

# Editorial

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Against the dark night sky at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico, when Tommie Smith and John Carlos both gave the Black Power salute in the iconic photo, Australian sprinter Peter Norman is easy to miss. As the Star-Spangled Banner played in the thin air, the salute was a very public act of defiance in front of a watching world, highlighting racism and systemic segregation in the United States. Only as the details of the moments between the end of the race and the medal ceremony were revealed, does the significance of Norman's presence in solidarity with Smith and Carlos become apparent.

After the race finished, Smith and Carlos asked Norman if he believed in human rights and if he believed in God, to which he answered yes to both. Carlos remembers expecting to see fear in Norman's eyes; instead he saw love as Norman immediately joined the protest. Norman sought out a badge of the Olympic Project for Human Rights to wear on his left breast to show solidarity, and even suggested that Smith and Carlos share their gloves, as Carlos had forgotten his pair.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 'Mexico 1968: Peter Norman – Athletics and Black Power Salute', National Film and Sound Archive of Australia, accessed 13 November 2024, <https://www.nfsa.gov.au/collection/curated/asset/95238-mexico-1968-peter-norman-athletics-and-black-power-salute>.

Their paths diverged after the protest. Banned from the Olympics for life, Smith and Carlos returned to the United States as heroes of the civil rights movement,<sup>2</sup> while Norman returned to Australia as a pariah and ridiculed for his stand as Australia was experiencing paroxysms of racial strife. Despite running Olympic qualifying times for the 1972 games, Norman was not selected again. This effectively ended his career, despite producing the single greatest Australian sprinting performance. Solidarity has a cost.

This issue of *Working Notes* seeks to explore the concept of solidarity and how it could remedy many of the social ills in contemporary Ireland. We begin with a paper by Peter McVerry, SJ, a homelessness activist for over 50 years and JCFJ staff member, which he delivered at the Seán Mac Diarmada Summer School in 2023. In the provocatively titled “Ireland in Crisis – How Can Intelligent People Be So Stupid,” McVerry diagnoses the “self-protective individualism” present in Ireland which reinforces the myth that the ideal person is “responsible for their own future without having to rely on anyone or anything else.” This pursuit of security through wealth is not solely an individual pursuit as McVerry widens the scope of his critique to nation states and their treatment of migrants.

Combining these two spheres, McVerry argues strongly that the failure of centre-right and centre-left politicians to meet the basic needs of many people has created “fertile soil for the Far Right,” with politicians then hardening their positions on borders and offering refuge. But a diagnosis alone will not suffice. McVerry prescribes solidarity as a vaccine which will prevent us from suffering the worst effects of “self-protective individualism.” Drawing on Gospel parables, McVerry concludes that “[s]olidarity is rooted not in my distress at the pain of others, but in the objective reality of their distress. Solidarity is a commitment to alleviating the pain of others.”

Following on, Meaghan Carmody, a Senior Sustainability Advisor for Business in the



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Community Ireland, proposes that solidarity is not only for the present but transcends time. In “Intergenerational Solidarity: What Duties Do We Have for People in the Future?” she contends that “our political systems should also seek to govern with future generations in mind.” After providing a series of philosophical rationales and findings from neuroscience, Carmody deftly traces a chronology of global governance efforts for future generations which have emerged over half a century. Sharpening her focus down to domestic politics, she then outlines the differing future generations structures which have been developed in Hungary, Wales, and Finland. Lamenting the short-termism of contemporary Irish politics which “prioritise immediate gains over long-term sustainability,” she proposes that the next government continue the groundbreaking work of Marc Ó Cathasaigh TD and create an Ombudsman or Commission for Future Generations.

After identifying the principle of solidarity as an “essentially contested concept,” Cesare Sposetti, SJ, managing editor of *Aggiornamenti Sociali* in Milan, sidesteps the futile definitional task and, instead, outlines its current application, particularly in the context of European politics. What follows in

<sup>2</sup> James Montague, ‘The Third Man: The Forgotten Black Power Hero’, CNN, 24 April 2012, <https://www.cnn.com/2012/04/24/sport/olympics-norman-black-power/index.html>.

“Solidarity as Political Practice: A European Perspective,” is a skilful excavation of the origin of solidarity through sociology, political philosophy and Catholic Social Teaching. From considering *obligatio in solidum* in Roman Law to the activism of social movements in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, Sposetti notes that “Catholic reflection on the issue of solidarity developed quite late, even though its roots can be clearly found at the core of the Christian message itself.” With echoes of the preceding papers, Sposetti identifies a movement of “desolidarisation” fostered by the modernisation process, leading to a hyper-individualism, but he finds hope in the intergenerational aspect of solidarity as younger generations find their voice.

Sharpening the focus to a particular group of people, Dr Cormac Behan of Maynooth University in “From Philanthropy to Solidarity: Diverse Expressions of Prisoner Advocacy and Support,” details the individuals and organisations involved in advocacy and support for those in Irish prisons. After outlining early philanthropists and prison reformers, such as John Howard and Elizabeth Fry, Behan argues that the emergence of the category of “politically aligned” prisoners, particularly due to the conflict in Northern Ireland, led to the formation of wider support networks providing advocacy and support for “ordinary” prisoners. This “renewed interest in the plight of prisoners” led to the emergence of Portlaoise Prisoners Union and the Prisoners’ Rights Organisation, which campaigned to improve substandard prison conditions.

Finally, in “Destabilising the Fight Against Poverty,” Sofia Clifford Riordan and Noel Wardick of the Dublin City Community Co-op question the existence of solidarity and collaboration between the Government and the community, local development and voluntary sector, who are central to the State’s response to alleviate the consequences of poverty. Through an in-depth analysis of “competitive tendering,” drawing on practitioner experience, Clifford Riordan and Wardick warn that this approach, when compared to other social services, is a “destabilisation of the very ecosystem designed and endorsed by the State to tackle poverty.” After outlining the job insecurity and pay disparity prevalent in the sector due to Government policy, the authors warn that if this destabilisation continues, anti-poverty networks will not be equipped to deal with the various crises which “will be compounded and exacerbated by the climate crisis.”

On that night in 1968, Norman won a silver medal in a marquee race but it was his solidarity and the courage of his convictions to stand alongside his fellow athletes that has endured. When he died in 2006, Smith and Carlos were both pallbearers at his funeral. In a 2020 gathering, Pope Francis counseled his listeners that solidarity is vital for the healing of our interpersonal and social sicknesses, to the extent that “[t]here is no other way. Either we go ahead along the road of solidarity, or things will worsen.”<sup>3</sup> Solidarity has a cost as we prioritise the needs of others and seek justice. As many of the social ills and policy failures in contemporary Ireland result from the primacy of the individual, solidarity may be the only antidote available to counteract this myth of self-sufficiency.

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3 Pope Francis, ‘General Audience - Solidarity and the Virtue of Faith’, Vatican, 2 September 2020, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2020/documents/papa-francesco\\_20200902\\_udienza-generale.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2020/documents/papa-francesco_20200902_udienza-generale.html).