

Ireland in Crisis – How Can Intelligent People Be So Stupid

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VIEWS FROM ABOVE AND BELOW

Ireland is at a crossroads, indeed it is in crisis. But the cause of the crisis is not some external agency or force. The cause of the crisis is within.

There are two ways of looking at Ireland's economic fortunes. There is a view from the top and a view from the bottom.

Viewed from the top, Ireland is one of the most successful economies in Europe. It has effectively full employment,¹ households have record levels of savings,² its economy is forecast to grow by 4.9% this year (the highest in the European Union)³, and it has a massive budget surplus which is growing year by year.⁴

But, viewed from the bottom, Ireland is a failing state. I often wonder why would a young person with a qualification stay in Ireland. They will never own their own home, they will be paying outrageous rents all their life for a place to live with no security of tenure, and they will have one of the highest costs of living in Europe.⁵ While most of the very visible local authority tenements have been demolished, such as in the inner city of Dublin, the tenements are still with us, but now they exist in the private rented sector, hidden behind what appears to be very respectable house fronts. We have a housing system which grows more and more dysfunctional every year, a public hospital system which seems incapable of addressing long waiting lists for treatment, or people waiting on trolleys for days on end, and services such as schools, hospitals, child mental health, GPs – they all have great difficulty in recruiting and retaining personnel. The list goes on.



Credit: Hans Eiskonen on Unsplash

Whichever view of Ireland you have depends on where you are.

Imagine a person who lives in the top flat of a building. The alarm clock hits eight o'clock in the morning and he pulls back the curtains. The sun shines in. He looks out into the back garden and sees the freshly cut grass, the flowers swaying in the breeze and the birds jumping about the lawn looking for worms. He thinks, "It's a lovely day." There may also be someone living in the basement flat of the same building. Eight o'clock in the morning comes and they pull back the curtains. The sun can't get in. They look out into the back garden, but all they see is the whitewashed wall of the outside toilet. They can't see the grass or the flowers or the worms. They don't know whether it's a lovely day or not.

Here you have two people looking out into the same garden at the same time of the same day, but they have two totally different views. There is a view from the top and a view from the bottom. And in our society, there are two totally different views of what is going on in Ireland. (Indeed, there are more than two different views, but let's just keep the analogy simple.)

There is the view of someone who has a well-paid, permanent, pensionable job, who lives in a nice house in a nice part of town, whose family all have health insurance, whose children are going to fee-paying schools and who will go on to third-level education and subsequently on to a well-paid, permanent, pensionable job and buy a nice house in a nice part of town. They believe Ireland is a wonderful place to live.

1 Eoin Burke-Kennedy, 'Jobless Numbers Rise to 4.2% but Ireland Remains Close to Full Employment', *The Irish Times*, 3 July 2024, <https://www.irishtimes.com/business/2024/07/03/irish-unemployment-rises-marginally-to-42/>.

2 Gill Stedman, 'Household Savings Rate Increases to 14.7%', *RTE*, 13 June 2024, <https://www.rte.ie/news/business/2024/06/13/1454560-household-savings-rate-increases-to-14-7/>.

3 Naomi O'Leary, 'Irish Economic Growth Helps EU Narrowly Avoid Recession', *The Irish Times*, 13 February 2023, <https://www.irishtimes.com/business/2023/02/13/eu-avoids-recession-as-forecasts-revised-up/>.

4 Eleanor Butler, 'Ireland Is Running a Budget Surplus: Why Has It Been Warned to Stop Spending?', *Euronews*, 5 September 2024, <https://www.euronews.com/business/2024/09/05/ireland-is-running-a-budget-surplus-why-has-it-been-warned-to-stop-spending>.

5 Sean McCarthaigh, 'New Data Confirms Ireland to Be the Most Expensive Country in Europe for Household Goods', *Irish Examiner*, 21 June 2023, <https://www.irishexaminer.com/business/economy/arid-41167393.html>.

Then there is the view of someone who left school at 16 to get an unskilled, insecure job in order to help his unemployed parents financially, who lives in a disadvantaged neighbourhood which has a major drug problem. His parents want to move to a nicer part of town, but they know that's never going to happen. His grandfather is on a long waiting list for a hip replacement in the public health service. He thinks Ireland is a lousy place to live.

DECISIONS FROM ABOVE

The problem is not that there are two views. The problem is that all the decisions in our society, in the business world, the financial world, the political world, are made by the people with the view from the top and they have no idea of what the experience of those with the view from the bottom is like. And yet they make the decisions that affect those people at the bottom. Living in the top flat blinds you to the reality of life in the basement. Financial security blinds you to the reality of people who struggle to survive from week to week, or even day to day. Owning your own home blinds you to the reality of living in the insecurity of private rented accommodation and paying exorbitant rents. Having health insurance blinds you to the reality of people having to wait years for urgent surgery. I am not trying to give anyone a guilt trip, but to suggest that we all – and in particular, decision-makers – have to move out of our bubbles. We do this not by reading reports or watching prime time videos but by engaging with those in the basement.

My bubble was burst when I went to the inner city of Dublin. I grew up in a nice home. My parents were financially secure. I went to a fee-paying school and on to university. I thought Ireland was a wonderful place to live and grow up. That is until I went to the inner city of Dublin. There I was shocked by the conditions in which people were forced to live, in appalling tenement accommodation, with an unemployment rate of about 80%. Young people growing up there had no realistic prospect of ever getting a decent job, so they were leaving school at 12 years old and hanging around the streets all day long. Their parents were unemployed and couldn't give them any money, so they did a little robbing,

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until they got to 16 or 17, at which time they did a lot of robbing, and went to jail. For them, Ireland was an awful place to live and grow up. But what shocked me even more was that I had been living in Dublin for many years and was totally unaware of the conditions in which people in the inner city lived. Six years in the inner city radicalised me.

Some people have no idea what I am talking about.

VIRUS OF SELF-PROTECTIVE INDIVIDUALISM

Let us go back to our house. The landlord decides he would like the tenants in the basement to have a nice view of the garden. So he decides to demolish the outside toilet and install a porch door so that the tenants can access the beautiful garden. Isn't that wonderful? However, now he tells the tenants in the basement that because he has made substantial improvements to their flat, he will have to increase their rent. They cannot afford to pay so the landlord gives them, very reluctantly of course, notice to quit.



Credit: iStock, 907650234

This is what the vulture funds did after the financial crash. They were invited in by the Government, so, like vultures flying over territories, they looked for what they call “undervalued properties” – homes where people were paying average or below-market-value rents. They purchase these people’s rented homes and upgrade them, the cost of which is passed onto tenants, some of who cannot afford the rent increases. The result is that tenants are being pushed out of their homes – they fall into arrears and have an eviction process launched against them. The exemption given to vulture funds by government – they pay no tax on the rental income,⁶ unlike Irish landlords who pay over 50% tax on their rental income, or capital gains tax on the sale of the properties – was a massive transfer of money from ordinary Irish people, many struggling financially, to very wealthy international funds.

The island of saints and scholars has become a land of buyers and sellers. How did we allow this to happen?

A destructive virus has corrupted our economy. It has become widely entrenched in our culture and mind-sets. It has even infiltrated into our churches and their spirituality. It has been incubating for many decades but it escaped during Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan’s time in office. It is called *self-protective individualism*.⁷ This virus leads us to believe that our security and happiness depends on possessing more and more.

This *self-protective individualism* promotes the idea that I, and I alone, am responsible for my future. It tells us that we are self-interested actors who compete against each other for scarce resources. It tries to persuade us that the ideal person is the one who is independent, who can stand on their own two feet, who is responsible for their own future without having to rely on anyone or anything else. Self-sufficiency is the ideal state; dependency is seen as a weakness, a vulnerability which

6 Real Estate Investment Trusts are generally exempt from Corporation Tax on income from their property rental business only. See Revenue, ‘Real Estate Investment Trusts (REITs)’, 7 June 2024, <https://www.revenue.ie/en/companies-and-charities/financial-services/reit/index.aspx>.

7 My colleague, Kevin Hargaden, has written about it at a scholarly level: Kevin Hargaden, *Theological Ethics in a Neoliberal Age* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2018).

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we have to overcome, if we are to be truly secure. And so we make our own future by striving to have enough financial resources to meet all our needs and have a little extra available for future emergencies, a rainy day fund. Our independence and security have come to depend on what we possess. The only true security we can rely on is financial security. Of course we all want enough. But enough is never enough. There is no ceiling. Enough is a meaningless term. We keep on trying to accumulate more and more, in the belief that the more we accumulate, the more independent and secure we will become. To seek to accumulate more and more is considered to be just common-sense, the responsible thing to do, we owe it to our families.

SELFISHNESS AS VIRTUE

A new form of selfishness—everyone for themselves—has mutated into a virtue. The constant fear of being made redundant and joining the ranks of the poor creates a ruthless competitiveness that seeks to secure and maintain every advantage possible. To do anything else is just foolishness. A concern for others and a solidarity with those who have fallen behind does not sit easily with this endless search for security. Capital accumulation takes priority over the common good. A person’s right to make money takes priority over the needs of the larger community. Money has become the supreme value that all other values are measured by. Money is the new God – in money I trust. This became even more apparent in the few months leading up to the budget. With a massive tax surplus, the political parties competed with each other to offer more money to more groups in return for their votes. Fine Gael was first out of the trap with the promise of a €1,000 cut in income tax for middle income



Protestors at the former Crown Paints site in Coolock, North Dublin. Credit: PA images/Alamy Stock Photo

earners.⁸ Some may believe that what I am saying is pure nonsense – and maybe it is. But maybe this virus has been so successful that it has so deeply infiltrated our mindsets that it is impossible to even imagine a coherent alternative. This is perhaps the reason why Irish people did not march, protest, or riot in any significant way at the austerity imposed in the years after the end of the Celtic Tiger. People, for the most part, accepted austerity because they believed that there was no alternative.

In the business world, maximising profit is the primary goal, often the only goal. Hotels have been sharply criticised for inflating their prices – they justify that by invoking the “market.” Supermarkets have been accused of “greedflation,”⁹ as food inflation was far in excess of general inflation. While all low and middle-income households in the country struggle to pay their energy bills, the energy companies are making massive, record profits. Land hoarding, which increases the cost of housing, is widespread. Institutional investors view residential properties, not as homes for people,

but as opportunities to extract profits. The business person who can replace 500 workers with technology, thereby cutting costs, is lauded as a shrewd entrepreneur. A landlord who is not seeking the market rent for their property is just considered stupid. Rent caps are opposed by the owners of rental property as an interference in their right to maximise the profit they can make from their property. Now that the price of houses has almost reached its peak, landlords are selling their rented properties, and evicting the tenants, in order to maximise their value of their house. Many would say that to do anything else would be foolish. In business, everything becomes subordinate to making money.

NATIONS ARE NOT IMMUNE

Seeking financial security through accumulating more and more applies to nations as well as individuals and businesses. Just as individuals are involved in a competitive struggle with other individuals to secure as much of the available resources as they can, so too nations are involved in a competitive struggle with other nations to secure as much as they can. Hence, anything that would reduce our competitiveness, such as lifting workers out of poverty by introducing a living wage, is unthinkable. Our quality of life depends on continuously growing the nation’s GDP. To fall into recession is to put at risk our quality of life. Economic progress

8 Double-income households earning more than €50,000 each with three children benefitted most from Budget 2025 as they will be better-off by more than €1,500 a year. See Conor Pope, ‘Budget 2025: Who Stands to Benefit Most from Tax Changes and Cost-of-Living Measures?’, *The Irish Times*, 1 October 2024, <https://www.irishtimes.com/your-money/2024/10/01/budget-2025-who-stands-to-benefit-most-from-tax-changes-and-cost-of-living-measures/>.

9 Phillip Inman, ‘Greedflation: Corporate Profiteering “Significantly” Boosted Global Prices, Study Shows’, *The Guardian*, 7 December 2023, sec. Business, <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2023/dec/07/greedflation-corporate-profiteering-boosted-global-prices-study>.

has become the religion of the modern age. To challenge the goal of increasing GDP, year by year, is therefore considered naïve and foolish. Unlimited economic growth is the assumption, despite the fact that we know the planet's material resources are finite and its ability to act as a sink for our waste is limited.¹⁰ Government policy is focused predominantly on increasing economic growth and managing budgets. The economic narrative is dominated by terms such as productivity, competitiveness and efficiency. Ireland's massive budget surpluses ensures Ireland's security, at least for the moment, in an insecure world. The world is on the edge of a precipice, it is time to put on our crash helmets, but all nations continue seeking maximum economic growth, in the vague hope that technology will save us.¹¹

Building walls or fences or patrolling the seas to prevent immigrants from coming in to take our jobs, our housing, and our wealth is the focus of much policy in US, the UK, Poland, Hungary, and Italy. Such narrow forms of nationalism err in thinking that they can develop on their own, regardless of the ruinous impact on others – that, by closing their doors to others, their quality of life will be better protected. Immigrants are seen as threats who have nothing to offer. Wealthy nations believe that they have worked hard to build up their wealth (conveniently ignoring the effects of slavery and exploitation of the resources of countries that were colonised) and are rarely prepared to share their wealth with others.

REEMERGENCE OF THE FAR RIGHT

In Ireland, the anti-immigrant Far Right is a small but vocal minority.¹² However, we have seen, in other jurisdictions such as Poland, Hungary, Denmark, Austria and Sweden, how the Far Right can gain power and control the political agenda. In Spain, the Vox party exerts

a deep influence on the political conversation.¹³ In Germany, *Alternative für Deutschland* is now a major (and normalised) presence at Federal and Regional level.¹⁴ In Italy, the Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni is of the *Fratelli d'Italia* party.¹⁵ Turkey has just re-elected its autocratic President.¹⁶ In France, Marine le Pen and her *National Rally* party scored their best ever results in last year's presidential and parliamentary elections.¹⁷ In Ireland, they have little chance of taking power. But they don't even have to gain power. In Britain, a small Far Right minority have taken control of the Conservative party and the entire national discourse has lurched away from social democracy; in the US, a small Far Right minority have taken control of the Republican Party with devastating consequences.

The Far Right spread fear and hatred, using social media, especially TikTok, Twitter (under its new management), Telegram, Facebook, and You Tube, exploiting algorithms, which amplify toxic and manipulative content at scale and a dizzyingly rapid speed, fostering engagement via likes, shares and views. Whenever survey results can be tilted towards their narrative, it is a certainty that they will be exploited by the Far Right.¹⁸ Disseminating false information can find a ready audience. Many people, especially young people, have come to believe – how can you blame them! – that the centre-right and centre-left politicians have failed to meet their basic needs, and that politicians are primarily interested in using their power and influence

10 In Doughnut Economics, Kate Raworth shifts the focus away from quarterly growth reports to how environmental sustainability can be addressed alongside social justice concerns. See Kate Raworth, *Doughnut Economics: Seven Ways to Think Like a 21st Century Economist* (London: Random House Business, 2018).

11 Paul Burnell, Gemma Sherlock, and Ruth Comerford, 'Government Pledges Nearly £22bn for Carbon Capture Projects', BBC, 4 October 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cy4301n3771o>.

12 Five Far Right councillors were elected in the 2024 local elections; including three independents and one from each of the Irish Freedom Party and the National Party. See Mick Clifford, 'Where to next for Far Right in Ireland?', Irish Examiner, 15 June 2024, <https://www.irishexaminer.com/news/spotlight/arid-41416222.html>.

13 Sandrine Morel, 'Spain's Vox Party Hosts Global Far Right Ahead of EU Elections', *Le Monde*, 20 May 2024, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2024/05/20/spain-s-vox-party-holds-rally-in-hopes-of-bringing-together-far-right-ahead-of-eu-elections_6672039_4.html.

14 Paul Kirby and Jessica Parker, 'German Far Right AfD Hails "historic" Election Victory in East', BBC, September 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cn02w01xr2jo>.

15 Jon Henley, 'Giorgia Meloni Has Emerged as a Kingmaker for the EU – but Will She Turn to Centre Right or Far Right?', *The Observer*, 2 June 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/jun/02/giorgia-meloni-italy-far-right-prime-minister-eu>.

16 Al Jazeera Staff, 'Turkey Election Run-off Results 2023 by the Numbers', Al Jazeera, 28 May 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/5/28/follow-the-vote-turkey-election-run-off-results-2023>.

17 In the 2024 Parliament elections, National Rally and its allies received 33% of the national popular vote. See Angélique Chrisafis, 'Far-Right National Rally in Reach of Being Dominant French Party after Election First Round', *The Guardian*, 1 July 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/jun/30/far-right-national-rally-in-reach-of-being-dominant-french-party-after-election-first-round>.

18 As an example, the report that suggested that 75% of Irish people believe Ireland has taken in too many refugees. Michael Brennan, 'Three Quarters of People Think Ireland "Taking in Too Many Refugees"', *Business Post*, 28 May 2023, <https://www.businesspost.ie/politics/three-quarters-of-people-think-ireland-taking-in-too-many-refugees/>.

for their own personal gain. Young people were told that if they study hard, do well in school, go on to gain a qualification, then Irish society would take care of them. Now, they know their politicians will not deliver that deal. This is fertile soil for the Far Right. And with the advent of so-called AI, fake videos will proliferate promoting white supremacy, Islamophobia, anti-refugee rhetoric, climate denial and other anti-science views – whatever will advance the Far Right cause. Because they focus on the fears of people, these actors can lead communities to become more polarised, increasing distrust and looking for scapegoats to blame, and that can have a huge influence on government policy far in excess of their numbers.

PURSUIT OF WEALTH

This virus of *self-protective individualism* tries to persuade us that accumulating more and more ensures, not just our security, but also our happiness. Our deepest desires can be fulfilled through commodities. We all seek to have enough to be able to buy our own home, to have a car, to go on holidays to the sun, go out to restaurants, have nice clothes. As someone said, “Money doesn’t bring happiness, but it sure allows you to look for it in more places.”

The quality of life in Irish society is increasingly measured in purely economic terms. We are persuaded that the problems that exist – poverty, homelessness, inadequate public health care – can only be solved by increased economic activity, on the obvious grounds that we cannot spend what we do not have. However, in 1975 when Ireland had much less, we built 8,900 social houses. When we had a recession in the 1980s, we still built 6,500 social houses. And, in 2015, when we were much wealthier, we built 75 social houses.¹⁹ In the poor Ireland of the 1970s there were about 1,000 homeless people in Ireland; in the much wealthier Ireland of 2024, there are over 14,000 registered homeless people²⁰

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

20 In August 2024, there were 14,486 people ‘officially’ homeless in Ireland, including 4,419 children. See Imasha Costa, Cate McCurry, and Cillian Sherlock, ‘New Record as Number of Homeless People in Ireland Reaches 14,486’, Irish Examiner, 27 September 2024, <https://www.irishexaminer.com/news/arid-41484685.html>.

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and at least another 12,000 who are homeless but not registered. The problem is not poverty – we can no longer plead poverty. The problem is the pursuit of wealth in a way that destroys community, turns basic human needs like housing and food into commodities, abandons the common good to private interests, favours owners over workers, and distorts the human person into a marketable product, called the ‘labour market’.

There is a direct connection between the pursuit of this individualised wealth along with the lauding of selfishness as a virtue, and the failure to provide these basic facilities. And the link between that failure and the rise of the Far Right cannot be denied.

How can we allow this to happen? It happens because this virus of greed also makes us very judgemental. It persuades us that those who are financially secure are those who have been successful and they, rightly, enjoy the rewards of their hard work and self-sacrifice. They live in nice houses in nice areas and have a secure, comfortable lifestyle. They have proved themselves to be responsible and can be trusted. But there is a stigma attached to being poor or unemployed. They are seen as people who have failed, for one reason or another. They mostly live in poor housing, in deprived areas with few resources and they struggle to make ends meet. This sustains the ideology of meritocracy: Society should reward those who have proved they are capable and trustworthy, and all it can responsibly do is try to motivate those who have proved that they aren’t. “Hand-ups, not hand-outs” is the way this ideology gets packaged. But that slogan obscures that the “supports” we offer are more conditional, more limited, and more ineffective than when our nation was an economic laggard.

That story stems back to the 1980s. In the context of rising inequality, unemployment, drugs, and poor local authority estate management, the challenges in large public housing estates were exploited to develop a stigmatising discourse that all social and public housing was a “failure.” Social housing came to be seen as a form of housing for a lower class of citizen. And then it gradually became extinct.

At the same time, there is a huge crisis in the private rented sector. Most people becoming homeless today are being evicted from the private rented sector, as landlords exit the market in droves. We could retain a lot of landlords in the system and bring new landlords into the system by one simple move. All we have to do is scrap the Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) and revert to the Rental Accommodation Scheme (RAS). In HAP, the local authority’s responsibility is simply to pay the rent to the landlord. Our government has transferred the responsibility for selecting the tenant, managing the tenant, and, if necessary, evicting the tenant, to the landlord. In RAS, the landlord’s responsibility is simply to make available a property to the local authority, a social housing unit. The local authority selects the tenant, manages the tenant and, if necessary, evicts the tenant, as it does with its own social housing estates. This is the local authority’s job, not the landlord’s. While I believe this could transform the private rented sector, and reduce the number becoming homeless, there isn’t a hope in hell of the local authorities agreeing to this. Already, they transfer a lot of their newly acquired social housing units to the Approved Housing Bodies, another way of transferring responsibility for managing social housing, another, more subtle, form of privatisation. It is protective individualism on the institutional level!

We praise those charities who are helping the poor. This is understandable, but flawed. Consider instead that food kitchens, in this, one of the wealthiest countries in the world, are actually an obscenity. Instead, have become normalised and are generously supported by the public. To adapt a quotation from a South American Archbishop: when Br. Kevin feeds the poor, he is considered a saint; when he asks why are they poor, he is considered a left-wing

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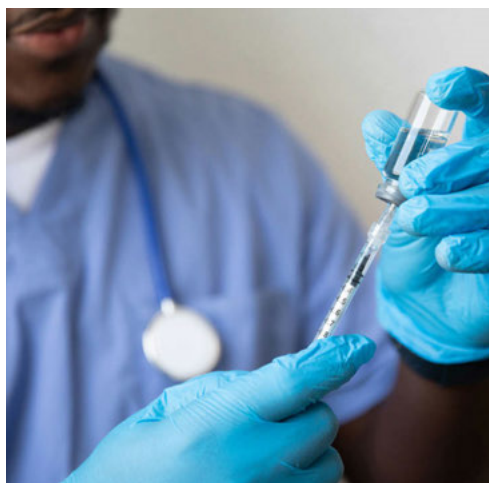
Solidarity derives not from our sense of generosity but from our sense of justice, from an acknowledgement that we are all united in our common humanity and the pain of others is our responsibility.

troublesome cleric.²¹ The St. Vincent de Paul are supporting record numbers of households in poverty in a country awash with money. But where is the outcry? Welfare projects, which meet certain urgent needs, should be considered merely temporary responses. When the number of homeless people passed 5,000, many years ago now, there was outrage. It was reported on the front pages of the media and on every news programme. But when the number passed 10,000, there was barely a whimper, except from charities working with homeless people, who were then disparagingly characterised by some in positions of authority as the “homeless industry.”

SOLIDARITY AS A VACCINE

What is happening in our world, and in our country, is a terminal spiritual disease. We worship money. But there is a vaccine. It will not prevent us from catching the virus of *self-protective individualism* but it will prevent us from suffering the worst effects of it. This vaccine is called solidarity. The Catholic Church in Ireland, as elsewhere, is a widely discredited institution. However, perhaps the values of the Gospel can challenge the unexamined, repetitious, conventional wisdom propagated by our leaders. At the core of the Gospel is this value of solidarity. Solidarity 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. Solidarity derives not from our sense of generosity but from our sense of justice, from an acknowledgement that we are all united in our common humanity and the pain of others is our responsibility.

21 Conor McCrave, “‘Despair When I See How the Government Is Behaving’: Brother Kevin Slams Government Housing Policy”, *TheJournal.ie*, 8 December 2019, <https://www.thejournal.ie/brother-kevin-criticised-the-government-over-housing-4923099-Dec2019/>.



Credit: nappy at Unsplash

Half the parables in the Gospels are about the obscurity of accumulating wealth in the midst of poverty. The story of the farmer who had a bumper harvest, but found that his barns were not big enough to store all the food, decided to tear down his barns and build bigger ones, so that he could live carefree for many years and eat, drink and make merry. This is a portrait of what our government considers a very prudent farmer. Jesus calls him a fool for not using his wealth to aid the hungry and poor who were living all around him.²² When the workers stood in the market place, hoping to be chosen for a day's work – as workers on the docks used to have to do in Ireland – the vineyard owner arrived at 9am and agreed with the workers for a wage of one denarius – enough to feed their families for the day. He came again at midday to hire more workers, again early afternoon and again one hour before work was due to finish. When they came to get paid, everyone got one denarius. The workers who started work at 9am complained – the trade unions might have advised them go on strike – but Jesus praises the vineyard owner for wanting to make sure all his workers could feed their families.²³

Jesus during his time on earth spent most of his time amongst the poor; the unwanted and marginalised were at the centre of his life. And, then, at the Last Supper he said: “Do this – do what I have done, sacrifice yourself for others – in memory of me.”²⁴

22 Luke 12:16-21.

23 Matthew 20:1-16.

24 Luke 22:19.

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Solidarity finds concrete expression in service, which can take a variety of forms in an effort to care for others. Service is never ideological, for we do not serve ideas, we serve people. Service means caring for the vulnerable members of our families and our society. In offering such service, we set aside our own wishes and desires, our pursuit of power, before the concrete gaze of those who are most vulnerable. Service always looks to the faces of those who are vulnerable, touches their flesh, senses their closeness and even, in some cases, “suffers” that closeness and tries to help them.

When Jesus said, “I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, welcome into the Kingdom of God,”²⁵ he was saying that our relationship with God depends on how we reach out to those in need, simply because they are in need. No matter what social, religious, or ethnic group they belong to, we encounter God in each of them. And refugees are amongst the most needy. It matters little whether the person in need was born in my country or elsewhere. Jesus’ call to love is one that transcends all historical and cultural barriers. There is always a cost to reaching out to those in need, be it giving a few coins to a homeless person, a donation to a charity, or a few hours of voluntary work. But sometimes the cost will disturb our comfort zones, and then we remember that Jesus sacrificed everything for us.

Solidarity finds concrete expression in service, which can take a variety of forms in an effort to care for others. Service is never ideological, for we do not serve ideas, we serve people. Service means caring for the vulnerable members of our families and our society. In offering such service, we set aside our own wishes and desires, our pursuit of power, before the concrete gaze of those who are most vulnerable. Service always looks to the faces of those who are vulnerable, touches their flesh, senses their closeness and even, in some cases, “suffers” that closeness and tries to help them.

25 Matthew 25:35, author’s paraphrase.

Solidarity is a willingness to respond to the suffering of others with a love which is prepared to see my life changed, even radically, in order to bring change to the lives of those who suffer. It is a recognition that my concern for others is also, ultimately, a concern for myself; that in neglecting others, I am also diminishing myself. As the Nigerian proverb says: “If your neighbour is hungry, your chickens aren’t safe”. Or, to put it into an Irish context, “if a drug addict cannot access treatment, your property isn’t safe.”

The quality of life of those who are financially insecure depends just as much on their accessibility to basic services as on the income they receive. Access to secure housing, at a price they can afford, timely access to health care, access to quality education, to childcare, to good nursing homes for their elderly relatives where that is necessary – all this is important. We sometimes have discussions about a universal basic income, but we also need discussions about universal basic services. Have we forgotten, to adapt a phrase from the Gospel, that “the economy is for people, not people for the economy?”²⁶

In Ireland, as in many other countries, some political parties have perfected the art of ignoring the poor and the needy. But suffering is the megaphone to shatter their deafness. The heart-breaking stories of people being evicted from their private rented accommodation, people who are elderly, or with disabilities or families with children and nowhere to go, can wake us up to the consequences of worshipping money. A society that seeks prosperity but turns it back on suffering is an unhealthy society. Several years ago, on the Joe Duffy programme, it was revealed that two women were diagnosed with cancer at the same time – one had private insurance, was treated straight away and her prognosis was very good; the other had a medical card and when she started treatment, many months later, was told that the cancer had spread and she had only a few months left to live. When the disparity is exposed clearly, everyone – even those at the top – can see how we all lose.

²⁶ See Mark 2:27.

CONCLUSION

Our planet is hurtling towards disaster. The only thing that can save us is global solidarity. But Covid showed us that global solidarity is in short supply. The wealthier nations bought up most of the vaccines that became available²⁷ and refused to reveal the formula to poorer countries so that they could develop an affordable vaccine for themselves, in order to protect the profits of the pharmaceutical companies, even though they had developed the vaccine with substantial state investment. During Covid, the phrase “we are either all saved together or no one is saved” was repeated again and again, but it did not lead to a global solidarity.²⁸ And there is little sign of such global solidarity occurring. Countries are increasingly competing with each other for influence, power, resources, and market share. And within countries, including Ireland, vested interest groups are clamouring to ensure that they will not be unduly affected by the changes required. The Far Right will seek to exploit and amplify the fears of vested interests, divide them and make building solidarity much more difficult.

Mainstream political parties, mainstream media, and most shapers of public opinion continue to support economic policies and shape society’s institutions in such a way as to continue to serve those who have power and wealth. Who benefits from higher house prices? Banks, the large institutional investment funds, and homeowners. Who is disadvantaged by higher house prices? Those first time buyers on limited incomes. Those who are stuck in rental limbo. We could reduce the price of housing by at least one-third, by enacting the Kenny Report.²⁹ The Kenny report, now 50 years old, proposed that we better control the price of building land. A house, now costing €450,000 could be reduced to €300,000, making home ownership much more widely available. But

²⁷ M. Therese Lysaught, ‘Vatican: It’s Unjust (and Dangerous) for Wealthy Nations to Hoard the Covid Vaccine’, *America: The Jesuit Review*, 27 January 2021, <https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2021/01/27/covid-vaccine-distribution-united-states-vatican-239797>.

²⁸ Kevin Hargaden, ‘Beacon Controversy Reveals Irish Solidarity’, *Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice* (blog), 29 March 2021, <https://www.jcfj.ie/2021/03/29/beacon-controversy-reveals-irish-solidarity/>.

²⁹ Full copy of the Kenny Report is available on the JCFJ website, see Peter McVerry SJ, ‘Housing Report from 1973 Could Have Prevented Current Crisis’, *Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice*, 28 July 2021, <https://www.jcfj.ie/2021/07/28/housing-report-from-1973-could-have-prevented-current-crisis/>.

the Kenny Report has never been discussed; it is not even mentioned, by the mainstream political parties, even those that purport to give priority to home ownership, as they know there would be an outcry from those who now own their homes and see the paper value of their asset being reduced.

Who benefits from increasing rents? Most landlords (we grant some are still struggling financially after the Global Financial Crash) and particularly the large institutional investment funds who now own tens of thousands of residential properties. When the then Minister of Housing, Simon Coveney, considered introducing a cap on rent increase, he proposed limiting the increase to the cost of living at the time, which was hovering around zero. But the large institutional investment funds had several meetings with the Minister and insisted that 4% was the minimum they would accept, if the government wanted them to continue investing. Who is disadvantaged by rising rents? Those on limited incomes.

Ireland is driving on a motorway in two cars, trying to reach the promised land, although

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the promised land, like the rainbow, moves ever further away the closer you think you are getting there. A small number of people are in the first car, a souped-up Mercedes, speeding down the motorway at 120 kph, occasionally breaking the law if there are no Gardai around, and driving at 150 kph. The rest are in the other car, a second-hand Ford Fiesta, which is chugging along at 100 kph. The distance separating the two cars is getting greater and greater. Those in the first car have no intention of slowing down to wait for those in the second car to catch up. No, they are focused on getting to the promised land as fast as they can. If we want to build a just and peaceful Ireland, we should get rid of the two cars and buy a bus.



Housing march in Dublin. Credit: Laura Hutton/Alamy Stock Photo