, so it is for all technofixes. Solutions such as spraying sulphur into the atmosphere, adding salt to the clouds and deploying mirrors into space to reflect the sunlight back are all lauded as possible solutions to climate yet could lead to further ecological degradation and distract from the real hard work needed to restore our relationship with our ecosystems. In an ecological system as complex as ours “merely technical solutions run the risk of addressing symptoms and not the more serious underlying problems.”⁴ ■

The old revolutionaries worried metaphorically speaking, everything solid melts into air. Centuries into the project they protested, we have burned the fossils of long-dead creatures into the atmosphere to such a degree that the ice caps are receding, the coral reefs are dying, the sea water is acidifying, the soil is denuding, the forests are retreating, the deserts are expanding, climates are shifting, storms are strengthening, droughts are lengthening, extinctions are spreading. But at the same time the rich are getting richer, our lives are being processed into data to be surveilled and tracked and analysed without our intervention, capital can flow freely but people are trapped behind borders, wages stagnate even while productivity grows, services that are needed universally can only be purchased at a price, the West continues to pillage the South, but does so now with the awoken linguistic tics that suggest justice, and absolutely nothing can be achieved without recourse to debt.

It’s the end of our world as we know it, and we feel fine. The collapse is so gradual, so indisputably modelled, so intricately mapped that it does not deserve the term *apocalypse*, which in its true sense means an immediate and sudden *unveiling*. The Irish writer Mark O’Connell, in his excellent recent book describes his boredom at how the collapse of civilization is already normalised: “It’s all horsemen, all the time.”⁴ We change the station, we click to another site, we seek for something, anything, to distract us from this catastrophic normalcy.

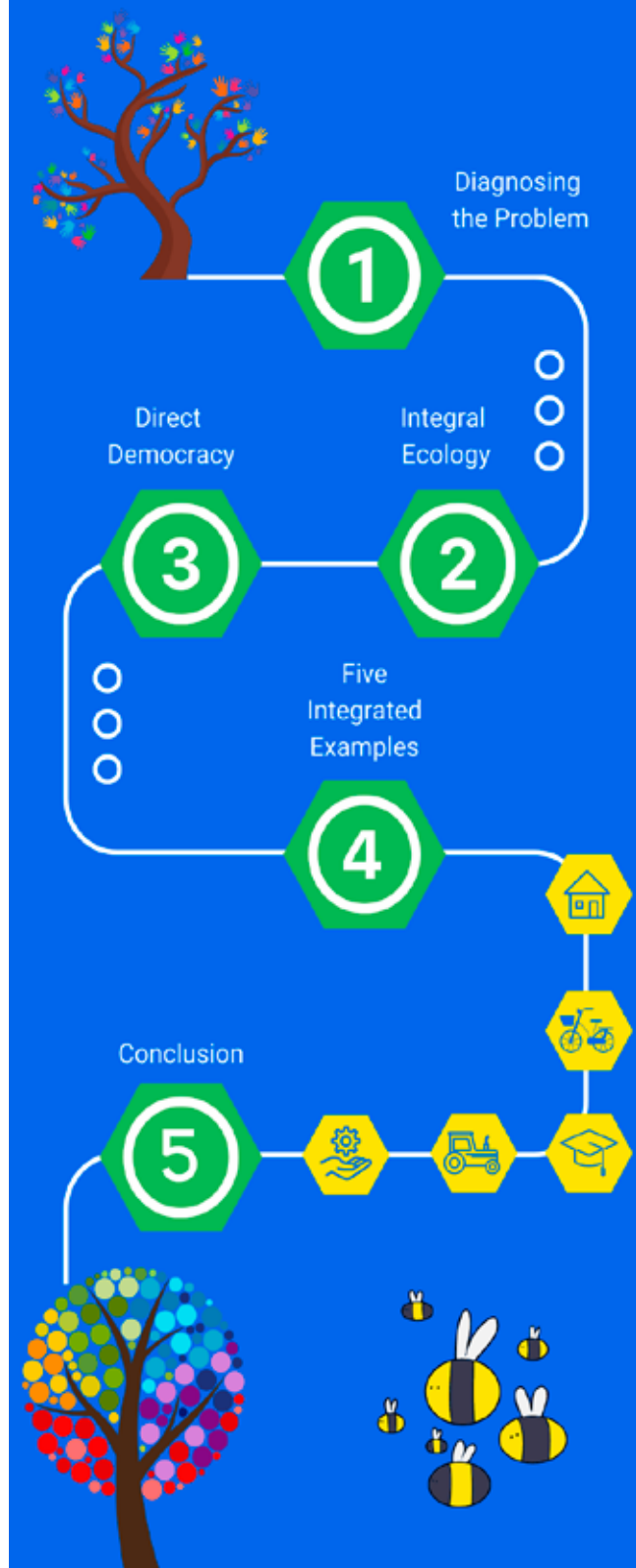
It is time to build a new normal. It is past time to liberate ourselves from carbon captivity. It is time to construct a new narrative that refuses to mystify planetary devastation behind line graphs and percentages. Whether we call it a just transition or a green new deal or an ecological conversion, it is time to finally reject the story we are living, which is so baffling, confusing, contradictory, and boring. Our policies after the pandemic cannot be a more refined version of the old normal. A new tale must be told.

Is this really the end of the world?? Surely some revelation is at hand?

⁴ Pope Francis, ‘Laudato Si’: Encyclical Letter on Care for Our Common Home’ (Vatican, May 2015), §144, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.

⁴ Mark O’Connell, *Notes from an Apocalypse: A Personal Journey to the End of the World and Back* (London: Granta Books, 2020).

Towards a Green New Deal



A SOLUTION: INTEGRAL ECOLOGY

The Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice has found an unusual source of insight as we seek to navigate this lamentable terrain: the Pope. Francis published *Laudato Si'* five years ago to global acclaim. The document has had little impact in Ireland, no doubt for understandable cultural and historical reasons. Yet we are convinced that there is profound wisdom in the approach advocated by Francis, and that it has significance far beyond those who are Christians.

Although rightfully interpreted as an environmental text, *Laudato Si'* is also a piece of trenchant political critique. Francis' fundamental conviction is that there is no way to consider the climate and biodiversity crisis apart from the profound social problems created by our heedless commitment to GDP growth without qualification. The roots of the ecological crisis are established by human practices. The "dominant technocratic paradigm" reduces the complexity of life down to simple one-dimensional pursuit of *more* without reference to purpose, "a technique of possession, mastery and transformation". All efforts to care for Earth will flounder unless we oppose this alienated parody of progress and instead seek to care for our brothers and sisters who are marginalised by an economic system that presents greed as virtue.⁵ We must fight against the extinction of species, but we must also resist the elimination of native cultures and indigenous ways of life. *Laudato Si'* is thorough in its diagnoses of the exhausting contradictions we endure lurching from crisis to crisis, and is vigilant against how a

⁵ An assumption exists among policymakers that if mainstream economics are simply tweaked, then the ill-effects of climate change can be mitigated. However, a recent paper concluded that mainstream economics is, in fact, an active obstacle to clear thinking and effective action on resources, the environment, and climate change. Consider: James K. Galbraith, 'Economics and the Climate Catastrophe', *Globalizations*, 2020, 1–6.

The Growth of Degrowth



Contrary to its name, degrowth is a growing field of thought within economics and ecology. Prompted by economic models of extracting infinite growth from finite resources, early theorising focused on the contradictions inherent to business as usual. Tim Jackson, in *Prosperity Without Growth*,¹ argues that the ‘decoupling’ of growth and resource-use through greater efficiencies is fanciful. He surmises that societal prosperity will become impossible because of the commitment to infinite growth and its exacerbation of inequality and wealth accumulation for a small cohort.

The immediacy of climate change events and environmental degradation has brought a new impetus to degrowth. In *Doughnut Economics*, Kate Raworth continues to shift the focus away from quarterly growth reports to how environmental sustainability can be addressed alongside social justice concerns.² Raworth concludes that only the creation and maintenance of a socially just and environmentally safe space within boundaries will prevent human deprivation and planetary degradation. Most recently, in *Less is More*, Jason Hickel utilises a sharper redistributive edge by identifying the key role of taxation policy.³ He argues that degrowth is the only viable path forward to sustain and even improve human wellbeing.

Aside from new metrics, the role of the State needs to be rethought and we need to move to a stable state economy. Hickel’s primary solution is the decommodification of public goods and an expansion of the commons. Degrowth requires cutting the excesses of the richest through progressive taxation, while redistributing existing resources ➤

reactionary response will easily lurch into a green technocracy, where expertise overrules democratic deliberation or some variety of eco-fascism which achieves mitigation through State-sanctioned force, repression, and dispossession.

But primarily, *Laudato Si’* remains a theological argument. It is a conversation with Francis’ namesake, the saint from Assisi who so famously cherished the created world. It is predicated on an understanding that the order and beauty we find in nature has meaning. We love the world because the world was made, and is sustained, in love. Integral ecology is that approach which recognises that the response to the climate and biodiversity catastrophe is “inseparable from the notion of the common good.” We cannot love our neighbour without loving our neighbourhood, and equally, there is no remedy for environmental devastation that does not involve social rejuvenation.

That it is a theological document does not mean that its only audience is people already convinced by the claims of Christianity. Those who do not consider themselves Christians can still engage critically and respectfully with theological concepts. Francis states that “we need a conversation which includes everyone,” while interacting extensively and seriously with contemporary secular thought throughout the letter. Even those who are antagonistic towards Christian conceptions of reality can appreciate the distinctive tone of this manifesto; the fury directed at a “throwaway culture”, joined by a stubborn commitment to hope and generosity, as signalled by the title. *Laudato Si’* is a call to praise, a recognition that the beauty and complexity of our environment calls out of us a response marked by joy, a super-abundant fertility that mirrors in our souls what we so commonly encounter in the world around us. This is a proposition that is markedly different from the cynicism and insincerity that marks so much of our political discourse.

Integral ecology, then, may be a theological claim, but it is the best kind: sourced in the rich history of Christian ethical and spiritual thinking and practice, but directed towards all people of goodwill. As Francis frames it, radical

¹ Tim Jackson, *Prosperity Without Growth: Foundations for the Economy of Tomorrow* (Abingdon-on-Thames: Taylor & Francis, 2016).

² Kate Raworth, *Doughnut Economics: Seven Ways to Think Like a 21st-Century Economist* (London: Random House Business, 2018).

³ Jason Hickel, *Less Is More: How Degrowth Will Save the World* (London: William Heinemann, 2020).

environmental action is the inescapable and distinctive responsibility of every Christian, but it is a responsibility to be shared in solidarity with all who believe differently and those who cannot say they believe anything at all. It is not a creedal document that requires agreement with every paragraph. It is an invitation into dialogue, recognising that the scale of the problem requires listening to all voices and hearing from all perspectives.

The Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice seeks to explore what integral ecology means on a practical policy level as we respond to the housing and homelessness crisis, to the injustices apparent in our criminal justice system, and in our economic arrangements. It is our contention that the disparate, diluted, often half-hearted political policies that have left Ireland as a climate laggard are informed by a philosophical failure. For a generation, the Green movement in Ireland has pursued technocratic expertise and developed admirable, sophisticated policy stances to address this issue and answer that question. But the lack of a coherent narrative means that all our efforts are rejected by the reigning hegemonic power or recapitulated in a domesticated form.

and investing in social goods like universal healthcare, education, affordable housing, alongside libraries and public parks. This would allow an improvement to the welfare purchasing power of incomes so that people can access the things they need to live well, without needing ever-higher incomes. Raworth supports a re-envisioning of the State which strategically invests in areas not concerned with growth. In agreement with Hickel, the State would provide universal basic services by making public goods available to all.

Infinite growth cannot continue with finite resources. Yet, there is little critique of this dogma within Irish policymaking. A moment of reflection would at least acknowledge contradictions. Serious reflection can only conclude that such incoherent thinking kills people and the current trajectory will have devastating effects on ordinary lives. ■



Integral ecology is a source from which we can weave a coherent, compelling, and convincing counter-narrative to the tired and increasingly desperate calls to return to business as usual. To say there is no ecological transformation without social transformation is to state an objective truth, but we need one that spills over in a way that reorganises our political priorities. The only humanism left is one that seeks to remedy social inequality as a means to avert ecological collapse. All these crises that consume us and all this fear induced in us remains a distraction from the definitive catastrophe that looms above us, lurches towards us and already lurks all around us. The climate and biodiversity catastrophe is not just one more problem along with all the others. It is the singular issue that exposes the suicidal nature of our current course.

Incremental change may be all that is possible in practice. Moderate rhetoric might be a winning strategy come election time. But we must speak with ringing moral clarity: the end of our world is already upon us. The voices within the establishment posture about realism and maturity, but their stalling is reckless. Our time to make a difference is short, so we must take positions of power that are open to us. We cannot wait for a better time than now; our time to make a difference is short. We must not squander the power we have on yet more of the same sort of thinking that got us here.

We must be clear that while consensus builds in words around the need for action, those who occupy the controlling seats in our parliaments and our marketplaces will not willingly vacate their place or discard the practices and projects they have developed, regardless of whatever elegant and articulate argument we deploy to demonstrate the futility of their thinking. Success in the face of this imminent breakdown will require struggle against forces with more resources than we have. Our rebellion against the status quo requires an agitating philosophy sufficiently different from prevailing wisdom to disorientate those who oppose adaptation and attract those yet on the fence. This is a moment when integral ecology demands our attention.

Through an integral ecology framework, the fundamental reality can be remembered:

the economy exists to serve society, not the other way round. Growth for its own sake, without reference to the common good, is nihilism wrapped in the promise of comfort. Everything is connected: there is an intimate relationship between the poor and the fragility of the planet, and reorganising our society and economy to adapt to the reality of climate and biodiversity breakdown is not a “cost”, it is an opportunity. The narrative that emerges from seeing what is plainly true – that our ecological crisis is inseparable from our social crisis – transforms even how we describe simple policy decisions. Every euro spent is not sunk, it is invested. Every step away from the growth mindset is a step back towards strength. Liberation is impossible without aiming to be carbon-free. We only truly care for Earth when we care for each other.

Integral ecology clears space to describe our political miasma more compellingly. Francis talks about the *rapidification* of our societies as a consequence of the techno-economic paradigm which prevails. In lieu of the haste with which we lurch from crisis to crisis, integral ecology demands the patient attention to connect the micro with the macro, embedding the individual’s experience of the climate and biodiversity catastrophe within the social challenges that are generated. Integral ecology allows us to join the environmental and the social together in terms that do not require a familiarity with the long-term effect of methane dispersion in the atmosphere, to describe the problems we face without reducing them to private individual actions in response. In this framing, housing is no longer a separate issue from ecology that we can get around to retrofitting at some point. In this understanding, how we welcome immigrants is no longer a distinct sphere from environmental care. From this perspective, the sustained period of asset price inflation which we are enduring, which benefits the wealthy at the cost of everybody else, is no longer some unfortunate happening beyond our control; it is a product of the rapidification which looks at our common home as a resource to be exploited and treats us similarly.

Before we can construct a meaningful Green New Deal for Ireland, we must first enact this takeover of our political imagination by

the terms of reality revealed in the ecological crisis. Climate and biodiversity breakdown are not specialised problems to be addressed by a niche office within a single ministry. The closest present analogy is that the challenge of the ecological crisis is greater even than our present half-century long obsession with GDP growth. Education has been replaced with job preparation, the arts has been repackaged as an industrial sector, and priorities across the public sector have been manipulated by an empty-vessel concept called “efficiency”. The narrative that has been spun – exposed as threadbare by the pandemic – emphasised personal autonomy and the pursuit of self-interest but it also reconstituted questions that were previously outside the remit of economic analysis as cost-benefit proposals.

A tool designed for the narrow purpose of budgetary planning is now recited ad nauseam as justification for an entire way of life. Any political conversation that cannot guarantee growth in the measurement known as GDP can’t get off the ground. GDP captures all that is wrong with our obsession with data: it is a useful tool, extended so as to often be worse than useless. It bypasses well-being, it ignores pollution, it leaves untouched the vast realm of altruism and social care that is not economically transacted but upon which the economy rests. Instead it offers a truncated picture of reality that functions to narrow all conversations that suggest fundamental change. It grows and expands, while employment, living standards, and the real facts of social mobility retract.

We cannot dismantle the Master’s house with the Master’s tools, but we can learn from them how things are put together. A successful intervention against the climate and biodiversity catastrophe now unfurling demands a political imagination that integrates the demand for justice and the demand for sustainability as the basis for a rejuvenated society. This is the beginning of a story that can shatter the misconception that environmental concern is an indulgence of the wealthy or the young, and a death sentence to the tired call-and-response discourse that allows soft-climate sceptics to present themselves as hard-nosed realists.

Trading Away Justice



Whatever set of movements, documents, and policies emerge to constitute a much-needed green deal for Ireland, we must ensure that we use them to ensure the transition to a carbon-free society is a means by which to achieve greater justice and equity for all, especially for those who are marginalised. A multi-layered radical experiment in national, regional, and local democracy is a means by which to initiate and guide this transformation. This guards against the twin risks of technocracy and populism, framing our discourse around widely agreed upon, scientifically-informed models but implementing them with local adaptability and flexibility.

This approach cannot be proposed as comprehensive because so much of our potential policy arena is determined in advance by international agreements which are opaque, if not impermeable, to democratic consultation. Without a revision of how macro trade deals and bilateral agreements are developed, we cannot hope to achieve a Just Transition. Last summer’s controversy over the incoherencies of the EU promoting a New Green Deal while also committing to the Mercosur deal is one recent example of how the democratic viability of a just transition to a low carbon society is bankrupted by what appears to be extra-democratic arrangements.

Citizen engagement grounded on a radical commitment to democracy is the only path available considering the deficit in electoral support for transformative environmental change and the strength of the status quo powers that seek to shuffle their feet. Power will not be relinquished without a battle; fighting to redraw these documents – a painstaking and expert task – to represent citizens before sectors is not tangential to the environmental project. ■

Climate Dialogue: Activating Communities

The scale of the problem we face is so complex, that it is only through a complex arrangement of conversations that we can explore possible solutions. These conversations will need to take place in a flexible system that allows for changes in circumstances and functions. Engaging and inviting people to participate in broad environmental topics; targeting specific communities for particular issues and moving the context of the discussion on to embrace and protect the natural environment in every aspect of our national conversation as well as facilitating action will all be needed if we are to succeed.



One of the first steps in this process is piquing people's interest. Public concern for climate change is largely derived from media consumption.¹ Reassessing how the media, in particular Ireland's State-funded broadcaster RTÉ, covers and discusses climate change and action would contribute massively to the national dialogue. Ireland has particularly low climate coverage which peaks around international events and extreme weather events and mainly concentrates on the political and ideological dimension of climate change. A prolonged national awareness campaign would help stress the dangers of climate breakdown and the importance of action.

Increasing the awareness of the public, while important, does not equate to a dialogue so much as a monologue. Mechanisms allowing engagement with local people, academics, and experts in their respective fields (agriculture, climate science, energy) will be needed.² While national policies and targets are required >

A METHOD: DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY

What would it look like in practice to try to implement an integral ecology approach to policy? Engaging with the finest, evolving scientific expertise is essential for any response to this crisis. It is impossible to grapple with the catastrophe that is coming without recourse to advanced expertise. We rely on a vast number of scientists in dozens of fields to track and model the changes that are occurring and to generate possible responses. The effort spans society, from public research universities, to private firms, to citizen ecology that conducts biodiversity censuses or community groups engaged in grassroots environmental restoration. We also need poets and musicians, artists, and pastors to help us integrate this learning. In the contemporary arid jargon, this crisis calls for collaboration across STEM and the Arts and Humanities, along with civil society.

But while these responses are essential, we are again bound to fail as long as these domains remain the primary point of engagement with the problem. As such, the Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice proposes a comprehensive social and political experiment in consultative democracy as the preparatory step towards a formalised Green New Deal. Integrating democratic wisdom with technical and creative expertise is a solid methodological approach to explore what policies would best encapsulate the vision of integral ecology. How do we specify the responses needed to ensure a just transition into a carbon-free future? The path forward is dialogical, not technocratic.

The malaise with electoral politics cannot be addressed by refined slogans or A/B tested campaigns from marketing executives who have successfully rebranded as change-makers. For the last decade we have seen progressive politics trade in the language of seeing and hearing and standing with those on the margins while remaining blind and deaf and passive in the face of the escalating extinction event. Those left behind by the onward march of a growing economy that never seems to benefit them do not need a more calculating political representation. They need to represent themselves. Gathering people –

¹ Eileen Culloty et al., 'Climate Change in Irish Media', EPA Research Report (Ireland: Environmental Protection Agency, 2019), http://www.epa.ie/pubs/reports/research/climate/Research_Report_300.pdf

² "What are needed are new pathways of self-expression and participation in society." Pope Francis, 'Fratelli Tutti' (Vatican, October 2020), §187, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html.

diverse and disagreeing people – around tables to talk and listen and debate is the only viable method for crafting a genuinely new politics.⁶ Integral ecology will arise from integrating conversations.

The Constitutional Convention and the Citizens' Assembly were the first steps towards this sort of an approach. We propose that this collective deliberation be designed so as to inform and equip the widest selection of our citizenry in a sustained conversation about the kind of society they want to pass on to the next generation. The reigning common sense is so committed to private property, private self-interest, and private autonomy that no narrational transformation is likely to occur without such deliberation. A pandemic arrives and the middle-classes and the middle-aged long to get stuck back into the middle of how life used to be when we were exhausting ourselves and our planet in pursuit of illusory percentage points of productivity gains. But a large-scale conversation – the like of which we have never attempted before – will offer the foundations to think through, with a green political imagination, what we want to have on offer for the children born today as they reach adulthood. The children of Millennials, Generation Alpha, will face unique challenges as they grow up in a world that is scrambling to cope with the cascading effects of climate breakdown.

The scale of the problem we face is so complex, that only a complex arrangement of conversations can hope to help us think through possible solutions. The steps that need to be taken presently appear beyond the reach of the electorate. Only when bringing everyone to the table can we hope to generate the conversations where no strategy is automatically off the table.⁷ The forces that seek to dampen or oppose climate and

to ensure Ireland is on the right path towards sustainability, it is at the local, ground level that these policies need to be implemented. Herein lies the importance of meaningful engagement with grassroots groups and local communities. Early and sustained consultation with community members who will be impacted most by climate action and environmental restoration projects can help identify and remediate issues that arise early in the project development and implementation. While this would obviously result in more work during the development stage of any project, it could help generate a better solution and negate any issues down the line which would come in the form of appeals, protests, and objections. Engaging at the local level can also result in more activated communities.³

While the importance of involving local stakeholders cannot be overstated, it is only one layer of the complex conversation that needs to happen. For this dialogue to be beneficial in transforming our environment and society it must be guided by experts. To develop truly holistic and environmentally sustainable action plans, ecologists, hydrologists, soil scientists, public health experts, climatologists, land use planners and environmental NGOs must be involved in the development stage beyond the current situation where some policy is mainly dictated by industry. But the category of “expert” must be expanded beyond this narrow interpretation to recognise those who speak from the Humanities, from the Arts, and from deep embodied local knowledge that is so easily overlooked when we inhabit the gaze of the technocrat. Only by grappling with the full complexity of our ecological situation and considering all possible interactions and consequences can we make progress.

This complex arrangement of conversation will require systems in place which facilitate it. Efforts and capabilities at ➤

⁶ “Lack of dialogue means that in these individual sectors people are concerned not for the common good, but for the benefits of power or, at best, for ways to impose their own ideas. Round tables thus become mere negotiating sessions, in which individuals attempt to seize every possible advantage, rather than cooperating in the pursuit of the common good. The heroes of the future will be those who can break with this unhealthy mindset and determine respectfully to promote truthfulness, aside from personal interest.” Pope Francis, ‘Fratelli Tutti’ (Vatican, October 2020), §202, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html.

⁷ No *humanistic* strategy. Implicit and explicit in our integrated ecology proposal is an outright rejection of the failed utopias that arise with depressing regularity from the minds of the technocrats and populists. Nuclear power or fantasy carbon capture technology only accelerate our problem. Closing the borders and building a verdant halcyon splendid in her isolation only creates new problems while evading the present crisis.

³ Jens Newig et al., ‘The Environmental Performance of Participatory and Collaborative Governance: A Framework of Causal Mechanisms’, *Policy Studies Journal* 46, no. 2 (2018): 269–297.

both national and local government will need to increase to meaningfully engage public participation. While the Constitutional Conventions are important inspirations for this kind of intensified democratic deliberations, as representative samples of the population at large they were designed in such a way as to almost guarantee excluding the most marginalised and directly affected. On the other hand more informal and localised fora such as the PeopleTalk project have a lot to offer. In 2013 Galway County Council invited PeopleTalk⁴ to set up a Citizen's Jury with an open-ended brief to consider people's experience of government at ground level and come up with proposals. The Jurors held listening sessions around the county and they were also informed that they would receive all necessary back up of expertise and administrative experience to assist their inquiries. They rejected this offer, however, and instead they devised an entirely novel approach. They asked to meet public servants working at ground level in different agencies including the County Council, the Gardai, the HSE and Social Protection. This approach proved to be highly effective and resulted in practical proposals which were promptly implemented. This model could usefully be adapted to a national dialogue on climate action.

Building a rich ecology of fora, across all levels of government and with different formalities, in which to discuss how climate and biodiversity breakdown impacts localities and the steps that can be taken in response is essential for including all voices. Trained facilitators and full-time coordinators at local authority level who are able to translate local conversations to inform the national agenda will be vital.⁵ Recruiting ecologists, planners and engineers into local authorities to increase the capability >

biodiversity adaptation know how to win if we allow the struggle to occur in their territory. Returning power to people in their localities is an insurrectionist move which establishes the maximum space of response instead of allowing the terms of the conversation to be set by the people who have thus far failed to act.

As we read it, *Laudato Si'* is an inoculation against the risk of tyranny hiding behind these crises. Without intervention, it is not the case that everyone's homes will be swept up in seasonal flooding, nor that everyone's pantries will run dry during years of bad harvests, nor that everyone's standard of living will fall without ceasing. Some will profit massively – as we see with their net-worth gains during the pandemic, the 1% need never let a crisis go to waste. The two practical threats facing our political stability as the climate and biodiversity catastrophe bites deeper are fascism and/or autocracy. We should take a page out of the ruling classes' playbook – let's not waste this crisis but use its arrival as an opportunity to re-establish the truly democratic nature of our discourse and our policy formation and how it is we share in common the things we love the most.

Sceptics will reject all manifestos for a changed world with a brush of the hand, declaring that it's just all talk. They underestimate the power of simply talking, and more importantly, listening. Meeting with the other, with the opponent, even with the enemy, around a table and hearing their perspective, their position, their hopes and fears and taking that seriously – there are few avenues open to us with more potential for deep-rooted, authentically revolutionary change. By its nature, it will be an open process. We cannot guarantee in advance that the outcome will meet our particular policy preferences or reflect our deepest values. But whatever emerges it will be a compromise that is generated not as it stands currently – from a failure of principle, a weak hypocrisy – but from the integrity of welcoming our neighbour as an equal and recognising that the only way forward is to move together.

⁴ Edmond Grace SJ, 'Enabling Citizens: A Two-Way Street...' (Dublin: The Wheel, 2018), <https://www.wheel.ie/sites/default/files/media/file-uploads/2019-11/Two-Way%20Street.pdf>.

⁵ There are structures in place that could be used to facilitate this discussion. The Public Participation Network is already in place across the country and could be resourced to allow for a national discussion on climate action.

HOW DO WE INTEGRATE POLICIES?

In a journal dedicated to the theme of *Policies After a Pandemic*, it would be a cop-out to simply state that the crisis will be addressed by just getting together and talking it out. We have a conviction – which is precisely analogous to faith – that a method which foregrounds democratic deliberation will not lead us far astray and is a much more fertile investment of energy than the current technocratic system of centralised control where a select few ‘expert’ voices are listened to, public participation is a facade tick box exercise and where policies tend to lean towards sectoral interests.

The hunger for an alternative to slow collapse already has a shape – rampant inequality, precarious and meaningless labour, inaccessible housing, years of our lives spent commuting, the ceaseless demand to leave more and more of ourselves at work, if we are lucky enough to have it, the creeping suspicion that subsequent generations will have it even worse again – which marks out what people want in lieu of the present system. While we wholeheartedly support traditional ecological preoccupations it is important to note that the growing political appetite is not directed towards saving the whales, but about somehow retrieving the idea that people have a right to medical care without needing to pay for it.

We integrate the reality of climate and biodiversity into our political agenda through the means of an ecological conversion which allows us to see how these issues are not in competition for our attention and affection with traditional green concerns. They are only addressed when we see them as green concerns.

The Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice is one of a number of groups that has already begun thinking about what this means in an Irish context. There is no aspect of our political life that is detached from this concern, but we will focus on five central social questions – housing, transport, education, agriculture, and human services – and explore how they integrate with the ecological challenge.

at local level will result in better planning, housing and transport overall. Barriers to implementing policies and action at the local level will need to be removed allowing for decisions to be made and action to be taken quickly and at reduced cost. Rational policies will need to be developed that allow for flexible, context specific solutions.⁶ Almost invariably, such an approach will require a shift away from the highly centralised budgeting system used in Ireland, divesting increasing power to local authorities to implement solutions that work well in specific places. The JCfJ is convinced that through focused climate dialogue, we can achieve justice best by putting our faith in the people. ■

⁶ Theresa O'Donohoe, 'Climate Dialogue, Covid19 Ready, in 7 Steps', Building Bridges between Policy and People (blog), 26 July 2020, <https://theresaod.com/2020/07/26/climate-dialogue-covid19-ready-in-7-steps/>.

Migration: When Regions Become Unliveable



For a nation which trades both on its history of emigration and its reputation as a welcoming country, Ireland's recent response to refugees and asylum seekers has been an abysmal failure. From the creation of a labyrinthine bureaucratic system for appeals, to the privatisation of accommodation, Ireland is severely ill-equipped for the rising levels of migration which will happen as a consequence of climate change and environmental breakdown.

Direct provision must be ended as a matter of urgency.

But this alone will not solve the myriad of policy failings which contribute to migrants and refugees remaining on the periphery of Irish society. In the five years up to 2019, 1.7 million people – Syrians, Afghans, and Iraqis – applied for asylum in Germany while Ireland received a paltry 16,882 applications. In spite of strong political opposition, Angela Merkel guides Germany to a compassionate immigration policy.¹ In Germany today more than 10,000 people have passed language tests to enrol in university. More than half work and pay taxes. Conversely, in Ireland, over 800 people with permission to remain languish in direct provision sites as the housing crisis prevents people moving on with their lives.

A public housing building programme will be a key policy strand to allow Ireland to play its part in the global response to climate migration. Examples of the scale needed are easy to find. Denmark plans to respond to its housing affordability crisis by building a new island – Lynetteholmen – with 35,000 new homes close to Copenhagen city centre.² A fifth will be >

¹ Philip Oltermann, 'How Angela Merkel's Great Migrant Gamble Paid off', The Observer, 30 August 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/aug/30/angela-merkel-great-migrant-gamble-paid-off>.

² Maddy Savage and Benoît Derrier, 'The New Island Solving a Nordic Housing Crisis', BBC, 19 September 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/gallery/20190918-the-new-island-solving-a-nordic-housing-crisis>.

HOUSING POLICY IS ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY

Homelessness has been normalised in Ireland. The number of people living without a home at any one time is about three times as high as it was six years ago. An entire industry has risen up to facilitate the government in sheltering people who fall into this dire situation – the majority of whom suffer from nothing more complex than a failure to pay stratospheric market rents. For decades, the Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice has been at the forefront of the analysis of this problem and has insisted that this is not a crisis, so much as the logical endpoint of the policy positions pursued by successive governments. What is required is an ambitious commitment to publicly owned housing, a medium-term ban on evictions, and an expanded mortgage-to-rent scheme.

These steps would alleviate the homelessness crisis. But the housing crisis would persist. For a long time now, assets and investments have accrued value far faster than wages or inflation. There is no way we can have a situation where homes are a store of growing value and have a situation where everyone is housed – the market will always price homes beyond the reach of some.

This apparently intractable problem is utterly transformed when we reconceive the issue around environmental concerns. If housing becomes the forefront of our ecological response, we suddenly slice through the long-established distorting and unproductive orientation of the Irish economy towards real estate. By committing to a large-scale public housing project, the State can relieve the trauma of child homelessness, which is a scandal. But by using those developments as the means by which to lay out communities ready for the 21st century, they can catalyse a series of changes which make climate and biodiversity rehabilitation possible.

Ireland has a rich tradition in public housing developments that pre-dates the establishment of the State. It used to be a policy arena where experimentation occurred, whether that was with early rent-to-buy schemes or cutting-edge design. Developments in the 1960s and 1970s that

are often caricatured as abject failures – with ideological intent – contributed to a culture that overwhelmingly favoured the model of private ownership. Building projects waxed and waned depending on the larger economic and political context but we went from being an impoverished nation that habitually built 7500 social houses a year to being a wealthy nation that managed in 2015 to build only 75.⁸

Development fit for the challenges we face would reject the idea that public housing is a residual service provided to those with the least means. Following the example of some of the most liveable cities in the world – Copenhagen, Berlin, and Vienna are often cited but dozens of European cities could serve as role-models – we propose that this public housing would consist of a rich arrangement of traditional public housing, affordable housing, cost-rental housing, and co-operative housing. These developments should be designed with the expressed purpose of adapting to life stages and generating communities where there is a real demographic mix. They should be populated by space orientated towards flourishing biodiversity and designed to a specification that minimises the carbon footprint of the family home. Alongside a large-scale State-subsidised retrofitting project – which will go some way to addressing fuel poverty, which is one of the most obvious forms of deprivation exacerbated by complacent environmental policy – this initiative alone has the capacity to transform our environmental performance, promote our economic recovery after the pandemic, and to do so in a way that enshrines a fundamental facet of any just transition by offering secure and meaningful jobs to those who will be affected by the closure of highly polluting industries.

affordable rental housing for students and low earners. Financed entirely by the Danish government, this plan provides multi-generational, medium-density housing which is not car dependent.

High immigration is likely to have a detrimental effect on low-skilled and low-paid native workers. This is evident in the work practices, taxation loopholes and sick-pay policies which are endemic in meat processing plants in Ireland. Sloganeering about immigration is trivial; serious work needs to be done to make Ireland more open to new arrivals in reality. A critical question is how to deepen our commitment to openness, without harming the already precarious working class who are most at risk of being exploited by the capital-owning class. In a time of weak unions and growing inequality, immigration policies should be designed to ensure the bargaining power of workers is not weakened, but strengthened. ■

⁸ Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 'Overall Social Housing Provision: Rebuilding Ireland - Progress against Targets', <https://www.housing.gov.ie/housing/social-housing/social-and-affordable/overall-social-housing-provision>.



HOUSING POLICY SPILLS INTO TRANSPORTATION POLICY

The standard suburban development model in Ireland since at least the 1970s has assumed private car ownership. By planning these new towns to be traversable by foot and bike and by connecting them to efficient public transport options, the contentious issue of transport gets reorganised on the local level towards environmental sustainability.

Adapting our transportation network features a number of stubborn challenges. As an island nation, we cannot easily forsake air travel. As an island with a small population, it is crucial that we maintain easy and affordable routes for foreign trade. As an island marked by sparse population spread, solutions like high-speed rail may be permanently out of reach. Industrial lobby groups which oppose moves to decarbonise the economy almost always make good arguments – as long as they are interpreted as if we are not actually in a climate and biodiversity crisis – and we should not assume that a magical technology will arise that achieves carbon neutrality overnight.

Recognising that there are aspects to this problem that remain knotted only emphasises the extent to which we should commit

fully to the aligned areas that are open to transformation. Ireland has a temperate climate. All but one of our cities are still within the scale that can be traversed easily by bike. The massive rise in cycling brought about by the Covid-19 lockdown has encouraged some local authorities to proactively develop solutions that make cycling a possibility for more and more people. For most of our journeys, most of the time, the majority of us do not need a car. With sustained and increased funding for public transport, especially focusing on accessibility for those who are mobility impaired, the question of where we live would be radically altered. As it stands, our housing developments and our cities, towns, and villages provoke us back into the gridlocked traffic.

One of the knock-on benefits of the kind of integrated housing policy we envision is the way in which it will provide genuine competition to the private market property development, which has been protected for too long by complacent government policy. If you can rent high quality housing at predictable and affordable rates in a local authority development or through a co-op, that is also arranged in a fashion that makes the need for a car optional, the developers who

have been satisfied to hastily throw up copy-and-paste dwellings for decades will have to get on board with the local loop transformation of transport policy.

We cannot solve all the problems at once, but when viewed as an environmental issue, housing suddenly cascades into a renewed vision for transportation. And that, in turn, affects other areas of policy.

TRANSPORTATION POLICY SPILLS INTO EDUCATIONAL POLICY

There are many significant trends in Irish education policy. One of the most striking is how the mode of transport to school has shifted towards private car ownership.⁹ There are few people who can step back and see this as a positive development. But it is a coherent response to the malaise in housing planning, to the pressure to balance the competing demands of work and family, and because there is often no option to walk safely, never mind cycle.

Integral ecology integrates the primary school into the heart of the community. The school already is a site of social mixing, where families with different stories of origin, different class positions, and different views on the world come together to participate in the kind of shared good which serves everyone. One of the slogans that Pope Francis calls upon most commonly is that “time is greater than space”. What he means by this is that lasting change occurs when processes shift. It is tempting to fight for domination and control of an issue, but it is much wiser to commit to developing the habits and practices that bring about the change needed without recourse to crushing opponents.

When we consider the physical fact of a school in the communities that we are calling for as a response to the housing and homelessness crisis, we will quickly recognise a significant

Taxation: A Simple Act of Solidarity



When the relevant parties gathered to discuss a potential Programme for Government in Spring 2020, one foundation was established before any other – there would be no tax hikes.

Taxation is one of those issues that brings the bigger picture into focus. We see why a new narrative must be woven when we consider how the present narrative around tax obstructs meaningful progress. Our language is revealing: citizen has been replaced by “taxpayer” and talking heads rail against the government spending “other people’s money”. You are a citizen of a republic without respect to the tax you pay; why is this linguistic tic towards feudalism not called out? The “Government” is made up of citizens who are taxpayers; why is this bogus public/private-sector dichotomy allowed to stand?

The facts are clear: our tax is some of the best value money we spend. It pays for streetlights and primary school blackboards and maternity leave. There is very little wasted. Apart from telecoms – an industry at the heart of this generation’s technological revolution – none of the privatisations of public services has generated markedly better or cheaper services. The State alone can deliver universal services that are free at point of use. This is because of taxation, when well-administered and well-designed (and carbon tax reminds us that this is no simple achievement), is a hugely effective means of achieving efficient action.

A Just Transition will entail Irish people – especially wealthier Irish people – paying higher taxes. This cannot be avoided; it should even be embraced. The case can be made that this is an act of social solidarity more potent than any of the individualistic acts of ethical consumerism or privatised activism which attract so much of our attention. Death and taxes, they say, are inevitable. If we want a just transition, telling a different and better story about why we should be proud to pay more tax is an inevitable challenge we must face. ■

⁹ Continuing the early-autumn tradition of bemoaning the increase of traffic with the start of the academic year, two news articles, 21 years apart, show the ongoing dependence on private cars for school journeys. Most significantly, they elucidate how little has changed, ‘The School Run Is a Major Contributory Factor in the Growth of the City’s Traffic’, The Irish Times, 30 August 1999, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/the-school-run-is-a-major-contributory-factor-in-the-growth-of-the-city-s-traffic-1.221795>; Shauna Bowers, ‘Traffic Volume Increases up to 16% as Schools Reopen’, The Irish Times, 31 August 2020, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/traffic-volume-increases-up-to-16-as-schools-reopen-1.4342849>.

difference. While current schools are sometimes equipped to receive a few students on bikes – you’ll often find one or two bike shelters and they are now allied to the positive trend of community “cycling buses” – the school placed within a community planned to adapt to the ecological crisis will have secure, demarcated cycling and pedestrian routes established as a default so that every student can get themselves to school.

This appears to be a small change, but is in an example of a change-for-time. Children raised to get to school in the back of an SUV never need to be convinced by glossy advertisements that the car should be the default mode of transport. They are raised in captivity to the carbon machines. Against that, a primary school population that walks and cycles to school has all kinds of pro-social implications – reduced obesity, increased self-confidence, even reduced journey times for those who have to use motor transport – but it also inculcates the habit of active transport. There is an old aphorism attributed (with shaky documentary evidence) to the Jesuits – give me a child to the age of seven and we’ll give you the adult. The ability to shape local transportation policy towards human-powered modes of mobility allows us to adopt that old Jesuit canard and direct it towards ecological ends. The new narrative which rejects rampant individualism in lieu of a solidarity born from the realisation that everything is connected is just fine theory – literally a mere story – without the habits and practices that support living it out.

The implications of integral ecology don’t end at the bike shed. As it stands, our educational system is comparable to the best in the world, but it is geared towards third-level participation and towards job acquisition. While we are not against either of these ideas in principle, the underlying commitment behind curricula development has been that school is about producing shovel-ready workers to keep the economy growing. Environmentalism is a subsection within the sciences or a module within geography. A student might stumble over ecological poetry or be exposed to *Laudato Si’* in religion class. But the fundamental fact that will shape her future – the escalation of

the already unfurling climate and biodiversity crisis – is not integrated into the curriculum. We are not preparing our young people to be active citizens or even to be competitors in the vast globalised economy while we are not equipping them to think critically and creatively about the ecological, political, societal, cultural, economic, and ethical implications of this crisis. There is no subject that cannot be advanced through this perspective and framing the idea of schooling around sustainability can creatively open up opportunities for many rich tangential conversations. It is time to green our schools. Unlocking the potential of our education system goes beyond teaching the younger generation the importance of ecological integrity. Ireland is a land of Saints and Scholars – we need the full power of both in the climate emergency. There is huge potential within Ireland’s 3rd level teaching and research institutes that could be harnessed to tackle the environmental crisis.¹⁰ Funding for these institutes could pivot towards environmental solutions with resources and funding given to communicate findings to the public.

EDUCATION POLICY SPILLS INTO RURAL DEVELOPMENT POLICY

One of the recurring problems facing the environmentalist movement in Ireland is the consistent framing of the cause as antagonistic towards the concerns and priorities of rural Ireland. There is no single political obstacle to be overcome that is more significant than this one. Considering it objectively, the farming community ought to be the core of the Green movement in Ireland. They are the group most closely and directly affected by the climate and biodiversity crisis. Also, it is important to note that for all the framing of the issue in media discourse, it is simply not the case that farmers are set firmly against environmentalism and vice-versa. But granting that there are rich spheres where fertile overlapping occurs, the fundamental suspicion

¹⁰ This would entail the inclusion of the humanities and social sciences, among other subjects, to address climate change, leading to a much broader span of subjects concerned with climate change than the traditional “hard” sciences and engineering. Deirdre Lillis has framed the addition of other academic disciplines as an opportunity for Irish third-level institutions obsessed with global university rankings and funding: ‘Comment: Ireland Has Dazzling Opportunity to Lead on Climate Change’, Business Post, 19 August 2020, <https://www.businesspost.ie/insight/comment-ireland-has-dazzling-opportunity-to-lead-on-climate-change-d6fb8747>.

that climate and biodiversity mitigation is a threat to communities outside our urban centres must be acknowledged and addressed.

Once we recognise the truth that our schools are restricted in fulfilling their potential by the pressure placed on them to serve GDP growth, we begin to crack open the space to talk seriously about the challenges that rural Ireland faces. It is not just that *in theory* that farmers should be environmentalists. It is that the only solution to the malaise ahead of rural communities is through an integrated ecological revolution. This is the case because for decades rural Ireland has been limited by the fundamentalist pursuit of economic growth.

There are few areas of our life more subject to the logic of rapidification than agriculture. There are fewer and fewer people able to farm as a fulltime vocation because the demands of the market are increasing while the rewards – in most instances – are reducing. There are many ways to describe this decline – and it ought to be a priority of the environmentalist movement to more clearly chart how the environmental decline in rural Ireland is mirrored and complexly created by the social decline in rural Ireland – but the most effective for our present purposes is to simply consider the question of debt.

The European Union extensively subsidises farming across the member nations. This is one of the merits of EU membership. Food should be available at an affordable price, with a high nutritional value, and produced in a way that cares for the animals and environments involved – all this can be shaped by strong EU intervention. But partly because anything framed as a “cost” is perceived within the old normal narrative as bad and partly because it would serve the priorities of large farming and agri-food interests, this subsidy scheme is directed towards a bogus “marketisation” system. To compete – in a game that is already rigged to help the strong grow ever stronger in the name of efficiency¹¹ – ordinary farmers around the country have taken on high levels of debt to improve their productivity.

¹¹ Murray W. Scown, Mark V. Brady, and Kimberly A. Nicholas, ‘Billions in Misspent EU Agricultural Subsidies Could Support the Sustainable Development Goals’, *One Earth* 3, no. 2 (21 August 2020): 237–50.

Forgive Us Our Debts



The preoccupation with economic growth, encapsulated in the obsession with GDP, and in rebellion against the fundamental fact that infinite expansion cannot be generated through finite resources, has delivered massive productivity gains over recent decades. This is undeniable. The average annual productivity gain over the 18-year-period to 2017 stands at 7.1%.¹ In the same period, the average industrial wage rose by about 1.1% per year.

An important question arises: where does the productivity go?

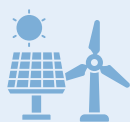
The obvious answer is that it gets hoovered up disproportionately by those who earn higher-than-the-average and it gets exported, back to where it was arguably actually generated before Ireland’s favourable tax and intellectual property regime attracted it here for accounting purposes.

The gap that has opened up between productivity gains and wage stagnation has been largely bridged by a massive increase in indebtedness across the western world. Ireland is no exception. Aside from the financial risk that this represents, debt needs to be understood as a tool of political domestication. The indebted person is the person who cannot afford to experiment, cannot afford to cut back, cannot afford to protest. Debt is what fuels the asset price inflation that is the cornerstone of our housing crisis. Debt is what our students must increasingly incur to even enter competitively into the labour market. It is no coincidence that the society that mortgages the future to bridge the incoherencies of the present is a society that is committed to squandering the resources that accumulated over aeons in the past for the sake of a luxury here and now.

There will be no Just Transition without dismantling the system that is so reliant on us living in arrears. ■

¹ Central Statistics Office, ‘Statistical Yearbook of Ireland 2018’, <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-syi/psyi2018/econ/earn/>.

Renewables: When the Wind Doesn't Blow and the Sun Doesn't Shine



There is a mantra that 'when the wind doesn't blow and the sun doesn't shine' we need gas to keep the lights on.¹ This statement masks a much more nuanced discussion. While renewable energy intermittency is a technical issue that makes incorporating wind and solar energy into the grid complicated, it is simply not the case that to have renewable energy we also need to invest more in the gas industry. Continued investment in fossil fuel infrastructure locks us into a high carbon society and diverts investment away from other climate smart solutions.² Considering that fossil fuel infrastructure is designed to last for decades, what we build now we will be using in 2050 when we aim to be carbon neutral.

While running our grid on 100% renewable energy is technically difficult, it is possible. Several different measures can be taken to bring this ambition into a reality including investment in more renewable generation, diversifying the energy being utilised, reducing demand for energy as much as possible, distributing power generation across the country, investing in energy storage³ and improving our electric grid to be 'smarter'⁴ and more connected with the rest of Europe. ➤

¹ Intermittency of renewable energy sources are used across the world as the standard argument against renewable energy, see, for example: Energy Services South, 'Achieve a Secure Energy Environment with Natural Gas and Renewable Energy', 25 March 2020, <https://energyservicesouth.com/secure-energy-environment-with-natural-gas-and-renewable-energy/>. The same argument has been deployed in Ireland in defence against the potential to ban gas and oil exploration and the building of new fossil fuel infrastructure. Consider: Christina Finn, 'Bruton: "When the Wind Doesn't Blow and the Sun Doesn't Shine, We Need a Back-up - and It Remains Oil and Gas"', *TheJournal.ie*, 30 May 2019, <https://www.thejournal.ie/oil-and-gas-drilling-ban-fine-gael-4661405-May2019/>.

² For more, see Clodagh Daly's excellent recent essay; 'Meet the New Boss; Same as the Old Boss - The Subsidisation of Natural Gas as a Decarbonisation Pathway in Ireland', *Working Notes* 34, no. 86 (June 2020), <https://www.jcf.ie/article/meet-the-new-boss-same-as-the-old-boss-the-subsidisation-of-natural-gas-as-a-decarbonisation-pathway-in-ireland/>.

³ Energy storage does not only include chemical batteries. Energy storage can include kinetic energy through fly wheels, pumped hydro plants, thermal energy including molten salt as well as through synthetic fuel generation and green-hydrogen production to name a few.

⁴ Kate Aronoff et al., *A Planet to Win: Why We Need a Green New Deal* (London: Verso, 2019).

Notice the prevalence of key words from the old normal narrative here – competition, efficiency, productivity. What do they mean here but that the political system pits neighbour against neighbour, that creatures are converted into commodities, and that what counts as progress is making more even if how we make it is worse and no one quite knows what we are making it for.¹²

Incomes are stagnating or declining. Villages are depopulating. The pressure to produce is inducing people into debt – and the person who is indebted is a person who is domesticated because they can't take a wild risk that might pay off big time if next month and the month after that for years to come, the bank needs another big cheque. The meat processing firms and the supermarkets have controlling stakes in how to dictate the price – what a sham of a market has been constructed on top of the subsidy scheme. It is not the environmentally inclined politicians who are ruining rural Ireland, but the so-called "moderates" who pretend to think that the farmer is the fulcrum of traditional Irish values while slowly erasing that way of life from the landscape.

Farming lobby groups – which are often in thrall to the concerns of the large producers who have benefitted from these developments – will not publicise the simple facts but everyone who considers it for a moment knows that markets *never* expand constantly without contraction. And when farming hits a recession – a prospect only heightened by climate instability and biodiversity decline – those heavily indebted traditional Irish farmers working every hour God sends to produce

¹² Ireland is one of the leading producers of baby formula in the world. While this is obviously healthy for the dairy industry's profit-making and shareholder return, the ethics of aggressively marketing the health benefits this product in regions such as West Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and Central America are much murkier. Infant formula is an important alternative in certain cases but, for most people, formula is an expensive alternative which could result in worse health outcomes than if babies were fed naturally. See: Suzanne Campbell, 'The Hidden Cost of Our Farmers' Winning Formula', *Farming Independent*, 2 April 2015, <https://www.independent.ie/business/farming/dairy/the-hidden-cost-of-our-farmers-winning-formula-31109175.html>. Coupled with the hard sell of baby formula on unsuspecting families, the Irish dairy sector have also developed markets to accept the waste product of our booming butter industry. After all the fat is removed, the remaining product is supplemented with cheaper palm oil to produce an ersatz milk. Finally, it is dehydrated and sent to African countries having a detrimental effect on their indigenous dairy industry. Consider: Simon Marks and Emmet Livingstone, 'The EU Milk Lookalike That Is Devastating West Africa's Dairy Sector', *Politico*, 12 August 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/interactive/the-eu-milk-lookalike-that-is-devastating-west-africas-dairy-sector/>.



Five Simultaneous Cyclones in the Atlantic, 14 September 2020

more out of less will be the ones holding the bill. What will happen to those farms? They'll be hoovered up in liquidation fire sales by the meat processors.¹³

This is the current vision offered by the old normal. Eventually, a debt tsunami will wipe out those stubborn farmers who don't leave for greener pastures. Politicians who are trusted at the moment to protect rural Ireland must be aware that this devastation is coming. "Don't worry," they may counsel, "you can get a precarious, low-paid, seasonal job tending to the land that you used to own and farm."

Education has been truncated to job preparation and farming has been contorted into commodity production. The prospect of an environmental transformation of agriculture is the best hope left for rural Ireland. Farming communities know the decline they are enduring is accelerating. An integrated ecology promises the possibility of renewing rural Ireland by remembering what farming is for. No farmer is excited by the prospect of contributing to global commodity trading. Farmers care about their animals and their land. The subsidy scheme has been redesigned in the past, and can be redesigned again to reward care and attention instead of

Investment is needed in the research and development stage to make more renewable energy sources such as tidal, wave and geothermal energy commercially viable options. Advances will need to be made in planning and technology to reduce the biodiversity harm that even these approaches offer and we should never forget that even renewable energy involves a significant carbon cost in the production of the machinery.

These solutions are all possible and just need the political will and planning to make them a reality. We need to change the mantra from 'when the wind doesn't blow and the sun doesn't shine' to 'climate change is the most important crisis of our time and we will find the solutions'. Recognition of the scale of the problem, and acceptance of the changes that are required, is a vital step in moving towards carbon neutrality. ■

¹³ Mark Paul, 'Goodmans Embroiled in Row after Buying Repossessed Farm', *The Irish Times*, 5 May 2018, <https://www.irishtimes.com/business/agribusiness-and-food/goodmans-embroiled-in-row-after-buying-reposessed-farm-1.3484732>.

benefitting blind output growth. Attempts in this direction are already being made and schemes that support high nature-value farming are important signposts to what the future can look like. What is lacking is how to piece these important, disparate pieces together into a narrative that allows people to see the truth as it is: the restoration of vibrant, traditional rural Irish communities can't happen without the rejection of rapidification, and of debt-laden, industrial agriculture.

INTEGRATED ECOLOGICAL THINKING CASCADES INTO UNIVERSAL BASIC SERVICES AND PROTECTIONS

Elaborating how different political problems are reorganised when we address climate and biodiversity breakdown with appropriate seriousness could be extended across all 18 government ministries in Ireland. This is the important work ahead of us – presumably through a series of iterative, radical sectoral proposals under a cohesive Green New Deal for Ireland. But underpinning each of these rejuvenated political conversations lies a baseline which, if established, offers us the foundation for transformative change.

Because we cannot separate the human crisis from the environmental crisis, what is called for is nothing less than the guarantee of universal provision of basic human services and of basic environmental protections in all contexts. What is to be considered a basic service can be discerned through democratic deliberation. The contrarian pedant will raise various *reductio ad absurdum* arguments. They can only be knocked back down if we remember that standalone policy proposals will be robbed or rejected; what is required is a compelling narrative that envisions a new normal.

We cannot have a healthy social environment while fundamental basic needs like housing, healthcare, and education are only available to those with resources. It is becoming a prerequisite that we must take on debt to make ends meet, which is devastating in the long term for everyone so burdened, but utterly crushing to the underclass that will be created, who cannot access credit in the first place.

So what constitutes a basic need? Does broadband count, for example? Some would mock the mere suggestion, but those who have tried to continue education for their children during the pandemic lockdown might silence such guffaws. There are complex policy questions about payment – are all these services to be free at point of use or should some services be accessed by some fee applied to some people? The details of what is entailed will not be laid out in a manifesto or a policy scheme but through democratic deliberation of the kind we insist is central to the adaptation.

The provision of single-tier, universally accessible services can restore health to our society which is weakened by growing inequality and deepening rapidification, but it must be paired with a range of universal protections of our shared environment.¹⁴ The water we drink, the air we breathe and healthy functioning ecosystems are central to life. Protecting these is complex, considering that we impact their quality in how we travel, grow our food, and function as a society. In the same way that universal services provide a floor on which society can stand, setting a threshold on these impacts could provide a ceiling which shelters our shared environment.

The Irish environmentalist movement – from the grassroots groups of volunteers, through the NGO sphere, and up to our elected representatives – must navigate a treacherously narrow path. There is no time to settle for incremental change, but what other change can we insist on when electoral support for the green agenda is rarely above 10%? We cannot settle for incremental progress but simultaneously we must take every opportunity to shape policy. Every bill that is passed, every policy that is proposed, every initiative that is implemented must be orientated towards the cleaning of our air, the restoration of our biodiversity, the reduction

¹⁴ A useful model to visualise what universal protections could entail is described in *Doughnut Economics*, by Kate Raworth. She lists a series of nine planetary boundaries: climate change; freshwater use; nitrogen and phosphorus cycles; ocean acidification; chemical pollution; atmospheric aerosol loading; ozone depletion; biodiversity loss; and land use change as metrics that could be monitored to ensure sustainable economic development. Collectively, these planetary boundaries for our common home form an ecological ceiling to prevent critical degradation. The author's argument is an essential read in its entirety. See: Kate Raworth, *Doughnut Economics: Seven Ways to Think Like a 21st-Century Economist* (London: Random House Business, 2018).

of our carbon outputs *and* towards the restoration of our social fabric that has been systematically weakened by decades of aggressively pro-market policies informed by the famished delusion that humans are motivated primarily by self-interest.

Integrated ecology leaves behind the idea that the challenge before us can be won by securing a policy here for carbon reduction and a programme there for species protection. Fighting on all fronts to guarantee universal access to the basics of a dignified life is a sort of political north star for a movement seeking to navigate this narrow path. This commitment is spacious enough to allow a compelling narrative to form. The good life in the old normal was to be found in affluence without limit, autonomy without purpose, and a common home that was treated like a resource waiting to be captured and processed for profit. The new normal waits to be established but insisting that everyone in Ireland works together to guarantee that everyone gets the fundamental goods demanded by our innate dignity and to guarantee that we protect the environment because of its innate value is a better story than what the establishment dares to offer. It is possible, we just have to build it with a patience and creativity that moves at a speed incomprehensible to those who think rapidification is the only way to achieve anything.

CONCLUSION

The world as we know it is falling apart. We currently settle for vague yet still aspirational commitments to be carbon neutral by 2050, but reality demands that we shift our efforts to true carbon zero faster than we think is possible. A zero-emission, ecologically integrated society is easily described as idealistic. That is not the damning condemnation that establishment spokespeople like to think it is. What, after all, is their vision except more of the same old normal but with green fringes? A faux Green New Deal will not cut it.

Voices from across the political spectrum called for a green stimulus after the 2008 crash. Political movements across the

Climate Grief: Coping with Irreversible Loss



Hope drives climate change advocacy and activism; an anticipation that our actions will result in a global shift in consciousness that will lead us to stop destroying Earth. But underlying this may also be a sense of profound grief, for what has already vanished of the natural world and for the futures we had envisaged. This despair is compounded by the knowledge that nothing was lost through misfortune or chance but as a direct result of our actions – we who comprise the most privileged section of the planet's population.

The well-known Kubler-Ross model of grief, which describes the process that a dying person goes through while coming to terms with their terminal illness, states that the journey begins at denial and moves through several stages before finally arriving at acceptance. In the context of climate grief, acceptance means fully acknowledging the enormity of our situation. The disappearance of the glaciers, the extinction of species, the regions of the world no longer inhabitable, the acidification of the oceans, the wildfires, the heatwaves, the floods, the droughts.

Much of the damage that has been done is irreversible, and the lives we have lived until now are no longer sustainable. We must accept this, and grieve for the modern conveniences and throwaway culture that has brought us affordable luxury but literally cost us the earth.

To cope with losses of such magnitude, and grieve for the future we thought we were planning for, we can look to spiritual sources, such as *Laudato Si'*, and we can turn to each other and offer mutual support as we collectively make the journey to acceptance, and beyond.

Grief is also described as parallel train tracks running alongside other emotions, ever present in life but not an ending in itself. Our grief over the harm that has been done can never leave us but it should not overwhelm us so that we become paralysed and hopeless. There is still time to act to save what we can of our beautiful world, and we should each do whatever we can and know that it will count. ■

planet have called for various versions of a Green New Deal after the publication of “H. Res 109”, a 14-page sketched bill presented to the United States Congress in February 2019. In the midst of the pandemic, organisations as moderate and established as the OECD have echoed these calls. There is almost inescapable momentum behind this idea. The detail in each sector will have to be worked out piece by piece¹⁵ and more than once as the cultural, political, technological, and environmental context shifts. The JCFJ hopes to play a leading role in that process, through its independent research and its membership of various coalitions and alignments with different movements.

As a result of being a policy research centre informed by deep philosophical and theological commitments and active across a range of issues, we at the Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice are keenly aware that there must be a coherent and compelling narrative that people can commit to. Simply restating the nightmare that will come upon us if we do not act will not be enough. No one wants to live in a horror movie. The story we are telling need not be a tragedy. There is time to act. There are grounds for hope. Recognising that there is no way to separate our care for the environment from our care for our neighbours is the first step out of the chaos of a world hurtling into dystopia.

“Genuine care for our own lives and our relationships with nature is inseparable from fraternity, justice and faithfulness to others.”¹⁶

We do not yet know how all the pieces will fit together that will tackle this monumental challenge. We know grassroots democratic discourse is central. We know our entire political imagination must undergo an ever-deeper ecological conversion. We know that establishing this respect for others and for the earth as our fundamental value – not efficiency, not ideological purity, not even *success* – is the place to start. The old normal is suicidal. Let’s start telling a better story.

Genuine care for our own lives and our relationships with nature is inseparable from fraternity, justice and faithfulness to others.

¹⁵ Sinead Mercier has written an admirable guide to our fundamental first steps in a transition to a low-carbon, more technological Ireland which will help to protect vulnerable workers and firms. See: Sinead Mercier, ‘Addressing Unemployment Vulnerability as Part of a Just Transition in Ireland’ (Dublin: National Economic and Social Council, March 2020), http://files.nesc.ie/nesc_reports/en/149_Transition.pdf.

¹⁶ Pope Francis, ‘Laudato Si’: Encyclical Letter on Care for Our Common Home’ (Vatican, May 2015), §70.

Any Light in Darkness? A Theological Reflection on Covid-19

Gerry O'Hanlon SJ

Gerry O'Hanlon SJ is an Irish Jesuit, theologian and former Director of the Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice who has written extensively on Church reform and on the role of the Church in the public square. His latest book is *The Quiet Revolution of Pope Francis* (Dublin: Messenger Publications, 2019, revised edition).



Deserted College Green, Dublin

How much longer will you
forget me, Yahweh? For ever?
How much longer will you
hide your face from me?

(Psalm 13:1 Jerusalem Bible)

OUR PREDICAMENT: THE INDIVIDUAL SEEKING MEANING

At the dawn of Western literature, in the *Iliad*, Homer tells the story of King Agamemnon who angered the gods through his arrogance. Apollo responded by causing a plague to erupt among the Greek army besieging Troy. In our more secular age, we do not need recourse to mythical stories about the gods to explain an outbreak of a novel coronavirus named Covid-19. We understand that disease, epidemics and, occasionally, pandemics are not exceptional in human history. Bacteria and viruses predate humans and, in the evolutionary tussle which characterises our world, outbreaks of infection naturally occur.

Nonetheless, especially in the case of a once-in-a-century outbreak (at least in our part of the world), we are shocked. Apart from the enormous disruption at the macro-level to

industry, commerce, trade, transport and so on, with knock-on consequences for global and national economies and employment, there are the personal and communal effects. The reality of illness, death and bereavement is present for many. We think of the surreal sight of funerals with few mourners. We marvel at the demanding and selfless service of front-line staff, be they in hospitals, at check-outs in supermarkets, on public transport or on the streets collecting and emptying our bins. There has been the reality of confinement for all. The not being able to “come and go” as we like. Restrictions on meeting loved ones. The inability to plan. Mounting uncertainty, boredom, and anxiety. Fear sometimes morphing into terror and even panic; weighing heavily on our mental health. Empty streets are replete with an eerie silence, albeit the clear sounds of birdsong. Our sense of life suspended. Many of us have now had an experience of what Pope Francis likes to call “the peripheries”¹ – what life is habitually like for so many migrants and asylum seekers, residents of direct provision, the homeless, and prisoners.

¹ The use of the term ‘periphery/peripheries’ by Francis dates back to Aparecida and his time in Argentina. See Massimo Borghesi, *The Mind of Pope Francis* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2017), 34–35, 155, 156 & 296.

We look to find learnings for the future in what is happening. Commentators have noted how our prized autonomy—so characteristic of the individualism of modernity—is suddenly revealed as somewhat threadbare. Indeed Boris Johnson, of all people, has gone on record repudiating the infamous “there is no such thing as society” aphorism of Margaret Thatcher. Terms like solidarity and the common good have gained new currency.²

More concretely, we witnessed in Ireland the almost overnight development of a single-tier health system in response to the public health crisis, referred to as ‘Sláintecare on speed’.³ World-wide there has been a reduction in air pollution due to the Covid-19 outbreak and the decrease of human activity, a reduction likely to lead to many fewer premature deaths.⁴ Indeed the overall improvement in environmental conditions globally and the prospects of meeting carbon emission targets have led many commentators to press for a more permanent change in ways of living and working, and have opened a renewed space for a hearing of the *Laudato Si’* encyclical of Pope Francis.

Now, as the incidence of the virus continues to wax and wane, we are taking tentative steps towards a return to a new normal. There has been, however, a certain wariness about this, extending to how we feel about one another. There is an awareness, too, that perhaps our shock can be an opportunity to break free from the gravitational pull of a return to business as usual and imagine a different future, where housing and health care, climate change and bio-diversity are valued as public goods and issues that we want to address.

Many commentators too, even in this secular age, have, like our forbears, addressed the human need to seek for a deeper meaning in this crisis. They have noted that we must not expect from science any more than a pointing to the kind of natural breakdowns, damage and what seems like random absurdity that are all part of an evolving universe, what Lonergan

in another context referred to as our world of “emergent probability”.⁵ Some have turned to the literary world, deriving meaning in the fiction of the likes of Camus, the poetry of Eavan Boland, or the thoughts of Viktor Frankl in his classic work *Man’s Search for Meaning*.

Sooner or later this trail of enquiry leads to talk of intelligibility and meaning, and then of love, and then, inevitably, the religious question arises. Supposing God exists, what role does God have in all this – on the side-lines like the deist God of the Enlightenment, or present and engaged, but then why so seemingly ineffective? Is God all-powerful? Does the answer change if we foreground instead the idea that God is all-loving?

A global pandemic may be particularly bewildering for us because we live in a secular age where, as Charles Taylor noted, we inhabit an “immanent frame”⁶ of reference which leaves us poorly equipped at a public level to discuss issues of ultimate meaning. We have to a large extent lost our literacy about religious matters; we are unfamiliar, as the late Nicholas Lash often pointed out, with the grammar and syntax of speech about the divine.⁷ At its best, this immanent frame allows us autonomy and freedom, transparency and respectful democratic inclusion in a neutral space that is only possible “if reference to religion and the transcendence of God is excluded or maintained privately.”⁸ The disenchanted world of modernity has at its heart a perception of the cosmos as impersonal “in the most forbidding sense, blind and indifferent to our fate.”⁹ It is true that post-modernity has, in different ways, argued for a “re-enchantment” of our world, but it often does so at the cost of the reduction of knowledge to personal opinion, within a relativism which is dismissive of what it sees as the tyranny of objectivity.

⁵ Bernard J.F. Lonergan, *Insight*, 3rd ed. (New York: Philosophical Library, 1970), 123–28, 171–72.

⁶ After Taylor, scholars have deployed the idea of an immanent frame to describe that view of the world where there is no sense of a cosmic order and no ‘supernatural’ beings, so anything which happens is only explicable through the physical world we perceive. See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2007), 539–93.

⁷ Nicholas Lash, *Theology for Pilgrims* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2008).

⁸ Graham Ward, ‘Christian Hope Facing Secular Fatalism’, *Doctrine and Life*, no. 70 (2020): 2–16.

⁹ Dermot A. Lane, SJ, *Theology and Ecology in Dialogue* (Dublin: Messenger Publications, 2020), 34.

² Thatcher shared the quip in an interview with *Woman’s Own* published on October 31, 1987.

³ Aoife Moore, ‘Emergency Legislation Debated in the Dáil Described as “Sláintecare on Speed”’, *Irish Examiner*, 26 March 2020, <https://www.irishexaminer.com/news/arid-30990309.html>.

⁴ Kai Chen et al., ‘Air Pollution Reduction and Mortality Benefit during the COVID-19 Outbreak in China’, *The Lancet Planetary Health* 4, no. 6 (1 June 2020): 210–12.

But there are signs that a contrite Modernism has begun to see the sense of re-admitting religion to the public square. Thinkers like Jurgen Habermas have argued for the necessity and usefulness of the religious focus and discourse on what is missing, in particular on issues of suffering and failure. The currency of post-secularism has gained validity as a more open secularism, flowing in harmony with the more generous liberalism at its roots. This post-secular stance recognises its own limits and fosters an awareness of the ability to find allies for its progressive instincts among the ranks of believers.¹⁰ It is in this context of building bridges rather than erecting walls that I turn to a more explicitly theological consideration of the crisis we face, hoping that non-believers and people of goodwill will feel welcome as partners of the conversation.

OUR EXPLORATION: MEANING AND FLOURISHING

Let me begin by just mentioning two major areas of shared interest between believers and non-believers. First, there is the pursuit of human flourishing. Here, one can easily see that there is a vast amount of common ground between all participants in this search, be they religious or not. The great faiths of the world, including the different strands of Christianity, have all developed ethical traditions and doctrines which can be sources of shared reflection and action with non-believers as people pursue flourishing, individually and corporately. The Catholic Social Teaching tradition fits within these categories and stands as a rich and long-standing source of critique of the culture of individualism and autonomy associated with the neoliberal economic paradigm which seems so desperately deficient in the light of Covid-19. Catholic Social Teaching has countered the diminished ethical vision of neoliberalism for decades, proposing instead robust notions of the common good, effective solidarity and a preferential option for the poor. This critique has culminated recently in Pope Francis' environmental manifesto, *Laudato Si'*, where he calls for an "integral

ecology"¹¹ and an "ecological conversion" informed throughout by engagement with secular scientific evidence.¹²

Secondly, the pandemic has prompted many – regardless of their confessional commitments – to seek out deeper meaning to the events we are enduring. This search may not terminate at a religious conclusion, but it invariably touches on religious questions. Covid-19 confronts believers with what has been called the question of theodicy: how does one justify the existence of a good God when there is so much evil in our world? This question – which is at the centre of the Book of *Job* in the Hebrew Bible – is one where the non-believer appears to have the upper hand. One thinks of Ivan in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* whose perfectly appropriate outrage at innocent suffering, especially of children, is so hard to reconcile with the existence of an all-powerful and good God.¹³

And yet, do we not ordinarily take meaning and purpose for granted as we live our daily lives and plan for our future and that of our children? Is this sensible if all meaning we find or construct or otherwise encounter is overcome by suffering and death? And how are we to account for our human experiences of beauty, truth, goodness, self-sacrificing love, justice, with their intimations of a more eternal sense and meaning, without God?¹⁴ Believers need to listen carefully to the objections of non-believers in order to purge their own necessarily limited and sometimes seriously erroneous images of God. Yet non-believers must see that no argument or proof is yet decisive on matters of deep meaning. The pandemic prompts all of us to give an account of the hope that is within us.¹⁵

These two important areas are of shared interest, if not always of shared agreement, among participants in any conversation looking

¹⁰ Michele Dillon, *Postsecular Catholicism: Relevance and Renewal* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Gladys Ganiel, *Transforming Post-Catholic Ireland: Religious Practice in Late Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), chap. 12; Gerry O'Hanlon, SJ, ed., *A Dialogue of Hope* (Dublin: Messenger Publications, 2017).

¹¹ Pope Francis, 'Laudato Si': Encyclical Letter on Care for Our Common Home' (Vatican, May 2015), §10 http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.

¹² *Laudato Si'*, §217.

¹³ "... I just most respectfully return him the ticket." Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (London: Vintage, 2004).

¹⁴ I note an interesting comment by Benedict XVI in his Encyclical *Spes Salvi*: 'I am convinced that the question of justice constitutes the essential argument, in any case the strongest argument, in favour of faith in eternal life'. See Pope Benedict XVI, 'Spes Salvi' (Vatican, 2007), § 43, http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20071130_spe-salvi.html.

¹⁵ 1 Peter 3:15, author's translation.

“Believers need to listen carefully to the objections of non-believers in order to purge their own necessarily limited and sometimes seriously erroneous images of God.”

to make sense of our present crisis. I want now, however, to explore what a more theologically-centred narrative of God in the age of a pandemic might look like. As believers engage these conversations about flourishing and theodicy, their stories rotate around God. My hope is that non-believers will feel welcome participants in this conversation.

OUR RESPONSE: FLOURISHING AND LAMENT

Theology and spirituality must engage with what is real if they are to avoid the ever-present temptation of abstract spiritualising. One of Pope Francis' most utilised aphorisms is that realities are greater than ideas.¹⁶ In our present context, then, we need to take seriously the experience of mourning and lamentation, of loss, personal and communal, that is at the core of our Covid-19 anguish.

In a helpful reflection on the idiom of lamentation in the Bible (and most prominently in the Psalms), North American theologian Bradford Hinze identifies different features of the genre.¹⁷ It is a cry for God to listen and respond; it offers testimony to personal and collective suffering in the form of complaint, grief, frustration and despair; it expresses the pain of unfulfilled aspirations or intentions; it gives evidence of an ache, tension, rage, dissipation of energy and numbness. Lament is the response of a people who are suffering what Walter Brueggemann has aptly described as “disorientation.”¹⁸ The driving forces behind the literary form of lament are two basic questions: why and how long? It involves a triadic relationship – the I

or we who laments; God, as the one addressed; and “the other”, identified as the enemy, who is held responsible for the reason for the lament. The lament involves a struggle with these relationships and “with the limited and distorted views of self, community, others, and even God revealed in situations of suffering.”¹⁹

Hinze notes that this posing of liminal questions calls all (including God) into account. Realities like pity and anger, retribution and remorse surface in a way that confronts the mystery and hiddenness of God, and can produce not deadly toxins but a truer form of love-in-action and a more purified understanding of the identities of self, others, and God. He notes too that it is easy to suppose that the New Testament, with the coming of Jesus, is characterised by the absence of lament. However, this is not so. Hinze cites as central Jesus' cry on the cross in Mark and Matthew, echoing Psalms 22:1-2, “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” (Matthew 27:46, NLT), as well as Paul's conviction that “the whole creation groans” (Romans 8:22, NASB) in the birth pangs of new life on our planet. The one who laments on the cross, Hinze goes on to say, “is suffering the consequences of responding to the laments of the people of God.”²⁰

Finally, Hinze considers the longstanding Christian tradition known as the “dark night of the soul” to describe how we often find ourselves at a profound *impasse*. In this state, life feels as if it has reached a dead-end where there is no way out, possibilities have narrowed to nothing, and the individual experiences crushing alienation, facing the prospect of psychological disintegration, breakdown, and self-deception. Hinze observes that we can draw the implications for communities and collective awareness: Christian sources equip communities when they find themselves forced to question their own identity, direction, effectiveness, and value.

During these periods of *impasse* there is a darkness and death that can, nonetheless, be the redemptive seedbed for hope and fertile soil for the power of God to work in

¹⁶ Pope Francis, ‘Evangelii Gaudium’ (Vatican, 2013), §231 http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.

¹⁷ Bradford E. Hinze, *Prophetic Obedience* (New York: Orbis Books, 2016), 76–89.

¹⁸ Consider: Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms, A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 51–58.

¹⁹ Hinze, *Prophetic Obedience*, 77.

²⁰ Hinze, 79.



the imagination, to bring about a new social imaginary.²¹ Our positive response to these difficult situations will be aided approaching our crisis in a stance of lament.²² To assess the situation we are faced with in this manner is a kind of “discernment of spirits” that is characteristic of the Ignatian tradition in which the positive potentiality of desolation is explored. In this way we can seek to avoid an indulgence in anger for its own sake and, instead, tap into its potential to generate constructive responses to injustice.

This scriptural and theological reading of lamentation clears ground on which we can acknowledge the horror of what is unfolding before us with Covid-19 in this surreal time of exile, when so many personal and social landmarks and points of reference are deleted or obscured. By avoiding easy spiritualising and settling for the notion of religion as “the opiate for the masses”, the next step is to follow hints for underlying meaning and hope. It remains to explore these more positive possibilities.

OUR THEOLOGY: LAMENT INTO A NEW HORIZON

For Christians it is the figure of Jesus who reveals who God is. Far from being distant and uninvolved, Jesus shows that God is with us. This is literally the title given to him in the Christmas stories recorded in the Gospel: *Emmanuel* – God-with-us. The Christian claim is that God takes on human form (Incarnation) in Jesus. He is “like us in all things but sin.”²³ Jesus is in solidarity with us through suffering. He presents the mercy of God to us in bodily form. And, *crucially*, he is one who dies through *asphyxiation* and *respiratory problems*. The events of Good Friday take on new meaning as we are haunted by this virus. His family and friends were denied the chance to grieve as well; the authorities intervening in the disposal of his corpse. The women who discover the empty tomb were, after all, engaged in a foray to try to honour his body in the culturally appropriate fashion.

After his death his followers came to believe that this fascinating, mysterious, very human figure they had known and loved so well had been resurrected by the power of God;

²¹ Hinze, 84–85.

²² Such an approach is proposed by Kevin Hargaden in his theological account of the aftermath of the Celtic Tiger: Kevin Hargaden, *Theological Ethics in a Neoliberal Age: Confronting the Christian Problem with Wealth* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2018), 176–181.

²³ Pope John Paul II, ‘Catechism of the Catholic Church’ (Vatican, 1992), §467 https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM.

“Jesus is in solidarity with us through suffering. He presents the mercy of God to us in bodily form. And, *crucially*, he is one who dies through *asphyxiation* and *respiratory problems*.”

that his life, suffering and death had been representative and substitutionary in a way that definitively sealed God's plan of salvation for humanity and all creation (a new heaven and a new earth); that he was in fact God; that God at the deepest level was Trinitarian, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.²⁴ These followers only came to be known as Christians years later, in part because they were as surprised by this turn of events as we would be. The entire intellectual history of the Christian churches unfolds from claims that can be expressed in a handful of words but take millennia to interrogate.

The attempts to make sense of all of this constitutes the Christian tradition, stretching from Mark and Paul in New Testament times up to the present day. One such attempt has been that of Swiss Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar.²⁵ Balthasar argues that in Jesus, different strands of humanity's intellectual search come together. The classical Greek pursuit of the unity of the transcendentals of Being – that which is beautiful is good and is also true – is brought into close conjunction with the Hebrew notion of glory (*kabod*, *doxa*).²⁶ He shows how in the Hebrew tradition, glory meant something weighty, impressive, powerful and splendid. That which was glorious was that which overwhelmed us, drew out our respect, awe and worship. Glory denoted that experience many of us have felt in the most treasured moments of our life when we realise with a feeling close to fear that we find ourselves on somehow holy ground, in a time and space set apart from ordinary existence.

24 See: Lane, SJ, *Theology and Ecology in Dialogue*, chaps 3 & 4.

25 Gerry O'Hanlon, SJ, *The Immutability of God in the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

26 This reconnection of truth, goodness and beauty by Balthasar is taken up by Pope Francis as the metaphysical premise of his own sociology and politics in his emphasis on the common good as the synthesis of the transcendentals and the goal of engaged citizens. See Borghesi, *The Mind of Pope Francis*.

The Christian conception of this experience is counter-intuitive because it insists that humanity reached its glorious perfection not in a figure who amassed great power but in one who “emptied himself” of his divine status to become not just human but our servant, and to the point of accepting death on a cross on our behalf (Philippians 2: 5-11, ESV). This theology of *kenosis* (meaning self-emptying) means that beauty (the transcendental equivalent of the biblical glory) now embraces not just a perception of a form that is pleasing and an enrapturement and captivation by it, but of a form that can be ugly, hard to look at, but beautiful because it is suffused by love. It is a function of our secularised age that so few people recognise the subversive intent of the primary visual representation of Christianity – the cross is a torture device deployed by a military superpower to oppress and terrorise a colonised people, but in the hands of the early Christians it became a symbol of self-sacrificial, non-violent human solidarity. Traces of this original revolution persist in our contemporary language. The popular phrase of Italian lovers, *ti amo da morire* (*I love you to bits, to death*), is personified by the life and death of Jesus Christ.

And so, Balthasar argues, we are captivated by the beauty of Jesus because he is the icon of God's love, which is not self-serving but other-focused. This is not an abstract claim, but the very nature of God's being – that's the implication of saying God is Trinity: God was focused on the other even before there were others in existence because God is in God's self a unity-in-diversity. This love overcomes evil and destruction, not by the interventionist *Deus ex machina* device of Hollywood hacks, but by the long-suffering, patient respect for our freedom and for the rhythms of the natural universe now held within the embrace of a love

“the cross is a torture device deployed by a military superpower to oppress and terrorise a colonised people, but in the hands of the early Christians it became a symbol of self-sacrificial, non-violent human solidarity.”



Hans Urs von Balthasar

that is the origin and end of our lives. In a time when we feel suffering, it matters that the Christian conception of God is one that bears the cost of our freedom and nature's profligacy.

In this light, we come to see that talk of God's *omnipotence* in the abstract is always misleading. Omnipotence, in the Christian tradition, is a characteristic of love. Love wins, but the victory is costly and it takes time.

Despite, then, the seemingly intractable nature of our difficulties in this life, and those in particular of this present period, the constant refrain of the Christian scriptures is "do not be afraid." And so, despite outward appearances, we are told that 'blessed are those who mourn' because 'for it is when I am weak that I am strong' (2 Cor 12:10).

This, however, is not some kind of masochistic cult glorifying suffering and weakness, much less an infantile dependence on God. Rather, the New Testament, and the life of Jesus himself, reveals a God who wants us to have life, and have it to the full (John 10:10),²⁷ both individually and collectively, but to do so while being in solidarity with one another and in relationship with God.

This is a God who knows that because suffering can be so hard and we can be so self-contained, we (like Jesus himself in the desert) are tempted to rely excessively on our own autonomy. Jesus himself asked for the "cup to pass", he felt abandoned by God on the cross, and yet the 'yes' of his radical trust (into your hands I commend my spirit) persisted and

resulted in that epoch-changing event of the resurrection. It is through faith in his life, death and resurrection that someone like Martin Luther King can say that "unearned suffering is redemptive"²⁸ and that Paul can imagine a role for all of us, through grace of course, in what is 'lacking' in the sufferings of Jesus Christ for his church and for our universe (Colossians 1:24, ESV). Christianity is not a result of abstract theorising arriving at a conception of deity, but a tradition that emerges out of the still-live question of how to make sense of the experience – beginning with those we now call apostles – of a humanity which loves with a quality that is truly divine. When our search for meaning in the age of pandemic wanders into hypotheticals distant from actual practices of love, it will quickly reach an impasse. The search for flourishing and meaning are pursuits mapped out by love.

And so, with Balthasar, Pope Francis can insist that "only love is credible"²⁹ and he never tires of basing all his injunctions to ethical endeavour, missionary activity, and church reform on the foundation of our encounter with Jesus Christ. Time and again he repeats the remark of Pope Benedict that "... being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction".³⁰

CONCLUSION: THE CORPORATE CONVERGENCE

For believers, the persistent temptation is to spiritualise, to hypothesise, to abstract away from lived reality into the neater world of ideas, separating Sundays from the rest of the week, the church building from the rest of our lives, to regress to a notion of meaning that puts all our eggs into the basket of the next life. There is inevitable risk in testing Jesus' insistence that the Kingdom of God is *now*. But this is a test believers cannot shirk. Since its revolutionary return to its own sources during the Vatican II meetings, the

²⁷ One thinks of the phrase of Irenaeus towards the end of the 2nd century AD – the glory of God is the human being fully alive. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1874), bk. 4, chap. 20.

²⁸ Martin Luther King Jr., *A Testament of Hope* (New York: HarperCollins, 1986), 219. For a careful engagement of this provocative idea, consider Rufus Burrow Jr, *Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Theology of Resistance* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co, 2014), 189–90.

²⁹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Glaubhaft Ist Nur Liebe* (Einsiedeln, 1963).

³⁰ Pope Benedict XVI, 'Deus Caritas Est' (Vatican, 2005), §1, http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est.html.



An Empty St. Peter's Square During Way of the Cross, April 2020

Catholic Church has ceaselessly pressed our shared responsibility for our world now.³¹ The Covid-19 crisis has given us an opportunity, through the lament and disorientation that we are experiencing, to re-imagine our situation and to re-engage in our efforts to create, with God's unfailing help, a new and better world.

Non-believers and people of goodwill will have their own take on what is happening. Considering recent history on this island, they may not welcome input from Christian sources. But this is a crisis that implicates us all and it wise to reject light from no quarter, especially as we must all pull together to survive this challenge. There are too many areas of overlapping consensus to keep the confessed believer separated from the convinced unbeliever. For example, the secularist axiom of the dignity of every human being, upon which universal human rights are based, receives foundational support from the Christian belief that every human being is created in the image and likeness of God.³² But these kinds of mutual learnings are only possible if there is sustained and respectful dialogue. A dialogue in which points of difference and commonality will emerge in a manner which a pluralist liberalism at its best is accustomed to accommodate.

One such point of convergence might be the beautiful poem of the late Eavan Boland entitled *Quarantine*. In it she tells of a couple setting out from the workhouse "... in the worst hours of the worst season of the worst year of a whole people," walking together, "she was sick with famine fever and could not keep up. He lifted her and put her on his back," but "in the morning they were both found dead. Of cold. Of hunger. Of the toxins of a whole history. But her feet were held against his breastbone. The last heat of his flesh was his last gift to her." Boland goes on to observe and conclude:


*There is no place for the inexact
Praise of the easy graces and sensuality of the body
There is only time for this merciless inventory:
Their death together in the winter of 1847
Also what they suffered. How they lived.
And what there is between a man and woman.
And in which darkness it can best be proved.*³³

We can all be moved by the beauty and nobility of this image of what it is to be human. But in this time of lament, the believer can also read it as a pointer to the glory of divine love personified in the crucified and risen Christ, source of hope, joy, and our motivation for a better, more just world.

³¹ Lane, SJ, *Theology and Ecology in Dialogue*, chap. 5.

³² What is more, as has been argued, mankind is created in the image of a Trinitarian God whose inherent relationality implies that the human person, far from being only an individual, is intrinsically relational, social, and political.

³³ Eavan Boland, *Code* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2001).

A black and white photograph of a small, scruffy dog, possibly a terrier mix, sitting on a light-colored surface. The dog has white fur with brown patches on its face and ears. It is looking upwards and to the right with a curious expression. Its front paws are extended forward, and its hind legs are tucked under it.

If you prefer to
listen rather than
read you might
be interested in
the audio
recordings that
are now
available for all
Working Notes
articles.

Find them on our website at <https://www.jcfj.ie/working-notes/>
or on **Soundcloud** at <https://soundcloud.com/jcfj>

UNTIL DEBT
TEAR US APART

Working Notes

Issue 88: Debt

The Spring 2021 issue of Working Notes questions what debt means in terms of our society and our world.

Subscribe to Working Notes at jcfj.ie and ensure you never miss an issue. Our journal is free, and you choose whether to receive a hard copy or become a digital subscriber to receive it by email.

To submit an article to Working Notes email Kevin Hargaden at khargaden@jcfj.ie



The Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice
is an agency of the Irish Jesuit Province.

The Centre undertakes social analysis and
theological reflection in relation to issues
of social justice, including housing and
homelessness, penal policy, economic ethics
and environmental justice.

Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice
54-72 Gardiner Street Upper, Dublin 1

Phone: 01 855 6814
Email: info@jcfj.ie