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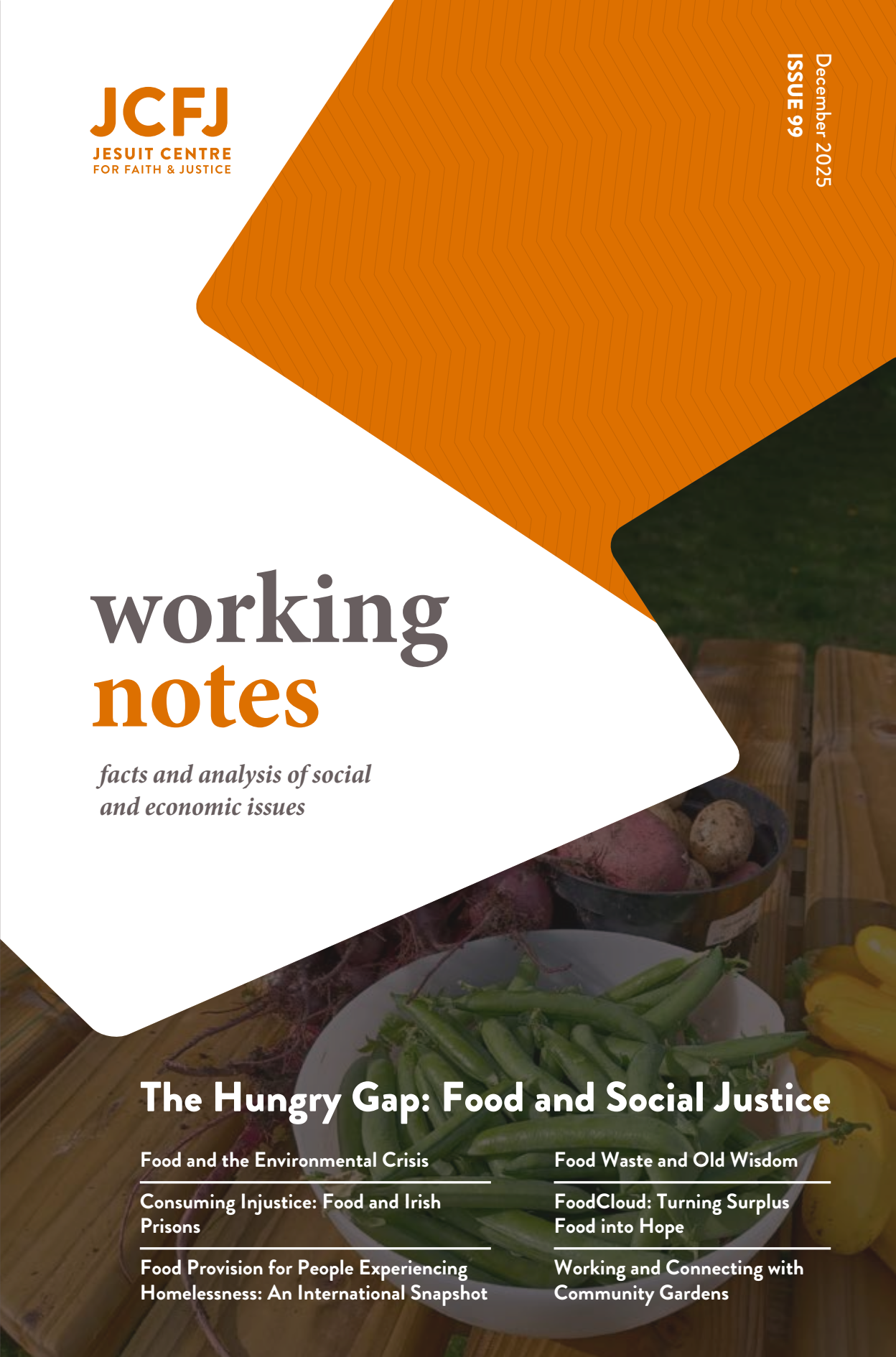

The Hungry Gap: Food and Social Justice

Working Notes
Facts and analysis of social and economic issues
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Front Cover: Siobhán McNamara

working notes

facts and analysis of social and economic issues

Editorial

Siobhán McNamara

Siobhán McNamara is Province Ecology Officer with the Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice

One of the first topics of conversation in the JCFJ when I joined the team in January 2025 was soup kitchens. Dublin City Council had just announced proposals to restrict on-street food provision by charitable organisations. The issue was discussed at the time in a blog post by our colleague Keith Adams who concluded that "if Ireland has soup kitchens, I want them to be visible — however uncomfortable for policymakers — not hidden in the peripheries of the city. I don't want it to easily slip from my mind that I live in a country that has extraordinary wealth yet has normalised street homelessness and food poverty."[1] Curtailing the ability of charities to feed the hungry in public would do nothing to solve the problem, but it would make it easier for the government and for the rest of the population to turn a blind eye to how many people are experiencing homelessness or food poverty in twenty-first century Ireland.

Also in January 2025, *Our Daily Bread* was launched in Brussels. This is an ecumenical network of Faith-Based Organisations, including the JCFJ, who advocate for sustainable food policy in the European Union. Using the integral ecology framework, the network's vision is "a food system where caring for the health of our planet is strongly connected to solidarity with marginalized people" where producers can "enhance biodiversity, embrace agroecological practices, and protect rural communities."[2]

So when it came to choosing an overarching theme for this issue of *Working Notes* at the beginning of this year, the topic of food—from its production to distribution and consumption—was timely. It was of particular interest to me as editor of the issue because I had just finished a year of weekly volunteer sessions at the FoodCloud warehouse in Tallaght. Here, surplus food from suppliers and supermarkets is gathered and sorted for distribution to a variety of charities and community organisations. The experience had given me some insight into the inefficiencies of our food system, where without a facility such as FoodCloud, truckloads of high-quality, in-date food would end up in landfill every week.

1 Keith Adams, 'The Uncomfortable Optics of Soup Kitchens', *Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice*, 22 January 2025, https://www.jcfj.ie/2025/01/22/the-uncomfortable-optics-of-soup-kitchens/.

2 'Our Daily Bread', accessed 10 November 2025, https://ourdailybreadnetwork.eu/.

Food has also been central to other voluntary work I've been involved in over the past few years. I am part of a volunteer-led community group in Dublin 12 called Bloomin' Crumlin, which has been a very rewarding experience and has helped me feel much more embedded in the community. Central to our events and activities is appreciating locally-produced food, whether it is grown in our own private gardens, in our community garden or polytunnel, or in a local allotment. The queues of people who have turned up every year to collect fruit trees, berry bushes and herbs during our annual Orchard Project giveaway testify to our community's appetite for cultivating good food in our small suburban gardens. The recipe ideas shared at our monthly vegetarian cooking sessions nourish our bodies as well as help build new friendships. The energy and commitment of our volunteers who help out in Kyrie Therapeutic Farm[3] in Kildare is an inspiration, and their work enables us to buy delicious, seasonal, organic vegetables directly from the producer. These products would cost far more in any local supermarket, if they were available in the first place.

The ritual of sitting down together to eat is central to the expression of our Christian faith, and food is one of the most fundamental and visible manifestations of how we care for each other. After a recent bereavement in my family, our kitchen spontaneously filled up with food brought by our neighbours and friends as a way to express their love and support.

If we take Dr Cornel West's definition of justice as "what love looks like in public" and reflect on how food is produced and distributed in our society, there is a lot we can learn about how we care for each other at a systemic level, and about where the gaps and shortfalls are. The articles in this volume examine the topic from a variety of viewpoints.

Our first article examines dietary choices from a theological point of view. These days, the question of eating meat evokes strong reactions to the point of becoming a neuralgic issue for some. Perhaps we do not fully appreciate just how much is at stake in our dietary choices and the food systems that we are part of. Fintan Lyons OSB elucidates some of the underlying ethical and theological considerations that are at play when we decide to feast on meat, or not. Starting with the ecological effects of industrial meat production, he moves towards a theological vision of food, weighing up ethical considerations such as animal cruelty, the distancing of meat consumers from the animals they consume, and what a healthy and sustainable human diet might actually consist of. His reading of the creation narratives and the story of Noah through the lenses of food production and consumption shows how "what's for dinner?" has been a religious question from the very beginning.

Continuing the ethical consideration of food, Keith Adams suggests that food is not a neutral topic in prison, where we are solely concerned with calories and meal timings. Rather, drawing on Anthony Bourdain's famous maxim that there is "nothing more political than food," Adams explores how food can tell us more about the contemporary experience of prison in Ireland, Irish prison governance, and the interplay of politics with penal policy. With this lens, he presents the reader with three courses of injustice. As a starter, there is the consumption of meals in deeply unsanitary and undignified settings. For the main course, we are served the extreme maltreatment of a whistleblower exposing eight-figure corruption; and, for dessert, we have de facto unpaid labour propping up a system with an annual operating budget of almost €600 million. There is no digestif as the reader is invited to consider a society where such injustices are palatable.

As well as penal policy, questions of housing and homelessness are central to the work of the JCFJ, and in our next article Divya Ravikumar-Grant offers a thorough review of international and Irish research in relation to food provision for people experiencing homelessness. As this sector is often privatised

3 'Kyrie Farm', accessed 10 November 2025, https://www.kyriefarm.ie/

and for-profit,[4] it is crucial to examine whether current provision pathways are effective in how they meet people's nutritional needs while also respecting their dignity.

Edmond Grace SJ then examines the question of food loss and food waste and applies an Ignatian lens, with a discussion of Ignatius's *Rules to Put Oneself in Order for the Future as to Eating* as one example of how faith traditions can offer useful guidance on a balanced and moderate approach to how and what we eat.

The next article also covers the issue of food waste and its environmental and social impact. Angela Kenny describes the work of the social enterprise FoodCloud and how it has developed its mission to tackle both climate change and food insecurity since it was founded in 2013. We wanted to showcase FoodCloud because it is an illustration of integral ecology: it shows that action for climate is action for people, because everything is connected. When good food is saved from ending up in landfill, this not only prevents unnecessary emissions, but it also helps more people to stay nourished and healthy.

The question of how to avoid food waste in the first place is obviously a complex one, but enabling more people to access locally-produced organic food can be a small part of that puzzle. So we end this volume on a hopeful note, with a discussion of agroecology and community gardening by Niall Leahy SJ. Leahy has had firsthand experience of how the principles of agroecology such as soil health, biodiversity, minimising inputs, and co-creation of knowledge, can be implemented even in very small-scale projects. The harvest of this work is not only nourishing food and healthier ecosystems, it is a weaving of the members' skills and energy, combined with the generosity of nature, to make more vibrant, cohesive, and resilient communities.

4 In the first three months of 2025, Dublin City Council paid more than €50 million to private operators for homeless accommodation and food. See Colm Keena, 'Seamus "Banty" McEnaney Group Earns More than €10m in Three Months for Housing Dublin Homeless', Social Affairs, The Irish Times, 29 July 2025, https://www.irishtimes.com/ireland/social-affairs/2025/07/29/seamus-banty-mcenaney-group-paid-more-than-10m-in-three-months-for-housing-dublin-homeless/.

Food and the Environmental Crisis

Fintan Lyons OSB

Fintan Lyons OSB is a monk of Glenstal Abbey. His publications include *Martin Luther: His Challenge Then and Now*; *Food, Feast and Fast: From Ancient World to Environmental Crisis; The Persistence of Evil: A Cultural, Literary and Theological Analysis*; and *The People's Celebration of the Eucharist*.

Issue 98 of *Working Notes* was devoted to the Encyclical *Laudato Si'* ten years on and included a contribution by Ruby R. Alemu from her thesis "The Cries of the Animals: Integral Ecology After Laudato Si'." She discussed the omission of reference to "nonhuman animals" in the encyclical because of the perspective of "anthropocentrism" and the Thomistic and Franciscan influences on *Laudato Si'*, and also found in Catholic Social Teaching. Alemu is correct in considering the place of animals in the scheme of things as one of today's theological issues.

It can be asserted that the Encyclical's theme, the care of our common home, has an anthropocentric perspective, that the physical environment is regarded primarily as a home for humanity, but it is true also that the Encyclical makes many references to animals and was inspired by the vision of St Francis who, as St Bonaventure said, would call creatures, no matter how small, by the name of "brother" or "sister."[1] Its critique of technological progress, with climate change as a consequence, is concerned not only with the welfare of humanity but also the problems animals and plants have adapting to change.[2]

The Encyclical is part of a series of papal documents which had already shown awareness of environmental problems and gave priority to the situation of humanity, because of the dignity of the human person, ultimately based on the Incarnation. Ecology therefore was seen primarily in terms of human ecology, as Popes wrote on a number of occasions; for example, Pope Benedict XVI said to a General Audience in August 2009: "The deterioration of nature is... closely connected to the culture that shapes human coexistence: when human ecology is respected within society, environmental ecology also benefits."[3]

Alemu also referred to the launch of *Laudate Deum* in the Vatican Gardens in October 2023 and the contribution of the author, Jonathan Safran Foer.

> (His) recommendation for the serious consideration of food system change highlights the lack of discussion in *Laudate Deum* of global food production and animal agriculture. His remarks also highlight the omission of animal agriculture and global food production from *Laudato Si'*. Specific to this conversation is the necessary reduction in meat consumption, as 'without a major and urgent transformation in global meat consumption, and even if zero [greenhouse gas global emissions] in all other sectors are achieved, agriculture alone will consume the entire world's carbon budget', which is needed to keep global temperature rise under 2°C by 2050.[4]

WHAT IS TO BE SAID ABOUT THAT CRITIQUE?

Western society's diet is heavily dependent on meat and meat products, with consequent use of large tracts of land needed for cattle especially, but also for other foraging animals. Consequently, new thinking is needed in relation to animals being used as a food resource. This has in fact developed with the findings in recent decades concerning atmospheric pollution and the threat it poses to the entire ecosystem. According to a 2017 study of the effects of cattle farming, "the livestock sector contributes 14.5% of global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, driving further climate change."[5] A report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change for the decade 2000-2010 concluded that GHG emissions from the production of beef and beef products were more than ten times that from other agricultural sectors, such as rice and cereals.[6]

There are also other issues. Meat and meat products in general have their origin in a mass production process that involves ethical ambiguity. In addition to the environmental concerns, it is often alleged that cruelty is

1 Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, (Vatican City: Vatican, 2015), §11.
2 Pope Francis, §35.
3 Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, (Vatican City: Vatican, 2009), §51
4 Ruby Alemu, "Laudato Si', Ten Years On: Reflections from An Animal Theologian" *Working Notes* 39, no. 98 (2025), 41.
5 M. Melissa Rojas-Downing, "Climate change and livestock: Impacts, adaptation, and mitigation", *Science Direct* 16, (2017), 145-163.
6 IPCC, *Mitigation of Climate Change. Contribution of Working Group III to the Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 87.

Credit: Furlap/Alamy

endemic to a large-scale process for the slaughtering of animals in order to provide meat for humans.

The nub of the case against industrialised slaughtering is that the scale of the operation makes human involvement remote, reducing it to a mechanical process in which human sensitivity to the infliction of pain is eliminated. In earlier times in the towns of Europe, animal slaughter for food was carried out at the point of sale, or even domestically, and consumers had to be aware of the cost in suffering to another creature required by the nurturing of their human lives. The portion of meat they took away from the market had an association with life as well as death, the life given up so that they could continue to live. Rather than causing qualms of conscience in most cases, it would instead have helped humans to realise their dependence on the resources of nature and as a result mitigate an arrogance and sense of independence and autonomy that fails to reflect the real status of humanity in the grand scheme of things.

Age-old tradition could certainly have had the effect of making people of normal sensitivity accept that this arrangement was a law of nature; sustaining life for humans meant the losing of life for other creatures. In the original marketplace practice of slaughter, according to a modern study of the abattoir system, the violence involved in taking life remained with the butchers "who were credited with possessing a violent and brutal character."[7] Consumers witnessing the slaughter might in that case react with feelings of unease, but in fact, familiarity may well have led them to associate any destructive feelings with the butchers rather than themselves and so register only an interest in the nourishment the meat would provide. Vegetarians have never accepted this as a justification for the practice of eating meat.

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7 Noëlie Vialles, *From Animal to Edible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 77.

> This certainly has had the effect of allowing consumers to see meat in a different light ... that it is simply a commodity, the subject of a transaction.

The satisfaction of the consumers was always a priority of those who provided them with meat, while their health and wellbeing was the concern of civil authorities. In the nineteenth century, medical discoveries relating to infectious diseases—rather than the desire to shield people from the reality of butchering—led to standards of hygiene being introduced that led to slaughterhouses being removed from public places. The gradual industrialisation of the process came with the need to provide for an increasing population, along with the realisation that mass production resulted in greater profitability. This certainly has had the effect of allowing consumers to see meat in a different light, giving the impression, one shared by the providers, that it is simply a commodity, the subject of a transaction.

ANIMAL WELFARE ISSUES

But investigation of today's meat production and processing industry has led to concern on the part of activists in animal welfare movements regarding conditions obtaining there, but also with regard to the psychological and physical wellbeing of those who work in abattoirs. The priority in interest is often accorded to animal welfare, as the mass production system seems open to physical abuse when animals are crowded into the facility, and more obviously because the mechanised nature of the process means that human intervention is in stages and no one has direct responsibility for killing. In the killing process, there is dissociation between the individual actors and the individual acts[8] and the issue of whether it can be a humane act becomes irrelevant. The counter-argument on the side of industry relies on questioning whether individual butchering was generally a humane process, given the possibility of imprecision or carelessness or sheer cruelty; if the opinion of historians is correct that butchers of old were of a brutal nature. Nonetheless, there is a growing perception that greater cruelty is endemic to the production-line slaughtering of animals. However, investigation of whether animals experience panic on smelling blood as they enter the abattoir has not been conclusive. The welfare of the workers is also an issue. In the view of two present-day theologians: "In the context of mechanised mass slaughter, the alienation of the workers from the product of their activity and the annihilation of their compassion, sensitivity and imagination are essential means of conditioning them to perpetuate slaughter willingly."[9]

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES AND HUMAN HEALTH

An issue separate from the slaughtering process arises from investigation of the industry in environmental studies. A report entitled *Food in the Anthropocene: the EAT–Lancet Commission on healthy diets from sustainable food systems* [10] was issued by an international commission in January 2019, with the aim of defining global dietary targets that will help to ensure that the UN Sustainable Development Goals and Paris Agreement targets are achieved. It found that, because of disparities of lifestyle between developed and under-developed economies, more than 820 million people have insufficient food. Many more consume low-quality diets that cause micronutrient deficiencies and contribute to a substantial rise in the incidence of diet-related obesity and diet-related non-communicable diseases, including coronary heart disease, stroke, and diabetes.

It established what it called a "healthy reference diet," one that needs to be obtained *universally* in order that the burgeoning world population may be fed without further degradation of the ecosystem. The diet consists largely of vegetables, fruits, whole grains, legumes, nuts, and unsaturated oils, a low to

8 Vialles, 45.

9 David Grumett and Rachel Muers, *Theology on the Menu. Asceticism, Meat and Christian Diet* (London: Routledge, 2010): 123.

10 Walter Willett et al "Food in the Anthropocene: the EAT–Lancet Commission on healthy diets from sustainable food systems", *The Lancet* 393, no. 10170, (2019), 386-7.

Credit: Iga Palacz/Unsplash

moderate amount of seafood and poultry, and includes no, or a low quantity of, red meat, processed meat, added sugar, refined grains, and starchy vegetables. The finding with regard to red meat has been severely criticised by farming lobbies, while media summaries of it accurately present it as implying a very meagre "half a rasher" a day — to many consumers a finding which invites derision.

Climate change poses a major threat to the sustainability of all life, human, animal and plant, as the average global temperature continues to rise. Whatever natural climatic cycles occur, there is scientific consensus that human activity is the main cause for this and meat eating is a major contributory factor.

INTERCONNECTEDNESS AND THEOLOGY

The coalescing issues of meat eating, the animal cruelty likely to occur, and the degradation of the environment reveal humanity's failure to realise the interconnectedness of all creation. The consequence is the rupture of the

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connection between humanity and the rest of creation which sustains it: the land, the plants, the animals. The failure has its origin in the dominant role humans have endeavoured to exercise from earliest times in the world over plants, animals, land and sea.

Many are more aware now than in the past that a malaise affects humanity in relation to its place in the world. The reasons for this will be understood differently according to whether there is belief in a creator or not. Christians look to the Book of Genesis for an explanation.

The account of humankind's doings over the course of several chapters of the Book of Genesis represented an acknowledgement and explanation of the situation which actually existed at the time of the compilation of the text (which included more than one literary tradition). It was also an attempt to reach back into pre-history to a world where harmony was thought to have existed. The first account of creation in Genesis, where the Creator gave humankind its place in creation in relation to other creatures, is one which in all translations establishes humankind's supreme role. It states:

> *Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth (Genesis 1:28).*

However, the next verse adds:

> *See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food (Genesis 1:29).*

As scripture presents it, in the beginning, humans were meant to rely on the

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regenerating resources of plants and trees. That was the situation in the ideal conditions of the beginning. The end of that account has God resting on the seventh day, not from a feeling of need but of delight in all he had created - and there is no mention of humankind sharing this rest.

The account of God resting is in fact peculiar to the author of the first account of creation and elsewhere in the Old Testament, as well as in the New, God's creative activity is continuous. When the Jews persecuted Jesus for working a miracle on the Sabbath, he replied: "My father goes on working and so do I" (John 5:17). Accordingly, the second account of creation (Genesis 2:5-25) gives the detail of how God continues to deal with humankind: "The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it" (Genesis 2:15). Humankind was not meant to live a life of indolence but work would be a sharing in God's creative activity. Later in Genesis, after the expulsion of sinful humanity from the garden, work was described as a frustrating and painful task. The earth would yield brambles and thistles and work involve toil and sweat (Genesis 3:17-19).

As the generations succeeded one another, "the Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth" (Genesis 6:5) and sent the great deluge to clear away the evil civilisation which had developed. Noah, who was a man who "walked with God", was chosen to inaugurate a new epoch after he and the survivors emerged from the ark and he had offered burnt offerings from the clean animals and birds; their fragrance was pleasing to the Lord (Genesis 8:21) and led to his making a covenant with Noah and succeeding generations.

The new epoch thus inaugurated presumed the existence of the disorder caused by sin and the continuing need for sacrifice. The compilers of the text in effect defended the legitimacy of the religious institution and its laws that existed in their day regarding the religious rites, which from the time of the covenant with Moses included sacrifices of well-being (or peace) where the flesh of the animal was eaten, though without its blood, after parts had been made a burnt offering. This had been part of the covenant with Noah:

> *Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth. The fear and dread of you shall rest on every animal of the earth, and on every bird of the air, on everything that creeps on the ground, and on all the fish of the sea; into your hand they are delivered. Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you; and just as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything. Only, you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood. (Genesis 9:1-3)*

The dominant role of humankind was asserted, but, fundamentally, the way the narrative developed involved recognition that life as lived was still marked by restrictions. It was not fulfilled because humans yearned for a life they could not have, that which was signified by the picture of the original garden and by God's rejoicing at the work of his hands in the Sabbath rest on the seventh day. The ideal for humanity would have been to enter into his Sabbath rest. The Psalmist spoke of how things actually turned out, of how God was wearied of humankind. "They are a people whose hearts go astray, and they do not regard my ways. Therefore in my anger I swore, 'They shall not enter my rest.'" (Psalms 96/5:10-11)

The Old Testament established a culture in which the eating of meat had association with sacrifice and would be based on what was normal dietary practice. As a result, eating meat was not an ethical problem for the developing Judeo-Christian community. They retained the meat (and fish) eating culture, and Peter's experience recorded in the Acts of the Apostles established greater freedom for them with the elimination of the classification of clean and unclean. In the gospels, Jesus is often depicted at meals with others and even described by his critics as a glutton and a drunkard (Matthew 11:19). After his resurrection, there is the unique and

mysterious event of him in his glorified state eating a piece of broiled fish in their presence – prompting the Venerable Bede to ask what in those circumstances became of the fish.

Despite acceptance by the Christian community, in monastic tradition and in ascetical circles generally there has been a settled conviction about the need to abstain from meat – a restriction imposed on all Christians during Lent and at all times on Fridays to modern times. But such restrictions were seen against a background of the need to do penance and of suspicion that the eating of meat inflamed the passions.

Much theological writing today re-interprets the passage in Genesis regarding humankind's dominance in creation to mean a role of custodianship. There are books on the theology of animals, especially those by Andrew Linzey, the Director of the Oxford Centre for Animal Ethics. There are books too devoted to "animal rights," a view which contrasts with traditional Christian theology, as rights is a concept which correlates with duties and so does not seem appropriate in relation to animals. St Augustine, for example, in his argument against the Manichean leader Faustus, who held the view that animals had souls, discussed the incident where Christ sent demons into a herd of pigs (Matthew 8:32) and believed that Christ was indifferent (literally cruel, *crudelis*) to those brute beasts because they had no souls.[11]

Much theological writing today re-interprets the passage in Genesis regarding humankind's dominance in creation to mean a role of custodianship.

In the contemporary world there is a felt need to re-discover harmony with the rest of creation—as *Laudato Si'* declared—to revive the vision of an ideal environment in an attempt to reverse the malaise which increasing pollution inflicts on the planet. Writers and reports such as those from the United Nations focus on a reversal of the deteriorating climate. From the perspective of world history, the plans are necessarily short-term, stated in terms of a crisis before the end of this century, rather than the remaining life-span of the planet of about four-and-a-half billion years.

A THEOLOGY OF EATING

Among the studies of this situation from a theological standpoint is *Food and Faith. A Theology of Eating*, by Norman Wirzba.[12] He approaches the question of harmony of humankind with the rest of creation by drawing on the idea of the original garden. His aim is to establish the ethical principles by which people need to live in order to experience some anticipation of an eventual return to this garden where they might share God's Sabbath contentment. This will require a disciplined existence. Continuing to call humankind by the name Adam, he states:

> *To eat, Adam must garden rather than simply shop. Food is not simply a 'resource' to be mined or a commodity to be purchased. Adam's work, and the insight that comes from gardening discipline, enables him to eat with a deep appreciation for what he is eating. It is this appreciation that enables him to experience the Garden of Eden as a 'garden of delights.'*[13]

In his view, the issue of vegetarianism versus meat-eating does not then arise. Humanity enjoys the rights accorded by the covenant with Noah.[14]

He does recognise the importance of the text of Genesis 1:28 from the first account of creation and that the prophets Isaiah and Hosea suggested that a vegetarian diet will also mark God's future peaceable kingdom. But he then asks if it follows that all consumption of meat is wrong and whether there are theological considerations that can be brought to bear on "this very complex and important issue."

11 Augustine, *Contra Faustum Manichaeum* 6.5, *Sancti Augustini Opera Omnia* V (Paris: Paul Mellier, 1842), 273.

12 Norman Wirzba, *Food and Faith. A Theology of Eating* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019)

13 Wirzba, *Food and Faith*, 89.

14 Wirzba, *Food and Faith*, xi.

His argument depends on the idea of sacrifice, which is implied by all creatures living in communion with one another. "(The) destiny of all creatures is that they offer themselves or are offered up as the temporal expression of God's eternal love."[15]

As stated here, there is a mutuality implied, but clearly "offering themselves" is proper only to rational creatures. This is a principle fundamental to the Christian life and is exercised in many ways, sometimes heroic. It falls to other creatures, such as animals, to "be offered." and in accordance with that argument, one can see that Buddhists or Hindus could argue that it would be appropriate for humans to offer themselves for the protection of other creatures and so avoid all harm to them.

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That is a perspective beyond the Western one, but the present recognition in the West of the urgent need to protect creation, and to have regard for the welfare of animals as well as humanity, is a step in the right direction.

15 Wirzba, *Food and Faith*, 174.

Consuming Injustice: Food and Irish Prisons

Keith Adams

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NOT ONLY CALORIES

Every aspect of prison life is subject to rules. Whether the rules or standards are applied fairly, promptly, or in good faith is for an entirely different discussion, but surrounding even the most mundane activity in prison lie national and international standards. This is the case with food in prison.

The European Prison Rules is clear that "prisoners should be provided with a nutritious diet that takes into account their age, health, physical condition, religion, culture, and the nature of their work."[1] It continues that the three meals should be provided with "reasonable intervals between them,"[2] and that "the requirements of a nutritious diet, including its minimum energy and protein content shall be prescribed in national law."[3] This represents very much a focus on minimum standards of dignity; three meals, evenly spaced, with adequate calorific content and macronutrients. This is the unambiguous domain of minimum standards, which are either realised or not.

As is common when human rights standards for prisons filter down from international to national level, a dilution occurs. The closer rules get to the physical prison, the more wiggle room is enshrined. In the Irish Prison Rules, a key section outlines that "[t]he Governor shall ensure that each prisoner is provided with a sufficient quantity of wholesome and nutritious food and drink each day and that food and drink shall be properly prepared, well presented and reasonably varied."[4] There is no mention of the spacing between meals. A former Inspector of Prisons noted, in a series of inspection reports during Covid-19 lockdown,[5] that the Irish Prison Rules is broadly in compliance with international standards. But significantly, it is limited in its potential enforcement due to the insertion of the clawback clause, "as far as is practicable,"[6] in relation to prison food. Concerns around the dietary, cultural and religious needs of prisoners are fulfilled "as far as is practicable," subordinate to concerns of security and order.

A key example of divergence from international standards is the length of time between meals. Drawing on the last available prison inspection reports from 2021, the length of time between the final meal of the day and breakfast the following day was typically 16 hours. As an example, in Castlerea prison, the times between breakfast and evening meal were 8.10am to 4.30pm, resulting in an overnight fast of almost 16 hours.[7] In an open prison, Loughan House, it was a similar story. Breakfast starts at 8am while "tea" or the late afternoon meal is at 4.15pm,[8] which again leaves an almost 16-hour break between served meals. In the Midlands prison inspection, one prisoner "explained that a small dish (e.g., a wrap) was provided at 16:00 in the afternoon and that he received no food [apart from the daily allocation of bread and milk] until breakfast the next morning."[9] In many cases, where individual resources permitted, this length of time would have to be supplemented by additional snacks from the prison shop. Drawing on the principle of normalisation, the former Inspector of Prisons, evoking multiple prison standard frameworks, recommended that "scheduling around meal times be amended to ensure meals are served at reasonable intervals and at usual times reflected in the community."[10] We await new inspection reports to be published by the Minister for Justice to see if progress has occurred.

FOOD IS POLITICAL

To the prisoner, issues and shortcomings around food are, naturally, of the highest concern. When a prisoner considers their

1 Council of Europe, 'European Prison Rules', July 2020, rule 22.1.
2 Council of Europe, 'European Prison Rules', rule 22.4.
3 Council of Europe, 'European Prison Rules', rule 22.2.
4 'Statutory Instrument No. 252/2007 - Prison Rules 2007', Government of Ireland, 2007, rule 23.1.
5 For an example, see Office of the Inspector of Prisons, *COVID-19 Thematic Inspection of Castlerea Prison* (Office of the Inspector of Prisons, 2021), 17.
6 'Statutory Instrument No. 252/2007 - Prison Rules 2007', rule 23.2.
7 Office of the Inspector of Prisons, *COVID-19 Thematic Inspection of Castlerea Prison*, 18.
8 Office of the Inspector of Prisons, *COVID-19 Thematic Inspection of Loughan House* (Office of the Inspector of Prisons, 2021), 16.
9 Office of the Inspector of Prisons, *COVID-19 Thematic Inspection of Midlands Prison* (Office of the Inspector of Prisons, 2021), 15.
10 See United Nations, *Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (Mandela Rules)* (United Nations, 2015), rule 22.1; Council of Europe, 'European Prison Rules', rule 22.4.

> When a prisoner considers their daily bread, there is an added resonance here as they have no control over their meals in any sense.

daily bread, there is an added resonance here as they have no control over their meals in any sense. Having sufficient variety, the feeling of satiation, and dietary needs being accommodated are all important concerns for the prisoner. Others have focused on the provision of food in prison in the day-to-day life of those incarcerated and its meaning.[11]

But, to pull the focus back to a more panoramic perspective for a moment, I want to argue that using food as a lens can also tell us much more about the experience of prison, prison governance, and the interplay of politics with penal policy. As food which is fresh and wholesome nourishes the body, food which is decaying and rotten causes sickness and illness. This essay will provide a brief account of some lesser-known food-related stories for the casual observer: firstly, the conditions in which some prisoners have to eat their meals; secondly, treatment of whistleblowers and accountability in Ireland; and, finally, prisoner labour in our prisons. By concluding that food is not a neutral site and that a narrow biomedical understanding of food should be eschewed,[12] this essay will argue that food reveals institutional injustices. As a kindness to the reader, food-related or culinary puns will be kept to a minimum.

After being chastised by fellow food writers to avoid discussion of politics and social conditions, Anthony Bourdain, celebrity chef and travel documentarian, noted that "there is, of course, nothing more political than food"[13] He provocatively suggests that if, in Thailand, being served a Lao style larb[14] by a host missing three of his four limbs, then should he not ask "Hey there, fella … what happened to your arm and legs?" We too can understand prison food in an entirely functional way—calories, variety, and timings—or we can dare to ask what injustices and political neglect are also there to be revealed.

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MEALS AMID AEROSOL PLUMES

We are all familiar with the Hollywood treatment of mealtimes in prison—*Shawshank Redemption* or the *Birdman of Alcatraz*—with the large refectory where the prisoners are escorted in for mealtimes. They queue in an orderly line for food to be served on a plastic tray, and then have that meal at long benched tables with hushed conversation out of earshot of the guards. A far cry from sitting on the edge of a bed, or standing in the corner, beside an unpartitioned shared toilet.

Yet, this is the experience for some people in our prisons. The foreword to the 2023 Annual Report of the Inspector of Prisons opens with an account of the "scourge of overcrowding,"[15] painting an increasingly common vista within Irish prisons. During an inspection of Cloverhill Prison,[16] it was discovered that, in 38 cells, four people were being held in a space measuring less than 12 square metres. Of the four people, one person would have a mattress on the floor of the cell. To give a sense of the space here, this typical cell is equivalent to a standard car parking space.[17]

11 For a detailed account of the existing scholarship on the symbolic role of prison food, An-Sofie Vanhouche has explored how prison food can shape or misshape aspects of identity and reflect existing power relationships in a carceral environment. For more, see An-Sofie Vanhouche, *Prison Food: Identity, Meaning, Practices, and Symbolism in European Prisons* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 11–34.

12 Deborah Lupton, *Food, the Body and the Self* (SAGE Publications Ltd, 1996).

13 Anthony Bourdain, 'SHUT UP AND EAT', *Medium*, 29 May 2014, https://medium.com/@Bourdain/shut-up-and-eat-a4b7c259f6ee.

14 Larb is a salad made with minced meat, originating from Laos, and influential in the cuisines of neighbouring countries such as Thailand.

15 Office of the Inspector of Prisons, *Annual Report 2024* (Office of the Inspector of Prisons, 2025), 5.

16 Cloverhill prison is Ireland's primary remand prison.

17 I want to thank the Irish Penal Reform Trust for this very helpful comparison when conceiving of how little space is available in these overcrowded prison cells. In the Dublin City Development Plan 2016-2022, the required minimum dimensions for a short-term parking bay, such as in a shopping centre, must be at least 2.5 metres wide by 4.75 metres in length. This totalled an area of 11.875 square metres. See Dublin City Council, '16.38.9 Design Criteria | Dublin City Development Plan 2016-2022', accessed 2 November 2025, www.dublincity.ie/dublin-city-development-plan-2016-2022/16-development-standards/1638-car-parking-standards/16389-design-criteria.

While this revelation was startling enough, more shocking details were to come. In each small cell, there was a non-partitioned in-cell toilet, yet the four prisoners had to eat their breakfast, lunch and dinner within the boundaries of an enclosed car parking space. Three meals to be consumed in what was described as "highly-confined, stuffy and malodorous spaces."[18]

The conditions of our prisons are communicative to those who are confined there. Through the cells and spaces where they are held, we tell them a story about what we think of them. This is a story of how we see their humanity and how we respect their human dignity. Having no choice but to eat their daily meals in close proximity to a toilet which is unscreened is to, for all intents and purposes, tell a person to eat shit.

Toilets are designed to rapidly and efficiently evacuate their contents in a downward motion.

"In each small cell, there was a non-partitioned in-cell toilet, yet the four prisoners had to eat their breakfast, lunch and dinner within the boundaries of an enclosed car parking space.

What is only becoming better known is the counter movement of the forced water creating an aerosol plume in the opposite direction.[19] The strong upward jet of air rapidly spreads pathogenic particles up to five feet about the bowl.[20] Through the use of lasers, engineering researchers concluded that toilet bowl water contaminated by faeces can contain pathogen concentrations after dozens of flushes, with smaller particles remaining suspended in the air while larger particles settle on surfaces and create the potential for transmission of norovirus through hand to mouth contact.

A cell in Mountjoy Prison with a mattress on the floor to accommodate a second prisoner due to overcrowding. (Credit: Moya Nolan)

18 Office of the Inspector of Prisons, *Annual Report 2024*, 5.

19 David L. Johnson et al., 'Lifting the Lid on Toilet Plume Aerosol: A Literature Review with Suggestions for Future Research', *American Journal of Infection Control* 41, no. 3 (2013): 254–58.

20 John Crimaldi, 'Toilets Spew Invisible Aerosol Plumes with Every Flush – Here's the Proof, Captured by High-Powered Lasers', ABC News, 9 December 2022, www.abc.net.au/news/2022-12-10/toilets-putting-down-the-lid-invisible-aerosol-plume/101756030.

Even closure of the toilet lid does not eliminate the aerosol plumes coming into the shared space of the cell.[21]

To imagine having to eat meals and sleep on bedding in small cells, where an unpartitioned toilet is flushed many multiples of times during the day, should turn our stomachs; an invisible coating of faecal matter on almost all surfaces. Yet, these are the conditions experienced by men in Cloverhill Prison and they have undoubtedly had their stomachs turned.

KITCHEN IRREGULARITIES

In 2013, Noel McGree was working a regular shift as a prison officer in the kitchen and catering section at the Midlands prison. One instinctive decision led to a chain reaction of events being set in motion. McGree said that he simply "refused to comply with a corrupt request."[22] He reports that he was told by a senior staff member to take food items from the prison kitchen to a waiting van. The food was to be used for the commercial food enterprises of that senior staff member. McGree declined, and his life, and that of his family, has been upended and destroyed over the course of twelve years.[23] National print media has never been forensic[24] in its coverage of the case but McGree's story is still being raised in the Houses of the Oireachtas.[25]

At the time, McGree admits to having turned a blind eye to what seems to have been rampant corruption in the Midlands and having just continued with his duties. In his account to Jane Turner, a former FBI whistleblower and contributing editor of Whistleblower Network News,[26] McGree identified that various other prison resources and equipment were being used for staff commercial enterprises. But by his account, the prison kitchen was the locus of this activity. It was being used by the catering department to cater private parties in public venues. Prison food was being appropriated and sold to people for occasions like funerals, birthdays, and anniversaries. The prison's resources, paid for by the Irish taxpayer, were being siphoned off with abandon for private individual gain.[27]

Refusal to participate in the theft had immediate repercussions. McGree was removed from the prison catering service—for which he had trained specifically and had trained others to QQI level—and reassigned to a landing with junior recruits.[28] With no law for protected disclosures in Ireland, and not wanting to willingly break the omerta, McGree reported the risks of having an inexperienced person in charge of the catering section, but held back on the wider corruption as he just wanted his former role back. Likening the Midlands to Shawshank prison in the eponymous film, McGree noted that "corruption was rife"[29] and there were many side hustles. That the retribution and retaliation were so immediate and swift,[30] continuing to present day,[31] may suggest that McGree was not embellishing his assessment. Being asked to steal food for a superior was likely an opportunity to demonstrate loyalty to the other prison staff, while also an invitation to be involved in material gain. Corruption

21 Jacob Stern, 'Whatever Happened to Toilet Plumes?', The Atlantic, 26 January 2023, www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2023/01/covid-virus-spread-toilets-public-bathrooms/672846/.

22 Liz Dunphy, 'Whistleblowing "Has Done so Much Damage", Says Former Prison Officer', Spotlight, *Irish Examiner*, 26 December 2020, www.irishexaminer.com/news/spotlight/arid-40196880.html.

23 Dunphy, 'Whistleblowing "Has Done so Much Damage", Says Former Prison Officer'.

24 Of the two national daily newspapers, there have been three articles about the long running case. The Irish Times has a solitary piece from 2021, while the Irish Independent has two recent articles covering the eviction of the McGree family from their home in Portlaoise by a vulture fund, and their contribution to an EU Inquiry on the treatment of whistleblowers, see Conor Gallagher, 'Allegations of Property Theft by Staff at Midlands Prison Investigated', *The Irish Times*, 6 January 2021, www.irishtimes.com/news/crime-and-law/allegations-of-property-theft-by-staff-at-midlands-prison-investigated-1.4450767; Amy Molloy and Maeve Sheehan, 'Prison Officer Whistleblower Evicted from Home over Substantial Mortgage Arrears Says State Didn't Protect His Family', Irish News, *Irish Independent*, 15 October 2025, www.independent.ie/irish-news/prison-officer-whistleblower-evicted-from-home-over-substantial-mortgage-arrears-says-state-didnt-protect-his-family/a673403875.html; Maeve Sheehan, 'Irish Whistleblowers Flood EU Inquiry with Allegations of Reprisals for Speaking Out', News, *Irish Independent*, 21 September 2025, www.independent.ie/news/irish-whistleblowers-flood-eu-inquiry-with-allegations-of-reprisals-for-speaking-out/a1038853716.html.

25 Houses of the Oireachtas, 'An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business – Seanad Éireann (27th Seanad) – Tuesday, 14 Oct 2025', Houses of the Oireachtas, 14 October 2025.

26 *Whistleblower Network News* is an independent US-based online newspaper providing readers with up-to-date information on whistleblowing. Beginning in 2007, they cover national and international legal developments and publish editorial and opinion articles on whistleblowing and compliance issues. Their stated goal is to develop a strong reputation as an authoritative news source on whistleblower related issues. For more on its reporting and advocacy, see 'About', *Whistleblower Network News*, 29 July 2020, https://whistleblowersblog.org/about.

27 For a full account of McGree's version, on which this section is based, see Jane Turner, 'Noel McGree', *Whistleblower Network News*, 25 January 2021.

28 Dunphy, 'Whistleblowing "Has Done so Much Damage", Says Former Prison Officer'.

29 Turner, 'Noel McGree'.

30 Mick Clifford, 'Whistleblowers Justified in Fearing Reprisal for Speaking Out', Opinion, *Irish Examiner*, 10 December 2020, www.irishexaminer.com/opinion/commentanalysis/arid-40187622.html.

31 Molloy and Sheehan, 'Prison Officer Whistleblower Evicted from Home over Substantial Mortgage Arrears Says State Didn't Protect His Family'.

> Being asked to steal food for a superior was likely an opportunity to demonstrate loyalty to the other prison staff, while also an invitation to be involved in material gain. Corruption becomes somehow less risky when everyone is involved.

becomes somehow less risky when everyone is involved to some degree. As McGree notes, it "was probably a test and a way to include me in the corruption. When everyone is included then they are less likely to report it."[32] Like the offer of the Edenic apple, a decision had to be made.

Following the passing of the Protected Disclosures Act of 2014, McGree made a protected disclosure in 2016 about the bullying he received.[33] The Department of Justice refused to accept that McGree was entitled to protections so he appealed.[34] In 2017, following the appointment of a retired judge, Justice William Early, a report was published by the Department of Justice which identified McGree as a whistleblower and acknowledged the ill-treatment and retaliation he received.[35] Tellingly, the corruption in the Midlands was not mentioned but McGree received two formal apologies—from the Department and the Irish Prison Service—and was reinstated to his old role in the catering section.[36] In many ways this was only the beginning of his travails and the apologies were "paper exercises."[37]

In the interim, the irregularities continued,[38] maybe emboldened by McGree's scapegoating and an institutional circling of the wagons. After a decision to report the full extent of the corruption, McGree provided private testimony to the Public Accounts Committee in 2019.[39] Following another report in 2020, commissioned by the Department of Justice, a figure was finally put on the endemic corruption in the Midlands: an estimated total of €20 million over eight years.[40] This is an eye-watering sum when the central theft was food. However, a 2019 audit of catering services and food procurement found a number of "non-standard, high-value food items" such as fillet steaks, rib roasts, prosciutto and catering chocolate being "repeatedly purchased" in one prison.[41] The report recommended a criminal investigation, which was commenced by the National Bureau of Criminal Investigation with a diminished focus on alleged property theft, rather than allegations of corrupt practice.[42]

> A 2019 audit of catering services and food procurement found a number of "non-standard, high-value food items" such as fillet steaks, rib roasts, prosciutto and catering chocolate being "repeatedly purchased" in one prison.

Yet, McGree, a reluctant whistleblower, received no protection from various Ministers or the Government of the day.[43] His treatment is a textbook example of how not to protect those who expose corruption. His identity was revealed early in 2017, permitting various forms of overt and covert retaliation. Public pronouncements by various Ministers that he would be protected as a whistleblower were never followed through. Reports abounded, but little else.[44] Thinking of his experiences, McGree laments the individual suffering experienced by trying to do the right thing but is equally reflective of the structural arrangements incubating certain malpractice, observing that:

32 Turner, 'Noel McGree'.

33 Mick Clifford, 'Prison Service Whistleblower Felt He Had Nowhere Else to Go', Opinion, *Irish Examiner*, 15 November 2018, www.irishexaminer.com/opinion/commentanalysis/arid-30885439.html.

34 Clifford, 'Prison Service Whistleblower Felt He Had Nowhere Else to Go'.

35 On one occasion, McGree was allegedly threatened with being framed for being contraband into the prison, see Gallagher, 'Allegations of Property Theft by Staff at Midlands Prison Investigated'.

36 Molloy and Sheehan, 'Prison Officer Whistleblower Evicted from Home over Substantial Mortgage Arrears Says State Didn't Protect His Family'.

37 Dunphy, 'Whistleblowing "Has Done so Much Damage", Says Former Prison Officer'.

38 The food theft was having effect beyond just McGree's personal and work life. He reported that food shortages were becoming common in the Midlands prison, causing tensions and violence among prisoners. See Turner, 'Noel McGree'.

39 Mick Clifford, 'Investigation into Ministerial Failures to Protect Whistleblower', *Irish Examiner*, 10 December 2020, www.irishexaminer.com/news/arid-40187652.html .

40 Molloy and Sheehan, 'Prison Officer Whistleblower Evicted from Home over Substantial Mortgage Arrears Says State Didn't Protect His Family'.

41 Daniel McConnell and Cianan Brennan, 'Whistleblower Asks PAC to Find out Why He Is Omitted from Prison Investigation', *Irish Examiner*, 12 June 2021, www.irishexaminer.com/news/arid-40311734.html.

42 Gallagher, 'Allegations of Property Theft by Staff at Midlands Prison Investigated'.

43 Clifford, 'Whistleblowers Justified in Fearing Reprisal for Speaking Out'.

44 Clifford, 'Investigation into Ministerial Failures to Protect Whistleblower'.

Credit: Justin Nugent/Alamy

> *"The high walls in prison are not just to keep the prisoners in, they're to keep the public's gaze out. There's no prison oversight body and staff can't talk to the media under the Official Secrets Act so all the abuse and scandals are kept hidden inside."*[45]

The Department of Justice and the Prison Service also had an opportunity to confront corruption, yet essentially allowed the waiting van to continue to be filled. Malpractice devoid of accountability appears to continue.[46] This pattern has a chilling effect on any future whistleblowers and, for those with strong convictions and the courage to risk it, retaliation is all but guaranteed.[47]

PRISON KITCHENS AND LABOUR

Despite an operating budget of €579 million for 2026,[48] the prison service still runs on de facto unpaid labour. The casual visitor walking through a wing "would be impressed by the spotlessly-clean landings (free labour!),"[49] and they are observing the diligent work of a person incarcerated in the prison. Many of the cleaning and institutional hygiene tasks are assigned to prisoners as it is "a basically universal function of imprisonment that those who are incarcerated have work to do."[50]

The same goes for the catering provided to prisoners and prison staff in their respective mess halls. The majority of the food provided to the over 5,700 prisoners is provided by fellow detainees.[51] This is noted by the Inspector of Prisons, from an oddly bottom-line perspective, that this aspect of internal services is provided "at a much lower cost than statutory or private provision."[52] Many of Ireland's prisons have prisoners assigned to work in the kitchens, typically between 10 and 20 in each prison

45 Dunphy, 'Whistleblowing "Has Done so Much Damage", Says Former Prison Officer'.

46 Conor Gallagher, 'Records Falsified Relating to Mentally Ill Inmate Found Dead in Cloverhill Prison, Watchdog Finds', *The Irish Times*, 5 August 2025, www.irishtimes.com/crime-law/2025/08/05/records-falsified-relating-to-mentally-ill-inmate-found-dead-prison-watchdog-finds/.

47 Of the 74 submissions from across the member states received by an EU inquiry, evaluating whistleblower protections, 40 submissions were from Ireland alone. See Molloy and Sheehan, 'Prison Officer Whistleblower Evicted from Home over Substantial Mortgage Arrears Says State Didn't Protect His Family'.

48 Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, 'Record €6.17 Billion for Justice Sector in Budget 2026', Gov.Ie, 9 October 2025, www.gov.ie/en/department-of-justice-home-affairs-and-migration/news/record-6-17-billion-for-justice-sector-in-budget-2026/.

49 Peter McVerry SJ, 'An Overview of Challenges Faced in Irish Prisons', *Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice in Ireland*, 30 March 2023, www.jcfj.ie/2023/03/30/an-overview-of-challenges-faced-in-irish-prisons/.

50 Kevin Hargaden, 'Prison, Work, and Human Dignity', in *Catholic Social Thought and Prison Ministry: Resourcing Theory and Practice*, ed. Elizabeth Phillips and Férdia J. Stone-Davis (Taylor & Francis, 2024), 48.

51 These workers seem not to be what Leo Vardkar had in mind as he declared his support for all the "people who get up early in the morning." See Sarah Bardon, 'Varadkar Wants to Lead Party for "People Who Get up Early in the Morning"', *The Irish Times*, 20 May 2017, www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/varadkar-wants-to-lead-party-for-people-who-get-up-early-in-the-morning-1.3090753.

52 In six General Inspections between November 2022 and December 2023, as yet unpublished, it was noted by Inspectors that there was "improvement of the prisoner food menu." See Office of the Inspector of Prisons, *Annual Report 2024*, 17.

kitchen.[53] With some prisoners working in the kitchen seven days a week.

Anecdotally, a role in the prison kitchen is highly sought by prisoners. It provides large swathes of distraction from a prison life which is fundamentally boring and demoralising.[54] Yet work completed by those society has imprisoned is significantly different from work in the community as "it is a form of labour that is uniquely susceptible to unjust practices because of the vulnerability of the worker."[55] Hargaden argues that while prison work is classified as a job, it is "often not appropriately remunerated"[56] and tends to sway from potentially rehabilitative to exploitative.[57]

As remuneration for prison work, prisoners may receive gratuities. The daily amount of the approved work gratuity is fixed for all prisons/institutions at 50 cent per session with a maximum of €3.50 per week for work training activities, such as work in kitchens, laundry, industrial cleaning, grounds maintenance, industrial waste management, painting and stores.[58] A week's work gratuities do not stretch far in a prison shop with no market competition.

Education and employability are presented as the key cornerstones of prisoner reintegration to society. A key reality for successful reintegration that is overlooked (intentionally) are questions of money and personal resources. Many people in prison return to situations of poverty with even less than when they entered prison. If the normalisation principle was to apply to prison labour, then the men

A key reality for successful reintegration that is overlooked (intentionally) are questions of money and personal resources. Many people in prison return to situations of poverty with even less than when they entered prison.

and women should be receiving the living wage of €15.40 for every hour worked.[59] It is not proposed that prison workers receive their wages immediately while under sentence, as the risk of tensions are present with certain prisoners being identifiable as having access to additional monies. Yet this remuneration for work, as in the community, could be held in a third-party account until the prisoner is being released. This lump sum which they earned by their labour would provide a basis for securing a room or accommodation to restart their lives.

WHAT IS PALATABLE TO SOCIETY

If Bourdain's assertion that all food is political is true, then this sphere naturally brings in questions of justice and injustice. How our food is produced, where it is produced, and the degree of profit extraction by processors and supermarket chains are concerns for environmentalists. Yet, when we judge the Irish prison, political interaction, and policy making through the lens of food, we are presented with three courses of injustice: food consumption in deeply undignified settings; systemic maltreatment of a whistleblower exposing eight-figure corruption; and de facto unpaid labour propping up a system with an annual operating budget of almost €600 million.

Whether we consider the prison or the plight of the prisoner at all, we can't escape the fact that the prison is part of our society. A part which we fund to the detriment of other areas of social services and have certain expectations of the humane treatment of others. If Irish society finds these injustices palatable and can force them down, then something more is revealed of our society's appetite and tastes.

53 Drawing on the last available prison inspection reports from 2021, Castlerea had 22 prisoners assigned to work in the kitchen with a further seven prisoners working in the prison staff mess hall. Mountjoy Male had 21 assigned prisoners, while Loughan House, an open prison, had 12 prisoners rostered in the kitchen rota. See Office of the Inspector of Prisons, *COVID-19 Thematic Inspection of Loughan House*, 17; Office of the Inspector of Prisons, *COVID-19 Thematic Inspection of Loughan House*, 17; Office of the Inspector of Prisons, *COVID-19 Thematic Inspection of Mountjoy Men's Prison* (Office of the Inspector of Prisons, 2021), 12.

54 McVerry SJ, 'An Overview of Challenges Faced in Irish Prisons'.

55 Hargaden, 'Prison, Work, and Human Dignity', 49.

56 Hargaden, 'Prison, Work, and Human Dignity', 49.

57 Virginia Mantouvalou, 'Work in Prison: Reintegration or Exclusion and Exploitation?', *European Labour Law Journal* 15, no. 3 (2024): 409–25.

58 The approved work gratuities are additional to the automatic gratuity dependent on the prisoner's incentivised regime. The lowest level or "basic" is 95c per day, those on "standard" receive €1.70 per day, and the prisoners on "enhanced" are paid €2.20 per day. In comparison, a full week of work gratuities is the equivalent to two days of "standard" gratuity. See Houses of the Oireachtas, 'Prisoner Gratuity Payments – Wednesday, 13 May 2020 – Parliamentary Questions (33rd Dáil)', text, Houses of the Oireachtas, 13 May 2020, Ireland; Ali Bracken, 'Half of All Prisoners Earn Top Rate of Pocket Money for Good Behaviour', *Irish Independent*, 25 December 2022, www.independent.ie/irish-news/half-of-all-prisoners-earn-top-rate-of-pocket-money-for-good-behaviour/42243093.html.

59 'Cost of Living Increases Push Living Wage to €15.40 per Hour in 2025/26 | Social Justice Ireland', Social Justice Ireland, 1 October 2025, www.socialjustice.ie/article/cost-living-increases-push-living-wage-eu1540-hour-202526.

Food Provision for People Experiencing Homelessness: An International Snapshot

Divya Ravikumar-Grant in association with Professor Saoirse Nic Gabhainn and Professor Colette Kelly

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AN INTRODUCTION FROM THE EDITORIAL TEAM

In early January 2025, news broke that Dublin City Council were planning to ban (or severely restrict) on-street soup kitchens through the creation of new bye-laws and regulations.[1] *The timing could hardly be worse. Both daily and nightly temperatures were plummeting, already creating increased hardship for people sleeping rough and those with emergency hostel accommodation.*[2] *Potentially adding to this hardship, now on-street soup kitchens and other food provision were at risk. A warm meal and a hot drink can be life-saving before a person lies upon a few layers of cardboard in a shop entry way, or whiling away the hours in a city centre hostile to your presence and very existence.*

This proposed ban on soup kitchens has been in the pipeline for a number of years, following a 2021 review and council plans in 2023.[3] *The Taoiseach's Dublin City Taskforce report on the city centre provided new impetus and political cover to ban on-street food provision.*[4] *Yet, the report makes no recommendations for how the charities and voluntary organisations could continue to provide these food services which are relied on by many individuals and families.*

It is estimated that around 24 volunteer food services are operating on the streets of Dublin, offering food to those who are homeless and experiencing food poverty.[5] *In the accompanying debate surrounding the potential regulation, a councillor noted that "food poverty is a major issue and regardless of whether the people in the queues are homeless, they need food."*[6] ■

1 The Dublin InQuirer covered the emerging plans when initially floated, speaking not only with people who use the services but also covering the ensuing debate by local councillors within the Dublin City Chambers. For the full account, see Laoise Neylon, 'Dublin City Council Says It Doesn't Plan to Ban Soup Runs, Just Regulate Them', City Desk, *Dublin InQuirer*, 7 January 2025, https://www.dublininquirer.com/dublin-city-council-says-it-doesnt-plan-to-ban-soup-runs-just-regulate-them/.

2 Many emergency homeless hostels require occupants to vacate the premises during daytime hours.

3 Olivia Kelly, 'Bylaws Would Ban "Well-Meaning" on-Street Soup Kitchen Runs to Dublin Homeless', Dublin, *The Irish Times*, 27 December 2024, https://www.irishtimes.com/ireland/dublin/2024/12/27/on-street-soup-kitchens-to-be-banned-under-new-dublin-city-council-bylaws/.

4 The authors recommend that Dublin City Council develop and enact new bye laws to regulate on-street charitable services such as soup kitchens and other services. See Dublin City Taskforce, *Capital City: Dublin City Taskforce Report* (Dublin, 2024).

5 Samantha Libreri, 'Concerns Permit System Threatens Dublin Soup Kitchens', RTE, 17 January 2025, https://www.rte.ie/news/ireland/2025/0117/1491321-dublin-soup-kitchens-council-permits/.

6 Neylon, 'Dublin City Council Says It Doesn't Plan to Ban Soup Runs, Just Regulate Them'.

Considering homeless service providers, this essay will propose that in order to improve healthy eating amongst people experiencing homelessness, there should be a focus on improving food skills amongst service providers by equipping them with appropriate resources and knowledge to provide nourishing meals that are nutritionally adequate. Based on research for an ongoing PhD project that examines the determinants of the nutritional quality of food provided to the homeless population, the co-development of food-based guidelines with relevant stakeholders, and testing the feasibility of food-based guidelines for use in homeless services, this essay will sketch out this position in five sections: sources of food available to people experiencing homelessness; the overall health of people experiencing homelessness; understandings of food poverty; types of food provision available to care for this cohort of people; and a brief summary of best practice and guidelines in this area.

FOOD SOURCES WHEN HOMELESS

Food provision for people experiencing homelessness is an under-researched area that is often left to the discretion of social service providers that work in homeless services. These providers have a number of competing priorities and may lack the nutrition knowledge and food skills required to plan, prepare, and cook food for people experiencing homelessness.[7]

Meal provision for people experiencing homelessness can take many forms: soup kitchens; on-street food provision services for people sleeping rough; homeless day centres that provide light meals such as soup and sandwiches; residential services such as hotels, B&Bs and hostels that may provide all meals throughout the day or just selected meals. Meals in these settings have also been shown to contain high amounts of saturated fat and sodium.[8]

7 Divya Ravikumar et al., 'Diet Quality, Health, and Wellbeing Within the Irish Homeless Sector: A Qualitative Exploration', *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 19, no. 23 (2022): 15976.

8 C. J. Frost et al., 'Improving the Nutritional Quality of Charitable Meals for Homeless and Vulnerable Adults: A Mixed Method Study of Two Meals Services in a Large English City', *Journal of Hunger & Environmental Nutrition* 11, no. 1 (2016): 14–28; Katherine A. Koh et al., 'Nutrition for Homeless Populations: Shelters and Soup Kitchens as Opportunities for Intervention', *Public Health Nutrition* 19, no. 7 (2016): 1312–14; Michelle Share and Marita Hennessy, *Food Access and Nutritional Health Among Families in Emergency Homeless Accommodation* (Focus Ireland, 2017).

On-street food provision on College Green, Dublin. (Credit: Niall Carson/Alamy)

Furthermore, meals provided within these settings can vary in terms of nutritional content, meaning that people experiencing homelessness may not be able to gain sufficient nutrition from the food provided to them throughout the day. US-based research demonstrated that meals provided to the homeless population do not meet the daily recommended amounts of fibre, vitamins, and minerals.[9] People experiencing homelessness found it challenging to consume the daily recommended amounts of servings from each food group.[10] Fruit and vegetable consumption has also been reported as low amongst people experiencing homelessness across Europe.[11] Food provided through emergency accommodation in the Irish setting has been shown to be highly calorific and contain high amounts of fat and salt. Breakfast often consists of fried foods and other foods may not be offered throughout the day.[12]

> **A lack of access to storage facilities such as a fridge, freezer or cupboard space can make it incredibly difficult to feed oneself or one's family within homeless settings.**

This leaves service users to source food throughout the rest of the day for themselves and their families. However, a lack of cooking facilities, insufficient time to queue for use of cooking facilities, limited access or a lack of access to storage facilities such as a fridge, freezer or cupboard space can make it incredibly difficult to feed oneself or one's family within homeless settings.[13] This can result in a high consumption of takeaway and

9 Courtney R. Lyles et al., 'Nutritional Assessment of Free Meal Programs in San Francisco', *Preventing Chronic Disease* 10 (2013); Lisa G. Sisson and Deborah A. Lown, 'Do Soup Kitchen Meals Contribute to Suboptimal Nutrient Intake & Obesity in the Homeless Population?', *Journal of Hunger & Environmental Nutrition* 6, no. 3 (2011): 312–23.

10 Elizabeth J. Adams et al., 'Nutritional Needs, Resources, and Barriers among Unhoused Adults Cared for by a Street Medicine Organization in Chicago, Illinois: A Cross-Sectional Study', *BMC Public Health* 23, no. 1 (2023): 2430.

11 Kristina Langnäse and Manfred J. Müller, 'Nutrition and Health in an Adult Urban Homeless Population in Germany', *Public Health Nutrition* 4, no. 3 (2001): 805–11; Catherine M. Rushton and Erica Wheeler, 'The Dietary Intake of Homeless Males Sleeping Rough in Central London', *Journal of Human Nutrition and Dietetics* 6, no. 5 (1993): 443–56; Claire Hickey and Dáithí Downey, *Hungry for Change: Social Exclusion, Food Poverty and Homelessness in Dublin; a Pilot Research Study* (Focus Ireland, 2003); Share and Hennessy, *Food Access and Nutritional Health Among Families in Emergency Homeless Accommodation*.

12 Ravikumar et al., 'Diet Quality, Health, and Wellbeing Within the Irish Homeless Sector'; Share and Hennessy, *Food Access and Nutritional Health Among Families in Emergency Homeless Accommodation*.

13 Ravikumar et al., 'Diet Quality, Health, and Wellbeing Within the Irish Homeless Sector'; Share and Hennessy, *Food Access and Nutritional Health Among Families in Emergency Homeless Accommodation*.

fast foods in order to manage hunger after breakfast is served. Service users in these settings are often forced to rely on foods with long shelf lives such as breakfast cereal, crisps and instant noodles.[14]

HEALTH OF PEOPLE EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

Food habits such as these have resulted in poorer metabolic health amongst members of the homeless population.[15] This has signalled the need for a cultural shift in our assumptions from one that anticipates that people experiencing homelessness are underweight to one that accounts for the possibility of the hunger-obesity paradox. The hunger-obesity paradox describes a state of both obesity and hunger within a person experiencing homelessness.[16] This theory arises from the increased consumption of cheap, energy-dense and nutrient poor foods within the homeless population and the consequent impact on metabolic health and obesity. Along with this, the lack of reliable and consistent food may result in people experiencing homelessness consuming more in one sitting due to a lack of assurance around their next meal.[17]

Over 50% of people experiencing homelessness in the USA can be categorised as obese.[18] Similar rates of over 50% were also reported in a US-based study with young people experiencing homelessness.[19] In Ireland, consumption of cheap-energy dense and nutrient poor food and the resulting

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The hunger-obesity paradox describes a state of both obesity and hunger within a person experiencing homelessness. This theory arises from the increased consumption of cheap, energy-dense and nutrient poor foods within the homeless population and the consequent impact on metabolic health and obesity.

impact on digestive health has been voiced by participants, with specific focus on weight gain and digestive discomfort.[20] In an Irish setting, abdominal obesity was found in over 90% of the 252 participants from the homeless population.[21] The risk of chronic disease is also a concerning issue amongst people experiencing homelessness, with two thirds of a German population suffering from at least one chronic disease.[22] Cardiovascular risk burden and morbidity and mortality are also higher amongst people experiencing homelessness.[23]

UNDERSTANDINGS OF FOOD POVERTY

On a broader level, food poverty continues to be a global issue, with the United Nations reporting that in 2020, 928 million people experienced severe levels of food insecurity.[24] Food poverty or food insecurity refers to the inability to maintain consistent access to food that is nourishing, safe, and contributes to growth and an active life.[25] It can be categorised across four dimensions: availability, referring to sufficient amounts of food production within a specific region;

14 Hickey and Downey, *Hungry for Change*; Ravikumar et al., ‘Diet Quality, Health, and Wellbeing Within the Irish Homeless Sector’.

15 Seena Fazel et al., ‘The Health of Homeless People in High-Income Countries: Descriptive Epidemiology, Health Consequences, and Clinical and Policy Recommendations’, *The Lancet* 384, no. 9953 (2014): 1529–40; Katherine A. Koh et al., ‘The Hunger–Obesity Paradox: Obesity in the Homeless’, *Journal of Urban Health* 89, no. 6 (2012): 952–64; Langnäse and Müller, ‘Nutrition and Health in an Adult Urban Homeless Population in Germany’; J. Scott et al., ‘The Prevalence of Diabetes, Pre-Diabetes and the Metabolic Syndrome in an Irish Regional Homeless Population’, *QJM: Monthly Journal of the Association of Physicians* 106, no. 6 (2013): 547–53.

16 Koh et al., ‘The Hunger–Obesity Paradox’.

17 Koh et al., ‘The Hunger–Obesity Paradox’; Chery Smith and Rickelle Richards, ‘Dietary Intake, Overweight Status, and Perceptions of Food Insecurity among Homeless Minnesotan Youth’, *American Journal of Human Biology* 20, no. 5 (2008): 550–63.

18 Erin M. Taylor et al., ‘Health Risk Factors and Desire to Change Among Homeless Adults’, *American Journal of Health Behavior* 40, no. 4 (2016): 455–60.

19 Irene Hatsu et al., ‘Unaccompanied Homeless Youth Have Extremely Poor Diet Quality and Nutritional Status’, *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth* 24, no. 3 (2019): 319–32; Smith and Richards, ‘Dietary Intake, Overweight Status, and Perceptions of Food Insecurity among Homeless Minnesotan Youth’.

20 Ravikumar et al., ‘Diet Quality, Health, and Wellbeing Within the Irish Homeless Sector’; Share and Hennessy, *Food Access and Nutritional Health Among Families in Emergency Homeless Accommodation*.

21 Scott et al., ‘The Prevalence of Diabetes, Pre-Diabetes and the Metabolic Syndrome in an Irish Regional Homeless Population’.

22 Langnäse and Müller, ‘Nutrition and Health in an Adult Urban Homeless Population in Germany’.

23 Jo-Hanna Ivers et al., ‘Five-Year Standardised Mortality Ratios in a Cohort of Homeless People in Dublin’, *BMJ Open* 9, no. 1 (2019): e023010; Charlotte Jones et al., ‘Cardiovascular Disease Risk Among the Poor and Homeless – What We Know So Far’, *Current Cardiology Reviews* 5, no. 1 (2009): 69–77; D. Menezes et al., ‘Mortality Outcomes in People Experiencing Homelessness across England: A Population-Based Study’, *European Journal of Public Health* 30, no. Supplement_5 (2020).

24 BMC Medicine, ‘Food Insecurity: A Neglected Public Health Issue Requiring Multisectoral Action’, *BMC Medicine* 21, no. 1 (2023): 1–2.

25 *The State of Food Insecurity in the World.* (Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, 2015).

Credit: Artur Widak/Alamy

access, which addresses food availability on a household level; utilisation highlights the biological ability of one's body to process food; and stability refers to the ability to access nourishing food consistently, regardless of economic and societal factors.[26]

Simplistic views of food poverty or food insecurity can result in rudimentary approaches to tackling this issue among homeless populations. Such approaches include increasing the number of food banks and other types of charitable food services that are available to food insecure populations. [27] Previous research indicates that the majority of the approaches to food provision centre around food assistance programs and lack government-run initiatives to tackle this systemic issue.[28] A rights-based approach to food poverty can shift this responsibility back to the government and aid researchers, practitioners, and policymakers in accounting for social responsibility in their work. Currently, third sector organisations, such as charitable food services, are forced to provide solutions to the issue of food insecurity rather than the onus falling back on governmental organisations.[29]

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TYPES OF FOOD PROVISION

The process of food provision can also result in issues related to a decline in service user dignity, resulting from the inability to exert control over one's food choices. Feelings

26 *Food Security Information for Action Practical Guides: An Introduction to the Basic Concepts of Food Security.* (Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, 2008).

27 Amy Erbe Healy, 'Measuring Food Poverty in Ireland: The Importance of Including Exclusion', *Irish Journal of Sociology* 27, no. 2 (2019): 105–27.

28 Christina M. Pollard and Sue Booth, 'Food Insecurity and Hunger in Rich Countries—It Is Time for Action Against Inequality', *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 16, no. 10 (2019); Carol Richards et al., 'Food Security in Welfare Capitalism: Comparing Social Entitlements to Food in Australia and Norway', *Journal of Rural Studies* 43 (2016): 61–70.

29 Martin Caraher and Sinéad Furey, *The Economics of Emergency Food Aid Provision* (Springer International Publishing, 2018).

of gratefulness for the availability of food can conflict with a desire to have more food choices that are of higher nutritional value. Some service users expressed the lack of dignity experienced: "The financial price is okay. The emotional and social price you pay is a lot more. […] You have to give a lot of pride up to go to a food bank."[30]

An inability to control food choices for oneself and one's family has been previously reported in Irish homeless settings.[31] As mentioned above, this is further impeded by the practical barriers to nutrition, such as a lack of access to cooking and storage facilities and an ability to prepare appropriate foods for one's children:

> *"You know the baby jars… you can't keep giving them. I'd like to give her… proper (food)… be able to cook it and give it to her… vegetables and meat… she should be having that at her age."*

Reshaping the approach to food provision for people experiencing homelessness to one that accounts for the right to food has the potential to move this topic from political aspiration to legal obligation.[32] Viewing food provision in this way can also mobilise individuals to confront their government officials in an effort to garner support.[33]

The need for guidance around food provision has been highlighted by service users in the Irish context, particularly given the fact that service users are spending increased lengths of time in homeless services.[34] This is particularly relevant with the Irish homeless population continuing to rise and over 16,000 people currently experiencing homelessness.[35] Although academic and charitable organisations have developed guidelines to improve the nutritional quality of food provided to people experiencing homelessness, there is a lack of evidence on the implementation and feasibility of such guidance. There is also a need for a tailored nutrition resource to aid service providers in providing healthy food to people experiencing homelessness.

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GUIDELINES AND BEST PRACTICE

The Queen's Nursing Institute in the United Kingdom published guidelines to aid healthcare practitioners in addressing poor nutrition within the homeless population. However, this guidance primarily focused on identifying and addressing malnutrition within this population.[36] In the Irish context, the Food Safety Authority of Ireland has produced guidance on on-street food provision for people experiencing homelessness, however, this guidance focuses specifically on food safety when preparing meals for people sleeping rough.[37] The United States Department of Agriculture provides guidance on food provision within homeless settings; however, this document focuses on food safety and nutrition for specific population groups such as the elderly or breastfeeding women and is provided in the form of a list of links.[38]

In 2012, the Hunger Coalition and the Congressional Hunger Center in California developed a toolkit to aid service providers

30 Julie Schweitzer et al., 'Negotiating Dignity and Social Justice in Community Food Access Spaces', *Safer Communities* 23, no. 2 (2024): 171–86.

31 Ravikumar et al., 'Diet Quality, Health, and Wellbeing Within the Irish Homeless Sector'; Share and Hennessy, *Food Access and Nutritional Health Among Families in Emergency Homeless Accommodation*.

32 Lawrence O. Gostin, *Global Health Law* (Harvard University Press, 2014).

33 Ana Ayala and Benjamin Mason Meier, 'A Human Rights Approach to the Health Implications of Food and Nutrition Insecurity', *Public Health Reviews* 38, no. 10 (2017); Gostin, *Global Health Law*.

34 Ravikumar et al., 'Diet Quality, Health, and Wellbeing Within the Irish Homeless Sector'.

35 'Monthly Homelessness Report: August 2025', Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage., August 2025.

36 Anne Coufopoulos, 'Food, Nutrition and Homelessness: Guidance for Practitioners', The Queen's Nursing Institute, 2012.

37 'On-Street Provision of Food to the Homeless', Food Safety Authority of Ireland, 2025.

38 'Food and Nutrition Resource Guide for Homeless Shelters, Soup Kitchens, and Food Banks.', United States Department of Agriculture., 2009.

in planning and preparing food for people experiencing homelessness. The toolkit contained useful information on healthy eating, reading nutrition labels, cooking with limited access to cooking facilities, and food safety. However, this toolkit was designed to teach homeless service providers how to educate homeless service users on food skills.[39] Unfortunately, this toolkit did not address the knowledge and skill levels of homeless service providers directly as the overall aim of this programme was to teach homeless service users. Food quality within homeless shelters was improved by focusing on making healthy swaps to improve food quality, for example, favouring white bread over whole grain bread.[40] This study interviewed ten directors of homeless shelters and reported that only one of these shelters had internal nutrition standards. This study also highlighted that food donations from private or corporate partners can be detrimental to efforts aimed at improving the nutritional quality of food provided to the homeless population.[41]

The pressure associated with tight budget constraints within homeless services has also been highlighted.[42] Budgetary constraints can also contribute to the need for homeless services to make use of donated foods due to financial pressure. For this reason, healthier food donations have been suggested as an important avenue for improving the nutritional quality of food provided to people experiencing homelessness.[43] The 'Iron Gate Tulsa Daily Menu Standards,' developed in 2023 focuses on providing social service providers with a visual aid to help them determine appropriate portion sizes and the breakdown of food groups in each meal. This guidance was produced to aid homeless services in standardising meal provision within this setting.[44] With service providers being considered the gatekeepers of food within homeless services, they are well placed to improve the nutritional quality of food provided in these settings.[45]

CONCLUSION

With homeless service providers having the most regular contact and service provision with people who are experiencing homelessness, I propose that in order to improve healthy eating in this population there should be a focus on improving food skills amongst service providers by arming them with appropriate resources and knowledge to provide nourishing meals that are nutritionally adequate.

The limited literature available in the field of nutrition and homelessness indicates that there is a need for a tailored approach to food provision for people experiencing homelessness. Initiatives to improve healthy eating amongst people experiencing homelessness should focus on improving food skills amongst service providers and arming them with appropriate resources and knowledge to provide nourishing meals that are nutritionally adequate. A practical approach to food provision is needed that accounts for the competing priorities of homeless service providers and the constrained budgets.

39 Sabrina Hamm, 'Homeless Nutrition Education Toolkit: A Resource for Nutrition Educators and Emergency Food Providers', Sacramento Hunger Coalition, 2012.

40 Koh et al., 'Nutrition for Homeless Populations'.

41 Koh et al., 'Nutrition for Homeless Populations'.

42 Frost et al., 'Improving the Nutritional Quality of Charitable Meals for Homeless and Vulnerable Adults'.

43 Ravikumar et al., 'Diet Quality, Health, and Wellbeing Within the Irish Homeless Sector'; Marianna S. Wetherill et al., 'Food Is Medicine for Individuals Affected by Homelessness: Findings from a Participatory Soup Kitchen Menu Redesign', *Nutrients* 15, no. 20 (2023).

44 Wetherill et al., 'Food is Medicine for Individuals Affected by Homelessness'.

45 Ravikumar et al., 'Diet Quality, Health, and Wellbeing Within the Irish Homeless Sector'; Verena T. Vaiciurgis et al., 'Food Provision to Support Improved Nutrition and Well-Being of People Experiencing Disadvantage–Perspectives of Service Providers', *Public Health Nutrition* 27, no. 1 (2024).

Food Waste and Old Wisdom

Edmond Grace SJ

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Credit: Gudella/Alamy

FOOD WASTE AND FOOD LOSS

The leftover food on our plate once looked appetising, but when we scrape our plates into a bin it becomes slop. It is disgusting and must be moved out of our sight. The European Commission reckons that we produce 80 million tonnes of slop in the EU every year - 179 kg per person per year.[1] With your average melon weighing in at 2kg, this means that each one of us produces one and three quarter melons of slop each week. In the entire EU that adds up to 770,000 decomposing melons every week. This happens every single week.

For most of human history very few could afford to waste food. Famine was frequent and the memory of starvation and death gave people a sense of food as something sacred. Only after the Second World War, when agriculture became industrialised and food was plentiful and cheap (and faith in God was in rapid decline), did people's attitude to food become purely pragmatic. In this worldview, food is for nourishment and enjoyment.

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Books are written with recipes from around the world, offering every kind of good health. There is no limit except the size of our stomachs. We like to have lots of food within easy reach. Because of the volume involved, it is always prone to decay—and to being discarded.

Slop is bad enough, but the really bad news is that 78% of food waste takes place before we eat it. It is called “food loss.” Producers often throw away perfectly healthy fruit and vegetables simply because they are not the right colour, shape, or size. They claim to

1 José Carlos Romero and Jaime Tatay (coord.), *Wasting Food*, (Barcelona: Cristianisme i Justícia, 2022), 5. http://cristianismeijusticia.net/sites/default/files/pdf/en184.pdf

be responding to consumer taste. We have become so conditioned that we now see bumpy, gnarled shapes and irregular colour as inferior though it all tastes exactly the same. What matters, for the producer, is that regular shapes are easier to package.

Food processing is another source of food loss. Milk and oil need to be processed if they are to be edible but many foods, including bread, soups, salad, meat products, cereals, butter, and cheese, are processed and elaborately packaged. This facilitates mass transportation and the profitability of big brands. The term food mile refers to the distance which a particular item of food travels "from the field to the fork." The higher the food mile the bigger the carbon footprint.

The most serious consequence of slop and food loss is that it all turns toxic and liquifies and, in a world with a growing shortage of drinkable water, these toxins seep through the soil and add to the problem.

As early as 1995, the EU was alert to the damage being done and the Landfill Directive was enacted. It set a target of reducing biodegradable waste, including food, by 35% over a period of 21 years. This sounds like a step in the right direction, and it would have been if anyone at the time had any idea how much of this stuff was being produced. No one had any idea of what 35% of an unknown quantity would have looked like.

"EMPTY" OR "FULL" WORLD?

For most of human history we have lived in an "empty" world where the bounty of nature seemed endless and space was, to all intents and purposes, limitless. Something has changed in the past fifty years. We now live in a "full" world in which we overrun all kinds of limits and do all kinds of damage to the ecosystem.[2] Not all are equally guilty. Compare the one and half melons of slop produced per person per week in Europe and North America to the 6 to 11kg produced each year in sub-Saharan Africa and South East Asia - less than half a melon a month!

2 Ernst Ulrich von Weizsäcker and Anders Wijkman, *Come on! Capitalism, Short-termism, Population and the Destruction of the Planet* (New York, Springer, 2017), 9.

The problem is with our eating habits. On the one hand we are too fussy (or the producers are fussy on our behalf). On the other, we are too casual, piling our plates with more than we need.

The problem is with our eating habits. On the one hand we are too fussy (or the producers are fussy on our behalf). On the other, we are too casual, piling our plates with more than we need. We will have to change our attitude to food and how we eat but it is hard to know how to begin.

ST IGNATIUS'S GUIDANCE

Intelligent reflection on our relationship with food is a feature of every religious tradition on earth. In the Hindu Dharmasastra literature, the reader is called on to offer food, as hospitality, to the gods, forebears and fellow human beings and, as alms, to monks and the needy.[3] One Christian example, among many, is St Ignatius Loyola who sets great store by restraint: "[p]rovided one takes care not to fall ill, the more one can cut back on one's normal intake, the sooner will one arrive at the just mean in eating and drinking."[4] He suggests that after each meal or "some other time when one has no appetite for food" we decide on what amount to eat for the next meal. Above all, he says we should take care "not to become wholeheartedly engrossed in what one is eating and not to be carried away by one's appetite at meals."[5] He calls for control both in the manner of eating and in the amount. This advice is practical and unremarkable, but imagine if we lived it not just at a personal but at a social and global level.

In typical fashion, Ignatius proposes Christ as the model for us to imitate at table: "[w]hile eating one should imagine that one is seeing Christ Our Lord eating with his apostles, considering the way he drinks, the way he

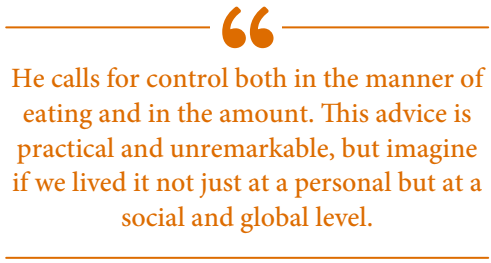
3 'From Feast to Fast: Food and the Indian Ascetic', in *Ascetics and Brahmins: Studies in Ideologies and Institutions*, by Patrick Olivelle (Anthem Press, 2011), 76.

4 Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, no. 213.

5 *Spiritual Exercises*, no. 216.

looks and the way he talks."[6] Some imagination around our food practices is certainly needed today. Returning to our spiritual traditions could start that imaginative process.

The traditional religious writers knew nothing about food waste or the limits of the planet, but their insights on food and its place in human living have something to teach our pragmatic secular age.



He calls for control both in the manner of eating and in the amount. This advice is practical and unremarkable, but imagine if we lived it not just at a personal but at a social and global level.

6 *Spiritual Exercises*, no. 214.

FoodCloud: Turning Surplus Food into Hope

Angela Kenny

Angela Kenny is Advocacy Manager at FoodCloud. After an early career in advertising Angela changed direction and is now focused on advancing climate policies to protect our precious planet, for our current and future generations.

Founders Aoibheann O'Brien and Iseult Ward (Photo credits in this article: FoodCloud)

On a damp morning in Dublin, volunteers at a local community centre gather around crates of bread, fruit, and ready-to-cook meals. There's chatter, laughter, and the familiar rhythm of people working together. Only hours earlier, much of this food was destined for landfill. Now, thanks to FoodCloud, it will be transformed into hot meals at a community lunch, packed into food parcels, or placed on the table of a family wondering how to stretch their weekly budget.

This scene plays out across Ireland every day. What looks like an ordinary delivery is, in truth, part of a quiet revolution. Since 2013, FoodCloud has been rewriting the story of surplus food. Founded in Dublin by Iseult Ward and Aoibheann O'Brien, the social enterprise connects businesses with surplus supplies to charities and community groups who can use them. It's a practical solution to two urgent crises: climate breakdown and food insecurity.

FoodCloud's work is rooted in a stark reality. Around the world, hunger and waste exist side by side. On one hand, millions struggle to put food on the table. On the other, tonnes of edible food are thrown away every day. As Pope Francis warned in 2013: "Throwing away food is like stealing from the table of those who are poor and hungry."[1] That statement feels even more pressing in 2025.

A WORLD DROWNING IN WASTE

Food waste is often invisible. It happens in quiet moments, a forgotten bag of salad leaves, a loaf going stale on the counter, an over-ordered pallet at a supermarket. But taken together, the numbers are staggering. Imagine leaving a supermarket with four full shopping bags. As you cross the car park, you drop one on the ground, and keep walking without looking back. That's how Dana Gunders, a scientist at the Natural Resources Defense Council, describes humanity's daily

1 Reuters, 'Wasting food is like stealing from poor, Pope says', *Reuters*, 5 June 2013, www.reuters.com/article/lifestyle/wasting-food-is-like-stealing-from-poor-pope-says-idUSBRE9540P2/

relationship with food.[2] Globally, up to 40% of all food produced never gets eaten. The United Nations estimates that one billion meals are wasted every single day. In the EU alone, that adds up to 59 million tonnes annually, about 132 kilograms per person. Ireland's share in 2023 was 835,000 tonnes.

The damage is not only moral, but environmental. Every discarded apple or loaf of bread carries a hidden carbon footprint: the land cleared, the water used, the fertiliser spread, the energy consumed, the fuel burned to transport it. Globally, the food system accounts for 34% of greenhouse gas emissions. Of that, food waste alone is responsible for up to 10%, four times the impact of the entire aviation sector. Unlike some climate challenges, this one is solvable. Reducing food waste is a tangible, immediate action. It requires no futuristic technology or radical inventions. The food already exists. The challenge is to move it into the right hands.

HUNGER AMID ABUNDANCE

And yet, alongside this mountain of waste, hunger is rising. Our global food system already produces enough to feed the world's population of eight billion. Still, the UN's 2025 *State of Food Security* report estimates that up to 720 million people went hungry last year.[3]

The imbalance is starkest in Africa, where Concern Worldwide reports that one in five people face hunger each day. Even more troubling: despite the UN's Sustainable Development Goal of Zero Hunger by 2030, the number of people going hungry has risen by 152 million in just five years.

Ireland is not immune. Here, one in eleven people live in some form of food poverty. Parents go without so their children can eat. Older people stretch pensions that no longer cover weekly groceries. Community organisations see the strain daily. FoodCloud's own 2025 survey of nearly 700 community partners reflects the trend. Sixty-three percent reported a rise in demand for food. Almost one in five said they are struggling to meet it.

HOW FOODCLOUD WORKS

FoodCloud's model is both simple and sophisticated. It provides two core solutions:

- **Redistribution hubs** in Dublin, Cork, and Galway take in large volumes of surplus food. Staff and volunteers then break it down into smaller, manageable amounts, which are distributed to charities and community groups.
- **The Foodiverse technology app** connects retailers directly with charities. Details of surplus food are uploaded in real time, and local groups can collect items themselves.

The Foodiverse app in action

This combination of physical infrastructure and digital innovation makes FoodCloud unique. It means food can move quickly from point of surplus to point of need. And it means charities can rely on regular supplies of fresh, nutritious food, something often out of reach for the people they support.

The impact goes beyond meals. Charities save money on food costs, allowing them to redirect limited resources into core services. Volunteers form new connections through food distribution. Communities gain resilience.

2 Dana Gunders, 'Why I Wrote the Waste-Free Kitchen Handbook', *NRDC*, 29 September 2015, www.nrdc.org/bio/dana-gunders/why-i-wrote-waste-free-kitchen-handbook

3 UN,'The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World (SOFI) Report - 2025', *World Food Programme*, 28 July 2025, www.wfp.org/publications/state-food-security-and-nutrition-world-sofi-report

Staff and volunteers preparing orders from community partners at the food redistribution hub in Dublin.

Orders are delivered to community partners by volunteer drivers.

One of FoodCloud's community partners with a delivery of food

The Islamic Relief Centre in Clongriffin describes how the partnership has transformed its mobile food bank:

> *We can now offer a wider variety of fresh produce, dairy, and baked goods, bringing not only sustenance but also a sense of dignity to our service users. By reducing our food costs, we've been able to reinvest in additional supplies and strengthen our outreach. This ensures even more people benefit from our services.*

Stories like this are echoed across Ireland. They remind us that when food is wasted, it's not just carbon emissions or euros lost–it's human lives, opportunities, and dignity squandered.

FROM LOCAL ACTION TO GLOBAL CHANGE

FoodCloud's vision extends far beyond Ireland. The integration of the Foodiverse technology into food redistribution networks is enabling the development of "virtual foodbanking" and it is proving to be a powerful tool for international change. Traditional food banks often require heavy infrastructure: warehouses, refrigerated trucks, and large staff teams. In contrast, virtual foodbanking allows community organisations to connect directly with local food donors. This reduces transport costs, lowers emissions, and increases access to food sources that may otherwise have been out of reach. The model is particularly promising in low- and middle-income countries, where the need is greatest and resources are scarce.

In Kenya, for example, FoodCloud has partnered with Food Banking Kenya (FBK) and The Global FoodBanking Network to integrate Foodiverse into daily operations. The results have been quite transformative. Since its launch, FBK has redistributed over 500 tonnes of surplus food, the equivalent of over 2.5 million meals.

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Traditional food banks often require heavy infrastructure: warehouses, refrigerated trucks, and large staff teams. In contrast, virtual foodbanking allows community organisations to connect directly with local food donors.

For organisations like Vineyard Children's Centre and Jesus Helper's Children's Home, which support vulnerable children, the difference is profound. Previously, they had to travel long distances to FBK's central warehouse a few times a month. Now, thanks to Foodiverse, they can collect fresh fruit, vegetables, flour, and dried goods several times a week from local donors. The children not only receive more frequent meals, but also more varied and nutritious food, including fruit that was once rare in their diets. Such collaborations highlight the potential of technology to drive systems-level change. They also show that tackling food waste is not just about redistributing calories. It's about building fairer, stronger, and more resilient communities worldwide.

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Such collaborations highlight the potential of technology to drive systems-level change. They also show that tackling food waste is not just about redistributing calories. It's about building fairer, stronger, and more resilient communities worldwide.

WHY IT MATTERS NOW

The clock is ticking. The United Nation's Sustainable Development Goal 12.3 - to halve food waste by 2030 - is only five years away, and the world is not on track. Without urgent action, both the climate crisis and the hunger crisis will worsen. Yet this is one of the few global challenges where solutions are not only known, but proven. Every day, FoodCloud demonstrates that redistributing surplus food works, for the environment, for communities, and for individuals. Crucially, fighting food waste is something everyone can take part in. Project Drawdown, the independent nonprofit advancing science-based climate solutions, identifies reducing food waste as an "emergency brake" for climate change. It's one of the most immediate and impactful actions we can all implement right now.

Caption: FoodCloud Kitchen provides top-quality event catering using surplus food

EVERYONE HAS A ROLE

Changing the narrative around surplus food requires a shift in mindset across the food system and in our own homes. Everyone can look at their own daily interactions with food and assess what change they could make.

- **Food businesses** can audit supply chains, identify areas of surplus, and partner with redistribution networks to ensure no edible food is discarded.
- **Growers** can work with organisations like FoodCloud and our Growers' Project to ensure that the fruits of their labour are eaten, not wasted.
- **Communities** can collaborate with redistribution projects to ease the burden on neighbours facing food insecurity.
- **Individuals** can play their part by planning meals carefully, storing food wisely, saving leftovers, and volunteering with FoodCloud or local food sharing projects. Small habits, repeated widely, add up to big change.

Above all, we must begin to see food differently. Not as disposable, but as precious. Each loaf, each apple, each meal carries value, for our planet, our communities, and our shared humanity.

PICKING UP THE BAG

FoodCloud's vision of a world where no good food goes to waste is not just aspirational. It's practical, necessary, and achievable. It represents a future where climate responsibility, community resilience, and human compassion meet. The choice is ours. Do we continue to drop that metaphorical shopping bag in the car park and walk away? Or do we turn back, pick it up, and share it with someone who needs it?

Join us on our mission to transform surplus food into opportunities to make the world a kinder place. Find us at https://food.cloud/

> Above all, we must begin to see food differently. Not as disposable, but as precious.

FoodCloud regularly runs Gleaning events, where leftover crops are collected from farmers' fields after they have been commercially harvested or on fields where it is not economically profitable to harvest.

Working and Connecting with Community Gardens

Niall Leahy SJ

Niall Leahy SJ is the Director of the Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice. Before entering the Jesuits he worked in the financial services sector and qualified as a Chartered Accountant. Since joining the Jesuits he has gained degrees in philosophy, education and theology with a focus on eco-theology. After ordination he served as curate and then Parish Priest at Gardiner Street Parish. He is a member of the Gardiner Street Jesuit community.

INTRODUCTION

I may not have green fingers but I enjoy working in the garden. The first garden I worked in was at home. Mowing the lawn, weeding the flower beds, strimming the edges, and disposing of garden waste were all excellent ways of being useful and earning some pocket money. But when it came to the cultivation of things, that was best left to my father, who was the brains of the operation. I didn't inherit that particular intelligence and I still consider myself more of a labourer than a true gardener. I will dig, shovel, trim, shear and haul all day long to my heart's content, but I must confess that I know very little about growing plants. The early potatoes ought to be sown around St Patrick's Day, but that's about as far as my knowledge of the gardening calendar goes. Nonetheless, the enjoyment of "working in the garden" has kept me coming back to gardening projects.

A few years ago when I was a curate[1] in Gardiner Street Parish, the mother of a transition year student reached out to me and asked if I could offer any work experience to her son and his school mates. Absolutely! I bought a polytunnel and some raised beds for our inner city walled garden and the lads gainfully helped assemble it all. Once erected, the polytunnel effortlessly attracted people from all quarters: parishioners, school children and their teachers, asylum seekers, researchers, and Jesuits. I was disappointed when it was announced that a new building project in our grounds meant that the polytunnel would be taken down. (Thankfully it found a new home in Co. Monaghan). But in three years, I saw just how ecologically, socially and spiritually fruitful a small gardening project could be.

NEW ADVENTURE AT THE OLD GARDEN

As fortune would have it, at the same time as our walled garden was becoming a building site, another gardening project was starting up — The Old Garden at Clongowes Wood, Co. Kildare.

1 In the Catholic Church, a curate is a priest who serves as an assistant to the main parish priest.

Niall Leahy SJ with some of the harvest in the Gardiner Street polytunnel in June 2024 (Photo credits in this article: Siobhán McNamara)

"But in three years, I saw just how ecologically, socially and spiritually fruitful a small gardening project could be.

An existing community garden in nearby Rathcoffey was on the look out for a larger location. They asked the Jesuits for the use of some land at Clongowes and a lease of seven acres of farmland was given.

From the outset, it was clear that the group had the vision and ambition to create a significant ecological and social project. In their own words, The Old Garden's vision is "to cultivate not just plants, but a thriving ecosystem where biodiversity flourishes, individuals connect, and sustainability thrives."[2]

2 'The Old Garden', accessed 26 October 2025, www.theoldgarden.ie.

An outline of the plans for The Old Garden.

Founded in 2024, The Old Garden is still in its infancy, and yet it has already developed a remarkable range of features and activities: 100 individual allotments for gardeners, egg-laying ducks and hens, honey-producing beehives, three polytunnels, an orchard, a pre-fab classroom, and solar panels that power the water pump. Regular market days add to its vibrancy and community involvement. More developments are planned, but in a short space of time the project has already grown in size, scope, and diversity.

I recently got involved with The Old Garden. My allotment is at the end of a row, which means that it is relatively large — around 10 metres long and 7 metres wide. When I received it, it was all grass. Correction: it was all grass and dock leaves. The community garden operates on organic principles, so quick chemical fixes like weed killer and pesticides are not permitted. The only way to be rid of the pesky dock leaves is to dig them up by the roots. To prepare the beds I was advised to use the no-dig method which maintains the soil's structure and fertility. Instead of removing the sods of grass, you cover the de-dockified area with cardboard and then cover the cardboard with top soil and decomposed manure.

Carrying load after load of soil and manure in the wheelbarrow is very physical work, but it's more fun than the gym. The worms get to work straight away and once you have a decent layer on top of the cardboard the bed is ready for planting. After I prepared one length in this manner, one of the volunteers kindly planted seed potatoes, carrots and beetroot for me. This summer was warm and humid so it was no surprise when the black spots of blight appeared on the potato stalks. The beetroot and carrots are faring much better, thank God — a sign of fertile ground. Whenever they are ready for harvesting I plan to bring some back to my Jesuit community and to donate the rest to be sold at the The Old Garden market, the proceeds of which go towards the running of the garden.

AGROECOLOGY IN ACTION

The Gardiner Street polytunnel and The Old Garden at Clongowes Wood ran/run according to the principles of agroecology. A loose definition of agroecology is agriculture that follows the patterns of ecology rather than those of industry. Agroecology is more than a set of principles that individuals put into practice: it is also a movement, representing a wide variety of small-scale food producers and consumers. The delegates who attended the International Forum for Agroecology in Nyéléni, Mali in 2015 represented "peasants, indigenous peoples, communities, hunters and

gatherers, family farmers, rural workers, herders and pastoralists, fisherfolk and urban people."[3] Community gardeners are not specifically mentioned, but they can be reasonably included under the heading of urban people.

The Declaration that the delegates published is worth reading. Here I have selected four quotations that resonate strongly with my experience as a community gardener.

1. *"The production practices of Agroecology are based on ecological principles like building life in the soil, recycling nutrients, the dynamic management of biodiversity and energy conservation at all scales.… There is no use of agrotoxins, artificial hormones, GMOs or other dangerous new technologies in Agroecology."*[4]

As I said, the no-dig method for preparing beds was recommended to me. Without this advice, my default approach would have been to dig and remove every sod to uncover fresh soil. The act of digging, however, disrupts the drainage channels that worms establish and the fungal networks that plants utilise for communication and nutrient sharing. It also releases carbon that is locked into the soil. No-dig is beneficial for plant health as it allows the plants to benefit from the natural regenerative and fertile processes of the soil's ecosystem.

The same thinking informs the policy not to use herbicides, pesticides, and fungicides. If I had used toxins to kill the grass and the docks, or even to prevent the onset of blight, I would have got trapped into the expensive loop of paying for toxins which decrease soil fertility and then compensating for this with artificial fertilisers. This approach takes soil, which is a complex and diverse ecosystem, and turns it into a sterile substrate which cannot provide nutrients. In the long run, it is not a sustainable option, regardless of scale. I have met farmers who are making the transition back to agroecological methods. One of them told me that he has learned to "feed the soil, not the plant!"

Part of the agroecological conversion is also to see the positive function that 'weeds' play in the wider ecosystem. Dock plants are certainly annoying because they are so persistent and roots go deep, but they are also an important source of food for many insects, including caterpillars, which are eaten by birds and hedgehogs. The dock leaves are doing their bit for biodiversity. And as for the blight, I knew I was taking a risk by planting potatoes so late in the summer. There is every reason to get them down around St Patrick's Day.

2. *"Families, communities, collectives, organisations and movements are the fertile soil in which Agroecology flourishes."*[5]

The two community garden projects that I have been involved with have been intensely collaborative projects between multiple organisations and constituencies. I was truly amazed by the number of constituencies that the Gardiner Street polytunnel drew into its ecosystem in such a short space of time. It was made possible by the Jesuit Community's willingness to allow a section of the back garden to be given over for it. The initial 'grunt' came from the Transition Year students of Gonzaga College SJ. Numerous gardeners, young and old, from Gardiner Street Parish, Gardiner Street Primary School, and JCFJ, gave of their time and energy. And we were actively exploring the possibility of running an after-school forest school for the local children, only for the building works to stop that in its tracks. Special mention must also go to the editor of this issue of *Working Notes* who implemented permaculture principles in the garden as part of her studies in biodiversity at the nearby Cathal Brugha Further Education and Training College.

I can see that the same social dynamic is at work at The Old Garden, although on a bigger scale. Mapping the myriad community connections would be a fascinating task. But just to give a flavour, here are a few of the constituencies that are actively engaged: board members, volunteers, allotment gardeners, Clongowes Wood College SJ

3 International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty, 'Declaration of Nyéléni 2015', International Forum for Agroecology, 2015, www.foodsovereignty.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/NYELENI-2015-ENGLISH-FINAL-WEB.pdf

4 'Declaration of Nyéléni', 4.

5 'Declaration of Nyéléni', 5.

and Jesuit Community, Kildare County Council, local business and corporate donors and sponsors, local garden centres, KARE (supports for children and adults with intellectual disabilities), Clane Men's Shed, market customers and other sellers, and guest speakers. Even international connections are being made: a French Jesuit novice (one who is in the initial stage of religious life) recently volunteered at The Old Garden for five weeks. The circle keeps expanding.

When communities invest in community gardens, the community and the garden both grow. Many allotments at The Old Garden are gardened by couples and families, so time spent in the garden is also family time. Others, like myself, ostensibly garden alone, and yet I have never spent time there without having casual conversation with whoever else is there. And even when I am pottering away by myself, nature has a way of creating space for people to be alone together.

All that is to say that the insight of the agroecology delegates at Nyeléni is being borne out in these two community gardens. Community gardens flourish because of the community web that it simultaneously depends on and helps create. All I would add is that "families, communities, collectives, organisations and movements" also flourish. They turn people who live in the same vicinity into actual neighbours. They help turn places into neighbourhoods.

3. *"We recognise that as humans, we are merely part of nature and the cosmos."*[6]

Our consumerist lifestyles give the impression that we humans sit above the rest of nature. Of course, this sense of elevation is but an illusion: it is impossible to extract or distance ourselves from the ecosystems that we are part of. For me, community gardening has been a way of regaining a sense of our embeddedness in the natural world, and humbly being "but part of nature and the cosmos."

To give it a theatrical spin, community gardening teaches you that the rest of nature is not simply the inert stage that provides the backdrop to the human protagonists. All the elements of a community garden, human and non-human, are constantly interacting, shaping, and reshaping each other. The continuous process of acting on and being acted on, is the unfolding of a drama.

"All the elements of a community garden, human and non-human, are constantly interacting, shaping, and reshaping each other.

The changing weather and climate is perhaps the most tangible reminder that the author has given nature a prominent role. Gardeners, like farmers, feel the impact of each shift in sun, wind, heat, and rain. The warm and moist summer that yielded a bumper crop of apples and pears also brought the blight that destroyed potatoes. Waking up one morning in Gardiner Street to see the polytunnel flattened by an overnight storm was a reminder that sometimes we gardeners only play a bit part. Thankfully, we could repair it, but if our food or livelihood had depended on it, the loss would have been devastating.

Much of our own impact is obvious, but gardening also has a way of alerting us to impacts that we were not previously aware of. At Gardiner Street, I knew that the garden wall provided shelter to many plants, but I only learned recently that the stone acts as a store of heat for them, and extends the flowering season. Again in Gardiner Street, we didn't mow one section of the lawn for 18 months. Left to its own devices, it became a meadow of clovers, weld, ragwort, feverfew, and many other species. This experiment demonstrated that mowing the lawn entails more than cutting grass: it is the suppression of a magnificent array of plants, flowers and pollinators that brings complexity and biodiversity to your garden. And all of this for aesthetic reasons. But which is truly more beautiful: a perfectly mown lawn that proclaims our control, or the wild, buzzing diversity of nature set free? Or to avoid an either/or scenario, how much mown lawn do we actually need?

6 'Declaration of Nyéléni', 5.

> Mowing the lawn entails more than cutting grass: it is the suppression of a magnificent array of plants, flowers and pollinators that brings complexity and biodiversity to your garden.

At The Old Garden, when I began to construct a small garden shed on my allotment, one experienced gardener urged me to stop and think about where it would cast its shadow before deciding on where to place it. Such experiences make you stop and think about the unforeseen consequences of your actions on the wider ecosystem.

4. *"We share a spiritual connection with our lands and the web of life."*[7]

If you had asked me a few years ago about experiencing a spiritual connection with the natural world, I would have assumed you meant the sense of peace that comes from walking in the hills, sitting on the beach watching the sun go down, or staring up at the moon and the stars in awe and wonder. I would have assumed that the experience had been arrived at through the contemplative 'seeing' of nature.

> Spend an hour in your garden and observe how nature is always giving of itself.

Community gardening, however, offers another avenue of arriving at the spiritual connection with nature: working with nature.

If you ever want to see Jesus's exhortation "Freely you have received, freely give" (Mt. 10:8) being put into action, then spend an hour in your garden and observe how nature is always giving of itself: the sun always gives its light and heat; the rain gives its moisture; the soil gives its fertility; the air gives its gases; the stones give their solidity; the trees give their shelter and protection; the plants give their fruit, their seed, their smell, their colour, and their beauty. All the elements of nature continuously give everything that they have to give.

> All the elements of nature continuously give everything that they have to give.

The recently-planted orchard in The Old Garden.

7 'Declaration of Nyéléni', 5.

Winter vegetables growing in the polytunnel. This produce will be sold to help cover the costs of the garden.

It is not a transactional arrangement. There is no prior negotiation of who will give what and what will be given in return. There is no measuring out. All elements give everything until they have nothing left to give. It works like a family, where it is impossible to keep track of who gives what or to keep a record of who owes what to whom. It is just accepted that every member gives what they have to give, and everybody gets looked after.

To get involved in a community garden is to be drawn into nature's dynamic of generosity and self-giving. I dig up a sod, and I discover a worm down there who was already digging away. I plant some seeds and the seeds start to germinate. I put weeds into the compost heap and the bacteria start breaking them down. Truth be told, gardeners don't just work in the garden—they work *with* the garden. The garden and the gardeners are generous and self-giving co-workers. This is their spiritual connection.

CONCLUSION: VALUE BEYOND MEASURE

You start to notice that the gardeners, volunteers and various constituencies that are involved are also generous people. I have got to know some of them and they simply give what they have to give. The array of talents is impressive: gardening and horticulture, DIY, community development, technology, engineering, finance and business, health and safety, communications, marketing, education.

Obviously community gardens don't run purely on fresh air — funds are needed. Gardeners pay an annual fee for the use of

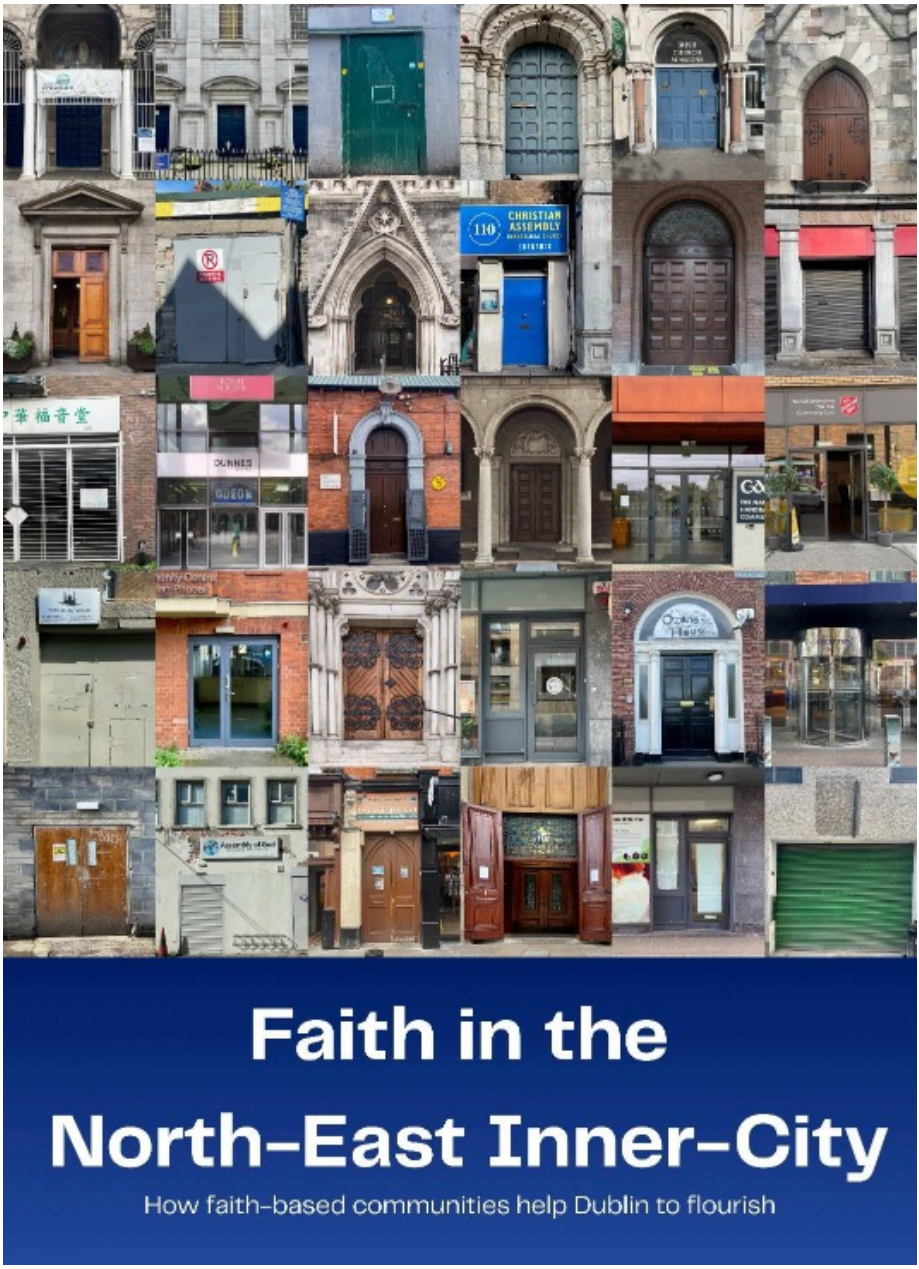
Brussels sprouts thriving in one of the allotments.

their allotment. People pay for eggs, honey and the seasonal produce that are for sale. Grants for capital investment have been applied for and received. It makes complete sense that local authorities have policies and plans in place to develop more community gardens and allotments.[8] By supporting these initiatives, they are acting as catalysts that release the energy and generosity of communities.

Moreover, the value that is generated far surpasses the money that is involved. And all that extra value comes from the generosity of nature and the people involved. People do all sorts of things in exchange for money, things which may be of greater or lesser value, or of none at all. But when people freely give of their time and energy to something, that is a sign that it is something of great value indeed.

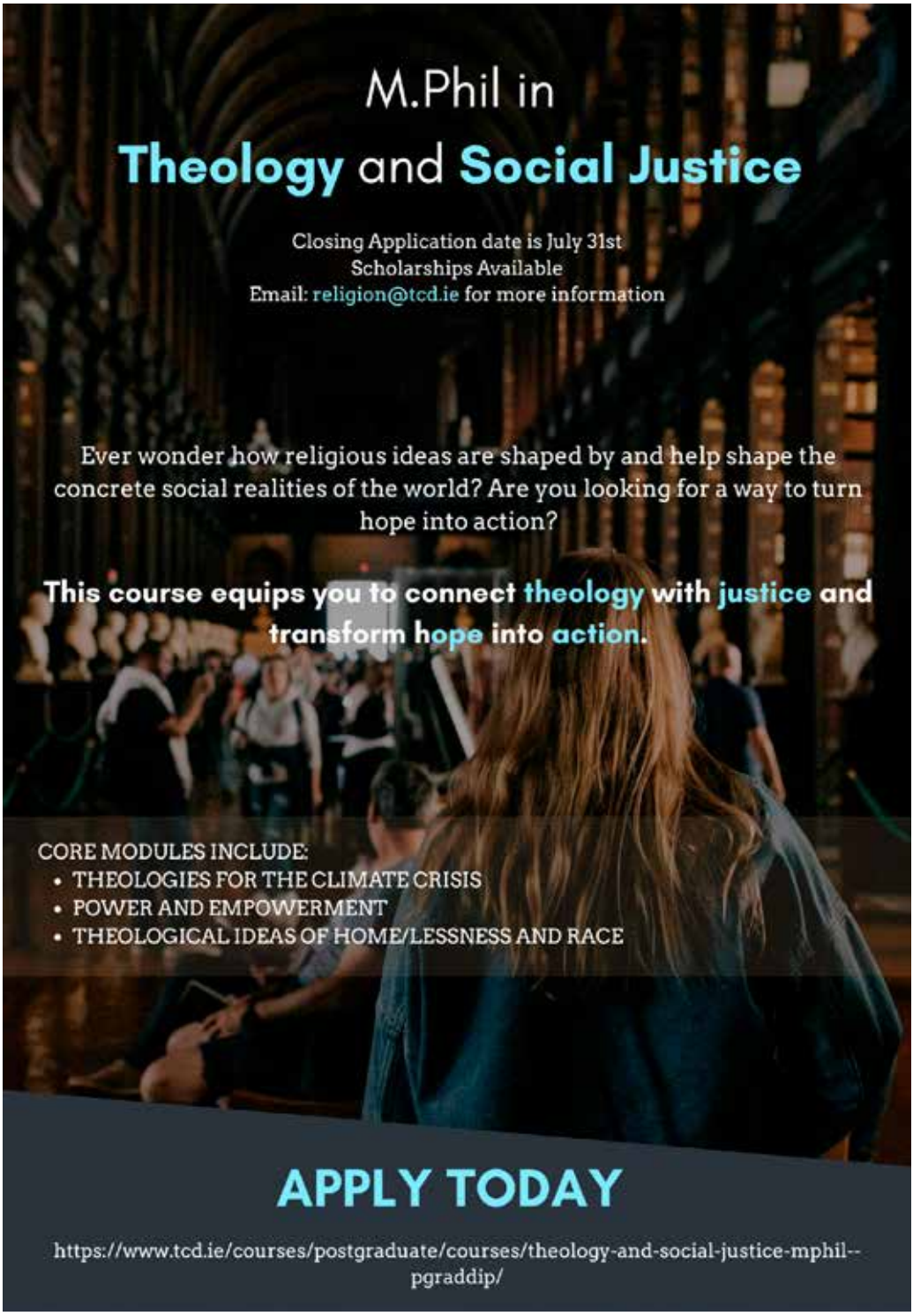
> “The value that is generated far surpasses the money that is involved.

8 Kildare County Council, Kildare's Allotment & Community Garden Strategy 2024 - 2030, https://kildarecoco.ie/AllServices/Planning/PlanningStrategies/Kildares%20ACG%20Strategy%20FV.pdf



Read the latest research published by the JCFJ which demonstrates that the North-East Inner-City's almost 50 Faith-Based Communities are co-builders of the common good, bearers of hope, and indispensable partners in shaping a city worthy of all who call it home.

www.jcfj.ie/research/faith-in-the-north-east-inner-city/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