

working notes

*facts and analysis of social
and economic issues*

100

Working Notes at 100: Faith that Still Does Justice

From Moral Monopoly to a Faithful
Contribution: “Social Theology” in
Ireland

Minimising Prison’s Excesses: A
Manifesto for the Irish Penal System

Housing, Homelessness but Not
Hopelessness: JCFJ’s Not-So-Radical Ideas

Environment: Caring for What We Value

Building an Economy with a Soul

Working Notes

Facts and analysis of social and economic issues

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Editorial

Niall Leahy SJ

Niall Leahy SJ is the Director of the Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice.

Working Notes continues to be a flagship expression of the Irish Jesuits' commitment to both the sacred and the secular sciences, and their mutually enriching collaboration. The Jesuits who founded JCFJ and launched *Working Notes* were inspired by the following expression of our mission:

*"The mission of the Society of Jesus today is the service of faith, of which the promotion of justice is an absolute requirement. For reconciliation with God demands the reconciliation of people with one another."*¹

The decree, written during the Society's 32nd General Congregation in Rome in 1975, went on to describe how social analysis was an essential tool for the fulfilling of that mission:

*"We cannot be excused from making the most rigorous possible political and social analysis of our situation. This will require the utilization of the various sciences, sacred and secular, and of the various disciplines, speculative and practical."*²

Feedback from our readers indicates that this mix – the sacred and the secular – is one of the things that keeps them reading. While the journal has maintained this foundational commitment, *Working Notes* has clearly evolved over the years. As the title suggests, the original focus of *Working Notes* was employment and responses to the unemployment crisis of the 1980s, particularly in Ballymun. The format of the early issues was so basic that 'Notes' was deemed appropriate. It is worth accessing the online archive of back-issues to see the range of themes and issues the journal has engaged with since, all of which add to the telling of Ireland's story in these decades.³

Like those early issues, this landmark issue has a homemade feel to it too. The editor normally invites essays from guest authors and contributors, but for this one-hundredth issue, I asked each of JCFJ's policy advocates to write a manifesto-style essay on their particular area of expertise, reflecting the Centre's convictions and commitments at this moment in time.

The first manifesto invites theology into engagement with analysis and policy. Our social theologian, Dr. Kevin Hargaden, sets

1 Society of Jesus, General Congregation 32, Decree 4, "Our Mission Today: The Service of Faith and the Promotion of Justice", §2, (1975).

2 GC 32, Decree 4, §44.

3 Available at <https://www.jcfj.ie/working-notes/past-issues/>

the scene with the observation that cultural individualism has infected our society – Christians included – but that people are seeking the collective once again. The risk is that we will be re-socialised by the populist and tribalist cultural forces that are on the rise, rather than by a concern for the common good, and solidarity with the most vulnerable members of society. Against this backdrop, Hargaden gives an account of Social Theology as a public exercise that engages with the secular sciences to generate policy proposals that promote human dignity and the common good. He makes the case that in a post-secular Ireland, Christian theology ought to make a faithful contribution to society rather than control it. We may consider JCFJ and ACET's recent research project *Faith in the North-East Inner-City* as a proof of concept in the contemporary Irish context.⁴

The size of Ireland's prison population is setting new records every month, and is now heading towards 6,000. The belief that *more prison* is the obvious solution to prison crowding has lived rent-free in the Irish moral imagination for far too long. In *Minimising Prison's Excesses*, Keith Adams offers four achievable steps towards penal minimalism in Ireland: independent investigations; ending prison expansion; a maximum cap on prison spaces; and the closing of female prisons. At a moment when the state could be sleepwalking towards the costly expansion of a malfunctioning prison system, Adams' contribution could not be more timely.

At least the state knows how many people it has incarcerated. Our housing policy advocate Dr. Alexia O'Brien wishes the same could be said for our homeless population. She notes that there is no single housing crisis – there are multiple housing crises. O'Brien identifies hidden homelessness as one of them. The official homelessness figures only count those in emergency accommodation, but non-government sources point to other multitudes who don't have a place to call home. In the North-East Inner-City where JCFJ's office is located, hidden homelessness

is hiding in plain sight. Our neighbouring Jesuit primary school, Gardiner St Primary School SJ, reports that 20% of its pupils are homeless or living in emergency accommodation, and we increasingly hear stories of people living in overcrowded accommodation. The Centre takes inspiration from our European neighbours both in how homelessness numbers are calculated and what policies are adopted. The European Commission's Affordable Housing Plan offers many promising ways forward.

Recent events in Dublin's city centre highlighted the importance of two environmental policy areas of commitment for the Centre. Dr. Ciara Murphy notes that the fuel-price protests highlighted two major weak points in our system: our over-reliance on cars for transport and our over-dependence on imported food and fertilizer. Murphy offers an alternative for transport, which puts the child rather than the car at the centre of spatial and political decision-making. As for our daily bread, the Centre is supportive of the burgeoning national and international agroecology movement which seeks to embed more food production and consumption within ecosystems and communities.

Finally, enjoy the reflections of our theological research assistant, Sophie Manaeva, who sat down with me to talk about her studies in the MPhil of Theology and Social Justice at Trinity College Dublin and her action research at The Bohemian Cooperatives.⁵ Manaeva is answering Pope Francis' call to young people to build an economy with a soul.

May you find seeds of faith and justice for the future in this one-hundredth issue of *Working Notes*.

4 Keith Adams et al., *Faith in the North-East Inner-City: How Faith-Based Communities Help Dublin to Flourish* (Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice, 2025), <https://www.jcfj.ie/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/Faith-in-the-North-East-Inner-City.pdf>.

5 Katlyne Armstrong, "Bohs Co-Op," Bohemians Cooperative, Dublin, 2026, <https://bohemians.coop/home/>.

From Moral Monopoly to a Faithful Contribution: “Social Theology” in a Post-Secular Ireland.

Kevin Hargaden

Kevin Hargaden is Social Theologian at the Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice. Kevin works in conjunction with the team to reflect theologically on political and policy issues. He holds a PhD in Theological Ethics from the University of Aberdeen.

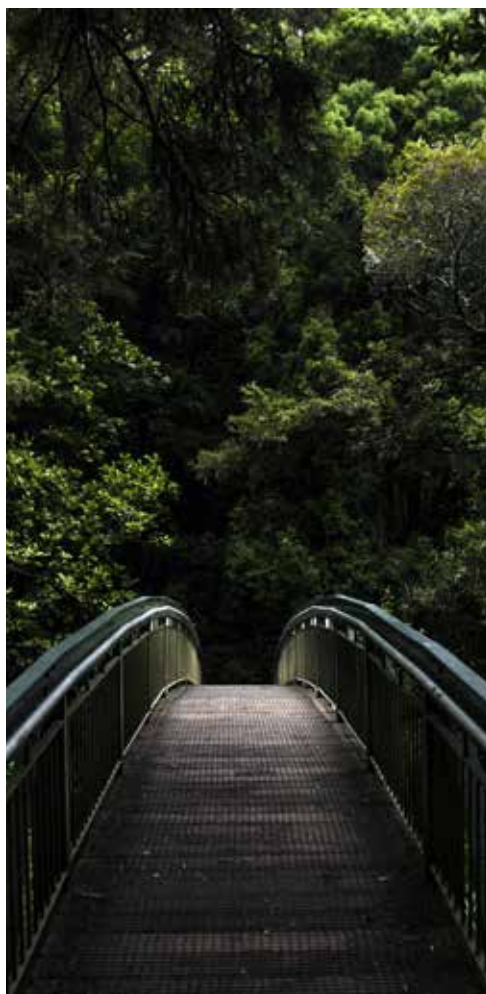
WHAT IS “SOCIAL THEOLOGY”?

Contemporary Ireland is defined by a curious paradox: we have never been more connected by technology and prosperity, yet we have rarely felt more socially fragmented. In a context where the State is often incapable of providing supports as basic as housing, a hyper-individualism prevails whereby people seek to maximise their own gain.¹ This is intense self-interest, very different from simple selfishness.² While not discounting specific contexts where thick communal care is still exhibited,³ it can seem increasingly that Irish society exists to maintain and grow a booming economy.⁴

In this vacuum, social virtues – solidarity, the commitment to the common good, civil speech – can seem to be withering. If we are to address the disconnect seen in protests on our streets and the democratic deficit detected in our policy, we need a theological framework discontent to be merely comfortable in church sanctuaries or academic ivory towers.

In this context, Social Theology becomes a necessity.

While some may see Social Theology as an ambiguously defined concept, in this essay I intend to present it as a vital bridge. Usage of the term stretches back to the nineteenth century.⁵ Its contemporary usage might be well described by reference to the Irish theologian, Dermot Lane. In his 1984 text, *Foundations for a Social Theology* he describes how:



Social theology is a bridge from Christianity to public policy (Credit: Asap Pang/Unsplash).

“being a Christian involves belonging to that larger reality we call the People of God. It also entails membership of that organic entity that we call the Body of Christ. Christianity is essentially a social religion and as such has important social implications. The working out of some of these social implications is the task of social theology.”⁶

Arguably, this particular definition leaves us with too much room to manoeuvre. If it is true that Christianity is essentially a social religion (and it is true), then rather than carving out space for a particular task known as “social theology”, we’re compelled to admit that all of theology should consider the “social”.

- 1 At the time of writing, Ellen Coyne discovered that almost a hundred women gave birth to babies in a context of homelessness or dire housing precarity at just one hospital in 2025. We are far from fulfilling the foundational promise of the State: to cherish all children equally. Ellen Coyne, ‘Five Pregnant Women Forced to Sleep Rough among Those Who Gave Birth at NMH in 2025’, *The Irish Times*, 30 April 2026, <https://www.irishtimes.com/ireland/housing-planning/2026/04/29/more-than-100-mothers-who-gave-birth-at-nmh-last-year-either-homeless-or-at-risk-of-it/>.
- 2 This social trajectory is wrapped up in Ireland’s very successful (in a certain narrow measurement of success) adoption of neoliberalism. Bruce Rogers-Vaughn, *Caring for Souls in a Neoliberal Age* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 70.
- 3 For example, not far from the JCFJ offices, you can encounter the remarkable social enterprise that is the Bohemians Co-op. Katlyne Armstrong, ‘Bohs Co-Op’, Bohemians Cooperative, Dublin, 2026, <https://bohemians.coop/home/>.
- 4 For the most compelling account of what is at play here, consider: Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (Beacon, 2001).
- 5 Where the author says theology must be social ‘because the Christianity of Christ and his disciples was pre-eminently a social movement, and because we are looking at everything to-day from the social rather than the individualistic point of view.’ DeWitt Hyde, *Outlines of Social Theology* (Macmillan & Co., 1895), vi.

- 6 Dermot Lane, *Foundations for a Social Theology: Praxis, Process and Salvation* (Paulist Press, 1984), 2.

This is an implicit conviction of the Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice. As a social policy research centre grounded in the Catholic Social tradition, we are engaged in academic theology both in terms of research and teaching. But such engagements are directed towards the aim of strengthening our work within wider society by drawing on the rigor of the university.

When I feel the risk of getting lost in definitional clarity, I remind myself that the demarcation of theological reflection into all of these different sub-disciplines – systematic, historic, moral, etc. – is a historical consequence of the emergence of the modern university.⁷ Such demarcations are not essential to the activity to which we are called. While specialization is useful, perhaps it is also true that specialization is for insects.⁸

But we can begin this essay by situating it in relation to other lines of inquiry available to the theologian. As a task, it sits under the broad heading of Moral Theology/Christian Ethics. It is closely positioned to Public Theology, Practical Theology, and Political Theology. But it has its own distinctive task which warrants its own space.

Public Theology takes on the task of dialogue in the civic space, often assuming a fundamentally apologetic stance, as it seeks to articulate Christian belief and practice to an increasingly secularised wider society. Practical Theology invariably involves appropriating social scientific methods to reflect on and interpret the practice of the faith.⁹ Political Theology concerns itself with the exercise of power, and the systems and structures of governance in society from a theological perspective. As William Cavanaugh and Peter

“

Many theologies are satisfied to point to a horizon for our moral imagination. Social theology aims to map the journey towards it.

Scott frame it, it involves “the analysis of political arrangements... from the perspective of differing interpretations of God’s ways with the world.”¹⁰

Like Public Theology, Social Theology is pressed into dialogue with those outside the church. Like Practical Theology, Social Theology draws deeply on the wisdom of the social sciences. And like Political Theology, it is concerned with how authority is established and expressed in society. But what marks it out as distinctive is its specific concern with how these different dynamics result in public policy.¹¹ Many theologies are satisfied to point to a horizon for our moral imagination. Social theology aims to map the journey towards it.¹² Necessarily it blurs the distinction that some might want to insist on between describing a reality and agitating for it – theological appeals to the moral imagination are worse than hollow if they don’t actually seek to enact some kind of justice in the world. Social Theology inherently transgresses the disciplinary boundaries of modern knowledge because it compels the theologian to place ancient arguments into dialogue with contemporary problems.

7 Johannes Zachhuber, ‘Schleiermacher and the University of Berlin’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Friedrich Schleiermacher*, ed. Andrew C. Dole et al. (Oxford University Press, 2023).

8 The protagonist of Robert Heinlein’s famous novel, *Time Enough for Love*, Lazarus Long, keeps a notebook full of aphorisms and reflections which includes the following: ‘A human being should be able to change a diaper, plan an invasion, butcher a hog, coon a ship, design a building, write a sonnet, balance accounts, build a wall, set a bone, comfort the dying, take orders, give orders, cooperate, act alone, solve equations, analyze a new problem, pitch manure, program a computer, cook a tasty meal, fight efficiently, die gallantly.’ He concludes: ‘Specialization is for insects.’ Robert A. Heinlein, *Time Enough for Love* (Berkley, 2001), 348.

9 As one influential definition puts it: ‘Practical Theology is critical, theological reflection on the practices of the Church as they interact with the practices of the world, with a view to ensuring and enabling faithful participation in God’s redemptive practices in, to and for the world.’ John Swinton and Harriet Mowatt, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research Methods* (SCM Press, 2016), 6.

10 William T. Cavanaugh and Peter Scott, ‘Introduction’, in *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, ed. William T. Cavanaugh and Peter Scott (Wiley-Blackwell, 2006), 1.

11 It may be helpful to think of the work of the Anglo-Irish barrister and theologian, David McIlroy. His research interrogates the basis of law from a theological perspective. Yet while McIlroy himself, as a leading lawyer, is deeply familiar with how particular laws are enacted (especially in the financial realm), his work is concerned with a higher level of interrogation. His rich work is a theology of law, which leaves space for theologians of policy to intervene. Consider: David McIlroy, *A Biblical View of Law and Justice* (Authentic, 2004); David McIlroy, *A Trinitarian Theology of Law* (Wipf and Stock, 2009); David McIlroy, *The End of Law: How Law’s Claims Relate to Law’s Aims* (Edward Elgar, 2019).

12 While Social Theology should be read as an ecumenical endeavour, it may take on different forms in different traditions. One might consider the similarities and differences with the Orthodox conceptualisation of ‘social ethos’: David Bentley Hart and John Chryssavgis, eds, *For the Life of the World: Toward a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church* (Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2020) In the specific case of the Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice, the form it takes is shaped by Catholic Social teaching.

BEYOND THE GREAT SILENCE

To do Theology – to be a Christian at all – in Ireland today is to live under the shadow of the conduct of the churches over the last century. If all our failings were written down, I suppose the whole world could not contain the books that would be written. There are many fine pieces of meticulous scholarly research (along with many more popular treatments) which seek to remember and account for these abuses.¹³ But perhaps, considering the scale of the travesty, the artist reaches farther than the academic.

In her novella, *Small Things Like These*, Claire Keegan is unflinching in her condemnation of Irish institutional religion. But she is also surgical in exposing how, rather than this being imposed on the people, it was something that – in a complicated way – was enabled by many citizens who actively subdued their consciences to passively comply with the social structures of authority.¹⁴ The local business owner, Mrs Kehoe, grants to the hero of the piece, Bill Furlong, that the nuns are dangerous but advises him to “Keep the enemy close, the bad dog with you and the good dog will not bite. You know yourself.” Keegan has Furlong “stand back then” and suggest: “Surely they’ve only as much power as we give them, Mrs Kehoe?”¹⁵

Working within the churches today involves a strange, dual-citizenship. We are heirs to a history of institutional violence that largely predates our birth but which – rightfully – lingers. In the same breath we can say that we were drawn into this church because we caught a glimpse of the Kingdom Jesus inaugurated and find it irresistible. While we cannot forget the harms inflicted by people who were meant to be ambassadors for the Prince of Peace, we also have received from dozens of generations before us a wisdom about the intrinsic value of every human being,¹⁶ the responsibility to care

for creation,¹⁷ and the fact that the riches of this world are abundant and not scarce.¹⁸

In this difficult situation, Social Theology occupies a sensitive space. The church is a social proposition. The Second Vatican Council threw open the windows of that church to the world.¹⁹ And yet any social intervention made here, now, in Ireland faces a legitimate credibility burden. The moral authority of the church has been bankrupted by the excesses of ecclesial institutions that abused the privileged place they held in society. How can anyone even dream of speaking a “Christian” voice into the public square?²⁰

One appropriate response to this would be silence. There is a deep, almost gravitational pull towards a self-imposed, penitential muteness. One could argue that the most faithful act an Irish Christian could perform today, in the darkness of these shadows, is to simply leave the public square. The sectarian, quietist impulse is always attractive. And there is a sense in which – even without the excavations of Irish ecclesial scandals – it is in keeping with the spirit of Jesus.²¹

But while this approach may be coherent for some branches of the Christian tree,²² the Catholic tradition in its fullness cannot navigate this path. “The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people of this age” beckon Catholics out from amongst themselves and into the world.²³ Even if there was a desire to retreat into the holy huddle that marks the sect, the church is summoned into being as leaven, and it cannot perform its function if it is kept on the shelf, safe within a sealed jar.²⁴ Or, to frame it in the way that Pope

13 For example: Marie Keenan, *Child Sexual Abuse and the Catholic Church: Gender, Power, and Organizational Culture* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

14 As Derek Scally has suggested, Irish society still has considerable intellectual and moral work to do – he proposes we borrow the German concept of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* – in processing the trauma inflicted on a vast number of women, children, and other vulnerable people at the hands of ecclesial institutions. *The Best Catholics in the World*, especially 285–302.

15 Claire Keegan, *Small Things Like These* (Faber and Faber, 2021), 94–95.

16 Psalm 8.

17 Numbers 35:34.

18 Psalm 24.

19 Pope Paul VI, *Gaudium et Spes* (Vatican, 1965), §26.

20 This is before we even consider the growing spread of ‘Christian nationalist’ influence: Naomi Klein and Astra Taylor, ‘The Rise of End Times Fascism’, *US News, The Guardian* (London), 13 April 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/ng-interactive/2025/apr/13/end-times-fascism-far-right-trump-musk>.

21 Consider, for example: Eberhard Arnold, *Selected Writings* (Plough Books, 1999).

22 Bruderhof Communities, ‘Learn about a 100-Year-Old Christian Community’, Bruderhof, Bruderhof Communities, 2026, <https://www.bruderhof.com>.

23 Pope Paul VI, *Gaudium et Spes*, §1.

24 This applies particularly to the laity. Consider: Pope Paul VI, *Lumen Gentium* (Vatican, 1964), §31. Though, as Pope Francis emphasised, the ordained should “smell like the sheep” which implies, again, going out amongst the people in the public square (Chrism Mass on Holy Thursday, March 28, 2013).

If the theology of the 20th century church can be characterised as being about control, Social Theology fit for the 21st century must seek to be a theology of contribution.

Francis made famous, the church needs “the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful; it needs nearness, proximity. I see the church as a field hospital after battle. ... Heal the wounds, heal the wounds. And you have to start from the ground up.”²⁵

It is exactly in this sensitive space that Social Theology can be critically important. If the theology of the 20th century church can be characterised as being about control, Social Theology fit for the 21st century must seek to be a theology of contribution.²⁶ Concerned as it is with the detail of how law is enacted in policy, Social Theology starts from the *ground up* with concrete realities, confronting the real limitations that face a society in its quest for justice.

But Social Theology also starts from the *ground up* of ecclesial reality. At this point in Irish history, the church has no right to set itself up as a moral authority. Such a path will be seed thrown on rocky ground (Matthew 13:5-6). But the Christians who make up the church – as a movement more than an institution – are formed (can be formed?) by a rich vision of the common good and a theory of politics that goes beyond technocratic expertise²⁷ or libertarian autonomy.²⁸ Whatever contribution that the Social Theologian makes to policy discourse, shaped as it is by the rhetoric of evidence-based approaches,²⁹ does not rest simply on

their own competence or creativity. Rather, it is shaped by the logic and witness of Christian tradition and practice.³⁰ Social theology is a contemporary expression of what it means to bear witness to the Christian conviction, most powerfully captured by Augustine, that politics is a negotiation about the loves we share in common.³¹ It has the capacity to furnish the church with words to speak – faithful to the apostolic deposit but coherent to our neighbours – with a humility appropriate for the legacy of abuse that we also inherit and cannot discard.



Christianity must start from the ground up
(Credit: Kyril, Unsplash).

25 Antonio Spadaro S.J., 'A Big Heart Open to God: An Interview with Pope Francis', *America Magazine* (New York, NY), 30 September 2013, <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2013/09/30/big-heart-open-god-interview-pope-francis/>.

26 Although, it should not be overlooked that Irish theology in the 20th century was widely regarded - even by its finest exemplars - to be (at best) an intellectually thin tradition. We cannot discount in advance that this marginalisation of the critical faculties available to the church offered by well-resourced and formed theologians is somehow a factor in the abuse scandals. Consider, for example: Enda McDonagh, *Faith in Fragments* (Columba, 1996), 65.

27 Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'* (Vatican, 2015), §106-14.

28 Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti* (Vatican, 2020), §168.

29 Frances Ruane, 'Research Evidence and Policymaking in Ireland', *Administration* (Dublin) 73, no. 3 (2025): 127-47.

30 'We call this new creation, church. It is constituted by word and sacrament as the story we tell, the story we embody, must not only be told but enacted. In the telling we are challenged to be a people capable of hearing God's good news such that we can be a witness to others.' Stanley Hauerwas, 'The Church as God's New Language', in *Christian Existence Today* (Brazos, 2001), 53.

31 Augustine of Hippo, *City of God* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 19.24 (p. 960).

HOW SOCIAL THEOLOGY WORKS

Ireland has rapidly moved from a society permeated by public religion to one where religion is consistently downplayed.³² This transition is not the only significant change marking Irish society over the last generation. The travails of the end of the Celtic Tiger notwithstanding, the country has experienced a dramatic rise in material prosperity³³ (though not without dramatic gaps in the social fabric).³⁴ Sustained migration flows have also had a transformative impact.³⁵ Claire Keegan might struggle to write a sequel to *Small Things Like These* set in today's socially and religiously diverse New Ross.

Without falling into naïve boosterism, there are many ways in which life in Ireland is good and/or improving. And while the place of Christianity has changed, it might be a much healthier place for the church to be.³⁶ But there are drawbacks to the emerging religious settlement around what a post-Catholic Ireland should look like. There is a real danger that the same hyper-individualism that marks the wider society would form (and de-form) religious culture. Christian faith, individualised, runs the risk of being socialised by a populism that serves sectoral interests, rather than by the concern for the common that serves all.³⁷

The tensions within our communities have surfaced in different ways, ranging from the Agricultural Blockades we saw earlier this year to the riots that engulfed Dublin's north inner-city in November 2023. In differing ways, it is not straightforward to interpret the meaning of these protests but they both testify to a

disconnect between “the government” and “the people”. Laws may be drafted and policy enacted in an evidence-based fashion, but a democratic deficit can be observed in how those initiatives are received.

The riots were ignited by (erroneous) rumours about a violent attack by an asylum seeker. The blockades erupted over the price of fuel but prominently featured a truck fitted out to look like a hearse, carrying the “coffin of Ireland” and members of the protest were directly implicated in a racist attack on the Muslim Sisters of Éire as they sought to feed hungry people on the streets of the capital.³⁸ We can imagine a Pastoral Theological response that aims to equip parishes to address these tensions on a local level. We can imagine a Political Theological response that excavates how these populist nationalist movements are often integrated within a global movement of influence and finance. But the Social Theological response attends to the concrete policy arrangements that frame these movements.

SOCIAL THEOLOGY IN OPERATION

When the Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice engages in environmental policy research, it does so from the “integral ecology” position articulated by Pope Francis in *Laudato Si'* which asserts that questions of environmental justice and social justice are not distinct, but are two sides of the same coin.³⁹ Thus, we are in a position to robustly articulate how Irish policy responses to the fuel crisis exhibit the State's captive imagination – it simply cannot conceive of a world beyond diesel and so were caught flat-footed when the protestors acted so decisively.⁴⁰ On questions as pressing as energy poverty, we need the wisdom of economists and engineers but theology offers this sharp concern for the lived experience of the person forced to choose between heat and light, between being cold or being hungry. Making that argument in terms

32 It can be construed in a flat, ‘culture war’ fashion, but the absence of the historic figure of St Patrick from the celebration of the national holiday is a worthwhile example, in a large part because the official State seems unaware of how groundbreakingly liberatory his writings are. Kevin Hargaden, ‘Thousands of Tourists Flock to Ireland for St. Patrick's Day. But One Figure Is Missing: St. Patrick.’, *America Magazine* (New York, NY), 12 March 2025, <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2025/03/12/ireland-saint-patrick-day-tradition-250145/>.

33 Kathleen Lynch et al., *Austerity and Recovery in Ireland*, ed. William K. Roche et al. (Oxford University Press, 2017), 252–71.

34 Keith Adams et al., ‘Tenant State of Mind: How Cost Rental Public Housing Can Reverse the State's Transformation Into a Tenant’, Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice, 2022, <https://www.jcfj.ie/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Tenant-State-of-Mind-Web-1.pdf>.

35 Bryan Fanning, *Diverse Republic* (University College Dublin Press, 2021).

36 Kevin Hargaden and Ciara Murphy, *Parish as Oasis: An Introduction to Practical Environmental Care* (Messenger, 2022), 11–20.

37 Kevin Hargaden, ‘The Faith That Does Justice in Partnership: Creative Fidelity in Company’, *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* (Dublin) 115, no. 457 (2026): 37–47.

38 Muslim Sisters of Éire, ‘April 10th Update’, Facebook, *Muslim Sisters of Éire*, 10 April 2026, <https://www.facebook.com/muslimsisterofeire/posts/pfbid032ZJQ1595jbpA9sVQZWfU3Ry8ZAozVUn9LQw3xxocAJBqZfxrQSWSm3mSsY4pLg6l>.

39 Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, §139.

40 Kevin Hargaden and Ciara Murphy, ‘Secondary Victims: Exploring Collateral Poverty and the Iranian Energy Shock’, *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* (Dublin) 115, no. 458 (2026), 200–207.

coherent within the policy arena is a significant contribution.

We can see how Social Theology works even more clearly when we consider the much more explicit questions of social integration prompted by the Dublin riots.⁴¹ There we witnessed overt racism in a most destructive mode.⁴² And when we attended to the policy environment in which the riot was unleashed, we found a worrying oversight that ran through the State's response. While much effort and considerable funding has been invested in the area through the "NEIC" body, there has been practically no recognition that the diversity present in the north-east inner-city of Dublin has a religious dimension.⁴³ Utilising social scientific research methods, the Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice engaged in a six month-long research project mapping and documenting the ways in which faith-based communities help to maintain and expand the social fabric of this neighbourhood.⁴⁴

The resulting report received extensive coverage in the national⁴⁵ and local media⁴⁶ and, more importantly, its impact was felt within Dublin City Council. The recommendations spanned a range of domains, from the potential of faith-based communities to strengthen public health initiatives, to the need for theological faculties to provide continuing professional development options for politicians, public servants, and civil servants around religious literacy. But the overarching argument demonstrates that theological concepts – human dignity, common good, solidarity – have direct salience to contemporary social questions.

41 Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice, 'The Voices of the North-East Inner-City', in *Working Notes*, vol. 95 (JCFJ, 2024).

42 Sofia Clifford Riordan and Noel Wardick, 'Reading the City Centre Riots: Thoughts, Feelings and Reactions of the Dublin City Community Co-Op', *Working Notes* (Dublin) 38, no. 95 (2024): 5–14.

43 Keith Adams et al., *Faith in the North-East Inner-City: How Faith-Based Communities Help Dublin to Flourish* (Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice, 2025), 54, <https://www.jcfj.ie/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/Faith-in-the-North-East-Inner-City.pdf>.

44 Adams et al., *Faith in the North-East Inner-City: How Faith-Based Communities Help Dublin to Flourish*.

45 Breda O'Brien, 'Amid the Tricolours of Dublin's Inner City, 50 Faith Communities Are Doing Vital Work', *The Irish Times* (Dublin), 9 November 2026, <https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/2025/11/09/breda-obrien-not-far-from-the-tricolours-of-dublins-inner-city-50-faith-communities-are-doing-vital-work/>.

46 Eoin Glackin, 'Look to the Many Faith-Based Groups to Boost Integration in Inner-City, a New Report Advises Council', *Dublin Inquirer* (Dublin), 23 October 2025, <https://www.dublininquirer.com/look-to-the-many-faith-based-groups-to-boost-integration-in-inner-city-a-new-report-advises-council/>.

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One might consider the *Faith in the North-East Inner-City* report as a proof of concept in the contemporary Irish context.

One might consider the *Faith in the North-East Inner-City* report as a proof of concept in the contemporary Irish context. There are various places where Irish democracy seems to be under stress, and they tend to coalesce around the ways – to varying degrees – people feel threatened by the increase in diversity. Moralistic interventions about how people *should* feel will not achieve much.⁴⁷ Avoiding the issue will make things worse.⁴⁸ The “moral monopoly” of the 20th century has been replaced with a kind of administrative neutrality. There are gains to this, obviously. But there are gaps too. It can feel at times as if those at the different levels of our society cannot begin to understand each other.⁴⁹ Our approach was to identify and then describe the mediating institutions that can bridge that gap. The deployment of spatial data and qualitative research was directed by and towards a theological end: social integration is a good but it is impossible if the State disregards the very communities that provide people with a sense of home. By making the invisible social capital of faith communities visible to the administrative state, Social Theology performs a valuable function. It says something that couldn't be said another way. And it does so with the humility appropriate to ecclesial speech in Ireland.

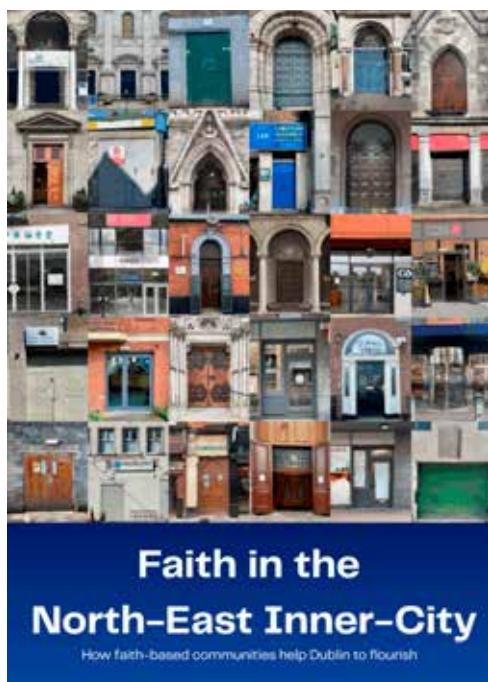
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By making the invisible social capital of faith communities visible to the administrative state, Social Theology performs a valuable function.

47 Kevin Hargaden, 'Interrogating Irish Racism', *Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice in Ireland*, 25 August 2020, <https://www.jcfj.ie/2020/08/25/interrogating-irish-racism/>.

48 Jackie Fox and Sandra Hurley, 'Security Review of All IPAS Centres after Arson Attack', *News, RTE News* (Dublin), 2 November 2025, <https://www.rte.ie/news/ireland/2025/11/02/1541711-drogheda-ipas-centre/>.

49 Tom Inglis, *Moral Monopoly* (University College Dublin Press, 1998).



The report can be considered as a proof of concept in the contemporary Irish context.

CONCLUSION: TOWARDS A POST-SECULAR CONTEXT

If a decade of work as a Social Theologian has taught me anything, it is that the ambiguity of the title is to be welcomed. Theology can appear today to be a relatively obscure activity. But if it has been marginalised, then that means it now enjoys great freedom to cross boundaries and engage in dialogue with other disciplines.⁵⁰ Through its ecclesial dimension, it should always have been roaming outside the boundaries of the university. Social Theology is thus a fully coherent way of practicing *faith seeking understanding*.⁵¹

The argument so far expounded in this essay assumes that we are living in a post-Catholic Ireland. But the findings of our research into the faith-based communities of Dublin's north-east inner-city emphasise how what

we need to craft is a post-secular Ireland.⁵² This would be a context where the Irish Catholic church remains distant from the seats of privilege it was afforded in the 20th century. But it would also be a context where the contribution of the Catholic church – and the Pentecostal congregations and the Muslim masjids and the mindfulness centres approaching spirituality through a syncretistic yoga – would not be discounted because they are classified as “religious”. In the post-secular context, the “church’s voice” is not a command but a contribution. It ought to listen before it speaks and keep sufficient distance to be able to offer prophetic critique when needed.

Social Theology, then, is a discipline that maps a path to justice that can actually be inhabited. It is a task that acknowledges the destruction embedded in our own history, without giving up on the hope of flourishing.

The task of the Social Theologian is not to be the *translator* who renders the Christian message coherent to calculation by the social sciences and the secular realm but rather to bear witness to the enduring truth of the Gospel – remaining attentive to the rigorous work of colleagues in the social sciences and supportive of those neighbours wrestling for justice through the blunt instrument of public policy. In the post-secular horizon, we discover that the most pressing theological task is often the patient, unglamorous work of ensuring that the dignity of the person is embedded in the very architecture of our communal life. Ultimately, Social Theology suggests that our love for our neighbour is only as real as the structures we are willing to build – and maintain – in conjunction with them.

⁵⁰ I am deeply influenced here by the example of the German theologian, Hans Ulrich, who confidently and yet humbly engaged in a decades-long dialogue with the Geneticists and Biologists at Erlangen University. In conversation with Hans, he gave me the impression that this was so successful not because Theology is so important, but exactly because it is not. Its academic obscurity is a form of (intellectual and institutional) liberation. Hans G. Ulrich, *Transfigured Not Conformed: Christian Ethics in a Hermeneutic Key*, ed. Brian Brock (T&T Clark, 2022), 206–29.

⁵¹ To cite the classic definition of Theology that we draw from the work of St Anselm: M. J. Charlesworth, trans., *St Anselm's Proslogion* (Clarendon Press, 1965), 104, 105.

⁵² While the first port of call for thinking about post-secularity may be Habermas, we suspect that something more like the grounded approach from the theologian, Luke Bretherton, offers a better prospect: Jurgen Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion: Philosophical Essays* (Polity Press, 2008); Luke Bretherton, *Christ and the Common Life* (Eerdmans, 2019).

Minimising Prison's Excesses

A Manifesto for the Irish Penal System

Keith Adams

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A PRISON MANIFESTO WITHOUT THE PRISONER

Charged with writing a manifesto for penal policy in Ireland, I mulled for a long time over how to structure such a document, or even where the emphases would lie. I couldn't escape the nagging thought of whether such a document needs to even include the incarcerated men and women in our prison system. Would it concern the problem of the prisoner or the problem of the prison?¹

To focus on the prisoner and the need for an expansion of in-prison mental health supports, addiction services, education, or re-integrative services is to miss the problem of the prison, and tacitly shape the recommendations based on a deficit-focused understanding of the prisoner. This is not to devalue the provision of high-quality and needs-focused services in prisons. On the contrary, they are vital, but they mainly respond to day-to-day needs. Advocating for them belongs in a policy paper seeking incremental change. A manifesto is something different. This should be a document that pushes beyond the question of what could be possible now and, conscious of other perspectives,² sets an ambitious course for the future. With this in mind, this manifesto will focus entirely on the prison, and not the prisoner.

Penal policy, or the structures of all the various ways we administer punishment, is much too broad of an endeavour to cover fully in a short manifesto. Fines, probation, community service which includes unpaid work, curfews, compensation to the victim – these are a few of the suite of legal institutional punishments available. Others, such as electronic monitoring, are currently being tendered for

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Prison has lost its status of being “exceptional” by becoming the norm

and will undoubtedly become available soon.³ Yet, two interrelated views are important here. Firstly, the prison in Ireland is our reference punishment, as all other sanctions are compared to imprisonment and judged as either more lenient or severe against that measure. Prison has lost its status of being “exceptional” by becoming the norm, and the standard form of punishment which criminal law is based on. Secondly, if we first place limits on the prison,⁴ and take it off the low shelf where it can be easily reached, the way is opened for creativity and more just solutions when dealing with social conflict.



Credit: iStock

- 1 Keith Adams and Louise Brangan, 'How I[reland] Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Prison', *Working Notes* 35, no. 89 (2021): 31; Louise Brangan, 'Pastoral Penalty in 1970s Ireland: Addressing the Pains of Imprisonment', *Theoretical Criminology* 25, no. 1 (2021): 1.
- 2 Radical reductionist responses to the problem of the prison can be found within political, ethical, sociological, philosophical and theological traditions. See David Scott, ed., *Abolitionist Voices* (Bristol University Press, 2025). For rich examples in the Christian tradition, see Hannah Bowman, *Abolition Ecclesiology: A Spatial Theology for a Church Against Prisons* (Fortress Press, 2026); Amy Levad, *Redeeming a Prison Society: A Liturgical and Sacramental Response to Mass Incarceration* (Fortress Publishers, 2014); Andrew Millie, *Criminology and Public Theology* (Bristol University Press, 2021); Kathryn Getek Soltis and Katie Walker Grimes, 'Order, Reform, and Abolition: Changes in Catholic Theological Imagination on Prisons and Punishment', *Theological Studies* 82, no. 1 (2021).

- 3 When the initial tender for a 12-month pilot received no compliant responses, the tender was re-advertised in March 2026 after changes to the technical specifications. See Darragh McDonagh, 'Plans for Electronic Tagging of Criminal Offenders Delayed after Tender Attracts No Bids', *Crime and Law, The Irish Times*, 6 March 2026, <https://www.irishtimes.com/crime-law/2026/03/06/plans-for-electronic-tagging-of-criminal-offenders-delayed-after-tender-attracts-no-bids/>.
- 4 Limiting the usage of prison should not be interpreted as an open invitation to increase the range of non-custodial sanctions as this expansion does not solve the issue of individual characteristics—social class, race, gender, precariousness, disability, previous victimisation, etc.—which often govern who we, as a society, end up punishing.



We have failed to notice our imaginations have become emaciated over time, resulting in more prison being the only solution for societal failures. If all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail.

The steps laid out in this manifesto present a pathway towards a minimalist use of the prison in Ireland. A penal minimalist approach is the correct response to the period of penal excess⁵ currently being experienced in Ireland. I can't claim it would lead to an ethos or praxis that is grounded in human dignity. Prisons are, by their design and social organisation, places of an "institutionally-structured violent context."⁶ But it would mean prisons and prison staff would be accountable for their actions and decisions. These steps won't solve everything, but they will take seriously the problem of the prison. While the manifesto does not discuss the prisoner, their experiences—cell-sharing, sleeping on floors,⁷ warehousing, and hygiene conditions⁸—are implicitly recognised as they are situated within this over-incarceration crisis.

I will outline four steps to limit the prison in Irish society: the creation of independent investigations; ending prison expansion; a maximum cap on prison spaces; and the closing of female prisons. Independent investigations are vital to know the prison; ending prison expansion and a maximum cap on population contain the prison; and closing women's prisons will begin the process of eliminating the prison. I don't believe any of this is overly

radical or ground-breaking. Every part is easily defensible, but we have failed to notice our imaginations have become emaciated over time, resulting in *more prison* being the only solution for societal failures. If all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail.⁹

INDEPENDENT INVESTIGATIONS

Institutions require oversight, especially institutions where people are deprived of their liberty. Much of the shift in prison oversight in Ireland, and at an international level, has been towards a focus on preventive monitoring. The attraction of this approach is self-evident at an intuitive level, but it can lead to deficits in the need for robust reactive monitoring through independent investigations, especially into deaths in custody or staff malpractice.

This domestic shift to identify environments, practices, and protocols which are liable to cause harm will likely culminate in the eventual creation of a National Preventive Mechanism (NPM),¹⁰ if the United Nations Optional Protocol of the Convention Against Torture is fully ratified. With the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission as the coordinating NPM,¹¹ the entire network will have preventative oversight of all places of detention, not only prisons.¹² Demonstrating the Irish State's longstanding indifference to prison oversight and accountability, Ireland is the last country of the Council of Europe without a NPM, due to an ongoing 18-year

5 In its simplest terms, David Hayes describes "penal excess" as an excessive use of the penal system but he also helpfully maps out what this overreliance looks like in practice: an excessive overall size, and a disproportionately uneven shape. In the former, he is describing the interference of liberty and autonomy for members of the polity, while the latter describes the extent to which certain cohorts of society are most regularly subjected to the State's coercive control. For a finely written exploration, see David Hayes, *Confronting Penal Excess: Retribution and the Politics of Penal Minimalism* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019), 32.

6 David Scott, *For Abolition: Essays on Prisons and Socialist Ethics* (Waterside Press, 2020), 53.

7 Colm Keena, 'Irish Prison Conditions among the Worst "Anywhere"', *The Irish Times*, 13 January 2026, <https://www.irishtimes.com/crime-law/2026/01/13/irish-prison-conditions-amongst-the-worst-anywhere-chief-inspector-tells-politicians/>.

8 Keith Adams, 'Consuming Injustice: Food and Irish Prisons', *Working Notes: Facts and Analysis of Social and Economic Issues* (Dublin) 39, no. 99 (2025): 13–20.

9 Stanley Cohen, 'The Critical Discourse on "Social Control": Notes on the Concept as a Hammer', *International Journal of the Sociology of Law* 17, no. 3 (1989): 347–57.

10 A National Preventive Mechanism is a body, or a group of bodies, which monitor at a national level the treatment of and conditions for people deprived of their liberty. For a detailed background to NPMs, see Irish Penal Reform Trust, 'The Ratification of the Optional Protocol (OP-CAT) to the UN Convention Against Torture (UN CAT) and the Establishment of a National Preventive Mechanism in Ireland', Discussion Paper, January 2017, https://www.iprt.ie/site/assets/files/6402/iprt_discussion_paper_on_npm_proposals_jan2017_docx.pdf.

11 Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, 'Commission Proposed as Coordinating National Preventative Mechanism', Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, 8 November 2022, <https://www.ihrec.ie/news-press/commission-proposed-as-coordinating-national-preventative-mechanism-under-inspection-of-places-of-detention-bill>.

12 The General Scheme of Inspection of Places of Detention Bill proposes expanding the role and remit of the Office of Inspector of Prisons, renaming it as the Inspectorate of Places of Detention, led by a newly established Office of Chief Inspector. Under the proposed legislation, this new office will become the designated NPM for the Justice Sector and will be responsible for the inspection of four places of detention. See Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, 'Draft General Scheme - Inspection of Places of Detention', June 2022, sect. 4, <https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/draft-general-scheme-inspection-of-places-of-detention-bill-june-2022.pdf>.

delay to fully ratify the Optional Protocol.¹³ Despite Joint Committee on Justice scrutiny of the General Scheme of the inspection of Places of Detention Bill back in 2022,¹⁴ the drafted Bill is still not on the business schedule of the Oireachtas.¹⁵

At present, there is no independent oversight of prisons in Ireland. Independence of this type of function requires a number of different components, chief of which is the ability to publish inspection, investigation, and death in custody reports in a full and timely manner. With the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration having legislative grounding to redact key sections¹⁶ and hold investigative reports indefinitely,¹⁷ until either sufficient time has passed or fleeting public pressure builds, the publication or non-publication of reports depends on political priorities. This is a simulacrum of prison oversight but is not independent.

Beyond preventive monitoring, reactive monitoring through independent investigations remains crucial. These uncover systemic and cultural failures which remain invisible otherwise, particularly with deaths in custody. Deaths in our prisons are increasing, some because of a larger and older population, but others as a result of malpractice and



The state redacts key sections of death in custody reports (Credit: iStock)

disregard.¹⁸ While inspections may unveil issues which require change, deaths reveal systemic failures and unveil wider prison culture and practice in a way that an inspection report cannot. For example, an inspection report is unlikely to reveal the falsification of records and observation logbooks while a death in custody investigation will zero-in on this practice in the hours before or after a death.¹⁹ Deaths in custodies show in the most tragic way possible where prison policy, practice and culture fail, and should be treated as such.

Investigations of deaths in prison are spread across three institutions charged with different foci.²⁰ The Office of Inspector of Prisons may identify an issue but only in relation to its alignment with human rights standards.

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Deaths in our prisons are increasing, some because of a larger and older population, but others as a result of malpractice and disregard.

13 Ireland signed the Optional Protocol to the UN Convention Against Torture in October 2007 but full ratification has not been possible due to the failure to set up an independent National Preventive Mechanism. See Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, 'Minister for Justice Publishes General Scheme of the Inspection of Places of Detention Bill', gov.ie, 24 June 2022, <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-justice-home-affairs-and-migration/press-releases/minister-for-justice-publishes-general-scheme-of-the-inspection-of-places-of-detention-bill/>.

14 Joint Committee on Justice debate - Tuesday, 18 Oct 2022, 'General Scheme of the Inspection of Places of Detention Bill 2022: Discussion', text, Houses of the Oireachtas, 18 October 2022.

15 For a full list of current Bills before the Oireachtas, see Houses of the Oireachtas, 'Dáil Business Daily Schedule', Houses of the Oireachtas, accessed 28 April 2026, <https://dailbusiness.oir.ie/>. As of November 2025, the General Scheme of the Places of Detention Bill was still being drafted by the Department with the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel. See Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, 'Prison Service – Thursday, 27 Nov 2025 – Parliamentary Questions (34th Dáil)', Houses of the Oireachtas, 27 November 2025.

16 Section 31(4) of the Prisons Act 2007 permits the Minister of Justice to "omit any matter from any report so laid or published" on grounds of prison security, State security, contrary to the public interest, or infringement of the constitutional rights of any person. For the full section, see Government of Ireland, 'Prisons Act 2007', Office of the Attorney General, sect. 31(4), <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2007/act/10/section/31/enacted/en/html#sec31>.

17 There are currently two unpublished investigative reports by the Office of the Inspector of Prisons, in relation to Mountjoy Women's prison, submitted in February 2022 and July 2022 respectively. Both investigations were conducted under Section 31(2) of the Prisons Act but remain unpublished after four years. See Minister for Justice, 'Prison Service – Wednesday, 3 Jul 2024 – Parliamentary Questions (33rd Dáil)', Houses of the Oireachtas, 3 July 2024.

18 Under Article 2 of the European Convention of Human Rights, which guarantees the rights to life, there is an obligation to provide an effective system for the investigation of deaths in custody. See 'European Convention on Human Rights', Council of Europe, 4 November 1950, art. 2, https://www.echr.coe.int/documents/convention_eng.pdf.

19 Muiris O'Cearbhaill, 'Unreasonable Force by Prison Officers and Falsified Records at Cloverhill Prison, Report Finds', *The Journal*, 24 July 2025, <https://www.thejournal.ie/cloverhill-prison-deaths-unreasonable-force-6771268-Jul2025/>; Sean McCarthaigh, 'Prisoner Found Dead in Cell within Two Days of Returning to Jail after Being on the Run', *Irish Independent*, 18 November 2021, <https://www.independent.ie/irish-news/prisoner-found-dead-in-cell-within-two-days-of-returning-to-jail-after-being-on-the-run/41065170.html>.

20 An Garda Síochána's investigation relates to alleged or suspected crimes associated with the death and they work on behalf of the Coroner, who then determines the cause of death and can make recommendations. See Office of the Inspector of Prisons, 'Death in Custody Information Booklet', Office of the Inspector of Prisons, n.d., 5–6, <https://www.oip.ie/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/DIC-Information-Booklet.pdf>.

In the death of Ivan Rosney in 2020, with the report belatedly published in a redacted form in 2026, the Inspector was able to raise the issues of a CCTV blindspot and injuries sustained during a control and restraint manoeuvre but nothing more concrete could be stated.²¹ An issue raised is not sufficient for the demands of justice. Deaths in prison investigations can't provide for accountability in the cases of malpractice and carelessness. Families – and the deceased – deserve much more.²²

This demonstrates the need for a splitting of preventive oversight and reactive investigations into two different statutory bodies, based on an understanding that each role requires a different expertise, theory of change, and mode of engaging with prison authorities. Preventive oversight and monitoring should remain with an expanded Inspectorate of Places of Detention, though serious concerns²³ remain about whether the General Scheme of the Inspection of Places of Detention Bill “afford the Office sufficient independence to comply with the provisions of the OPCAT,”²⁴ specifically in relation to “financial and functional separation from the Department of Justice.”²⁵ While the future legislation may allow the new Office to lay reports directly before the Oireachtas, allowing the Office to bypass Ministerial

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A fully independent statutory body, such as a Prison Ombudsman, is required urgently to investigate deaths in custody, publish these reports independently, and make binding recommendations.

intervention, a political naïveté may exist as there are other means to compromise independence and stymie statutory roles.

A fully independent statutory body, such as a Prison Ombudsman, is required urgently to investigate deaths in custody, publish these reports independently, and make binding recommendations. With the creation of such a body, the role of complaints investigation could also fall under its investigative ambit.²⁶ At present, all complaints are investigated by the Irish Prison Service, though the most serious Category A complaints are managed through external consultants.²⁷ While a new internal mechanism has again been long promised,²⁸ this addresses none of the key issues that arise from an institution investigating itself. Maybe an internal complaints mechanism can remain for Category C complaints and less serious, but Category A and B complaints²⁹ should be shifted to a thoroughly resourced

21 Office of the Inspector of Prisons, *Death in Custody Investigation Report: Mr. J. Cloverhill Prison, 28 September 2020* (Office of the Inspector of Prisons, 2026), 10–11, <https://www.oip.ie/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/Office-of-the-Inspector-of-Prisons-Death-in-Custody-Report-Mr-J-2020.pdf>.

22 Following the death of their nephew, Colm Connolly, in the Midlands Prison on 1st April 2026, his family are seeking legal advice to uncover the circumstances of his death. Colm died as he was being moved by prison officers from his shared cell to an observation cell. The family were not informed of Colm's death by the prison Governor, were unable to formally identify the body, and a post mortem was conducted without their knowledge. With more questions than answers, the family note that “[w]e are Colm's voice now and we have to do right by him,” and they “want an independent inquiry to investigate what happened to Colm, not prison authorities investigating each other.” For more details see Sarah Slater, ‘Family Seeks Independent Inquiry into Death of Nephew at Midlands Prison’, *The Irish Times*, 4 May 2026, <https://www.irishtimes.com/crime-law/2026/05/04/family-seeks-independent-inquiry-into-death-of-nephew-at-midlands-prison/>.

23 Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, ‘Commission Proposed as Coordinating National Preventative Mechanism...’.

24 Irish Penal Reform Trust, ‘IPRT Welcomes the Publication of the General Scheme of the Ins...’, Irish Penal Reform Trust, 1 June 2022, <https://www.iprt.ie/latest-news/iprt-welcomes-the-publication-of-the-inspection-of-places-of-detention-bill/>.

25 Irish Penal Reform Trust, ‘IPRT Welcomes the Publication of the General Scheme of the Ins...’, Section 6(2) of the General Scheme permits “[s]uch funds, premises, facilities, services and staff as may be necessary for the proper functioning of the Inspectorate of Places of Detention shall be provided to it by the Minister with the consent of the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform.” For more detail, see Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, ‘Draft General Scheme - Inspection of Places of Detention’.

26 The former Minister for Justice, Simon Harris T.D. noted that, following consultation with the Office of the Ombudsman, “it was agreed that under the revised complaints system, the role of the Ombudsman will become operational once the new complaints system has been established and has bedded down.” His successor, Helen McEntee T.D. clarified that draft amendments to the statutory instrument (S.I. No. 252/2007) undergirding the prisoner complaints system operated by the Irish Prison Service would “provide a role for the Ombudsman in the Prison Complaints system. See Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, ‘Prison Service – Wednesday, 15 Feb 2023 – Parliamentary Questions (33rd Dáil)’, Houses of the Oireachtas, 15 February 2023, <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2023-02-15/138>; Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, ‘Prison Service – Tuesday, 13 Jun 2023 – Parliamentary Questions (33rd Dáil)’, Houses of the Oireachtas, 13 June 2023, <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2023-06-13/900>.

27 Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, ‘Prison Service – Tuesday, 29 Jul 2025 – Parliamentary Questions (34th Dáil)’, Houses of the Oireachtas, 29 July 2025, <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2025-07-29/2102>.

28 The original timeline for the introduction of a revised prison complaints system by the Irish Prison Service was the third quarter of 2019. See Irish Penal Reform Trust, *Progress in the Penal System (PIPS): Assessing Progress during a Pandemic* (Dublin, 2020), 90.

29 Category A are complaints alleging assault or use of excessive force against a prisoner, or ill-treatment, racial abuse, discrimination, intimidation, threats or any other conduct against a prisoner of a nature and gravity likely to bring discredit on the Irish Prison Service. Category B are complaints of a serious nature, but not falling within any other category of complaint. Examples of Category B complaints could include verbal abuse of prisoners by staff, inappropriate searches or any other conduct against a prisoner of a nature likely to bring discredit to the Irish Prison Service. The latter are investigated by a Chief Officer.

Prison Ombudsman.³⁰ This would also provide an avenue for visitors and staff who witness behaviour or conduct they deem necessary to report to a fully independent body.

ENDING PRISON EXPANSION

We are told repeatedly that we are in a prison “overcrowding” crisis but overcrowding is a redundant description. In relation to a confined space where too many people are present by design, I am unsure what overcrowding describes that *crowding* does not achieve.³¹ Yet this phrasing is ubiquitous in Government communication on the state of our prisons, underlining the need for immediate action as something worse than crowding is happening. But there is more happening with the choice of wording too.

Like the use of the passive voice which omits the driver when reporting road deaths, particularly involving pedestrians and cyclists, “overcrowding” does similar obfuscating work for the Irish judiciary and Department of Justice. When overcrowding is used to describe the current situation in our prisons, it suggests an inevitability or a natural occurrence while hiding the over-use of the prison as a state-inflicted punishment of choice. Over-imprisonment offers more clarity with the same number of words, and a few more letters.

Using “overcrowding” as the central framing device of our prison system primes the minds of civil servants and Ministers which are entirely formed by elementary economics of supply and demand. It becomes hard to imagine that anything beyond more prisons and more prison capacity could be needed. This is evident in the current Government’s commitment to build an additional 1,600 prison spaces by 2031,³² at a

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There is always money for prisons in Ireland.

cost of €495 million.³³ Yet, such messaging and policy trajectory will further increase the use and length of prison as punishment by the judiciary as they will believe ample spaces are now being developed.

There is always money for prisons in Ireland. With any Government spending, the policy choice to spend half a billion euro on prisons is also a policy choice not to spend this tax revenue elsewhere. Holding this thought in our mind, two other things are undeniably true. There are much higher levels of mental ill-health, addiction, and homelessness among incarcerated men and women in Ireland than in the wider population. This is true the world over, when the criminal justice system is another component of a wider class conflict and the social control of the lumpenproletariat.³⁴ It is also true that community mental health services in Ireland are underfunded,³⁵ local addiction services are struggling with rapidly growing and complex community needs,³⁶ and the Housing First programme is on pause.³⁷

The reduction of policymaking to a crude “supply and demand” logic is not a bad thing necessarily, when applied to social services. If only it was applied with rigour and consistency, with our unrelenting levels of homelessness and rent rates being the key example, then some of our worst social problems would begin to be resolved. When this logic is applied to our prison system

30 In a 2022 Joint Committee on Justice hearing, Dr Ciara O’Connell, Senior Inspector with the Office of the Inspector of Prisons called for a prisons ombudsman to consider complaints. She further noted that, even after an external investigator reaches a determination, the governor still has the power to overturn the decision. In addition, the Inspector of Prisons, Mark Kelly, advised that “[p]rocessing complaints and inspection are two completely different functions, and it is not a good idea to coningle them.” See Joint Committee on Justice debate - Tuesday, 18 Oct 2022, ‘General Scheme of the Inspection of Places of Detention Bill 2022: Discussion’, Houses of the Oireachtas, 18 October 2022.

31 This was a very helpful distinction made by Prof. Sarah Armstrong, University of Glasgow, during a session at the 2026 Annual Conference of the British/Irish section of the European Group held in University College Cork.

32 Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, ‘Record €6.17 Billion for Justice Sector in Budget 2026’, gov.ie, 9 October 2025, <https://www.gov.ie/en/departments-of-justice-home-affairs-and-migration/news/record-6-17-billion-for-justice-sector-in-budget-2026/>.

33 Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, ‘Prison Service – Tuesday, 14 Apr 2026 – Parliamentary Questions (34th Dáil)’, Houses of the Oireachtas, 14 April 2026, <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2026-04-14/2081>.

34 Georg Rusche and Otto Kirchheimer, *Punishment and Social Structure* (Russell & Russell, 1939).

35 Mental Health Reform, *Pay the Bill: Pre-Budget Submission 2026* (Mental Health Reform, 2025), <https://mentalhealthreform.ie/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/PBS-2026-report.pdf>.

36 Orla Ryan, ‘The Changing Face of Addiction: “Some People Were First Using Drugs in Their 50s and 60s”’, *The Irish Times*, 2 March 2026, <https://www.irishtimes.com/ireland/social-affairs/2026/03/02/the-changing-face-of-addiction-some-people-were-first-using-drugs-in-their-50s-and-60s/>.

37 Laoise Neylon, ‘Dublin’s Housing First Programme Is on Pause, Raising Questions about Competitive Tendering for Social Care Services’, *Dublin Inquirer*, 18 July 2025, <https://www.dublininquirer.com/dublins-housing-first-programme-is-on-pause-raising-questions-about-competitive-tendering-for-social-care-services/>.



Flyers from the Irish Prison Abolition Network doorknocking campaign in Cork

at present, the over 600 men and women sleeping on the floor³⁸ are viewed simply as a “demand,” which requires a supply of more prison spaces to solve the issue, with no acknowledgement that this will lead to an induced demand.

What happens, however, if we flip the application of the logic and instead consider that the men and women, three or four to a one-person cell, are the “supply”, and the community development and support services are the “demand” element. To commit long-term and appropriate funding to the various community mental health and addiction services is to reduce the supply of people finding themselves in conflict with the criminal justice system. Would this half a billion being redirected to social policy interventions be sufficient? It is impossible to put a cost on decades of underinvestment and neglect of the communities which provide much of the “supply” to our prisons. Both the embedding of inequality and future spiralling costs should be anathema to our centre-right, fiscally prudent Government parties; rather the

perpetuation of both issues will occur. Yet, to not address the demand at community-level is to further exacerbate social inequality and structural injustice, while committing to additional hundreds of millions to the cost of our prison system annually.

MAXIMUM PRISON CAPACITY

Coupled with ending the expansion plan for prison currently underway, a legally binding cap on the prison population is required to complement this step for those men and women already incarcerated. At present, the prison population is tipped by experts to exceed 6,000 men and women before the end of the year.³⁹ Like our homelessness figures, new records are being set each month with no media attention. To highlight the degree of over-imprisonment, the Irish Prison Service now publish the number of people sleeping on the ground each night.

To arrest this continuing overuse of imprisonment, coupled with the compounding negative impact on prison conditions, there is a need to implement a “one person, one cell” policy. In the prison estate, there are 3,560 cells⁴⁰ which if legislated as a legally binding cap on our prison population, would lead to a reduction in existing prison numbers and a corresponding improvement in prison conditions.⁴¹ This would be achievable within a reasonable timeframe, as demonstrated by the use of structured temporary and early release during the Covid-19 response which brought prison numbers down to a more manageable level. Increasing the level of ordinary remission⁴² on sentences to a third and enhanced remission to a half, while also removing Executive decision-

39 Cormac O’Keeffe, ‘Prisoner Numbers on Course to Reach “unimaginable” Level’, Irish Examiner, 5 January 2026, <https://www.irishexaminer.com/news/courtandcrime/arid-41770376.html>.

40 Irish Prison Service, ‘Census Prison Population July 2025 – Cell Occupancy – In-Cell Sanitation’, Irish Prison Service, July 2025, <https://www.irishprisons.ie/wp-content/uploads/documents.pdf/JULY-2025-In-Cell.pdf>.

41 In July 2025, the latest available census of the Irish prison population, 3,634 people had to use a toilet in the presence of others, see Irish Prison Service, ‘Census Prison Population July 2025 – Cell Occupancy – In-Cell Sanitation.’ In addition, many prisoners have to eat meals in crowded cells adjacent to unscreened toilets, see Adams, ‘Consuming Injustice: Food and Irish Prisons’.

42 Currently, the Prison Rules allow for a standard remission of a quarter of the sentence, subject to compliance with certain criteria. There is also an enhanced remission of a third for prisoners who demonstrate engagement in authorised structured behaviour, but it is subject to Executive decision-making, involving sign-off by the Minister for Justice, and is infrequently granted. For more details, see ‘Temp Release & Remission’, Irish Legal Blog, accessed 29 April 2026, <https://legalblog.ie/temp-release-remission/>.

38 Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, ‘Prison Service – Thursday, 22 Jan 2026 – Parliamentary Questions (34th Dáil)’, Houses of the Oireachtas, 22 January 2026, <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2026-01-22/454?highlight%5B0%5D=prisons>.



There is a need to implement a “one person, one cell” policy.

making through Ministerial sign-off, would further speed up this decarceral approach.⁴³

In Oberstown Youth Detention Centre, Ireland already has an example of a maximum capacity in a place of detention,⁴⁴ where a suitable space must be available prior to a teenager being sentenced there.⁴⁵ This increased regulation could encourage the wider criminal justice system to seek alternative options, thus leaving prison as a legitimate place of last resort.⁴⁶ To simply seek the removal of short sentences of less than 18 or 24 months would inevitably lead to sentence inflation as no hard limit is provided. Rather, a legally binding cap on prison capacity insists on a parsimony in sentencing, where space must be retained at all times for the more serious cases before the Courts. A self-regulation of sentencing practice would be created where space would not be expended on the handing down of short sentences for shop-lifting and petty offences.⁴⁷ If implemented, the prison capacity would have a limit of 3,560 people, which is almost 2,300 less people than current prison population but only 150 less than the lowest prison population during the pandemic response by the Irish Prison Service.⁴⁸



*Irish prisons have surpassed maximum capacity
(Credit: Unsplash)*



In Oberstown Youth Detention Centre, Ireland already has an example of a maximum capacity in a place of detention, where a suitable space must be available prior to a teenager being sentenced there.

43 In 2025, in response to crowded prisons, new changes to criminal justice legislation in England and Wales would allow for automatic release after serving 40% of a prison sentence. See ‘New Change to Some Offenders’ Automatic Release Dates’, GOV.UK, 11 September 2024, <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/new-change-to-some-offenders-automatic-release-dates>.

44 Oberstown Children Detention Campus has a maximum capacity of 46 children (40 boys and 6 girls) which is set by the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality by way of a certificate made under the Children Act 2001. See Minister for Children, Disability and Equality, ‘Detention Centres – Tuesday, 1 Jul 2025 – Parliamentary Questions (34th Dáil)’, Houses of the Oireachtas, 1 July 2025, Ireland.

45 For examples of where the judge had to consider alternative options, see Tom Tuite, ‘Judge Forced to Release Alleged Teen Joyrider as Oberstown Detention Centre Was Full’, Irish Independent, 15 May 2023, <https://www.independent.ie/irish-news/courts/judge-forced-to-release-alleged-teen-joyrider-as-oberstown-detention-centre-was-full/a1503782977.html>; ‘Judge Forced to Grant Bail to Teen as Oberstown Full’, RTE, 12 February 2018, <https://www.rte.ie/news/courts/2018/0212/940172-teenager-bail-oberstown/>.

46 United Nations, *Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (Mandela Rules)* (United Nations, 2015).

47 Gabija Gatavectaitė et al., ‘Almost All Women in Irish Prisons Are There for Committing Petty Crime’, TheJournal.ie, 23 April 2019.

48 In the three months from March 2020 to June 2020, the monthly average for the prison population decreased from 4,062 to just 3,707 incarcerated people and hovered around this mark for ten months. See Keith Adams, ‘Covid-19 and the Decarceral Instinct’, *Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice*, 2 December 2021, <https://www.jcfj.ie/2021/12/02/covid-19-and-the-decarceral-instinct/>.

CLOSING WOMEN’S PRISONS

Women’s prisons offer an opportunity to both radically reshape a section of the penal system and experiment with other policy interventions. In recent years, female imprisonment in Ireland attempted a new approach to punishment through the adoption of the language of care. This resulted in the creation of Limerick Women’s Prison, a “trauma-informed” prison,⁴⁹ and the adoption of trauma-aware language by both Limerick and Mountjoy Female Prison. Yet, as a result of not placing any guardrails or limits to prison capacity, both prisons now have the highest levels of over-capacity.

49 Liz Dunphy, ‘“It’s a Great Move Forward for Society”: Limerick Prison Opens New Luxury Women’s Wing’, Irish Examiner, 18 October 2023, <https://www.irishexaminer.com/news/arid-41250700.html>.

When the aim of prison as punishment is obscured by an inflection of care and the utilisation of trauma language, the present growing rate of imprisonment of women is a natural consequence. Framed as a new approach to female imprisonment in Ireland, more and more women are now incarcerated while penal practice remains the same, though adorned with a more socially-acceptable language.⁵⁰ When we stop talking about prisons as a place of state-inflicted punishment and retribution, replacing it with a discourse of care,⁵¹ the prison population will inevitably increase. This is a natural consequence of the public and judiciary beginning to understand female prisons as places of care.

Many women are imprisoned for non-violent offences related to addiction and familial provision.⁵² But prisons are not places of care, and never can be — rather they are places of institutional violence and victimisation, not conducive to restoration. With the inability to move beyond “supply and demand” logic, a new women’s prison within the grounds of the closed Cork Prison is being discussed for development. This will lead to three women prisons over-capacity rather than just two. When will we, as a society, know that we have imprisoned enough women in ostensible places of care, that the desired social control is realised? What future endpoint will indicate the need to stop? Will we even recognise it?

A radical minimalist approach to female prisons is required in Ireland. Politically, the State has proved itself untrustworthy in relation to the imprisonment of women, both historically⁵³ and in the present. More prisons will encourage these baser instincts. Socially, many of the women incarcerated are living lives of abject poverty and marginalisation, with imprisonment ensuring destitution and

ostracization. Care giving responsibilities are interrupted, with the pain of familial worry amplified. Even for those women whose offence results in a death, the circumstances can involve a defensive element from intimate partner violence,⁵⁴ so highly unlikely to reoffend. This closure of the two women’s prisons would not happen overnight, rather it is a vision of a future where, as a society, we have decided not to punish those who have benefitted least from society’s shared goods.

This radical minimalist approach would require a commensurate investment in community services (proposed in step two). If, for example, we decide that a maximum of twenty women need to be removed from the wider community at any time. Then two small scale detention facilities⁵⁵ (up to ten women each in normalised community-based settings) with low-security and “dynamic security”⁵⁶ measures could be developed. Augmented with the implementation of women’s problem-solving courts, this would gradually filter people away from carceral settings to places of care and support.⁵⁷

Starting to think in these minimalist terms, such approaches to female imprisonment are not a single intervention for women but would also lead to a paradigm shift towards recognising social needs which the prison cannot meet.

54 Sophie Howes, *Women Who Kill: How the State Criminalises Women We Might Be Burying* (Centre for Women's Justice, 2021).

55 Small-scale detention is a concept developed in Belgium by De Huizen (the houses) where large prisons are eventually replaced by detention houses and transition houses which meet the criteria of being small-scale, differentiated, and anchored in the neighbourhood. Unfortunately, due to political decisions in sentence execution, this concept has led to additional places of detention rather than replacing places in large-scale prisons. However, the concept of small-scale detention has transformative potential in female imprisonment if the medium-security closed prisons are closed at the same time as the small-scale detention is developed, so capacity for female prisoners is radically reduced and not augmenting existing prisons. See ‘Het Detentiehuis: Innovatief Concept Met Een Mensgerichte Aanpak Voor Een Herstelgerichte Strafvuivering’, De Huizen, accessed 29 April 2026, <https://www.dehuizen.be/ons-concept/het-detentiehuis>.

56 The concept of dynamic security, as opposed to static security, is based on an “alert group of staff who interact with, and who know, their prisoners; staff developing positive staff-prisoner relationships; staff who have an awareness of what is going on in the prison; fair treatment and a sense of ‘wellbeing’ among prisoners; and staff who make sure that prisoners are kept busy doing constructive and purposeful activities that contribute to their future reintegration into society.” See ‘Handbook on Dynamic Security and Prison Intelligence’, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2015, 29.

57 Ruth Armstrong and Shona Minson, ‘Justice Changes Her Face’: *What Women’s Problem-Solving Courts Can Teach Us About Taking a Community Based Whole Systems Approach to Improving Criminal Justice Outcomes*. (Justice Matters/Clinks, 2025), <https://www.weavers.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Final-Submitted-Clinks-Report-on-WPSC-Research-Review-1.pdf>; Shona Minson, ‘The Disruption of Women’s Imprisonment: Negative Consequences and Non-Carceral Alternatives’, *Studies* 113, no. 450 (2024): 155–67. 2025

50 Bree Carlton and Emma K. Russell, ‘The Weaponisation of “Trauma-Informed” Discourse in Prison Policy: An Abolition Feminist Critique’, *Incarceration* 4 (2023): 1–18.

51 Miriam Ticktin, ‘Thinking beyond Humanitarian Borders’, *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 83, no. 2 (2016): 255–71.

52 Gatavacitea et al., ‘Almost All Women in Irish Prisons Are There for Committing Petty Crime’.

53 For example, clients who utilised the incarceration and forced labour of the women and girls at the Donnybrook Magdalene Laundry included semi-state companies, third-level institutions, private schools, hotels, restaurants, hospitals, shops, elite sports clubs, and law and accountancy firms. Though it is questionable how historic this relationship is, considering the closure of the last Laundry on Sean McDermott Street was only in 1996. See Mark Coen et al., eds, *A Dublin Magdalene Laundry: Donnybrook and Church-State Power in Ireland* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2023).

Ireland's two open prisons – Shelton Abbey and Loughan House – are only for men but are geographically isolated. Repurposing the two women's prisons as two open prisons for men, within a low-security cordon, in Dublin and Limerick respectively, would reduce the overall intensity of prison security levels, permit meaningful sentence progression, and allow prisons to become more reintegrative as people could work closer to their communities prior to release. The closure of female prisons is a proposal which may have public support⁵⁸ or, at least, less opposition. A monolith like the prison system can't be dismantled or reduced through a head-on approach, rather little cracks must be first exploited and allowed to run the length of its walls.

LIMITS ARE NOT A LIMIT TO CREATIVE RESPONSES

With plans and funding to add 1,600 additional prison beds by 2031, Ireland is going through a period of penal excess where the State is “using the penal system too much.”⁵⁹ A penal minimalist approach, as outlined in this manifesto, is a “public good”⁶⁰ which responds to the presence of penal excess as its conceptual opposite. This manifesto makes some proposals which are modest and well-discussed in policy discourse, and others which are a little more radical and less-considered in Irish penal policy. Together, I propose that they describe a path towards a minimalist use of the prison in Ireland. It is not intended to say everything about every part of the prison system or the experience of every incarcerated person. Instead, it recognises that once you begin a journey the next steps emerge as the path unfolds in front of you. Establishing limits will create the context for society to approach these problems with creative freedom.

Prison policy advocacy, like all policy advocacy, is typically delivered in a positive register.

Drawing on human rights frameworks and best practice, the focus is on how to achieve better prison practice, service, and conditions which are dignified. This is important in the day-to-day and to offer civil servants policies and ideas to implement. However, this manifesto outlines a negative policy, setting limits and restrictions on current practice and trajectory, or “negative reforms” which “remove greater or smaller parts on which the system in general is more or less dependent”⁶¹ and challenge the prison's underlying structures of violence. An approach shaped by optimistic incrementalism will miss the forest for the trees, as the political and policy drivers of prison expansion will continue unchecked.

Each of the four steps seeks a limit. A limit to excess violence and excess imprisonment. To have a fully independent investigation of deaths in custody and serious complaints is to limit inhumane incarceration and the excesses of misconduct and disregard in the Irish Prison Service and Department of Justice contrary to Article 2 commitments of the “right to life.”⁶² The re-allocation of prison capital budget to community services and development work would limit the expansion of prison in lieu of a just social policy. A legally enforceable maximum cap on prison capacity limits the warehousing of people who have experienced many forms of deprivation and harm. Finally, closing women's prisons places a limit on the neo-expansionist discourse of prisons as places of care and restoration.

Continuing to instinctively read ‘limits’ and ‘constraints’ as bad things is to entirely miss the point of this manifesto. A prison cap, closure of women's prisons, independent investigations, and investment in community services is not a limit on imaginative responses to social conflict. Rather it is the opposite.⁶³

61 Thomas Mathiesen, *The Politics of Abolition Revisited* (Routledge, 2015), 223.

62 ‘European Convention on Human Rights’, art. 2.

63 In an interview with the New Internationalist, Nils Christie firmly underlined that any prison policy is a choice, not an inevitable path as he wondered “Then I ask myself: when is enough enough? How many people can you execute? How large a prison population can you have before you change the kind of country you live in? It is the same kind of question as to whether you want a national theatre or libraries. What kind of country would it be without them?” For full interview, see ‘Crime and Civilization’, *The New Internationalist*, 5 August 1996, <https://newint.org/features/1996/08/05/crime>.

58 In a public survey, conducted by RED C and commissioned by the Irish Penal Reform Trust, prior to the 2024 General Election, two-thirds of those surveyed agreed that “expanding prison capacity is not the solution to reducing crime, rather, we should focus on preventing crime and addressing its root causes.” *Public Attitudes Polling on Prison and Criminal Justice* (Irish Penal Reform Trust, 2024), https://www.iprt.ie/site/assets/files/7530/iprt_-_prison_and_criminal_justice_public_opinion_polling_-_13-11-24.pdf.

59 Hayes, *Confronting Penal Excess*, 13.

60 Hayes, *Confronting Penal Excess*, 15–16.

Creative, non-penal solutions to social conflict and the building of infrastructures of care are fostered when we know there are limits to the amount of imprisonment we can administer as a society. Over-use of the prison reveals the dearth of our societal vision. By placing prison on a much higher shelf, it should prompt our imagination to consider a more just society with less punishment and harm.

“

Creative, non-penal solutions to social conflict and the building of infrastructures of care are fostered when we know there are limits to the amount of imprisonment we can administer as a society.



Vanaja Unit for Women, Finland (Credit: RESCALED)

Housing, Homelessness, but not Hopelessness: JCFJ's Not-So-Radical Ideas

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INTRODUCTION

Unpacking the current state of Irish housing could be a whole *Working Notes* issue in itself. The longer it goes on, the more we are starting to reject the notion of “the housing crisis”. What we mean by that is that this now goes so far beyond one crisis, and treating it as one problem is, quite frankly, one of the reasons we got to where we are today. We have an affordability crisis, social housing crisis, private rented crisis, access to homeownership crisis, student accommodation crisis, accessible friendly homes crisis, and so on and on. They are so interconnected with each other and yet so massively complex in their own regard that treating them as the same thing continues to fail those that are afflicted by that specific crisis (or multiple crises at once for many people!). Because this problem is so diverse and so deeply rooted into the housing system, it can be easy to feel defeated and like the system will never change. Nevertheless, this is not an option, not for the country and not for the Jesuit Centre. Our beliefs, convictions, and practices hold firm, now more than ever.

OUR PAST WORK ON HOUSING

While the Centre’s inception grew from helping the community find gainful employment (quite literally why our publications are called *Working Notes*), inspired by the work of Peter McVerry SJ, a founding member, housing as always been a policy issue addressed by the Centre. The crash of the Celtic Tiger in 2008 led to housing becoming a core piece of research and advocacy, with the first major piece of writing being *The Irish Housing System: Vision, Values, Reality* in 2009. Since then, we have published *Rebuilding Ireland – A Flawed Philosophy* (2017), *Tenant State of Mind* (2022), *Cost Rental in Ireland: A Proposal Towards a Public Housing System* (2022), and *Using the Kenny Report to End Land Hoarding* (2025), as well as providing resources on the EU Affordable Housing Plan and how current Irish policies align with it. All this being said, arguing for a just housing system is not new to us. In fact, we are doubling down on our

stances. Since the publication of *The Irish Housing System*, the housing crisis has turned into the housing crises. We solve this by taking what the Government would see as a “radical approach”, when really, it is basic maths:



Housing – policies for profiteering = housing for the people



Housing for the people + a just system = a society where the Common Good and Human Dignity thrive

This, of course, is not good for the 1% of people who have created the current conditions of exploitation and gross profits lining their pockets. This deep indifference for the majority of people is felt strongly throughout the country, but there is a particular level of disdain for the people by the Government and investors that happens in Dublin, and even more acutely in Dublin’s Inner City.

WHERE WE SIT: LITERALLY

The physical location of our office is not by chance. Sure, we sit within the Jesuit Church behind St. Francis Xavier, and as a Jesuit research centre, that makes sense. However, beyond that, being on Gardiner Street in the heart of Dublin’s North East Inner City (NEIC) and staying here has been a choice that reflects our wider mission: to be where it matters. Not just in research or with professional networks, but to be with the community and to be where our work can be most valuable.

Gardiner Street has long been an important street of temporary shelter, historically as bed and breakfasts, inns, and guesthouses for those needing to go to and from Connolly Station. The lower part of the street nearest to the station is lined with short-term

accommodation buildings, reflecting its historical importance. In recent years, though, these short-term accommodations for tourists and travellers have been converted into emergency accommodation for homeless individuals and families. Half way up the street is a shiny new student accommodation block, further evidence of the changing demographics and systems at work between the Georgian houses.

The growing tensions between the wants and needs of the residents versus what the city council is providing is stark. Under the guise of working on eliminating anti-social behaviour, the council have proposed cutting one of the few precious amenities on the street. They wish to do away with the football and basketball pitches in Mountjoy Square and refurbish it as an ode to the Georgian era. While this may seem unconnected to housing, it directly impacts it. Why would a family want to move to an area that their children are not allowed to play in, and why would we tell those looking to move to a safer area that the activities that promote positive social behaviour and keep an area safe are no longer available?

The street has been in the focus of recent news around housing, particularly in relation to homelessness and the extent of emergency accommodation I just mentioned. RTE's Prime Time ran a feature on Gardiner Street in February of this year, where local activists, politicians, and educators highlighted the challenges faced.¹ One of the more shocking figures to be presented is that 1 in 10 homeless people in Ireland is residing on this one street, much of it concentrated in the lower half. 20 short term accommodations have been turned into homeless accommodation, with nine of those being designated for families. This, of course, has a direct impact on the children living in these conditions and their ability to grow and thrive. Our neighbouring Jesuit school, Gardiner Street Primary School, is reporting that 20% of their student body is homeless and in emergency accommodation. How do we as a country find this to be an acceptable reality?



Gardiner Street Lower

The wider NEIC as a whole sees all housing systems working, between social housing, private rented, homeownership, and as mentioned, student accommodation and homelessness services. This area is also rich with faith-based communities, where the positive work of our parish is only one aspect of the growing microcosm of faith-led approaches to bettering our communities.² It is where the policies of the government are felt on the ground and have been—unfortunately—made to leave people feel like it is an undesirable place to live while also producing undesirable living conditions. The growing anti-migrant rhetoric places Dublin 1 at the epicentre,³ where our rich diversity is what makes this area a cultural hub. Sadly, these are the exact people who are getting stuck in poor housing and overcrowding due to our worsening housing crisis and the inability to find a place to rent until they arrive, or alternatively, actively stuck in poor accommodation because they cannot find anywhere better within their budget. This is not unique to migrants, however, and is a problem for every resident of Ireland, citizen or not.

1 Louise Byrne, "One in Ten Homeless People in Ireland Living on One Dublin Street," *RTE*, February 13, 2026, <https://www.rte.ie/news/primetime/2026/0212/1558240-one-in-ten-homeless-people-in-ireland-living-on-one-dublin-street/>.

2 Keith Adams et al., *Faith in the North-East Inner-City: How Faith-Based Communities Help Dublin Flourish* (Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice, 2025).

3 Back in November 2024 following the stabbing of primary school children, rumors flew quickly and widely that an illegal migrant was to blame for the horrendous act. This was proved to be false, but chaos erupted and riots broke out across Dublin, much of which happening in Dublin 1 and the NEIC, centred around the idea that migrants were ruining Ireland.

WHERE WE SIT: IDEOLOGICALLY

In a time where division seems more prevalent than unity, we must remember that unity is what makes us stronger. Our allies must remain our allies, and Ireland is fortunate to be in a strong partnership through the European Union. We learn from each other, the good and the bad, and we work together in creating a better place to live. We must, as a country, continue to strive for reaching the bar our EU friends are setting, but also to be the country that others look to and strive to meet.

There are two main ways that Ireland could majorly benefit by doubling down on our European stance, both ways JCFJ have already taken in our approaches. The first is our belief in how we understand homelessness, understanding that it goes behind how the government calculates it⁴ and encompasses rough sleeping on the street, couch surfing, living in transitional/temporary homes, overcrowded living, domestic violence refuge shelters, and refugee centres—all of which we refer to as “hidden homelessness”.⁵ This is more in line with the European Commission backed FEANTSA’s European Typology of Homelessness and housing exclusion (ETHOS) scale that categorizes homelessness into six operational categories: people living rough, people in emergency accommodation, people living in accommodation for the homeless, people living in institutions, people living in non-conventional dwellings due to lack of housing, and homeless people living temporarily in conventional housing with family and friends (due to a lack of housing).⁶

The second is our support for the European Affordable Housing Plan that was released late 2025. The release of the Plan is deeply welcomed by us, as we have consistently been

arguing for affordable housing in all forms (see *Cost Rental in Ireland*⁷) and will continue to do so. Affordable housing is, like our argument for calculating homelessness, not just one typology the government assigns, but rather a structural reform that means affordable homeownership and affordable renting both in public and private sectors. The EU Plan provides a pathway forward in achieving this ambition while also reaffirming our commitment to being a European and leading the world towards more sustainable practices in every sense of the word.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

It is the tradition of JCFJ to push back on the narratives being given to us by the Government and to fight for justice for all. In our very first *Working Notes*, we challenged the so-called success of the new Jobsearch programme, arguing that the new figures released were not new numbers, but rather “simply a part of [the original data] presented under a new heading”.⁸ The willingness to challenge the Government and its data was not necessarily monumental, but was significant nonetheless. It solidified to the people where we as a Centre and Church stood and has continued to provide us the confidence in being a research body that will openly and willingly call out injustice to the people, regardless of who we stand against.

Building on this history, we will continue to call out moments of wider structural weaknesses when it comes to how we understand and approach housing. This means continuing to argue for better recognition from the government on what homelessness actually is and not allow them to cherry pick numbers which show them in a better light. It is reminding the people that when something is called “affordable”, that doesn’t make it so. It means continuing to work with other researchers and the community to amplify the voices of the many and those that are all too often silenced. It means creating a place where our youth don’t feel the need to emigrate

4 Currently, Ireland calculates their homeless numbers as only those in emergency accommodation. This has drawn much criticism over the years, as this a) does not accurately reflect the real homelessness epidemic, and b) is not how we have always calculated our figures. Prior to 2015, those in refuge centres were included in homelessness statistics released by the Government. Even more controversially, a decision in 2018 by the Government re-categorized how to define emergency accommodation, excluding any types of emergency accommodation that operated through individual apartments/houses, arguing it is not considered emergency accommodation if it is owned by a local authority or an Approved Housing Body. Eoin O’Sullivan, *Measuring Homelessness in Ireland* (2018), Dáil Submissions.

5 Rory Hearne and Kenneth McSweeney, *Ireland’s Hidden Homelessness Crisis* (Maynooth University, 2023).

6 ETHOS Light: European Typology of Homelessness and European Exclusion, 2026.

7 Keith Adams et al., *Cost Rental in Ireland: A Proposal Towards a Public Housing System* (Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice, 2022).

8 *Working Notes 01* (Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice, 1987).



EU affordable housing policy proposals offer promising ways forward (Credit: Gintare K/Pixels).

and yet can come home if they choose so and not be destitute to their family homes due to costs.

Moving forward, the Centre will continue to work on issues of hidden homelessness, where we have been undertaking research on understanding hidden homelessness in the area through a means of exploring the various ways of exploitation that is happening in our immediate area, of which, further identifies the levels of homelessness and brings us closer to a European understanding. Additionally, with the new EU Affordable Housing Plan clearly outlining the goals of member states, we will be keeping a close eye on Ireland's willingness to follow an evidence-based approach to tackling unaffordability, continuing to make it known when they are or are not succeeding.

The idea of home sits at the very heart of the Christian tradition. The Irish Catholic bishops have consistently denounced the present approach, insisting that "housing

should not be treated in the same way as any other commodity."⁹ Irish theologians have been at the forefront, globally, in addressing this issue. Ethna Regan has written about how housing is "a demand of the common good, a basic right, and a necessity for a truly human life."¹⁰ Suzanne Mulligan has warned about technocratic approaches which imagine this crisis as a puzzle to be solved by policy experts: "We must think of housing in a new way, and crucially we must learn from those who are unhoused."¹¹ Those most afflicted by the crisis should be central in the resolution. And Siobhán Garrigan has compellingly presented the secure sense of being at home as something more profound than merely providing *housing*. She notes that "home" can function in English as a verb. It is, she

⁹ Irish Bishops' Conference, *A Room at the Inn?* (Irish Episcopal Conference, 2018), 10.

¹⁰ Ethna Regan, *Catholic Social Teaching and Homelessness: The World Tribe of the Dispossessed*, 4, no. 1 (2019): 28.

¹¹ Suzanne Mulligan, "Homelessness: Some Theological Reflections," *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* (Dublin) 112, no. 448 (2023): 446.

maintains that to *home* involves being “open to the future, open to the stranger, open to the other.” Ultimately, for Christians, to provide a home is to provide the context where a person can be “open to the Spirit.”¹² The Centre intends to bear witness in its work to this rich, holistic vision of what it means to provide home (and what it means to *deprive* people of home). As Pope Francis noted:

*Lack of housing is a grave problem in many parts of the world, both in rural areas and in large cities ... Not only the poor, but many other members of society as well, find it difficult to own a home. Having a home has much to do with a sense of personal dignity and the growth of families. This is a major issue for human ecology.*¹³

CONCLUSION:

Ireland has a long way to go when it comes to tackling “The” housing crisis. For starters, we need to be real about what our problems are—you cannot slay the beast if you don’t know what the beast is. This means homelessness figures that more accurately reflect the state of homelessness in the country. It also means acknowledging that we have been alienating a substantial portion of the population by allowing rental and purchase prices to continue to be so far out of reach. Enough of hiding the truth and enough of putting the self-interests and interests of the investors first. It is time to get real and face the music, because maybe then we might start making some *real* progress and change. While it at times even we feel like we are screaming into the void, we know we are not. Our mission to do justice for all drives our motivation and a willingness to spearhead and support research that will lead to a betterment of the people. We will continue to build on our legacy as a reputable source of research while also speaking truth to power, guided by our faith and desire to take care of one another. We know our “radical ideas” are not radical, and the Centre will continue to push for a housing system that works for all and not few. Only through this will meaningful change happen.

12 Siobhán Garrigan, *A Theology of Home in a Time of Homelessness* (Cambridge University Press, 2025), 58–59.

13 Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'* (Catholic Truth Society, 2015), §152.

Environment: Caring for What We Value

Ciara Murphy

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INTRODUCTION: THE POLITICAL, ENVIRONMENTAL AND SOCIETAL CONTEXT

The green wave – the global swell of positive public sentiment towards ecological action – has broken. This wave, encouraged by the publication of *Laudato Si'* over 10 years ago, peaked several years later with massive global climate demonstrations and Green New Deal policies developed in the EU and globally. In Ireland, it manifested as a government coalition formed in 2020 which gave an influential place to the Green Party. This government brought forward a raft of environmentally friendly legislation and policy changes to help turn the tide of ecological destruction in Ireland. The pinnacle of this work was the publication of the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act in 2021.

The wave triggered a step change within the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) and specifically within the Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice (JCFJ). After the publication of *Laudato Si'* in 2015, there was a decision to develop a specific focus on ecology within the Jesuits. The position of Environmental Policy Advocate was established at JCFJ to embed within the Irish Jesuit province the environmental values and work long pursued by individual Jesuits. Over the following years, work within the Centre and within the wider Irish Jesuit Province intensified, including increased collaboration with other environmental groups and faith-based organisations who advocate for environmental protection.

The general election in 2024 effectively signalled the dissipation of the Irish green wave. When the Green Party lost the majority of its seats, the other parties of the coalition were free to partner with less eco-conscious partners. There was an effective swap of the Green Party with a group of Independents. As the waters recede, we are unfortunately witnessing a sharp turnaround in climate policies globally, and Ireland is no exception.

We may gasp at the harshness with which Trump has slashed environmental and public

health regulations,¹ and we may despair at the narrow right-wing politics gaining traction by trampling on environmental protection. But we need to view the decisions of our own government with clear eyes and admit that a dangerous gap is emerging between its eco-friendly rhetoric and ecocidal actions. At COP30, the UN Climate Change Conference in Brazil, Taoiseach Martin extolled Ireland's climate action while lamenting the failure of other countries to do the same.² At the same time several pieces of legislation were being developed which aimed to essentially kill the Climate Act³ (the same Act which many members of this government were responsible for voting through in 2021⁴) and fast-track massive fossil fuel infrastructure which would lock us into carbon dependency for decades. Not being satisfied with undermining climate friendly legislation, the Government are also ushering the Arbitration Amendment Bill through the legislative process which could open Ireland up to disputes in investor-State courts, effectively allowing us to be sued for policies, such as environmental or health protection policies, which interfere with profit-making abilities of companies.⁵ This court system has been known to chill environmental protection policies for fear of litigation.⁶

While the political reality and attitude towards sustainability has changed, the climate and biodiversity reality has deteriorated.

- 1 Dharna Noor and Oliver Milman, "How Trump's EPA Rollbacks Could Harm Our Air and Water – and Worsen Global Heating," *Environment, The Guardian*, January 30, 2026, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2026/jan/30/trump-epa-rollbacks-air-water-climate>.
- 2 "We Have to Go Further", Taoiseach Tells COP30, *News*, November 6, 2025, <https://www.rte.ie/news/environment/2025/11/06/1542420-cop30-summit/>.
- 3 Ciara Murphy, "For the Greater Good," *Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice in Ireland*, March 11, 2026, <https://www.jcfj.ie/2026/03/11/for-the-greater-good/>; Pat Leahy, "New Critical Infrastructure Laws Will Block Climate-Based Legal Challenges," *The Irish Times*, accessed April 9, 2026, <https://www.irishtimes.com/politics/2026/04/08/new-critical-infrastructure-laws-will-block-climate-based-legal-challenges/>.
- 4 Marie O'Halloran, "Climate Action Bill Adopted in the Dáil by Majority of 129 Votes to 10," *The Irish Times*, accessed April 9, 2026, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/oireachtas/climate-action-bill-adopted-in-the-dail-by-majority-of-129-votes-to-10-1.4595471>.
- 5 Oisín Suttle, "CETA and the Investment Court System Submission to the Joint Committee on European Union Affairs," April 6, 2021; Pat Leahy, "Government Prepares to Ratify Canada Trade Deal before Summer," *The Irish Times*, accessed May 7, 2026, <https://www.irishtimes.com/politics/2026/05/04/government-prepares-to-ratify-canada-trade-deal-before-summer/>; "Investor-State Dispute Settlement (ISDS) Mechanisms and the Right to a Clean, Healthy, and Sustainable Environment | International Institute for Sustainable Development," accessed May 7, 2026, <https://www.iisd.org/publications/brief/iisd-clie-clientearth-ids-sustainable-environment-submission-2023>.
- 6 Arthur Neslen, "Litigation Terrorism: The Obscure Tool That Corporations Are Using against Green Laws," *Environment, The Guardian*, February 12, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2024/feb/12/litigation-terrorism-how-corporations-are-winning-billions-from-governments>.



We are discovering that environmental justice issues literally intersect with every aspect of our lives

We experience prolonged periods of rain, flooding⁷ and violent storms at home while other countries across the globe are preparing for wildfires,⁸ continued drought⁹ and living with devastating desertification.¹⁰ Biodiversity and ecosystem collapse, which often goes under the radar, is a significant threat to global security and economic prosperity.¹¹ When soils are so degraded they can no longer produce food, or when fish stocks collapse and food production is no longer guaranteed, tensions frequently spill into conflict and the displacement and destruction which come with that.

We are discovering that environmental justice issues literally intersect with every aspect of our lives: the air we breathe, the water we drink, where we live, how we get around, and the peace that exists between peoples. Pope Francis articulated this clearly in *Laudato Si'*: “the human environment and the natural environment deteriorate together; we cannot adequately combat environmental degradation unless we attend to causes related to human and social degradation.”¹² In summation, he wrote, “It cannot be emphasized enough how everything is interconnected” (LS138).

THE FUEL PROTESTS: A MIRROR FOR OUR ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEMS

The political reality of 2026 would not be complete without examining the fuel protests, and the societal, political and environmental weaknesses they reveal, which were sparked by a spike in fuel prices in the wake of the US and Israel’s war on Iran and Lebanon. For businesses which are heavily reliant on fuel for their operations – agricultural contractors and hauliers in particular – the fuel increase was enough to put them out of business. The non-violent, but contentious, demonstrations blocked motorways, essential fuel infrastructure and city centres. The voices coming from these protests were a mix of sincere people with their backs up to the wall and Far-Right agitators and sympathisers.¹³ The dominant call was to axe the carbon tax¹⁴ and the demand for its removal was itself revealing. In a fuel crisis it is very understandable to want to lower costs by whatever means possible, but targeting the carbon tax, a significant lever we have to try and curb fuel demand and fund carbon-saving actions, indicates an aversion to climate action. We value the price of fuel and the perceived freedom which goes with it over ecology.

The fuel price protests exposed many weaknesses in the Irish economy and society. They highlighted what we value, and conversely under-value, as a society. In this manifesto I will highlight two areas of systemic dysfunction that the protests revealed, and which are research and advocacy priorities for JCFJ.

First, the protests showed how reliant we are on private cars and road transport. Empty fuel stations and long lines of cars waiting to refill became a common occurrence around the country, threatening the functioning of emergency services who were at risk of not being able to get where they needed to

7 Ciara Murphy, “Working with Nature to Reduce Flooding,” *Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice in Ireland*, February 5, 2026, <https://www.jcfj.ie/2026/02/05/flooding-in-ireland/>.

8 Sundi Rose Gift Article, “Georgia Is Expecting Spike in Wildfires in 2026. Here’s Why,” *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer*, April 14, 2026, <https://www.ledger-enquirer.com/news/state/georgia/article315393945.html>.

9 India Today Science Desk, “China Faces Double Climate Threat of Floods and Droughts in 2026. Here’s Why,” *India Today*, April 5, 2026, <https://www.indiatoday.in/science/story/china-extreme-weather-2026-flooding-drought-forecast-china-floods-drought-2026-weather-forecast-climate-crisis-impact-2891972-2026-04-05>.

10 *Kenya to Host Global Desertification and Drought Day 2026 – Kenya News Agency*, April 10, 2026, <https://www.kenyanews.go.ke/kenya-to-host-global-desertification-and-drought-day-2026/>.

11 George Monbiot, “The UK Government Didn’t Want You to See This Report on Ecosystem Collapse. I’m Not Surprised,” *Opinion, The Guardian*, January 27, 2026, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2026/jan/27/uk-government-report-ecosystem-collapse-foi-national-security>.

12 Pope Francis, “*Laudato Si*” (Holy See 24 May 2015). §48

13 Caelainn Hogan, “On the Streets of Dublin I Met Fuel Protesters and the People Who Support Them – yet Our Leaders Still Don’t Get It,” *Opinion, The Guardian*, April 14, 2026, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2026/apr/14/dublin-ireland-leaders-fuel-bills-iran-war-fossil-fuels>.

14 The carbon tax is essentially a “polluters pays” tax we add to fuel to take into account the massive negative environmental consequences it has in the form of climate change and air pollution.



Fuel price protests in Dublin where farm contractors and hauliers demonstrated by blocking major roads and urban centres with tractors and lorries (Credit: Wikimedia).

go. Those who were lucky enough to be able to take the train were largely unaffected. However, the sparse rail network in Ireland meant that switching to trains was not an option for everyone. Active transport and bicycles in particular came into their own in Dublin city. Ironically the city scape was made relatively safe to cycle by the lack of moving vehicles.

Secondly, weaknesses in our agricultural system were also exposed. Farming contractors were significantly represented in the protest. Massive machines which are used to cut silage and plough for and harvest crops – mainly grain for cattle feed – burn through huge amounts of green diesel. The increased cost threatens the viability of many businesses. Blockages of the ports for just a few short days resulted in fears that feed for chickens and pigs could run short. Statements of ‘No Farms, No Food’ were undermined by the knowledge that we already import 90% of our food and export the vast majority of meat and dairy, which we specialise in. The lack of diversity in the industry means that many farmers are totally reliant on this specific model of fossil fuel intensive agriculture.

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Statements of ‘No Farms, No Food’ were undermined by the knowledge that we already import 90% of our food and export the vast majority of meat and dairy, which we specialise in.

Food and transport are thorny issues which require not just action at government level, including infrastructural, policy and enforcement action, but also behavioural change from the public. We cannot technologically innovate ourselves out of these ecologically problematic areas. While we wholehearted support technology which can help us move away from fossil fuel dependence and towards sustainability, without a change of mindset these problems will not be solved. Consider the Electric Vehicle or EV. This amazing technology has the ability to substantially reduce our transport related emissions. However, the space an electric car occupies will still cause congestion and a body being struck by an electric powered vehicle is no more intact than one struck by a fossil

fuel powered one.¹⁵ Personal and collective ecological conversion is also required, we need to “look for solutions not only in technology but in a change of humanity; otherwise we would be dealing merely with symptoms.”¹⁶ Churches are communities that make moral demands of their members. So, as a church organisation, we are comfortable advocating for issues that require both systemic and personal lifestyle changes and advocate for “the urgent need for us to move forward in a bold cultural revolution.”¹⁷ Food and transport are two such issues.

Regarding transport, focusing on child-safety, rather than speed, dramatically changes how we design and use our transport system. Within the agri-food system, farming not only for food production but for the stewardship of the land and the welfare of communities results in a model which is more holistic and socially, economically, and ecologically sustainable. Failure to address these issues will lock us into a deepening downward spiral of multifaceted malfunction. On the other hand, addressing them offers a real opportunity, not just to steer us away from tragedy but to create the conditions where communities can thrive.

TRANSPORT: WALKING AND WHEELING TOWARDS THE COMMON GOOD

Transport is an area which is so omnipresent in people’s lives that we can lose sight of its significance. How we get around dictates much of our lives: where we live, how much time we get to spend with family and friends, our physical well-being, and our independence. The transport system and our resulting travel patterns dictate much of this.

Ireland’s patterns of development have resulted in sprawl. Houses in urban centres are increasingly unaffordable, low-density housing has pushed people further away in search of value, culminating in commuters facing hours of travel to get to work, to shops or to recreation. The transport network, being dominated by roads for private cars, means that those travel hours are mostly spent behind the wheel. This driver is at the mercy of the system. A collision could mean long, unplanned hours in the car. Time with kids, hobbies, volunteer work, and exercise are all sacrificed to a system which prioritises cars above all else. Devastatingly, these collisions also mean someone is not going to get home, or be left with debilitating injuries. Road deaths and serious injuries in Ireland are moving in the wrong direction¹⁸ resulting in more and more families and communities left bereft as a direct result of the system and infrastructure we have built.

In urban areas this system results in streets which are clogged with cars, making outdoor time for children unsafe, unhealthy and therefore, increasingly, unlikely. This lack of independence of movement is mirrored in the rural context. One-off houses on any type of road can nearly be considered an island from which young people cannot escape. When bigger cars speed down small and “quiet” roads, spaces which used to be open to walking and cycling are now danger areas which lock kids inside the boundary of their home.

This is a system which does not work, even before we consider the massive climate and environmental toll our transport system takes. In Ireland, transport represents the second highest contributor to greenhouse gas emissions.¹⁹ It is also proving to be one of the most difficult to reduce, as our overreliance on fossil fuel-powered private transport continues.²⁰ The cars, trucks, and other fossil fuel-powered vehicles also spew toxic pollution

15 There are also severe ecological issues associated with EVs. The mining with is required to manufacture the batteries and the complex technologies involved in clean energy results in widespread pollution and is also linked with accusations of forced labour and other human rights issues. Robin Whitlock, “Infyos Finds 75 per Cent of the Worlds Battery Supply Chain at Risk of Violating US and EU Laws on Forced Labour,” September 16, 2024, <https://web.archive.org/web/20240916/095556/https://www.renewableenergymagazine.com/storage/infyos-finds-75-per-cent-of-the-20240916..> The additional weight of the battery in EVs can also add to the danger they pose in collisions.

16 “Laudato Si’ (24 May 2015).”, §9

17 “Laudato Si’ (24 May 2015).”, §114

18 Jack McCarron, *As Road Deaths Rise, the True Scale of Injuries Remains Unclear*, News, April 14, 2026, <https://www.rte.ie/news/primetime/2026/0414/1568053-as-road-deaths-rise-the-true-cost-of-crashes-remains-unclear/>.

19 Brian Donlon et al., *Ireland’s State of the Environment Report 2024* (Environmental Protection Agency, 2024).

20 Editor, *Ireland Set to Exceed Carbon Budget Allocations for Transport, Electricity - Sustainability Online*, October 20, 2025, <https://sustainabilityonline.net/news/ireland-set-to-exceed-carbon-budget-allocations-for-transport-electricity/>.



A child ghost bike is a visible reminder of the consequences of car-centric transport policy. Every child death is a tragedy (Credit: Wikimedia).

into the air, filling our streets and lungs with a chemical cocktail which impacts our breathing and cardiovascular system.²¹

Biodiversity is also severely impacted by our dependence on cars. The extensive road infrastructure displaces biodiversity and natural ecosystems wherever they exist. Cars physically kill a large proportion of our fauna – the visible remains are found on our windscreens and on the side of the road. The road network also disrupts the movement of animals and fragments ecosystems, resulting in more fragile and vulnerable communities. In a literal sense, when we take land to build roads, we take away any other potential function it has, making our environment that little bit poorer.²²

Improving this situation will require a combination of changing infrastructure²³

and regulations, alongside a radical change in our relationship with cars. Focusing on the safety of children, the hidden victims of our transport system, is the obvious place to start. Every child injured or killed on the road (or in a car park²⁴) is a tragedy. The primary method used today to reduce these figures is avoidance. Don't let your child cycle or walk by themselves. The other method is to pile responsibility onto their young shoulders and that of their carer. Keep a firm hand. Teach them to look left and right when crossing the road. Wait for the green man. None of these are foolproof when drivers are speeding, breaking red lights,²⁵ or not leaving enough room for inevitable wobbles.

Developing genuine safe routes to school – for every school in the country – would be the first step in creating a transport system that is safe and accessible for children. Removing cars, slowing them down, completely separating children as they walk and cycle from moving cars, and ensuring safe crossing spaces where necessary, are all on the menu of actions to take. This would look different in urban and rural areas. In urban centres

21 Petra Stock, "Pollution from Trucks and Buses Costs Australians \$6.2bn in Health Effects Each Year, Study Finds," *Environment, The Guardian*, February 22, 2026, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2026/feb/22/air-pollution-emissions-trucks-buses-australia-health-effects>.
 22 Maarten J. van Strien and Adrienne Grêt-Regamey, "Global Expansion of the Ecological Impact of Extra-Urban Road Traffic," *Nature Sustainability* 8, no. 11 (2025): 1294–303, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41893-025-01637-2>.
 23 This would include building active transport infrastructure, sometimes taking space from car infrastructure. This also means reconsidering proposed roads (e.g. the Galway ring road) which will do nothing to ease congestion but will only add congestion and soak up money making it unavailable for alternative sustainable transport projects. Cian Ginty, "Galway Ring Road Planning Inspector's Report Has Little Grasp on Reality," *IrishCycle.Com*, April 9, 2026, <https://irishcycle.com/2026/04/09/galway-ring-road-planning-inspectors-report-has-little-grasp-on-reality/>.

24 Conor Lally, "Boy (3) Dies after Being Struck by Vehicle in Car Park of Dublin Shopping Centre," *The Irish Times*, March 11, 2026, <https://www.irishtimes.com/ireland/dublin/2026/03/11/boy-3-dies-after-being-struck-by-vehicle-in-car-park-of-dublin-shopping-centre/>.
 25 Eoin Glackin, "Across the City, Parents Snatch Their Kids out of the Way of Red-Light-Breaking Drivers," *Dublin Inquirer*, March 27, 2026, <https://www.dublininquirer.com/across-the-city-parents-snatch-their-kids-out-of-the-way-of-red-light-breaking-drivers/>.



Credit: Shutterstock

where space is at a premium this will mean removing the majority of cars and giving space for walking and cycling. Removing cars also gives the space to create interesting and biodiverse green spaces in otherwise barren areas.²⁶ To make this a reality alternative forms of transport, including critically important rail, light rail, and bus corridors need to be developed to give people an alternative to move from one space to another.

The beauty of creating safe routes to school is that anyone using those streets can use that infrastructure. A footpath just as easily hosts the feet of commuters as of students.

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Developing genuine safe routes to school – for every school in the country – would be the first step in creating a transport system that is safe and accessible for children.

²⁶ Green space in urban areas is vitally important for recreations and wellness but is also incredibly important for climate adaption. Having unpaved areas which are planted allows rain water to drain naturally into the soil and reduces pressure on the engineered drainage system.

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Independent children give back a huge amount of time to their parents who don’t have to taxi them every day.

Planning for and designing urban spaces with children’s independence and welfare in mind creates a city that works for everyone. Quieter, safer roads not only allow young people to get where they need to on their own steam but also results in better air quality, less noise pollution,²⁷ less congestion, more space to recreate in, and cheaper urban housing when car parking spaces don’t need to be factored into the price. Ensuring safe spaces for kids also transforms carers lives as well. Independent children give back a huge amount of time to their parents who don’t have to taxi them every day.

Sustainable transport will look a little different in rural areas. Students tend to travel further

²⁷ Noise pollution can lead to multiple different health impacts including heart disease and psychophysiological effects. Environmental Protection Agency, “Noise and Your Health,” accessed April 17, 2026, <https://www.epa.ie/environment-and-you/noise/noise-and-your-health/>.



We only need to take a look at our fellow European countries to see that child friendly cities are not only possible but are already being created.

to get to their place of education so safe footpaths or even cycle lanes that extend 3km out from urban centres would allow more students to walk and cycle. Access to a school bus for every child that wants it is essential but one of the main issues in rural areas is speed (and the increasingly large size of vehicles). We have an incredibly dense network of small rural roads which could create a web of active transport infrastructure. The speed of cars prevents this becoming a reality. Enforcing safe speeds on rural roads and creating a culture where road space is shared is the only way to allow children to be safe and independent.

This is not fantasy — these are serious policy proposals which could lead towards this future. We only need to take a look at our fellow European countries to see that child friendly cities are not only possible but are already being created.²⁸ Closer to home, pilots and small-scale projects give a taste of what could be. Scoil Iognáid SJ, in Galway city was the first school street developed in Ireland.²⁹ Before the action to remove cars was taken, the situation for students was dangerous and chaotic, air pollution was an issue and residents on the street complained about not being able to enjoy their homes. Creating a safe space for the students allowed for more relaxed school start and end times. Spontaneous games of football on the street began when students arrived early; residents decorated their homes to engage the students as they passed. Air quality improved and the reliance on cars to get to school reduced significantly. There is much work being done by community groups, transport coalitions and academics to translate small scale projects like this into the default experience for students in Ireland.

28 Amanda Merck, "Curbing Traffic: The Human Case for Fewer Cars in Our Lives, by Melissa Bruntlett and Chris Bruntlett: Washington, DC, Island Press, 2021," *Journal of Urban Affairs* 45, no. 8 (2023): 1524–26, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07352166.2022.2155440>.

29 Erika Sassone, "Galway School Project's Sees Massive 14% Drop in Car Use in One Year," *Galway Beo*, November 29, 2021, <https://www.galwaybeo.ie/culture/galway-school-projects-sees-massive-6278114>.

SUSTAINABLE AGRI-FOOD SYSTEMS

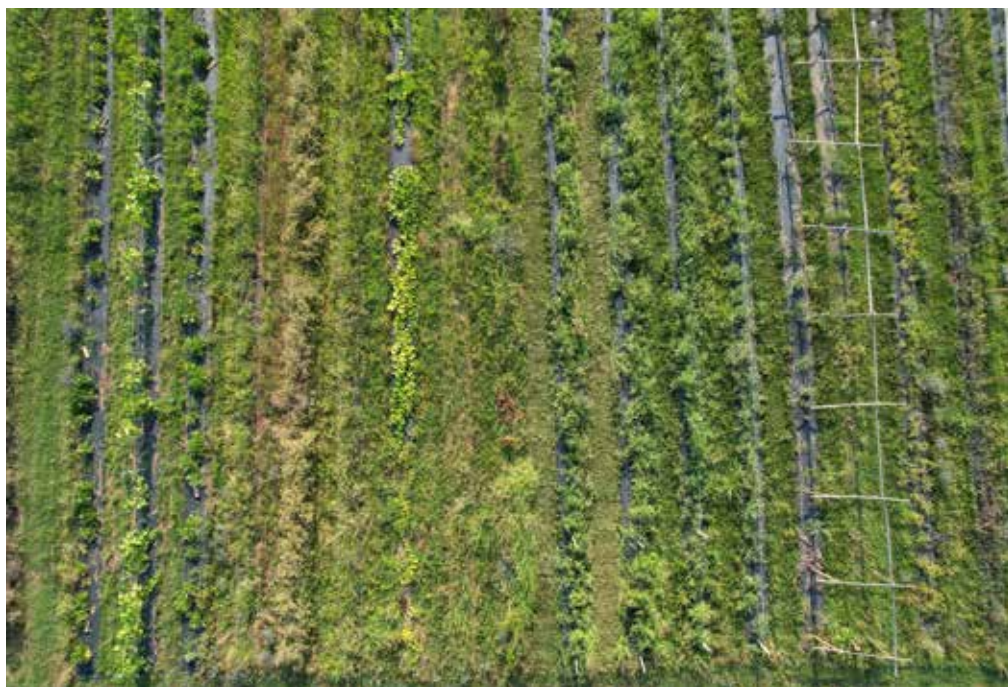
We know that the agricultural system we have does not work for our farmers,³⁰ biodiversity, climate, or food security. Irish agriculture is dangerously skewed towards beef and dairy production. Horticulture has become an increasingly precarious venture with prices of Irish grown vegetables and grain essentially losing value over the years.³¹ The increasingly intensive fashion in which we produce our food leaves little room for biodiversity. Nearly 70% of our land is used for agriculture — meaning the sector is the nation's largest single contributor to climate change, producing well over 35% of the State's greenhouse gases. Heavy stocking rates and fertilizer use pollutes and degrades water bodies and soil, creating conditions which reduces the resilience of the system. We end up in a situation where on the surface there is an appearance of vitality, of growth. This illusion is maintained by a cocktail of chemicals and constant disturbance which eeks out the residual goodness in the land. This system is entirely time-bound and at risk of collapse. When the life in the soil is so depleted that all that remains is dust, it will be unable to support healthy plant growth. All this, so that fewer and fewer farmers can earn a living from the land?

We need an alternative which can bring us out of this zero-sum system and into a diversified and sustainable pattern. Sustainable agri-food systems, such as agroecology, offer an alternative vision. Agroecology is considered as a science, a practice, and a social movement.³² It encompasses the whole food system from the soil to the working conditions and welfare of the farming community as well as the access to, and diet of, the end consumers

30 Niall Leahy SJ, "Irish Food Is Going Big and Going Bust," *Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice in Ireland*, March 27, 2026, <https://www.jcfj.ie/2026/03/27/irish-food-is-going-big-and-going-bust/>.

31 Niall Leahy SJ, "Irish Food Is Going Big and Going Bust."

32 "Our Understanding of Agroecology • Agroecology Europe," *Agroecology Europe*, n.d., accessed April 16, 2026, <https://www.agroecology-europe.org/our-approach/our-understanding-of-agroecology/>.



Agroecological farming produces highly nutritious food and maintains soil fertility (Credit: Shutterstock).

of the food.³³ It is a model which encourages working with nature, rather than against it, and which recognises that the only way to ensure continued food production is by protecting and restoring the health and complexity of the systems in which they grow. By feeding the soil on which we depend it can continue to feed us.

Short food chains are essential to this model, along with increased direct connectivity between farmers and end consumers. This includes directly selling at market days and through community supported agriculture where customers become members of the farm and pay in annual or monthly instalments for their food. The relationship which can form between grower and consumer through these forms of sales would be impossible in supermarkets, which are structured to undervalue the time, effort, and resources it takes to grow and produce food in Ireland.

To transform any system, advocates and champions are needed. At JCFJ we greatly admire the work of Talamh Beo, a member-led organisation of farmers and citizens

who advocate for agroecology and food sovereignty. They stand for a system “which puts the power back into the hands of farmers, communities and citizens instead of corporate interests and industrial agriculture and food production.”³⁴ In a country which prides itself on being “green” and has a long history with food production we have become dangerously disassociated from where our food comes from. Trying your hand at growing food, joining a community garden, searching for your nearest community supported agriculture project or even supporting advocacy work can all help mend the rift which has developed.

“THE BEST TIME TO PLANT A TREE WAS 20 YEARS AGO. THE SECOND-BEST TIME IS NOW.”

In Ireland we have waited so long to make serious strides towards ecological and climate protection. The evidence is all around us that if we wait too long, our feet will get wet from the floods, the burden we have to carry will be too heavy, and the journey to sustainability will be so much further. Our failure to tackle

³³ Alexander Wezel et al., “Agroecological Principles and Elements and Their Implications for Transitioning to Sustainable Food Systems. A Review,” *Agronomy for Sustainable Development* 40, no. 6 (2020): 40, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13593-020-00646-z>.

³⁴ “About,” *Talamh Beo*, n.d., accessed May 18, 2026, <https://talamhbeo.ie/about/>.

the environmental and socially detrimental quagmires of our transport and agricultural systems is a failure to care for our common home and a failure to care for our neighbour.

Reorienting our values – to care for the vulnerable child and to care for the systems and people who literally sustain us with food – has to be the first step towards a safer and healthier world. The proposals outlined in this manifesto are not aspirational or fanciful. They are grounded in the knowledge that the alternative – our current way of living – cannot be sustained in the long run and draws on examples and projects already in existence. The increased road deaths, the headline generating congestion,³⁵ and our outsized contribution to the climate crisis all demand we change our path of travel. Focusing on the need of the child cuts across the noise and concentrates on the existing solutions which can not only create environments in which they thrive but also ameliorates other social and environmental externalities which are intrinsic to our current transport system.

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Our failure to tackle the environmental and socially detrimental quagmires of our transport and agricultural systems is a failure to care for our common home and a failure to care for our neighbour.

In a similar vein when we acknowledge that we rely utterly on the health of our soils and water, and the welfare of our farmers, for our food, the value we place on protecting these becomes tantamount to the current value we place on food production. If reorienting our values is the first step of the journey then taking serious and urgent action to care for and protect what we hold dear is the next. The best time to take action to care for our common home was decades ago but the next best time is definitely now.

35 Diarmuid Pepper, “Dublin Is the Third Most Congested City and Sixth Slowest City in the World for Traffic,” News, The Journal, The Journal, January 21, 2026, <https://www.thejournal.ie/dublin-traffic-congestion-tomtom-research-6933461-Jan2026/>.

Building an Economy with a Soul

For this issue's "Can I get a witness?" Niall Leahy SJ interviews Sophie Manaeva. Sophie is a full-time graduate student at TCD and part-time theological research assistant at JCFJ.

NL: Sophie, your full-time occupation is as a student. Could you tell me what course you're doing and what kind of knowledge and skills you're learning on that course?

SM: I'm doing a Master's in Theology and Social Justice at Trinity College Dublin. It's a collaboration with the Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice, and it approaches theology from a policy perspective. So it equips the students with theological skills and knowledge, while at the same time critically looking at policy and how that is affected by the kind of theological and philosophical stories we tell—and how that can enable social justice and social change.

NL: So there's a certain intellectual excavation going on, or digging down into hidden assumptions about policy today?

SM: Definitely. And specifically, we would look at realms of policy around environment, around homelessness, race and migration, as well as looking at the more scientific aspects of policymaking, and how to kind of critically approach the way that evidence is used—what kind of evidence is used, and the stories that that evidence tells.

NL: Is there any particular story or assumption that's operative today that you have discovered in this course? Or any "myth" that you weren't aware of before?

SM: I think the module on economic justice has been eye-opening for me, just because of how implicit this ideology of maximizing profit is—how ubiquitous it is throughout society—and how we apply it to areas like housing and environment where maybe we shouldn't. And being equipped with a theological perspective on that, as well as the political and economic background, has been really eye-opening and really helpful.

NL: And are there any ideas that have particularly grasped you or inspired you in your studies?

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The field of heterodox economics has been really interesting—particularly when it's aided by theological ideas.

SM: That's very hard to narrow down. I think, for me, in the economic justice class, the field of heterodox economics has been really interesting—particularly when it's aided by theological ideas as well. So, ideas like the Economy of Communion, the Economy of Francesco, Bruni and Zamagni's Civic Economy, and Kate Raworth's Doughnut Economics—the idea of having both a ceiling and a floor for development and for sustainability. And how it is possible to design an economy with a moral, faith-informed vision. That's been really transformative for me, theologically.

NL: Did you have an interest in economics before you went into this course, or did that come through the course?

SM: I think I've always been interested in social justice, and I've always been aware of the economic dimensions to that, and how it kind of makes worse—or makes wider—societal inequalities. But being equipped to think economically through these modules has really developed that for me a lot.

I've become a lot better at recognising and thinking about social justice with that added economic dimension. Because I'm coming from a humanities background, through and through—I studied classics and religion in undergrad—so the economic stuff is brand new for me. It's a new way of thinking, "logically," I guess. But I really enjoy the challenge. And that's why I really like people like Kate Raworth and others doing heterodox economics, who are doing economics but not in a simplified way that abstracts out the moral vision of what life should be like.

NL: You have also been working closely with Bohemian Cooperatives. Is that a real-life illustration of an economy with morals?



SM: Absolutely. I think that's what makes it so exciting for me, because it's such a practical, real-life example of how this can possibly work – how a community can be made to be more resilient and to flourish all together. Working with the team and seeing their dedication, their commitment, and their vision has been really encouraging as well.

NL: What is your work within that team?

SM: So I'm working alongside them to translate this idea of community wealth building into language that's appropriate to Catholic Social Teaching, in order to sort of widen the net for inclusion – for these new cooperatives and this ecosystem that they're hoping to build.

I've been immersing myself in their work, in the materials they've produced, in the reports they've made on how community wealth building is working in places like the Basque Country with Mondragon in Spain or Cleveland in the US. I've also been able

to see how their community-supported agriculture works—how a local farmer comes in and provides packages for families.

It has been just so encouraging to see how dedicated they are, how committed they are to this vision – and how it's not just aspiration, it's really happening. There is a solid, strategic plan for how this economy might look in the next three to five years. What I really admire is their willingness and eagerness to collaborate with civil society in all its dimensions, including faith communities, because they understand the importance of having that cultural foundation of cooperation in order to make the economic aspect work. It's not just about setting up a single cooperative business—it's about creating and encouraging participation in a cooperative economy.

NL: You have also helped to establish the Economy of Francesco in Ireland. What is it, and why is it something you're drawn to?



It's not just about setting up a single cooperative business—it's about creating and encouraging participation in a cooperative economy.

SM: The Economy of Francesco builds on both of these ideas: faith-informed economy and participation. It engages young people: entrepreneurs involved in businesses, changemakers in civil society and advocacy, and intellectuals involved in economics and other disciplines. The goal is to build an economy “with a soul.” I think that expression really captures it. As young people, we can see that, especially in Ireland, housing policy is not sustainable into the future, environmental policy is not sustainable into the future, and a lot of that has to do with economic organisation. So it's a way for young people to bring their faith to the table and imagine a different vision of the future economy.

NL: Do you think it's something special in church circles?

SM: It's definitely special because it is such a strong global movement. There's so much collaboration and support and inspiration that we can draw from different global contexts, and to see what works. It also platforms success stories – social enterprises or policies that work in specific places. And that's what we're trying to do with an Irish hub as well—to bring those kinds of changes into Ireland.

NL: If you could implement a policy right now, what would it be?

SM: Maybe this is a bit narrow, but last year Dublin City Council followed Scotland in establishing community wealth building as a kind of paradigm for economic development in Dublin. It's still very new, and it hasn't necessarily gained ground yet. So my hope would be that it would gain momentum, and not just in Dublin, but beyond too. That would help establish an ecosystem of community wealth building here. I think that could be transformational in many areas of life.

NL: On a more personal note, how has all of this affected your own life?

SM: That's a tough question. But I feel like I've become more aware of how community happens. With Bohemian Cooperatives, they always say that they run all these programmes – skills workshops, libraries – but there's a kind of “hidden agenda” which is to build community beyond just teaching people things. And that has really stuck with me. Just noticing the ways in which community is built every day, through small, regular encounters, and taking people as they are. It really strengthens your relationship to others. And with things like the Economy of Francesco, it doesn't just feel like isolated academic ideas – it's young people coming together, being hopeful about the future. That's a powerful way of sustaining that hope, and not getting bogged down by how big everything can feel.

NL: Sophie, thank you very much.

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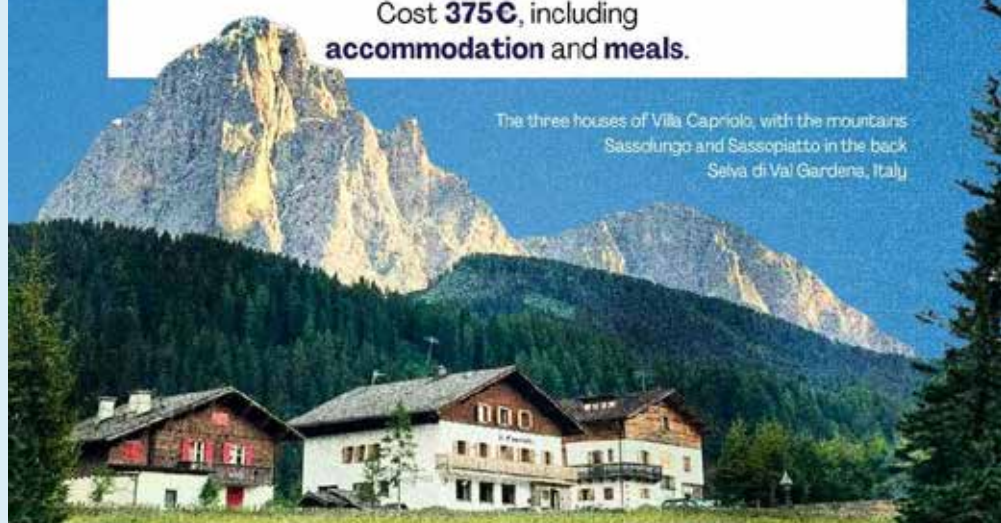
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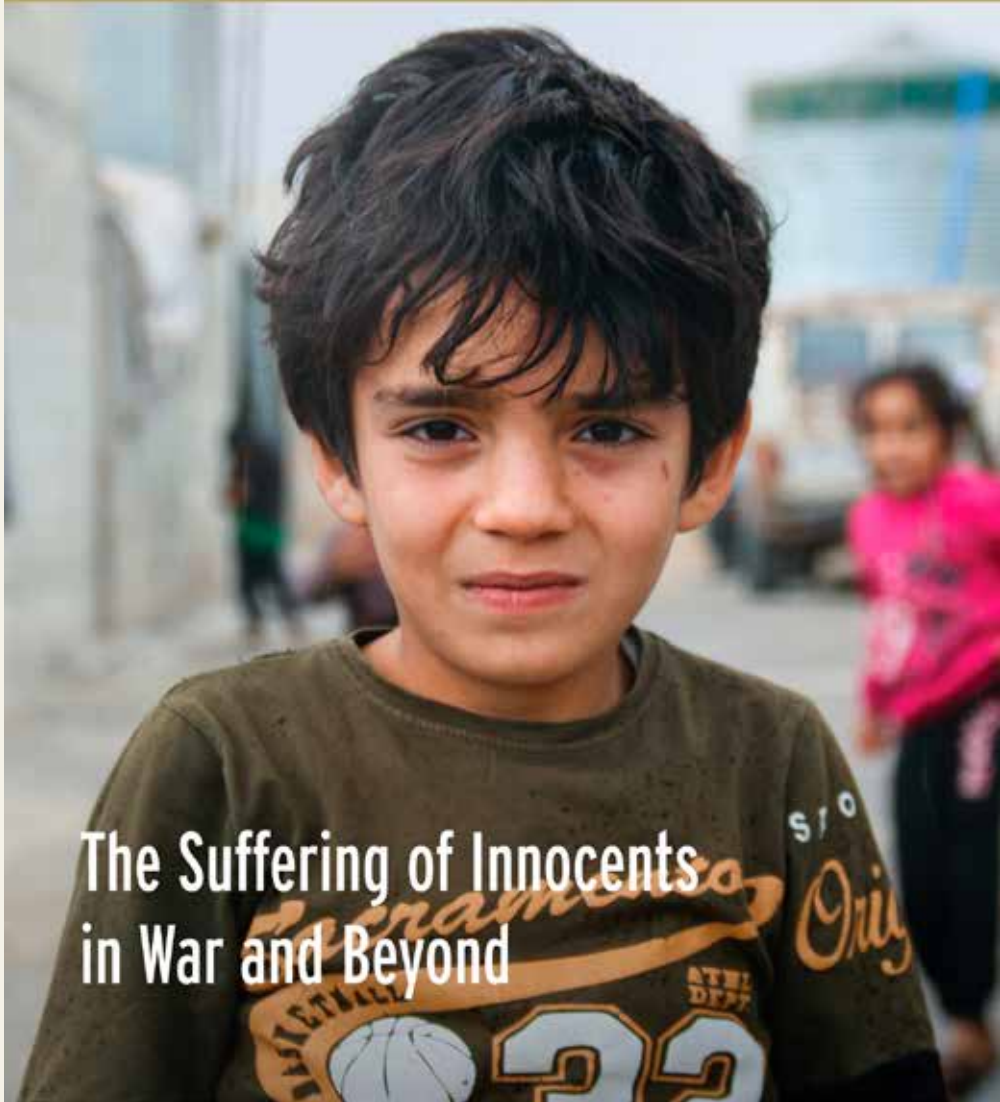
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The Suffering of Innocents
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