

THE

AUTMN 2014



BULLETIN

MAGAZINE OF THE SOCIETY OF ST. VINCENT DE PAUL

POVERTY AND GREED IN IRELAND

SUPPORTING PRESIDENT HIGGINS

RURAL IRELAND

FIGHTING THE GOVERNMENT

SVP CHALLENGES

ENERGY REGULATOR DIVORCED FROM REALITY

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The Highest Degree

For years I lived in the torments of Hell
No one heard when I rang the bell
I felt deprived of love and life
As I cringed in my cell of poverty and strife

Bills sent chills, I lived in fright
No coal in the shed on a long winter's night
The food running out and the money spent
The week not yet over and I didn't pay rent

And just when I reached my lowest – the ebb
Angels descended anointing my head
These angels, the saviours, who heard my lost call
They are God's holy helpers, the Vincent de Paul

Extending their kindness, they offered me help
They clothed my children, put food on the shelf
And when in crept September and schools going back
They helped me buy uniforms and books – I relaxed

My body re-healed, but my heart remained broken
I had travelled dark roads, I was stripped of emotion
My spirit felt buried, a tired run-down feeling
My soul searched release and a spiritual healing

Then one Summer's night, at a quarter-to-eight
Two of "God's helpers" appeared at my gate
They guided me gently, to sign on a course
And little-by-little, I regained my life force.

I attended more courses, it was a revelation
To re-enter life and receive education
Learning new skills made me feel ten feet tall
All thanks to the members of St. Vincent de Paul

- Contributed by a person who was helped



This magazine is named in honour of the principal founder of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, Frederic Ozanam

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Contents

- 4 PRESIDENT HIGGINS SPEECH
Ethics Initiative
- 8 CHALLENGING MINISTER
On Health Issues
- 11 CHARITY OF THE YEAR
In Belfast
- 14 SVP LAUNCHES BOOK
170 Years of Fighting Poverty
- 16 SVP INTERVIEW
With Newly Appointed National Secretary
- 20 RURAL FEAR
Government Abandons Rural Ireland
- 22 MABS
Financial Problems affect Mental Health
- 25 VINCENTIAL PARTNERSHIP
For Social Justice
- 29 ROBBING PENSIONERS
How Government does it
- 30 NEW WEBSITE
SVP Launches
- 31 RELIGION IN TODAY'S WORLD
Peg Hanafin discusses
- 38 YOUNG SVP
Delvoping youth
- 40 SVP NATIONWIDE
- 46 THE SVP HOMELESS SHELTER
A TV3 series
- 51 A FIXED STAR

EDITORIAL

“ALICE IN WONDERLAND” APPROACH TO ENERGY POLICY

Ireland is extraordinary. When the Government appeals for efficient conservation of energy and the amount of energy consumed in Dublin City each year has fallen by more than a third as a result of the recession, a fall of 36% between 2006 and 2011, the utility companies can use that drop in consumption as a justification to increase prices and the Government sees no reason to stop it. Irish households are paying 20 per cent over the EU average for electricity and the Commission for Energy Regulation is adding to their profits by its attitude towards the consumer.

In this edition we highlight strong and deserved criticism of the manner in which the Commission for Energy Regulation is treating consumers. It is an “Alice in Wonderland” approach to energy policy where electricity generators are compensated by the State imposing higher charges on households and industry to preserve the profits of utility companies.

Given that CER has a mandate to protect the interest of energy customers, we question how exactly the CER is doing that.

Read - “WHY DO VULNERABLE CUSTOMERS HAVE TO SUPPORT PROFITABLE BIG BUSINESS?” on page 36.

Another example of the Government's approach to increasing taxes on hard-pressed households, of which the SVP is aware, is the way in which Irish Water has been set up and its approach of charging households at levels higher than elsewhere in Europe.

We also report how the Government is presiding over the decay of Rural Ireland. “First, they came for the post offices; then they came for the rural pub; they then came for the garda station.”

As Ireland faces into another Winter it will not be surprising, from what the Society of St. Vincent de Paul knows through its work of helping those in need, if it is a period of discontent for many Irish families and individuals.

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THE NEXT EDITION OF THE SVP BULLETIN
WILL BE PUBLISHED IN JANUARY

A Time of Risk and Opportunity for Ireland



In the last edition of The SVP Bulletin I wrote about the Society's meeting with President Michael D.Higgins at Áras an Uachtaráin in which we discussed how the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul could contribute to the Ethics Initiative which the President had launched. We followed this with the public announcement of our support to his initiative at a conference attended by about 300 people in the Davenport Hotel in Dublin, an audience composed widely of other voluntary organisations, representatives from State agencies, Government Departments, business and trade and SVP members.

President Higgins described that as the beginning of the second chapter and phase of his Ethics Initiative and expressed satisfaction and pleasure that the Society of St.Vincent de Paul was supporting his work in this regard.

Over the next months we will be undertaking other activities directed towards making Ireland a better place for all of its citizens. What we have helped to begin is a national debate as to the type of social society towards which Ireland as a nation should aim, where there is equality of opportunity for everyone, founded on policies which focus on people as much as on strategy and economic issues.

Now is the right time to have such a discussion, a time of both risk and opportunity for our country.

As President Higgins said when he addressed the meeting in the Davenport Hotel in late September, the opportunity we must not let go to waste is that of addressing the root causes of the crisis precipitated by the global financial meltdown of 2008 and the model of society it supported. The current crisis has moral and intellectual ramifications that run much deeper than that, as he pointed out. It is, indeed, time for an interrogation of the values, the vision of life and of human relations that animate us as a nation.

Please read the full text of President Higgin's speech which is printed in the following pages.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'G. Meagher'.

Geoff Meagher
**National President
SVP Ireland**

THE SOCIETY OF ST.VINCENT DE PAUL CAN LEAD DISCUSSION ABOUT THE FUTURE OF IRELAND

SVP SUPPORTS ETHICS INITIATIVE BY PRESIDENT HIGGINS Speech by President Michael D. Higgins at SVP Ethics Launch Event

May I start by thanking very warmly the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul for organising today's event, held under the auspices of The President of Ireland's Ethics Initiative. I am deeply grateful to the willingness expressed by Geoff Meagher (SVP National President) in his introduction, on behalf of you all, to engage with this Initiative which I launched in November of last year with a view to stimulating discussions, across all sectors of Irish society, on the challenges of living together ethically at this beginning of the twenty-first century.

I very much share Geoff's feeling of urgency, the sense that now is the right time to kick-start such a discussion – a time, as he put it in Saint Vincent de Paul's freshly released pre-Budget submission, of both "risk and opportunity for our country."

The Saint Vincent de Paul's pre-Budget submissions have always been among the most detailed, empirically-based and accessible of the submissions I recall attending over the years. I believe that the organisation is well placed to lift the commentaries of our time beyond a description, or reiteration, of the consequences of poverty on our people. They can lead a discussion on the "why" of it all.

The opportunity we must not let go to waste is that of addressing the root causes of the crisis precipitated by the global financial meltdown of 2008 and the model of society it supported. Indeed it is not enough to say that the upheavals caused by an unprecedented banking collapse and property bubble can be fixed if the right supervision and regulatory mechanisms are put in place. The current crisis has moral and intellectual ramifications that run much deeper than that. It calls for an interrogation of the values, the vision of life and of human relations that animate us as a society.

An amalgamation of highly individualised projects of accumulation, self-centred ideals of consumption, have displaced models of public welfare shared in the public space, enjoyed in the public world. Greed, self-interest, the insatiable pursuit of material gratifications, unrestrained competition, and the placing of the market as the centre of public policy for all human needs – such values have become widely endorsed, with sweeping repercussions on policy making, media representations and, more generally, contemporary public discourse on what constitutes 'prosperity' and the good life.

What is on offer at times is, as it were, an increasingly private life in a gated community of the mind that serves to protect itself from, or is at best indifferent, to the excluded.

The risk, as I see it, is that if we do not tackle the

assumptions that have inflicted such deep injuries on our moral imaginations, we will end up going back to "business as usual" – as many of those advocating acquiescent fortitude on "the road to recovery" would like us to do. There are signs already – on the housing market, on the credit markets – that such a return to business as usual may be underway.

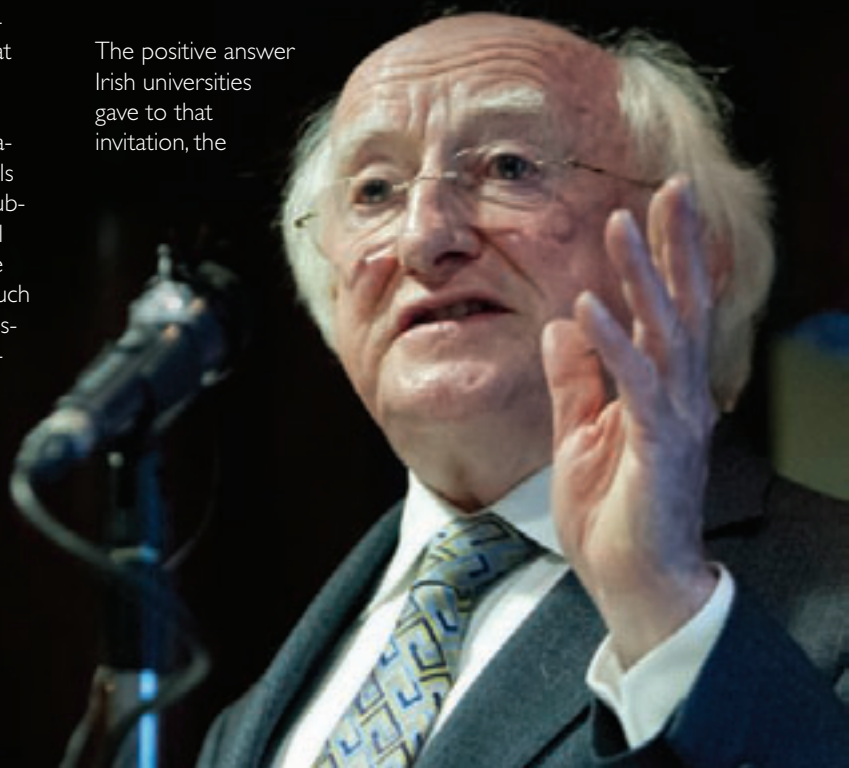
We must not, then, miss this opportunity to seek, together, a new set of principles by which we might live ethically as a society. This idea was very well encapsulated by Saint Vincent de Paul's former Vice-President, Professor John Monaghan, when he said:

"We do not want to look back on this period as one when the seeds of future social inequities were sown, but one in which the values necessary for a socially just, fair and caring nation emerged."

We must seize the energy of our times – find the moral and intellectual energy to overcome the inability that is currently so pervasive when it comes to addressing the matters of economy, society, ideology, and the deadening fingers of bureaucracy.

In a first phase of the Ethics Initiative – the second of my Presidency initiatives after "Being Young and Irish" – I invited Irish third level institutions and the Royal Irish Academy to contribute. Indeed universities have, I believe, a crucial role to play in nurturing alternative ways of thinking and in crafting an intellectual response to our current situation.

The positive answer Irish universities gave to that invitation, the



President Higgins address SVP Dublin Sept 2014

many ideas they put forward, and their commitment to organise some 50 events over the course of this year – many of which have already taken place – are greatly encouraging.

Yet one had the impression of a fractured vision, of concerned scholars not in contact with each other, of a system under such neo-utilitarian grip that it yielded in the goal of delivering a pluralist teaching of economic theory and history.

The reflection on ethics, we must never forget, is not just a matter for academics; it concerns us all. This is why in a second phase, I proposed that this Ethics Initiative be brought to civil society organisations as an overall frame, as a debate, above all as an opportunity for critical and fresh thinking, which, I hope, can contribute to harnessing and supporting the profusion of positive initiatives that exist in Irish society.

Last June, Geoff Meagher, Tom MacSweeney, John Monaghan, John Mark McCafferty from the SVP and I had a very fruitful conversation in Áras an Uachtaráin on how the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul could contribute to the Ethics Initiative, in collaboration with other organisations who have also expressed an interest in doing so, and some of whom have sent representatives here this morning.

As Geoff mentioned in his introduction, The Wheel has initiated a large consultation process – entitled “People’s Conversation” – addressing our conceptions of citizenship ahead of the centenary of the 1916 Proclamation; Dóchas, the umbrella organisation for overseas development agencies, has resolved to seize the opportunity of the European Year for Development in 2015 to conduct a reflection on the meaning of “development”. My office has also had contacts with, among others, the National Women’s Council and the Irish Congress of Trade Unions.

May I, once again, then, thank Saint Vincent de Paul for providing us with a platform to formally launch, this morning, the second phase of this national conversation on ethics. I am confident that the debate can and will garner momentum among the wider public, for the simple reason that it is a reflection many Irish citizens have already undertaken, and regard as urgent.

As members of a society which has been affected more than most by the global financial crisis, Irish people have been led to an abrupt realisation that the challenge of living together in a way that permits a flourishing of human capability and a cohesive society cannot be met, indeed can be contradicted, by an uncritical confusion of real needs and consumer wants of an insatiable kind, and the reliance on the market for the satisfaction of both.

Our citizens are anxious for a vision of where we are heading to as a society. Too many of them live in an atmosphere of unabated stress, dealing with financial circumstances that curtail their horizon and constrict them to a regime that is one of survival.

Among the important questions and choices which we must urgently address in today’s Ireland are: how do we view those who are vulnerable? How do we respond to their circumstances?

In several of my previous speeches, I suggested that the use of

the term ‘vulnerable’ is too often associated with specific categories of people – “vulnerable older people”, “vulnerable children,” for example. In fact, none of us present here this morning are ‘invulnerable.’ All of us have urgent needs for care at various stages in our lives, as a consequence of infancy, old age, physical or mental illness, impairment or other difficulties. Vulnerability is a constituent part of the human condition: all of us will, one day, face existential circumstances such that we will need support and assistance.

We should be mindful of using too uncritically, and with a suggestion of inevitability, words such as “the poor”, which have such loaded connotations in the history of our country, and have too often led to harmful distinctions between ‘the deserving’ and ‘the undeserving’ poor.

Interrogating our attitudes towards poverty, at home and abroad, is therefore one of the vital questions which, I hope, the Ethics Initiative will address. In this regard, the debate underway within the Saint Vincent de Paul Society, and beyond, on the respective merits of charity on the one hand, and the social justice perspective on the other – this debate is a very fundamental one.

As some advocates view it, charity does not provide a robust way of responding to the needs for housing, health, childcare and education of the most vulnerable, because it is based on a willingness to give, which can be taken away, and not on a collectively binding agreement of solidarity recognising the rights of those who receive assistance. What Ireland needs, those critiques argue, is a full-blown welfare state, real citizens with socio-economic rights, and not just recipients of charity or, as they are often recast nowadays, “customers”.

Yet with a strong argument for tomorrow, today’s needs have to be met. I personally do not see the need for making an excluding choice between the two – but it is not for me to settle this discussion. Let me only remark that if tensions exist within the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul around these issues, I would view them as productive and moral – frictions that keep this important debate going.

In fact, it seems to me that Saint Vincent de Paul is an organisation that has the ability to traverse all the critical ground between both ends of the spectrum, by combining the spirit of charity with the pursuit of social justice. As your mission statement makes clear, Saint Vincent de Paul is committed to providing support and friendship, through the personal bonds of trust and companionship which the members forge with those they visit week after week, and through the pragmatic, hands-on responses they apply to people’s pressing needs. But you are also committed to working for social justice.

We need your spirited concern for others, your willingness to offer of your time and support. But we also need the public policies, institutions and redistribution mechanisms that can reduce inequalities in our society. A thriving charitable sector of course does not and should never exonerate the State from its duty of care towards all of its citizens.

The ethics of friendship, with its moral gift, and the building of a Caring State, the achievement of concerned citizens, go hand in hand.

To conclude, without pre-empting the shape and content of your contribution to the Ethics Initiative, nor the manner in which the dialogue you have initiated with other civil society organisations will unfold, may I say that I am convinced that your input will be a most valuable one, for your experience is so vast, deep and has authenticity; for the insight which all of you, Saint Vincent de Paul members, have is a precious one.

Day-after-day, you seek out the forgotten; you listen to the voices of the voiceless; you support those who have to cope with unemployment, indebtedness, a relationship breakdown, a disability, or loneliness, and sometimes several of these plights at once. Your knowledge can very productively inform, not just our collective discourse, but also the policies aimed at tackling poverty.

Of course the experiential knowledge of the citizens whom those policies are serving must also be central to their devising. In this regard, I find exemplary the manner in which the research conducted by Saint Vincent de Paul makes such space for the voices of the people your members support. This is the case in your recent publication entitled *The Human Face of Austerity*, and it is also a strong feature of the research you will discuss later on this morning, which focuses on the difficulties faced by households headed by a person parenting alone.

All of us Irish people should be grateful for the quiet, sustained weekly work of the Saint Vincent de Paul Society's volunteers. But we must also be challenged by their actions, rooted as they are in the conviction that the struggles of the marginalised are the struggles of society in general.

Indeed an adequate collective discourse for the Ireland of tomorrow must be one that includes the capacities and goals

which, in the eyes of our most vulnerable citizens, render human life worthy of living. A discourse that would let the poor and the unemployed of Ireland speak.

The test of authenticity for our democracy lies in its ability to reconnect with the practices, perceptions, aspirations and everyday realities of the most vulnerable among our citizens in a way that enables them to perceive their circumstances in policy options – this requires so much more than the periodic conducting of polls.

Irish citizens have made it clear that they are awaiting a new substantive agenda of ethical options that might compete as policies for our shared future. They are willing, with adequate invitation, and when presented with challenging alternatives, to take part in the crafting of this new agenda. In that journey a change of consciousness may occur; that in turn becomes a policy aspiration, and in time becomes the fabric of a real Republic.

Thus this Ethics Initiative is an invitation to you – volunteers, members and staff of charitable organisations – to critically reflect on your own conceptions and practice. It is a call on all the civil society associations represented here this morning, and hopefully more of them will join this platform, to join forces to voice the values that they wish to see placed at the heart of our collective future. It is an encouragement to you to compel us, your elected representatives, to listen to the voices of the most vulnerable in Irish society.

Today's event marks a further step in a process which, I am convinced, can yield very important results. I greatly look forward to the outcomes of your efforts, and I assure you of my support in your future endeavours.

Audience at the launch of President Higgins Ethics Initiative





CHALLENGING THE MINISTER FOR HEALTH

**Report from Audry Deane,
SVP Social Justice & Policy Officer**



Maybe it was the location, maybe it was the glossiness, but the dominant tone at the Health Consultation event run by the Department of Health I attended in the Aviva in Dublin in mid-September was very corporate. There was talk of 'teams' and 'tents' - how many management metaphors can you shoe-horn into one sentence - 'outputs, capacity reviews' and of course lots of mentions of 'Budget over-runs'.

But I wanted to talk about people.

Over a quick cup of tea I told the Minister for Health, Leo Varadkar, how much the €2.50 charge (for every prescription item for medical card holders up to a monthly maximum of €25) was hurting vulnerable people, particularly if there are chronic conditions involved, which is statistically more likely for those with lower incomes.

He told me straight up that he was uncomfortable at the charge, but in the next breath quickly told me how much this charge is bringing in - €112 million a year to be precise.

I was left with the feeling that the Minister felt that he had won the argument, on fiscal grounds. I was not convinced, so I asked a question from the floor when a panel session with the two Ministers, the three Director Generals (of the HSE, ESRI and also, for some unexplained reason the new Further Education and Training Body (SOLAS), took place.

I told them that the SVP wanted a health system run by people caring for people and I asked if he intended to give an explicit statement of what values he wants to see underpin future and ongoing reforms in health. I explained that many SVP members see at first-hand the struggle and hardship experienced by vulnerable families and individuals who simply do not have enough income to survive.

I re-stated SVP's opposition to the prescription charge per item for medical card holders and pleaded with him to rethink this damaging charge.

I was followed quickly by a spokesperson from the Pharmacists Society who fully supported my point, describing how very vulnerable people (homeless people, people combating addiction using methadone, people with multiple needs and not enough money to go around) ask pharmacists which of their prescriptions can they get by without filling. There was a palpable tension in the air, a sense that people wanted a response.

The Minister restated baldly that he did not like this payment but needed the income. However, his Minister of State, Kathleen Lynch, did add, that there may be some movement in excluding some groups from the charge.

I left the shiny Aviva building with a sense of clarity - the Minister had been given a very clear message from the SVP. Only weeks to go to find out if he has the courage of his convictions.

WORKING FOR GLOBAL JUSTICE WITH DÓCHAS



Dóchas is the association of Irish Non-Governmental Development Organisations. It was formed in October 1993 and its Vision is “of a world where poverty and inequality are unacceptable and where every person has the right to live free from fear, free from want and able to fulfil their potential.”

The Society of St.Vincent de Paul has joined Dóchas as an Associate Member.

This article is by Hans Zomer who is Director of Dóchas

Through your SVP work in combatting poverty, you know that poverty is too deep and too multi-dimensional to be eradicated by one organisation alone.

As a result you have a long tradition of working with others, making use of the ideas and influence of all those who can make a difference – governments, companies, academia, media and civil society organisations.

The other members of Dóchas share this commitment to joint work and SVP’s membership of the Dóchas network allows it to connect and collaborate with like-minded organisations, strengthen knowledge and expertise and influence key decision-makers at national, European and global levels.

Dóchas’ work on global justice advocacy and its work co-ordinating the Irish NGO advocacy work on issues of European and Irish interest is of particular interest to the SVP.

I’m very happy to welcome the Society of St.Vincent de Paul as an Associate member of Dóchas.

Dóchas, the Irish Association of Non-Governmental Development Organisations, currently brings together 62 Irish organisations that work on global justice and development. Its purpose is to enhance Ireland’s contribution to world development, and it does that by:



* Leading the Development sector towards high standards of practice.

* Being an independent representative voice of Ireland’s Development sector; in order to influence public debate and decision-making in Ireland and the European Union.

Dóchas has developed codes of conduct and professional standards for the work of Irish Development NGOs, in areas as diverse as public communications, financial reporting, corporate governance and human resource management. It also has a number of technical working groups that meet regularly on issues such as food security, development education, humanitarian aid, disability and HIV & AIDS.

It also serves as a port of call for anyone wanting to know more about Irish Development NGOs, and through its partnership with the Department of Foreign Affairs, Dóchas provides a mechanism for policy dialogue between the Government and Ireland’s big and vibrant global development sector.

Values	Priorities	Activities
<p>Dóchas believe in:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People’s rights and social Justice • Working and learning together • Richness in diversity 	<p>Dóchas works for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More and better aid • Better coherence among policies • Putting people at the centre of development process 	<p>Dóchas delivers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mutual learning based on shared experience and analysis • Policy dialogue • Co-ordination and networking

Abstracts

Of developments in Social Justice

THE ECONOMY SHOULD SERVE PEOPLE – NOT THE OTHER WAY AROUND

“We have to remember the principle that the economy has to serve people and not the other way around,” so said the new European Commission President, Jean-Claude Juncker on taking up office. “The financial crisis is not over when 25 million people remain unemployed,” he added.

HEALTH PROFESSIONAL SECRECY

The Health Service Executive (HSE) had to remove details of State payments running into billions of Euro made to thousands of primary care health professionals after a threat of action from the Data Protection Commissioner following a complaint from the Irish Dental Union which claimed that there was no public interest justification for the publication of the payments. The HSE had published the information, it said, “so that the taxpayer is aware of the expenditure of public funds to dental practices.” The HSE has also removed details of payments to GPs, pharmacists and ophthalmologists who are contracted to it.

FIRMS HAVE LITTLE FAITH

Business owners are not reporting crime because they have no faith that the perpetrators will be apprehended or prosecuted, according to the Irish Small and Medium Enterprises Association (ISME). An Association survey indicated that the direct cost of crime to Irish businesses has risen significantly during the recession.

6,500 CHILDREN IN CARE

More than 6,500 children are in the care of the State, according to figures from the Child and Family Agency.

5,000 CONTACTED CRIME HELPLINE

According to the National Crime Victims Helpline, robbery, burglary and theft are the most common crimes and more victims seek help after these offences than any other. Assaults, sexual abuse and harassment are other major reasons for complaints. Twice as many females as males sought help in 2013.

EMIGRATION FALLS

The number of Irish people emigrating fell last year for the first time in seven years. The numbers dropped from 50,900 to 40,700 according to the Central Statistics Office.

SEANAD CHANGES

Significant changes in the way the Seanad operates will be implemented by October, according to the Leader of the House, Senator Maurice Cummins. He said it would have a greater role in matters such as EU scrutiny and North-South co-operation.

NOT ENOUGH WATER

Two-thirds of homeowners do not believe the proposed ‘free allowance’ of water will cover their daily needs when charges are introduced according to a Sunday Independent opinion survey carried out by Millward Brown.

HIGHEST SUICIDES ON RECORD

There were 554 suicides in 2011, the highest on record according to the latest figures from the CSO.



SVP IS CHOSEN AS CHARITY OF THE YEAR IN BELFAST



By SVP Northern Regional President, Aidan Crawford

In the North we have been striving towards social justice so that every person can have the same opportunity to realise his or her potential in society, regardless of creed, political belief or background.

This is particularly important as, during the last four to five years, we have seen a 100% increase in demand for our services. We now provide more than 2,000 home visitations by 1,600 members per week; breakfast clubs and after-school clubs, Vincent's community shops and a wide range of practical support for those in need.

Our Conferences have been active providing support and fellowship to their communities. Our strength in membership and our presence in every city, town, village and townland, allows us to identify those living in poverty throughout the year, across all communities.

Each Conference has been active in fundraising, with fashion shows, golf days, pensioner trips, and coffee mornings to name but a few successful events. We also have committed supporters, who, along with our volunteers, are the lifeblood of our charity. One such veteran fundraiser is Des Keenan, who undertook a 'cooker-push' through 20 towns across Northern Ireland - no mean feat for a man turning 70 this year! SVP supported him on his route and we are very grateful for his dedication.

As an organisation, we are delighted to be chosen by the Deputy Lord Mayor, Maire Hendron of the Alliance Party, to be her charity of the year. This honour is in recognition of our on-going work and we have kindly been gifted the use of Belfast City Hall for our Christmas Charity Gala on November 29, which will be a major corporate fundraiser.

We have also been recognised through the National Citizenship Project (NCS) government initiative, which engages young people in social action projects. For their NCS project, two cross-community groups from Belfast have teamed up to make hampers for those in need in their communities, which will be distributed through SVP. We appreciate their commitment which is a great support for our work.

Through the BBC, we recently highlighted that the cost of going 'back to school' is putting increasing pressure on families. A basic regulation secondary or grammar school uniform and PE kit can be more than £200 stg and we are finding more people are visiting our 28 shops seeking uniform items to help offset this major cost. We encourage families with unwanted uniform items, in addition to other clothing, bric-a-brac and homewares, to donate them to Vincent's.

It is with sadness that we must announce the closure of Vincent's in Dromore, Co. Down, which, due to difficult trading conditions, was unfortunately no longer viable. We would like to thank our loyal volunteers in Dromore and also our customers who supported us through the years. SVP will continue to work to benefit those in need in the area and local people can still donate unwanted items to SVP through our recycling bins in the town.

It is positive that the Government has recognised and is acting on the need for more social housing to meet increasing demand. This issue is one of the main concerns brought to us weekly – not only are families and individuals living in overcrowded accommodation but the shortage of social housing makes homelessness a real concern for many.

With the festive season approaching, we will undertake our annual Christmas activities and appeals to provide hampers, toys and financial support to those families who, whilst struggling to put gifts under a tree, are also having difficulties in putting food on the table, at what should be a joyous time.

With a far-reaching presence across Northern Ireland, our devoted volunteers work tirelessly to give people a hand-up to help them become free from poverty.

• *Anyone in need or those wishing to support our work, please contact our Regional Office on phone 028 02890 351561 or by emailing info@svpni.co.uk, in the first instance.*

YOU CANNOT LEAVE YOUR NATIVE ROOTS BEHIND YOU

“Blasket Islanders were a great people. They were a great community. They are a generation lost.”

Gearóid Cheaist Ó Catháin was the last child to live on the Blasket Islands. He was once called “the loneliest boy in the world” and has written a book about his life which records a different time in Ireland. He recalled his life and times in conversation with Tom MacSweeney.

Ballintemple, a suburb of Cork City on the southern side of the River Lee, is a long way from the Blasket Islands off the coast of County Kerry. As we sit in the front room of his house, Gearóid Cheaist Ó Catháin starts our conversation with a remark that has all the longing of a man for his roots, for what formed his nature, himself and his attitude to life:

“You cannot shake your roots, they are everywhere,” he tells me, as he recalls how as a youngster he left his home on the island when the Great Blasket was evacuated in the early 1950s. “It was a community that was isolated, but it was a great community, it lived as a community. You cannot shake off your heritage. It always sticks onto you like glue.”

As remote as it was and as difficult as life was, the people of the Blaskets had a great determination about life, he tells me.

On the walls of his living room are photographs and paintings of island life, the launching boats from a beach, men watching the sea and a dramatic photograph of the islands against the backdrop of the wild Atlantic Ocean. Although a small community, the Blasket islanders who lived three miles from the tip of the Dingle Peninsula have had a profound effect on Irish culture and the Irish language,

the names and works of Peig Sayers and Tomás Ó Criomhthain are legendary

Gearóid recalls a lifetime when he once became an international celebrity. He was the last child brought up on the Blaskets. Nearest in age to him was his uncle who was 30 years older. In 1949 a national newspaper article described him as “the loneliest boy in the world – he has only seagulls for playmates.” It reverberated around the world. Of the 30 inhabitants of the Blaskets at the time, he was the only child and when it was published just before Christmastime, his home became inundated with gifts, presents from

many parts and even offers of a new home for him and his family in the United States.

“Our house was almost taken over as letters and gifts arrived. The whole family could have been taken to America. One Texas man wanted to adopt me, to buy me really I suppose and there was a family in Iowa who had a big business and they wanted to take the whole family to America. My mother would have shown some interest, but my father was a native Blasket Islander and was never beyond Tralee which was 40 miles away and would not go and they and the islanders thought it a bit weird that a Texas man would offer to take a child away from the island.”

Those were different times, he reflects, as he tells me that it was a newspaper article that was written to sell papers and with an apt description to do so, but it was not the real story of his life on the island:

“I was cherished and special because I was the only child there when I was born and brought by my mother onto the island from the hospital, with a huge welcome by all the islanders as we landed and they all followed to our house where there was a big celebration. For the island it was great that there was new, young life. Life on the island was tough but as a child I had a good life. I was never lonely. The story was a headline grabber and I suppose apt at the time to sell newspapers and as a child I was certainly delighted with all the presents that came to me, which I would never have had otherwise.

“But I was not lonely in living on the island. It was not a bit like that. I was surrounded by grownups and every one of them looked after me as if I was their child. I was very well looked after. I could visit from one house to another, I had plenty of things to do and everyone took care of me. They cherished the only child on the island. It was a good life for me as a child.”

Gearóid grew up on an island which had no doctor, nurse, priest, school, church or electricity, or any of the facilities of modern lifestyle available on the mainland.

Sitting in his room, he goes back in memory for me to those years on the Blaskets:

“They are and always will be a part of me. They have a special place in my heart, one which I will never let go. Being a native islander has left its mark on me, as is natural. In a crowd I can feel uneasy. When I lived on the Great Blasket from the time of my birth to the age of six, I was the only child there. I left when the island was evacuated in 1953.

“Of the evacuated islanders, I am now the only survivor.”

We discuss the illusion which those who live on the mainland may have of life on the islands and I ask him what was the essence of the Blaskets community. People seemed to have a great determination, even as remote and difficult as it was to live there, I suggest.

“I have often been asked that question and the only way I can describe it to you is that they had a great belief in their religion which was a very strong part of their lives. They worried and were upset when things went wrong, when a crop failed, or the fishing did not turn up but they believed in God’s will and they went about their duties of life diligently, constantly, even though they were always having to fight against the elements,

“They were fighting the weather which can be atrocious around Ireland as we know and the further west you go it gets worse and they were fighting against it and yet their whole existence depended on it and they believed in the Will of God. As fishermen most of the men could not swim. I asked them about that and their response was that where they were in the Blaskets, if they got into a bad storm at sea, they would have no shelter and there could be no hope, so they would drown and that was it.”

Boats were their lifeline to the mainland, the only transport and I suggest that, to an outsider, they could look frail and not strong enough for the waters he was describing:

“That might seem the way, but it is wrong. The boats were built for the conditions and were ideal for them. Their construction was a



very, very fine art and the people building the naomhogs knew their art. They were great boat builders. They had everything measured to the last inch for each boat. There was a working boat and a leisure boat. The working boat was a four-oar naomhog and the three-oar would be the leisure boat use, but each one was sound and suitable for the duties that it had to do, one lighter, the other heavy. There was a lot of great workmanship put into the boats, most of which was done during the Winter and indoors.

"You had to be a skilled boat handler because the naomhog are a small craft but were very usable in the waters around the Blaskets where they faced hard, tough weather. The boats were very good carriers of material and animals and the people who were rowing them knew their business inside out. They would not venture out when they did not have the suitable weather to do so. Their day's work depended on the weather and they tried to avoid danger.

"InisTuisceart is about 12 miles from the Great Blasket. My grandfather would spend a week studying the weather before they would make the journey to there because there was no shelter."

At this stage Gearóid points at a photograph of InisTuisceart on the wall of his living room. It makes the point about what he is saying, the isolated location is obvious.

"They had to get their timing and the weather exactly correct. There was no landing place where a boat could remain overnight in safety and those decisions, that kind of assessment was made long before there were weather forecasts as widely and easily available as they are today."

Gearóid has published the story of his life on the island in a book from The Collins Press entitled: "THE LONELIEST BOY IN THE WORLD: The Last Child of the Great Blasket Island," written with author Patricia Ahern.

I tell him that his description of the lights of Christmas on the island made a big impression on me:

"Christmastime was very special on the Great Blasket. The islands are remote. There was no electricity and the only light was from an oil lamp that would be close to a window and the windows of the houses were very small. You wouldn't see the light in the distance. You would nearly have to be up to the house before you would see it but at Christmastime it was different. The islanders would buy big candles in Dingle and every window was lit so the whole village would be ablaze and for a three-or-four year-old it was magical to see the village lit up. If there was a full moon off Dunmore Head it would seem to be shining to the Blaskets and it would seem to create a pathway lit up across the sea like a road. If it was a frosty night, the frost would glisten on the felt roofs. It was like a picture postcard."

But those felt roofs were not that strong when the winds blasted across the Blaskets:

"If you have ever been on an island, the wind is terrible and on the Blasket Islands nothing grew. It was bare, just bare, salty, the wind constantly blowing. South/West, North/West, South/East winds, the Blaskets got them all and they blew ferociously across the Blaskets

and when those winds came, they came spectacularly. There was no shelter. When people ventured out of their houses during those winds, to feed the animals for example, they would have to have somebody manning the front door against the wind, because the roofs on the houses were delicate. They were felt, tar, stone, mortar, so they were not really good against the strong winds. Two people would have to venture out together for safety, tied to each other so the force of the wind would not blow them around, so they could try to walk against it. The force of the wind was a big problem when those winds came."

I asked him what the reaction was amongst the islanders when Eamon de Valera's government gave the order to evacuate the islanders in 1953:

"When the decision came to go the younger of the islanders felt it was the right thing but the older people did not. In those years things were looking different when they went to the mainland for supplies and so on and the younger people had been leaving and they wanted better facilities and work and they were anxious to go. The older people, they wanted to stay. Some were born in the 1800s, they had grown up on the island and they didn't want to go. My grandfather died in 1961 and he was about 94 years old, so you can imagine his lifespan. The older people really faded away in the transition. My grandfather never ventured outside the door of the house he was given when people moved to the mainland around Dunquin and my maternal grandfather died within two years of leaving the Blaskets."

Gearóid writes about the conditions of some of the houses which were built for the islanders, which were not of the best quality it would seem from the book. He writes of how his family adapted to life on the mainland and his schooling, including boarding school. I found it an absorbing book and a very enjoyable read. He is direct, to the point and blunt when needed, such as his disagreement with the way in which the Irish language has been treated. As a native speaker he says "I never forgot the fear on the faces of my classmates," over the way pupils were treated when learning Irish:

"Even today, something stinks about how the Irish language is perceived. Leaving it to academia will kill it. We need a revival, someone with a fresh approach who could make the language appeal to the masses, someone like Seán Ó Riada, who brought traditional music out of the dark corners and brought it into concert halls and made it into a worldwide industry."

So, finally, I asked him how he feels now about being the last of the island people?

"It makes me feel very sad. Whenever I return to the Great Blasket it pains me to stand on the slipway, knowing that I am the only survivor of all those who were evacuated from the island in 1953. They are all gone now, each and every one of them.

"Many of my relatives never ventured onto the island. It is the loss of a generation, of a group of people who in their day were full of community, but saw their young people heading off to America and elsewhere, never to come back many of them and that tore the hearts out of many people.

"An ancient, noble, island civilisation has been wiped out, utterly and completely."

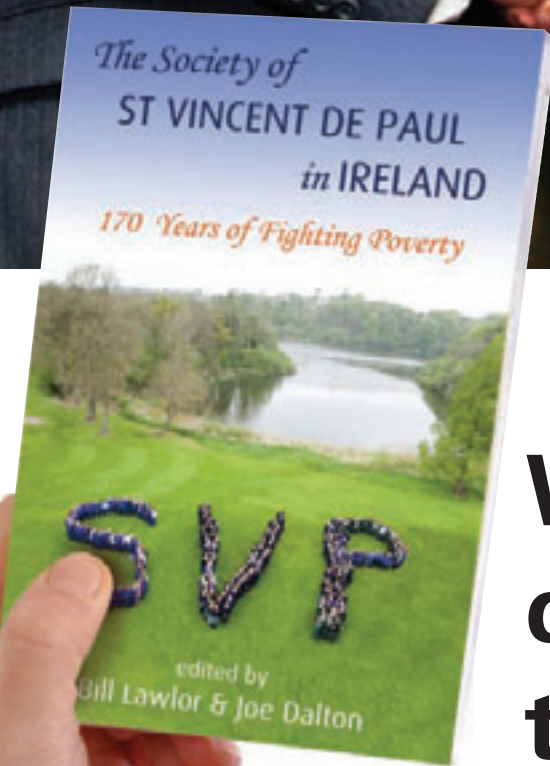


Photos:
Gearóid as a young boy on the Great Blasket slipway.
Photo courtesy of Donal MacMonagle/macmonagle.com
Other photos: Courtesy of The Collins Press

170 YEARS OF SVP HISTORY TOLD IN NEW BOOK



SVP National President Geoff Meagher presents the first copy of the new book to President Higgins



What the teacher didn't know about the SVP

BY FIONA LOONEY

TO ME, SIMPLY, THE SVP IS HELP

I grew up in Greenhills, South Dublin, in a parish that – as our priests liked to remind us – boasted one of the largest annual collections for the Society of St Vincent de Paul in the country. They would mention this every year, at the start of December, just before the wicker collection baskets with the distressed green-cushioned lining were passed around. It became, I suppose, a sort of annual challenge: if we had rattled the record books the previous year, then we would positively set them alight this Christmas. And we did. Every year, for as long as I lived in that parish, we bettered ourselves. And it wasn't as if we had much money.

Years later, I heard, anecdotally, that the only parish in the Dublin diocese to come close to matching our contribution was Dun Laoghaire, an area which had many pockets of affluence, all of them apparently deep. But Greenhills was very different.

By the time I reached secondary school at the start of the 1980s, the oil crisis of the 1970s had efficiently converted itself into a savage economic recession that blighted working class areas like ours. It was almost unheard of for girls in my school to have two parents working, and as we navigated our way unsteadily through that period of high unemployment, the number of my peers who had a parent working at all steadily dropped. And all the time, we kept giving more money to the St Vincent de Paul.

Sometimes, when I tell people now about that time and that place, they find it odd that people who effectively had no spare cash were such enthusiastic supporters of any charity. To outsiders, it must have been the equivalent of famine victims in Africa setting up a direct debit to Concern. But the SVP never felt like charity to us. The other organisation that thrived in our parish during those bleak years was the local credit union, and in many respects the approach to both institutions was the same. Times were hard and money was short, so everyone threw what few pence they had at both organisations in the secure knowledge that when a new school gabardine coat was needed, one or the other would provide it. It really was as simple as that.

Fiona Looney is a writer, broadcaster and mother of three living in Dublin who, from her personal experience, writes the Foreword to the new book about the SVP - 'The Society of St. Vincent de Paul in Ireland – 170 Years of Fighting Poverty' – which has just been published.

The work of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul depends upon the thousands of volunteer members in every parish in Ireland who, without fail, carry it out every day, every week, of every year. This book records the Society's work through the experiences of its members and, as such, is a unique record. SVP members are supported by dedicated professional staff, necessary in modern times as they help those in need.

This article is an extract from the Foreword which Fiona Looney has written. The book will go on public sale this month.

I can recall many times, especially in the weeks before Christmas, being in friends' houses when the SVP would call with an envelope or a hamper.

Once, I was at Mass with one of those friends on the day after the SVP had called, and I saw her drop fifty pence into the Society's wooden box as we left the church. So it was never really about charity; it was about investing in our community and in our own future. It was about looking after the whole parish because we never knew when ours would be the family in need of the hamper, the envelope, or even just the knock on the door. This wasn't Live Aid; this was like a very crude pension plan. It wasn't selflessness; it was self-preservation. I remember, back then, somebody in religion class in school asking a teacher about the saint who lent his name to the SVP. What did she know about him, the student wanted to know.

In those days before Wikipedia, the teacher admitted that she didn't know anything at all about who Vincent de Paul was or where he came from. At the click of a mouse, I can now tell that enquirer that Vincent was a French priest who performed many charitable works, but what fascinated me back then was that it hadn't occurred to any of us that Vincent de Paul might ever have been a real person. The society was such a cornerstone of our lives, of our local community, that it seemed almost ridiculous to think of it as anything other than a living, breathing collection of selfless individuals who quietly and without fuss appeared on your porch when times became too hard.

Even now, as an adult poking around the internet, I find it odd to imagine Frédéric Ozanam, who founded the Society in France in 1833, moving amongst the Parisian poor of the nineteenth century. To me, that is not what the SVP is.

To me, simply, the SVP is help.

When I was a child in the 1980s, it was help in Greenhills. Now, it is help in a different part of Dublin – but still always help. Right here, right now.



The new National Secretary of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, **Andy Heffernan** is interviewed by Sarah Eustace

Following the departure of Kieran Murphy after 11 years as National Director of Saint Vincent de Paul, Andy Heffernan has joined the Society as the new National Secretary. In this new role Andy will be reporting to the National President, with responsibility for the development and delivery of programmes supporting the core work of the Society as well as the co-ordination of the wide range of programmes delivered by National Office.

Andy joins the Society with a wealth of knowledge from a diverse range of roles and sectors.

He is originally from Kilkenny and now lives in Dundrum, Dublin and is married with 2 daughters, aged 12 and 8 years. His interests include all sports, but especially rugby. He is also very interested in current affairs and enjoys reading. Having joined the Defence Forces straight from school, Andy completed a B.Sc., in NUI Galway, education through the Army, whilst in latter years he has been awarded an MSc in Executive Leadership from the University of Ulster.

During his 20 years in the Defence Forces, Andy undertook a wide range of appointments from junior officer roles to training, command and staff appointments. He also served abroad on three occasions as a Commander with the United Nations in Lebanon, whilst he was seconded to GOAL in the mid 90's and worked as the Co-ordinator for that overseas aid organisation for their relief programme in Goma on the Rwandan/Zaire border. In the late 90's he took on a diplomatic role within the EU where he was Chief Operating Officer for the EU's monitoring Mission in Bosnia

Andy tells me, as we talk in his office at SVP headquarters on Sean McDermott Street in the heart of Dublin, that this "diverse experience" gave him "a fantastic grounding in general management skills."

"As part of the Defence Forces," he says, "you are not necessarily a specialist in any particular discipline, but you change roles regularly so you get experience in a range of different areas, from training, to financial management, legal roles and many more"

This experience gave Andy a solid foundation when he moved on from the Army in 2003 to join St John of God Community Services, one of his first experiences of working with a non-profit organisation. Andy moved through the ranks from Administration Manager to Director of Services, before becoming the Chief Executive, responsible for delivery of publicly-funded services in Intellectual disability and mental health.

"This not only involved setting up a new entity within the St John of God organisation, but also bringing coherence and a sense of mutual identity to 10 established services, who provided similar services. In different ways. I learned a lot at St John of God Community Services about large organisations, the importance of local service delivery and how to develop and encourage innovation at a local level within an overarching framework. I also learned the importance of knowledge management, and developed ways to share information across different services, where regions can learn from both the successes and on occasion the failures of each other"

Andy believes that having a clear strategy for an organisation is vital. He has developed strategic plans for organisations but believes the most important thing is "how to operationalise those into practical, measureable annual plans which can be used to inform decision making at all levels."

Over the coming weeks Andy will be visiting all SVP Regional Offices to meet with Regional Presidents, Regional Administrators and as many members and staff as possible, in order to get a sense of the wide range of activities of the Society throughout the country. He has also joined a local SVP Conference and in the future envisions spending a considerable proportion of his time in the Regions to ensure a strong understanding of local service delivery from National Office.

He was attracted to the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, he tells me, "not only because of its excellent reputation and geographical reach, but also because of the non-judgemental manner in the way services are delivered and the focus on promoting self-sustainability."

The practical expression of an organisation's values through the work and actions of its members and staff is very important, he believes and he is interested in seeing the Society's values in action.

"Overall I am very impressed with the commitment and real concern of both members and staff of the Society, especially the considerable contribution of members, which goes above and beyond what I would have expected.

"I am looking forward to visiting more of the Regions to get a better sense of what goes on at local level and am excited at the prospect of using the skills and knowledge I have to support the Society into the future."

There's still fight in rural Ireland

From the Sunday Independent editorial

The radical maverick John McGuinness has correctly claimed the great failure of Ireland's political and administrative elites is one of failing to keep the people safe. Over the summer, this failure has secured a visible symbol courtesy of the people's revolt in Roscrea. Theirs is a tale that begs the question as to whether anything has changed in Irish public governance since 1968, when John Healy wrote his seminal *No One Shouted Stop* about the death of a small Mayo town. It is a wretched indictment of the inertia and careless indifferences of our rulers who, after decades of non-accountability, have become utterly fearless about displaying their utter indifference over the lives of the citizens, that so little appears to have changed, except perhaps that radicalism now appears to be the sole preserve of mavericks.

Lest the claim of deterioration be thought unfair, it should be noted 1968 was a year of hope. By contrast, in recent years, indifferent centralising forces have ripped the heart out of rural Ireland. First, they came for the post offices; then they came for the rural pub; they then came for the garda station. Then the self-same central government abandoned these communities when the recession came for the building workers, the factories, the retail workers and the high streets.

Hilary Clinton once famously wrote about how "it takes a village" to build a health country. Sadly, by contrast, in Ireland a combination of hostile world forces and indifferent governance has created a thousand deserted villages. Multinational capitalism is, in fairness, not expected to have a social conscience. The failure of a government and its self-interested mandarins, however, to raise their heads from appeasing bondholders to deal with the deal with the destruction of the small rural town is an abdication of duty.

It is all the less defensible because the decay in rural Ireland – which for our urban elite appears to only be of use as a place to locate pylons and wind farms – resembles the sense of national decline of the equally lost Ireland of 1959. That same soft mist of purposelessness that turned Ireland into the Indian reservation of Europe is now racing across our rural towns. The most high-profile consequence of the moral malaise that comes with the boarding up of communal hope is the embrace of a nihilistic culture of heroin use last seen in the most social and economically blighted areas of Dublin in the 1980s. This, and the highest rates of youth suicide in Europe, are the visible consequences of abandonment wounded communities are feeling.

A responsible political class would attempt to repair these wounded communities. Instead, a government obsessed by smart jobs in Google centres only offers condescension about Ireland turning the corner. It may be for some, and thank God for that. But, for those areas of Ireland who do not belong to Enda Kenny's cherished Google quarter, the road they have taken leads back to 1959. And, sadly, rather than a Lemass, all they see waiting to guide them are political clowns, dressed in motley. Happily, far from being dead, Roscrea and other towns are fighting back. The people, far from being credulous, are in arms against the reality of austerity and those fatted political calves who, like John Redmond a century ago, would sacrifice the flower of today's youth to this fiscal witchcraft. It will be interesting to see over the next year what generals they will choose to lead the kick-back.

• Read Rurac Fear page 20

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WILL ANYTHING CHANGE?



By Fr. Perry Gildea

'London is overrun with beggars, half naked, who pursue the stranger; rushing under the very wheels of the carriages, and bearing on their countenances an inexorable despair? The poor-law and the workhouse cannot deal with the evil... Let it not be alleged that this is a display of misery got up to move the passer by... Penetrate to the back of those sumptuous thoroughfares, Regent Street and Oxford Street and you will find narrow little alleys, dark and foul which lead to courts still narrower, hedged in with high houses. Here the beggars congregate; they are lodged by the week... Many of the families are too poor to bear the burden of the week's rent, so they unite to share and lighten it, and thus lose the satisfaction which the most wretched should enjoy, that of being alone of themselves. I saw one room and a narrow closet that was inhabited by fourteen persons.'

A few years ago the literary world marked the celebration of the 200th Anniversary of the birth of Charles Dickens, and one would be excused for assuming the above quotation was from one of his novels. Not so, this is part of a letter written from London in 1851 by Frederic Ozanam. In that year Ozanam and his wife were brought to London by his life long mentor and colleague M. Ampère. Their immediate purpose was for a change and a rest and to visit the Great Exhibition in the famous Crystal Palace. He failed to be impressed by the Exhibition. He writes 'nothing can be finer than the order in which the infinite variety of human riches has been collected together in one edifice...', but then goes on to add 'This Exhibition includes nothing but articles of luxury, things which the wealthy classes alone want and pay for.' M. Ampère also wrote about this visit and he commented 'He (Ozanam) would leave me to return alone to the Crystal Palace, that he might have more time to visit the cellars and garrets inhabited by the poor of Catholic Ireland; he would come away from them with his heart full, and always, I suspect, a little poorer than he went.'

However they obviously had plenty of time to visit many of the sights of London. Ozanam's letters reveal his discerning eye. Visiting dockland and the vast warehouses of imported

goods in their cellars he observes. 'lamp in hand, we explored gigantic cellars where the vintages of Spain and Portugal lie buried – regular catacombs, but catacombs of Mammon, flanked not with tombs but with barrels worth their weight in gold. We know from his letters that he met with the local Conference of the Society and went on visitation with them. This may have resulted in another impression of the City. His final comment on his visit to London and the Exhibition:

'I always seemed to see standing on the threshold of the Exhibition, the same demon who transported our Saviour to the top of the mountain, and hear him saying again. "All this will I give thee if thou wilt fall down and worship me." It looks to me like the seal of reproach on these riches that they do not serve to ameliorate the lot of humanity, the lot that is of the greater number, and that the most opulent city in the world is also that which treats its poor most harshly.'

The plight of the London poor, which so distressed Ozanam, provided much of the material for many of Dickens' novel. While the dire conditions they both described and decried have significantly changed, the fundamental question of society accepting and addressing the needs of the poor remains. In recent weeks and months various voices have been raised in protest at government action which is once more directly increasing the suffering of the poorest and most vulnerable in our society. Frederic Ozanam was concerned not only to relieve poverty but dedicated to speaking out on behalf of the poor and working to remove the causes of poverty. The Society he founded must continue all aspects of his mission.

These letters are contained in Frederic Ozanam, Professor at the Sorbonne: His Life and Works by Kathleen O'Meara, Bibliolife, LLC

Fr. Perry Gildea is Spiritual Advisor to the SVP Northern Region, from whose newsletter this article is reprinted

RURAL FEAR EMPHASISES FAILURE OF GOVERNMENT POLICY IN CLOSING GARDA STATIONS

Seamus Boland, Chief Executive of Irish Rural Link suggests the establishment of a formal community-police partnership to operate at county or regional level and says it is imperative that the Minister for Justice takes immediate action to reassure the thousands of people living in isolated areas that the Government will protect them from attacks.

Irish Rural Link is the national network for rural communities.

It represents the interests of community groups in disadvantaged and marginalised rural areas by highlighting problems, advocating appropriate policies and sharing experiences and examples of good practice.



SEAMUS BOLAND

Two years ago, a sixty-eight-year-old man cycled some 30 miles to check into a nursing unit, having abandoned his home because of fear of being attacked. It was both a shocking and a sad reflection of the fear felt by many others in the same situation.

It also reflected the reality of a consistent narrative which outlines the numerous attacks on people living in isolated rural areas. These are people who show no mercy and have absolutely no regard for their victims.

Against the background of the yearly announcement of Garda station closures, announced by the previous Minister, Mr. Alan Shatter T.D. the narrative exposes the complete failure to reassure people that there is a credible alternative to this closure policy and that the Gardai would be equipped with the necessary squad cars and equipment needed to sustain a realistic presence in these areas.

Since the 68-year-old arrived at the nursing home, he may have considered the possibility of going home. After all, the home means everything to most people, especially those who have lived many of their years there. It is the home that stores memories of times gone by. But now, he will hear the voices of his attackers, the calls by Garda representative leaders for more resources and how rural communities should be afraid.

He would also have heard that the idea of rural community Garda clinics would also be quietly shelved and that many community organisations are extremely unhappy with the Minister and the Garda Commissioner's response. He will know that many rural property owners are now spending large sums of money on increased security.

“ ... a 68-year-old man cycled thirty miles to check into a nursing unit, having abandoned his home because of fear of being attacked...”

Where once the entrance gate lay permanently open and the front and back doors rarely locked in rural Ireland, we now see the electric gate and the blinking security light on the gable end of the house indicating that the house is connected to an alarm system.

Such is the lack of confidence by vulnerable people in the Gardai, that unless they have the means to spend large sums of money on protecting their homes, they remain in a constant state of worry.

Of course the man I referred to will know the work of communities in their efforts to reassure people, who are worried about break-ins. Examples include: the work of community alert and neighbourhood watch initiatives; the support given by rural transport programmes; the provision of home security systems and the work of many of the active retirement associations. He will be aware of the many helpful hints asking him to link with neighbours and reminders to people in the community to call in.

The problem with all of this is that he and thousands of others need to believe that the basic service provided by the Gardai is robust enough to protect communities and that there is evidence that criminals get caught and prevention mechanisms are real.

Whatever may be said about reducing garda presence through station closures and reduced personnel, the least that can be determined is that before these reductions, there was some Garda presence in the area. The loss of that presence must be compensated in some fashion and it is here that new ideas need to be considered.

One of those ideas is to establish a formal community-police partnership to operate at county or regional level.

This is a step up from the community's involvement in local voluntary programmes. It would ensure that policing and security plans for the area are designed with the police and the community in mind. In fact they are designed by the police and the community. It is completely understood that the Gardai cannot be everywhere; however the community if active and properly structured can. Such a model, while existing in rural parts of Scotland and other countries will have plenty of questions, but at least let it be discussed and teased out.

It would also be extremely useful if the new Minister for Justice would, in a public way, by words as well as deed, reassure the thousands of people living in isolated areas that she is well aware of their plight and intends to do something about it. In fact, as we come into the Winter, it is imperative that she does so immediately.

In the mean time we can all play our part in ensuring that people are not forgotten.

This means visiting people and involvement in the local neighbourhood watch or community alert programme. It means deliberately noticing what is happening in the local community and being quick to observe if someone hasn't been seen.

The alternative is the continuation of a fear that was so strong it forced an elderly man to seek refuge some thirty miles from his home in the dead of night.



MORE PEOPLE SUFFERING FROM MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS DUE TO FINANCIAL STRESS



Reports Michael Culloty of the national Money Advice and Budgeting Service

“..... Additional taxes will mean many MABS clients having little or no disposable income in 2015.....”

MABS offices are managed by voluntary Boards that may include the main stakeholders (Citizens Information Centres, local authorities, Social Welfare, Society of St Vincent de Paul etc.) at local level who have an interest in assisting people who are in debt or at risk of getting into debt.



Since 1992, the Money Advice and Budgeting Service (MABS) has been an important component of the State's overall response to assist people to manage on a reduced income and to address over-indebtedness. MABS continues, in an ever-changing economic climate, to play a vital role in assisting up to 50,000 new clients each year in addressing their financial difficulties and in their often complex negotiation with creditors.

MABS, given its limited resources, has responded effectively in recent years to increased client numbers, the changing regulation of the banking sector, the new debt resolution environment and being the appointed Approved Intermediary for the provision of the Debt Relief Notice solution for people in debt who have no income or assets.

Issues of Concern for MABS and its Clients

In their 2015 pre-Budget submission MABS raised issues that are of concern to MABS advisers and which reflects the experience gained from almost 50,000 people that MABS assisted in 2013. Some of these issues are:



Protection of the Economically Vulnerable

MABS on-going concern is to ensure that adequate protection continues to be given to those who are most economically vulnerable. Budgets over the last few years have had a serious impact on low-income families and the working poor which runs counter to years of positive supports to assist families work their way out of poverty. As a result of cuts in welfare, in public services and extra household charges the cumulative effect on welfare recipients and the working poor must not be underestimated. As the economy improves MABS have asked, in their pre-Budget submission, that priority be given to those most impacted by the recession.

Impact of New Taxes

The impacts of the property tax and water charges have seen additional taxes on the average Irish household. MABS, from its own records, has identified that the average yearly disposable income of 26,000 new clients who attended the local MABS in 2013 was 456.63. These additional charges will result in the MABS clients having little or no disposable income in 2015.

Debt and Mental Health

While MABS does not retain information on clients' mental health, due to data protection obligations, MABS are acutely aware of an increase in clients suffering from financial stress related mental health issues seeking the support of MABS Services. Our staff witness this suffering and stress on a weekly basis. This issue is of on-going concern for MABS and we have recommended in our pre-Budget submission the introduction of robust Mental Health Guidelines, such as those introduced in the UK, which would be of significant benefit to the MABS client group and others.

Minimum/Living Wage

The MABS statistics show that 37% of clients approaching the service are in receipt of income other than welfare. Many of these clients would be in employment and some on the minimum wage.

In principle the minimum wage was originally intended to set an income baseline that would provide employees with an adequate income. In July 2014 the Living Wage Technical Group, established by the Vincentian Partnership for Justice, published their research into a Living Wage for the Republic of Ireland. They have calculated that for Ireland the Living Wage should now be 11.45 or 483.60 per week (Gross). This shows that those on the existing minimum wage have a shortfall of 2.80 per hour so resulting in an income inadequate to meet the cost of essentials for everyday living.

Availability of credit

MABS has identified that personal debt and lack of access to credit are issues of growing concern. Many Irish people experience 'financial exclusion' and basic bank accounts have not as yet

been made available in Ireland. In September 2013 the Board of the Citizens Information Board, out of concerns in relation to access to credit for the MABS client group, prepared a paper on Micro-Credit for the Minister for Social Protection. That paper gave an overview of the issues pertaining to the availability of small scale lending which is needed by a growing cohort of citizens, as well as outlining a micro credit model.

Closing of Bank Accounts

Some Banks, when customers are unable to meet their credit commitments, close access to the operational side of their account, so removing its normal transactional aspect which is so vital for everyday money management.

Given the Government's interest in the issue of access to financial services and the prevention of financial exclusion we considered it appropriate to raise this issue in our pre-Budget submission and to ask if this practice was in keeping with the ethos of the Financial Inclusion Strategy.

Credit History

MABS is of the view, in order to assist individuals and the economy generally, that a mechanism needs to be found to "rehabilitate" the credit histories of those consumers who are unable to maintain their debt repayment commitments in full because of the change in their economic circumstances.

MABS requested that consideration be given to the introduction of an arrangement similar to that introduced for MABS participants in the 1999-2001 "MABS/IBF Debt Settlement Pilot", whereby a special entry was introduced to the Irish Credit Bureau (ICB) records to indicate compliance with the agreements reached between creditor and debtor.

Hidden Costs Associated with Bill Payment

For those without access to a bank account, many over-the-counter payment services now carry an additional fee. Whilst such fees may appear to be nominal, they considerably erode the amount of income available to a family and mitigate against responsible household management.

- *Michael Culloty is the National Development Officer, Social Policy and Communications with MABS*



MABS National Helpline 1890 283 438
Monday to Friday 9am to 8pm.
www.mabs.ie

THE SVP, THE MAUREEN O'CONNELL FUND AND AMACH LGBT GALWAY

The Society of St.Vincent de Paul exists to provide help to those in need.The SVP objective is the relief of poverty, both material and emotional, in Ireland and abroad without differentiation on the grounds of race, colour, creed, ideology or gender.

The Society has been in Ireland since 1844 and has extensive experience of working with a diverse range of people who experience poverty and exclusion.

It has never failed to answer calls for assistance.

It is in this context that the controversy which arose when the Catholic Bishop of Galway, Dr. Martin Drennan, made public on radio and in the newspapers his request for clarification of a donation which the Maureen O'Connell Fund (MOCF), which is administered under the direction of the SVP St. Augustine's Conference in Galway, had made to AMACH LGBT Galway.

The Society decided to deal with this matter courteously and not to reveal in public the exact terms of a letter received from the Bishop. Nor did it disclose the exact contents of the reply which it sent to Bishop Drennan.

The decision to make the matter public was not that of the Society.

The grant made to AMACH LGBT Galway was approved by MOCF as a contribution to a resource centre which Galway City Council had also pledged to provide. Approval was made on the basis that AMACH! LGBT Galway is a community based organisation. It is also supported by Galway County Council, Galway City Partnership, GORT Resource Centre, Loughrea Family Resource Centre, Galway & Roscommon ETB, West Training & Development and Youth Work Ireland.

The decision was endorsed by the SVP National Management Council as providing support for an excluded and marginalised group in need of support.This is consistent with the SVP Mission statement to support social justice initiatives.The decision was made purely on the basis of need in the Galway area, in the same way as all requests for support are assessed. It does not signify any other motive.

The SVP objective is the relief of poverty, both material and emotional, in Ireland and abroad, without differentiation on the grounds of race, colour, creed, ideology or gender.

No grants from the MOCF come from any public donations made to the SVP.The MOCF administers a legacy willed to the SVP by the late Maureen O'Connell.The fund can only be used in Galway city and county.

A total of €8.5m of the Maureen O'Connell Fund has been spent or approved for 60 beneficial projects.These have included once-off grants and funding for projects which have been supported over a number of years. Support has been provided to several resource centres and day-care centres in Galway city and county. Other grants were provided for SVP social housing and for a range of education projects for children from pre-school through primary to second level in the city and county.

The Bishop of Galway did not accept the invitation of the National President of the SVP to meet to discuss the matter. The €45,000 grant is over a 3-year period, subject to quarterly reports about its implementation.

Living Wage 2014 Ireland

Why The Minimum Wage is Not a Living Wage

Do you know that 1 in 8 of households living in poverty in Ireland is headed by an adult working full time? A 39 hour working week with a National Minimum Wage rate of pay does not ensure a minimum acceptable standard of living. There is a growing realisation in Ireland, the UK, USA and elsewhere that individuals working full time should have a decent standard of living.

Many people in Ireland are not aware of the difference between the National Minimum Wage and a Living Wage. They assume that both are synonymous. Households dependent on the National Minimum Wage know they are not synonymous, as do organisations working to eradicate poverty and inequality.

As a member of the newly formed Living Wage Technical Group the Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice is very pleased that its facts and figures on what constitutes an acceptable standard of living have contributed to the development of a Living Wage. This edition of Just.Now focuses on the Living Wage.

ON A
LIVING WAGE
YOU CAN AFFORD...



CLOTHING



FOOD



HOUSING



HEALTH



EDUCATION



TRANSPORTATION



SOCIAL/RECREATION



The Current National Minimum Wage (NMW)

- Was introduced in 2000 at a £4.40 (Euro €5.58) hourly rate
- Today the hourly rate is €8.65
- The Minimum Wage Commission decided in 2000 that the rate for a NMW should be set around two thirds of median earnings (the median wage is the midpoint wage where 50% earn above and 50% below)
- Since 2000 the NMW rate has fallen considerably below this threshold
- Originally the rate was set by balancing the need to establish a rate which would prevent in-work poverty and which would not have a negative impact on the economy or employment
- The current NMW is not a living wage for the majority of earners

The Current National Minimum Wage (NMW)

- Launched on 3rd of July 2014 for the Republic of Ireland by the Living wage Technical Group – two trade unions – UNITE and SIPTU, two think tanks – TASC and NERI and two Social Justice Groups – Social Justice Ireland and the VPSJ.
- Will be updated on an annual basis to reflect changes in the cost of a Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL)

Minimum Wage

- €8.65 per hour
- A rate which is set by policy makers
- Is arbitrarily determined, and does not reflect the cost of a standard of living
- Does not change as living costs change

Living Wage

- €11.45 per hour
- A rate which is based on evidence and research
- Benchmarked against the cost of minimum standard of living
- Updated each year to reflect changes in the cost of a Minimum Essential Standard of Living

REPUBLIC OF IRELAND LIVING WAGE €11.45

How is the Living Wage Calculated?

The Living Wage for Ireland is calculated on the basis of the Minimum Essential Standard of Living research in Ireland, conducted by the Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice (VPSJ). This research establishes a consensus on what members of the public believe is a minimum standard that no individual or household should live below. Working with focus groups, the minimum goods and services that everyone needs for a Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL) are identified. With a focus on needs not wants, the concern is with more than survival as a MESL is a standard of living which meets physical, psychological and social needs, at a minimum but acceptable level. Where necessary the core MESL data has been complemented by other expenditure costs for housing, insurance and transport. The Living Wage Technical Group has decided to focus the calculation of a Living Wage for the Republic of Ireland on a single-adult household.

Family Living Incomes

While the calculation of the Living Wage is based on a single-adult household, the Living Wage Technical Group recognises that households with children experience additional costs which are relevant to any consideration of such household's standards of living.

To put the Living Wage rate in context, and demonstrate the additional income and social support needs of households with children, a range of Family Living Income needs have also been calculated, following a complementary method to that used for the Living Wage. Details of these Family Living Incomes will be published each year to accompany the annual Living Wage update.

Benefits of a Living Wage

Enabling workers to have a decent standard of living means people can buy more goods which in turn increase demand, which in turn expands employment and business, which in turn improves the economy and which in turn increases tax revenue!

Challenges

- Show how a Living Wage will benefit everybody
- Lobby that the minimum wage is increased over the long term until it corresponds to a Living Wage
- Promote the Living Wage at political level
- Persist in the promotion of the Living Wage Movement – locally, institutions e.g. Universities, professional organisations, faith based groups and civil society groups.

What Can We Do?

- Be in solidarity with low paid workers
- Promote the Living Wage in our conversations
- Join a group which promotes the Living Wage
- Learn from UK Citizens Organising (www.citizensuk.org) - Faith based communities working for a Living Wage
- Obtain more information from Living Wage website – www.livingwage.ie or from the VPSJ
- If applicable implement a progressive realisation of a Living Wage for all in our employment
- Keep in mind the Gospel teaching – “The Labourer is worthy of his (her) hire” Luke 10:7



Reflection and Prayer in Preparation for the 17th October Commemoration

On the 17th of October 2014 at 11.30am people will gather at the 17th of October Human Rights and Poverty Stone to listen to men and women as they tell their stories of poverty, injustice or discrimination in their daily lives. People will stand together in solidarity with the millions of men, women and children who throughout the world yearn for food, accommodation and friendship. They also yearn for their human dignity to be recognised and their human rights to be respectful.

Since 2008 the Irish 'Human Rights and Poverty Stone' is situated near the Famine Memorial on Customs House Quay. Similar stones can be found in over 50 significant places around the world and they all bear the pledge of Fr. Joseph Wresinski (1977-1988), initiator of the UN Day for the Eradication of Poverty.

"Wherever men and women are condemned to live in extreme poverty, human rights are violated. To come together to ensure that these rights be respected is our solemn duty." Fr. Joseph Wresinski

"Poverty is the worst form of violence" – Gandhi

"Poverty is not natural, it is man-made, and it can be overcome and eradicated" – Nelson Mandela

"In a country well governed, poverty is something to be ashamed of. In a country badly governed, wealth is something to be ashamed of" – Confucius

"If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor" – Desmond Tutu

"Poverty devastates families, communities and nations. It causes instability and political unrest and fuels conflict" - Kofi Annan

I came that they may have life to the full – John 10:10

Whatever you do to the least of my Brothers and Sisters you do to me. Matthew 25:42

Universal Prayer

composed by Father Joseph Wresinski, October 17, 1987, Notre Dame Cathedral, Paris

For these millions of children twisted by the pain of hunger; no longer able to smile, yet still yearning to love. For these millions of young people, who have no reason to believe or even to exist, and who vainly search for a future in this senseless world.

Our Father we pray to you, Send hands to reap your harvest.

For these millions of men, women and children, whose hearts are still pounding strong to the beat of struggle, whose minds rise in revolt against the unjust fate imposed upon them, whose courage demands the right to priceless dignity.

Our Father we pray to you, Send hands to reap your harvest.

For these millions of children, women and men who do not want to condemn, but to love, to pray, to work and to unite, so that a world of solidarity may be born. A world, our world, in which all people would have given the best of themselves before dying.

Our Father we pray to you, Send hands to reap your harvest.

May all those who pray find a hearing in God's presence and receive from Him the power to remove misery from humanity, the humanity created in His image.

Our Father we pray to you, Send hands to reap your harvest.

Pope John Paul II chose this prayer to open the 1997 Paris World Youth Days.

PENALISING PENSIONERS WHO LOOKED AFTER THEMSELVES

Underhand Practice by Government

By Jim Dempsey

While the Government has painted a picture of well-off pensioners who should be taking more pain during the economic recession, the reality is that pensioners who provided for their own future and saved for it, have been treated particularly badly in an underhand way by the Minister for Finance.

There is what may be a worrying situation emerging for many middle and lower-income pensioners who have in the past few months begun to feel the effects of Government actions as their companies have cut pension payments to pay millions in a tax which the Minister for Finance imposed. He called it a "levy" which was to last four years but it has been extended and may now become a permanent extra tax aimed specifically at those who have had to pay for their own pensions. These include private sector and semi-State employees who fund their own pensions. It did not affect public sector workers. Effectively, it is an extra income tax imposed on pensioners, a fact which may surprise those who read articles in the general media that pensioners have got off lightly from austerity.

That is not the truth. The reality is that the Government has raided the savings which people put by for their retirement, through paying for their own pensions. The levy took an estimated €650 million out of pension savings in 2014 and those who are depending on these schemes suffered income cuts, which the pension funds had to make in order to stay in existence.

It is possible that the Government through its actions may have sounded the death-knell of some pension funds, leading to further problems in the future.

While an impression has been given that these levies most affected what were described as "golden pensions," the reality is that they have hit hardest the basic pensions of many lower-paid and middle-income retirees in both private and semi-State organisations, who have to fund their own pensions as "private" pensions.

The analogy in the way in which public opinion has been misled in this matter is similar to the manner in which the Minister for Finance indicated, when changing taxation on health insurance costs, that he would only affect the higher schemes, when in fact the hardest hit were what would be termed "ordinary" people.



The pension levies, with more to be implemented, have cost lower and middle-income earners heavily in their annual incomes.

The Minister for Finance backtracked on a previous Budgetary commitment not to renew the Pensions Levy after 2014 by twisting words. While removing a 0.6% levy on pension funds at the end of 2014, he introduced a new levy of 0.15%, meaning that pension schemes paid both the 0.6% levy and the 0.15% levy in 2014 (a combined 0.75% levy) and the 0.15% levy in 2015. This cost many millions of Euros and so the pensioners had their incomes cut. Just like those who took wage cuts, so did private pensioners, but a media which 'bought' the Government opinion, failed to challenge and contradict it.

Mr. Noonan said the new levy of 0.15% was designed to fund "the continuing jobs initiative and to make provision for potential State liabilities which may emerge from pre-existing or future pension fund difficulties."

The Irish Congress of Trade Unions, the Irish Association of Pension Funds and various other industry experts described the levies as an attack on average earners and a Government raid on their savings

The Irish Association of Pension Funds (IAPF) said that the Government was taking away the money which people tried to save for retirement, which was the purpose of a pension.

It is, effectively, a stealth tax imposed by the Coalition on those who have to fund their own pensions and is already having a serious effect on many people, "driving them towards penury," according to one description.

Fianna Fáil Spokesperson on Finance, Michael McGrath, T.D., said the Government was "unfairly penalising pensioners and savers by raiding the private pension savings of three-quarters of a million private sector workers. Thousands of private sector workers have seen the value of their pension funds hammered during the economic crisis. For many years, the State encouraged people to invest in their own pension funds. For a Government to raid these funds at a time when fund values have already collapsed defies logic."

• The author of this article has had experience in the pensions industry and with the SVP.



Linda O Connell

SVP LAUNCHES NEW WEBSITE

**Report : Linda O Connell, National Online & Media
Co-Ordinator and Sarah Eustace National Online
Media Assistant**



Sarah Eustace

This year is the 170th anniversary of the Society of St Vincent de Paul in Ireland. In the second decade of the 21st Century, the problems people face have become somewhat more complex and the SVP has needed to evolve to best meet the various needs of those we assist.

One of the changes in its response has seen the Society utilise the advances in modern technology and the advent of online communications to benefit its clients.

The Society launched its previous website in 2008 in order to help meet the demand for information about the Society's assistance programmes from the general public. This proved to be a good platform for the Society to promote its work and allow people to easily access our services and request assistance where needed.

The number of people using online media to interact with the Society has been growing exponentially in the last few years. More than 360,000 people visited the site in 2013. They also seemed to appreciate the anonymity it gave them as many people find it extremely difficult to ask for help. As usage

increased and the range of the Society's services expanded, the original site became somewhat dated and in need of an upgrade. We also needed to refocus and reassess, based on the experiences we had gained, how we could best communicate with our varied audiences.

We decided to redevelop our website and make it more user-friendly by prioritising three key user types: those looking for assistance, those wanting to volunteer and those wanting to fundraise or donate.

The old site showed itself to be an excellent medium by which to promote and highlight the advocacy work carried out by the SVP in lobbying government and participating in policy-review groups in its attempts to alleviate poverty and lessen social exclusion. It has helped the Society in no small way to become the leading voice for social justice in Ireland and the website has been an invaluable tool in educating the public on these matters.

The new site, launched in early September is much more interactive and will host an array of media such as videos, blogs, Podcasts and image galleries. Its 'searchability' has been vastly improved, making it much easier to navigate and source information specifically relating to named regions.

Consequently, our 11,000 volunteers can now use this site to promote their Conference-centred events, news, fundraisers and volunteer drives, giving it a more personal and local feel. New functionality in the fundraising section, for example, will allow people to create their very own fundraising page with a unique web address to share with friends and family. The great thing about this is that 100% of the money raised goes to the



chosen area. We also have a ticketed-fundraiser facility where, again, volunteers can setup their very own fundraiser and sell tickets to the event.

We will be offering Corporate Ecards all-year-round (previously this was only available during Annual Appeal time) which will be professionally created and which, on foot of a corporate donation to the Society, will include the company's logo and can be sent to clients and customers.

We really hope you like our new site and would appreciate any feedback or comments you might have.

Please visit us at www.svp.ie



WHAT IS RELIGION IN TODAY'S WORLD?

asks Peg Hanafin who suggests that it is “often used to control, manipulate and disempower people and to keep the oppressed silent and the militant obedient...”

We should ask ourselves have we handed over our direct connection with God and outsourced our spirituality in a blinded way to external powers, who decide the rules that govern religions of all hues?

I watched a thought-provoking priest giving a sermon recently on television and when he said that the recession had increased the numbers attending special ceremonies at Christmas and Easter it made me think about how we feel about religion and its necessity in our everyday lives. He said we turn to religion when we are in trouble, sad or seeking some favour. He is correct of course, that is what we do. So what is religion? The definition in the dictionary says religion is an organised collection of beliefs, cultural systems and world views that relate to humanity and to an order of existence. The word religion is sometimes used interchangeably with faith, belief systems, or a set of duties, the service and worship of God or the supernatural.

A global report in 2012 reports that 59% of the world population is religious, with more women than men having religious beliefs.

We live in a world full of mysteries and unknowns. Fear of the unknown makes people turn to religion and to God. It is this fear of the unknown that makes religion such an attractive alternative and is the root of all religious beliefs. Almost all religions are designed to bring about a packaged peace of mind and give us values and strong beliefs and an attitude to live by. Religion offers comfort and a moral guidance for how to live life and helps us believe in a life after death.

We do not hear much preached about hell in today's sermons, any more than we hear about grave sins, but it is these fears that a strong belief in God eliminates and gives people hope for the receiving of the Lord's compassion at the end of life. People do turn to religion in bad times and seek solace and answers to questions that are bigger and more complicated than they can understand, like when people have a terminal illness, but it is our own deep spirituality that sustain us eventually.

Freud saw religion as a way for people to reassure themselves that their difficult lives are worthwhile and tolerable in view of

the benefits that may come in the 'after-life.' According to him, people just go along with the philosophy, morality and instructions that religion or the church dictates in their daily lives. Some think that religion is only a crutch for those who are weak and have no strong opinions.

Well, it may be true that religion is a crutch for many believers who have difficult lives and turn to faith as a solace to the soul. Religion and the rules that govern a religion give a strong foundation upon which to build daily lives, stops people making serious mistakes and helps them find ways to care for others, puts boundaries and rules into a framework for living, which is of vital importance to our everyday lives. Religion even used as a crutch is a useful tool, beneficial and helpful, but it must not be overused, or abused to a point where instead of helping to heal they cause disruption and damage.

When we look at religious extremists and the damage they cause to the lives of others, we must accept that religions can and do harm people in the name of whatever God they support.

Religion is often used to control, manipulate and disempower people and to keep the oppressed silent and the militant obedient. We should ask ourselves have we handed over our direct connection with God and outsourced our spirituality in a blinded way to external powers, who decide the rules that govern religions of all hues?

The promise of life after death has kept many on the straight and narrow and in recent years, the damage done by the abuse of children and those vulnerable by church clergy, has left many questioning what they believed in and held sacred. There are no perfect people in this world so erosion of values and beliefs are a fact of life.

But fundamentally religion encourages positive changes in our lives. We have all experienced Divine intervention in our lives in one way or another, even if we think it is coincidence. Our Faith teaches us humility, patience, gratitude, to reach out to others in our family, community and to those that need a helping hand. It also encourages us to challenge abuse of power; to stand up for the oppressed and downtrodden and to fight injustice at every corner. Faith and religious beliefs also allow people to be truthful and loving of others. It also encourages us to fight against greed, corruption, manipulation, deceit and the abuse of power by those in authority and in leadership roles. Every individual must rely on their own spirituality to trust in themselves to loving and making just and compassionate decisions.

If we believe that there is a loving God who created us, cares for us and wants what is best for us, then it follows that blessings for a happy life will be showered on us when we practice love, care and sharing, all of which brings us closer to our God.

Religion and how we practice it is the right path in life, some people may disagree, but as faith leads to hope which in turn leads to a life of happiness and fulfilment, even those that consider it a crutch for bad times will benefit from faith in every area of life.

Religion has always been part of humanity and has taken a central role in virtually every civilization and culture.



Peg Hanafin

Critics are continually telling us that religion is on the way out, but we need only look at the numbers climbing holy mountains, attending sunrise masses, attending novenas, thronging to holy places, to see that people want to be part of religious beliefs. It is a powerful and persistent part of our life and shows no sign of disappearing as the critics suggest.

Indeed that preacher I saw on television was correct. Since the recession we have seen a rise in churchgoers and professions of faith at every level. We are now facing a dwindling clergy and we must face up to the fact that we may have a society in the future that will be short of priests and religious to care for our religious needs. That is when we will have to resort to our own strengths of spirituality.

With the absence of clergy to conduct funerals, weddings, sacraments or be at a bedside as someone dies, the awareness of how precious their presence were in our lives may only then be realised.

Our Faith, beliefs and inner spirituality encourages us to love God, love our neighbour and live within the Commandments of the Lord.

But we must also re-examine our dependence on external sources that have tried to take ownership of our individual spiritual development from without, to the detriment of our God-given spiritual power within and to the escalation of our fears around the unknown.

We need to remember that we are made in the image and likeness of God and asked to trust in His compassion and love and not feel ostracised by the choices we make in life.

You can only feel outside the fold if you fail to nurture your own spirituality, which is God's unique and personal gift to every human being.

•Peg Hanafin, M.Sc.; Psy. Rehab.Couns, Dip Psych., is a Counsellor with 35 years' experience

The background of the page is a close-up photograph of autumn leaves. The leaves are in various stages of color change, ranging from bright yellow and orange to deep red and brown. The lighting is soft and warm, creating a bokeh effect with out-of-focus light spots. The leaves are scattered across the frame, with some in sharp focus in the foreground and others blurred in the background.

Guild of St. Philip Prison and Visitor Centre Volunteers and Staff

Day of Reflection and Renewal

At Mount St. Anne's Retreat and Conference Centre, Killenard,
Portarlinton, Co. Laois

Saturday November 14th, 2014: 10 a.m. – 4 p.m.

(tea/scones on arrival + lunch provided)

This is a day for meeting old and new friends involved in this SVP work, sharing, supporting one another and looking forward to what can be done in the future.

For more information:

Contact Catherine Coleman 087-2274959, ctcoleman@eircom.net

(Local SVP members will meet trains in Portarlinton and drive visitors to nearby Killenard, if necessary)

Political questions should give way to the much greater importance of social questions

By Tom MacSweeney, SVP National Vice-President

As National Vice-President for Social Justice I have been on delegations to meet with Government Ministers and their officials with the Social Justice Team as we advocated the Society's policies on various issues.

On a number of occasions when the question of Government understanding of the hardship its policies have caused to families and individuals has arisen, I have quoted a mantra given to me by members of Visitation Conferences:

"SVP members go where politicians do not. We are invited inside the doors of people's homes. Politicians canvass on the doorsteps. We hear the reality."

Throughout austerity and the recession the Society of St. Vincent de Paul has been constructive, careful and measured in its comments about the effects of Government and State authority decisions affecting the families and individuals which the Society serves. The Society's first-hand experience of the severe effects of austerity imposed by Government decision on the community is better than any other assessment because of the unique system of Visitation which is carried out by SVP volunteers throughout the nation.

As a result the Society has seen the widespread effect of deprivation and hardship on families and individuals from those who depend upon social welfare, to the low-waged and middle-income groups.

Since the return of the Dáil and increasing gradually throughout the Summer; Government Ministers, officials, supportive media commentators and politicians of both Coalition parties, have conveyed the impression that the country has entered recovery and that the era of austerity is over.

While the Society would welcome this, it is not the general view of Conferences, the parish-based units, of the Society throughout Ireland. Members still report instances of severe deprivation, lack of money, shortage of the necessities of life, worries about maintaining a "roof over our heads" as many families have told SVP Visitation volunteers. There is a major homeless problem and unemployment remains a huge issue.

This is not the view which the Government likes to hear; nor is it welcome that this Society takes issue with policies which impose extra demands and more hardship on those least able to cope. There appears at times to be a lack of understanding



that people just do not have enough money to live on and that imposing new charges on households, such as for the life-essential of water; coupled with increasing costs for energy and rising food prices, will continue to impose suffering on many people.

The Social Justice Team is currently engaged in disagreement with the Commission for Energy Regulation (CER) which has a key role in enforcing Government energy policy, where the SVP considers that the CER is not showing enough concern for consumers, compared to its actions in pricing policies which favour the utility providers.

From the announcement of the Society's work towards a future vision for Ireland this September in support of the ethics initiative by President Higgins, our public approach towards Government, State, semi-State and local authorities, private organisations, companies and all those who interface with the public will be a strong, committed voice calling for equality of opportunity and treatment for all citizens.

Governmental approach has imposed wage cuts on workers, but not done the same with powerful interests, individually and in groups, whose contractual arrangements could not be broken. Why, the majority of Ireland's citizens, can well ask, have many of those whose greed and corruption caused lasting damage, even break-up to families and individuals, whose actions caused the loss of homes, forced emigration and caused lasting social damage, not been dealt with for the economic destruction they caused.

The Founder of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, Frederic Ozanam said: "I should wish to see political questions give way to the much greater importance of social questions."

The Government could, with benefit, take note of that comment which will be to the forefront of our work for social justice.

So could the Fiscal Advisory Council. While understanding its focus on correcting national finances quickly, its recommendation for even more austerity shows little concern for ordinary people and the suffering they have endured for many, many years. But then those in positions of power; commentators, economists, academics, have not experienced the deprivation which SVP members see every week of the year in the course of their visitation work to families in difficulties due to austerity and Government cutbacks caused by the greed of financiers.

WHY DO VULNERABLE CUSTOMERS HAVE TO SUPPORT PROFITABLE BIG BUSINESS?

By **Brendan Hennessy**
SVP Social Justice and
Policy Team



Commission for Energy Regulation Must Protect Customers SVP Questions Whether It Is Doing So

We usually read about business support for charitable organisations and vulnerable people but it is not often we read that the vulnerable customer is subsidising big business.

This is not acceptable to the Society of St.Vincent de Paul. It seemed the case recently when I was struck by the following headline "Tynagh power plant gets 8% rise in subsidy" (Irish Times 11.8.14). The article explained that during the boom years the Government feared that the State was unable to meet its electricity generation needs and set up a ten-year supply contract with Tynagh Energy which guaranteed its running costs.

Those guaranteed fees are worth €66.4m in 2015 to a company that had recorded year-on-year profits of €25m. That profit is subsidised by the Public Service Obligation (PSO) levy which is paid by all domestic customers and has increased in cost by over 300% in the last three years.

The fees are set by the Commission for Energy Regulation (CER) who have a key role in enforcing Government energy policy.

So the Regulator is making the customer pay for the profits of big business.

The Society of St.Vincent de Paul criticised the CER decision on the cost of the levy stating that it represented a regressive tax which compensated large industry players for market losses but left the customer, including vulnerable customers, with the bill.

Given that CER has a mandate to protect the interest of energy customers, such a decision has raised questions in the minds of SVP members as to how exactly the CER is protecting customers' interests.

The CER's overall mandate is to "protect the interests of energy customers, maintain security of supply, and to promote competi-

tion in the generation and supply of electricity and supply of natural gas". This is of course a very broad remit requiring the management of many vested interests. The question for customers, particularly vulnerable customers and their advocates is - how are their interests considered and weighted? How can they input to such a complex technical topic? Are CER decisions protecting the customer interests?

The decision regarding the PSO levy would not appear to have been in favour of consumers.

The customer focus of CER is once again in question in relation to the charging structure of water services.

While in the difficult position of negotiating the territory of mandated Government policy and ensuring the viability of the new utility Irish Water, the decisions made by CER will have a direct impact on nearly every household in the state.

Sadly the customer who pays for everything, either directly or through the State, is quite divorced from CER decision making.

A blatant example of this was the public consultation process for the charging structure of Irish Water. The consultation process occurred over four weeks in August, involved 36 different documents, and was aimed at technical and economic professionals and offered little for the customer of Irish Water to consider.

One simple way the Regulator could have stood-up for customer rights was in penalising Irish Water for infringements of its own 'customer charter'.

The SVP advocated that charter payments to customers should be similar to those in the energy sector at €40, but instead CER chose the much lower rate of €10. It is very hard to see what incentive there is for Irish Water to improve customer service in what the CER decided.



As a regulator, CER is not alone in being open to such criticism.

In 2012, the Council of European Energy Regulators (CEER) belatedly recognised the importance of customer-focused regulation and has sought to overcome this deficit by creating a “2020 vision for European Energy Customers”. Given that competitive electricity markets started to open as far back as 2000, it would appear that across Europe regulators have been highly driven by market, technical and economic considerations, the assumption being that a properly constructed competitive market will provide the customer with the best offerings at an affordable price.

However after some 15 years, European regulators are now realising that the customer also needs to be considered explicitly and have developed a vision that acknowledges the need for ‘an energy market that engages with and understands the diverse needs of customers; that delivers services that meet those needs, whilst protecting customers’ interests; ... offering all customers a fair and affordable deal’.

The Council has developed key principles to guide the achievement of that vision. They include two in particular which we would identify with:

- Affordability (fair prices and energy saving measures) and
- Protection & Empowerment (with specific reference to vulnerable customers).

The Council sees this Vision as a ‘valuable means of giving greater priority to customer issues, based on more effective engagement with customer bodies’. They also plan to examine the interaction between Regulatory Authorities and organisations

representing customers’ interests to see how improvements can be made.

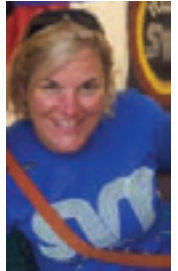
The SVP has worked closely with the CER in relation to promoting sustainable energy billing policies which recognise the budgetary challenges facing many households. We have also promoted the idea of customer stakeholder groups chaired by the Regulator as a way for advocate groups to get the needs and concerns of vulnerable customers as close to decision making as possible.

Ultimately every Irish citizen is affected positively or negatively by the decisions of the Commission for Energy Regulation in relation to energy and now water:

Considering the depth of the remit it behoves CER to recognise that the services it regulates are piped to every household in the State. Surely then CER cannot ignore the known reality of the socio-economic make-up of Irish society? Therefore, Government and utility companies, must acknowledge the financial needs of many households and lessen rather than increase their burden.

To this end the SVP has asked the CER to promote the concept of social impact analysis as a necessary mechanism to understand the intended and unintended social consequences, both positive and negative, of its policy decisions and consider the social change processes they invoke.

We urge the CER to adopt the principles of fair pricing, affordability, protection and savings and work with customer bodies to redress this imbalance between customer needs and market needs as a matter of urgency.



SUPPORTING YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

**Report : Becca Gallagher
National Youth Development
Coordinator**

In the last edition of the Bulletin I wrote a short piece paying tribute to the Teachers and Chaplains across the country who are so active and supportive of our SVP Youth Development Programme; without them we would not have a Programme for Schools at all. As we embark on a new school / academic year we are hoping to continue to build on the success of our Youth Programme and see it grow. Last year young people in over 190 schools across the island engaged with our programme at varying levels, and this year we would like to see the number of students being provided the opportunity to take in our programme increasing even more.



In order to do this we need your expertise and skills on the ground. Already there are many SVP members linking with local schools, either through delivering presentations to groups of students or providing other supports to school activities.

I would like to make sure that those who are already, or have an interest in becoming, involved can do so with support from myself, the Youth Development Officers and the National Youth Committee, all combined. Please feel free to contact any of us and we will assist and support you however we can.

With this in mind we have developed resources and information / training modules that will assist you in your work with

young people and the Youth Programme, I have set provisional dates for delivery of this across the country (as per below). Please contact me if you would like to sign up for any one of the dates set, you can email me at becca@svp.ie / phone me at 01 8299033.

The training itself involves two separate elements, which will be delivered within one day. The first part (morning) of the training is for members who wish to develop their skills and confidence they can use when visiting schools and making presentations to students. Useful methods and resources will be explored in this half-day session.

Date	Time	Location
Saturday 27th September	10-1.30pm Session One 2.30-5pm Session Two	SVP House, Dublin
Saturday 8th November	10-1.30pm Session One 2.30-5pm Session Two	Limerick / Galway (venue to be confirmed)
Saturday 22nd November	10-1.30pm Session One 2.30-5pm Session Two	Cork / Waterford (venue to be confirmed)
Saturday 6th December	10-1.30pm Session One 2.30-5pm Session Two	North / Northwest (venue to be confirmed)



A standard 'Guest Speaker Presentation' is available and should be used by any SVP member visiting a school on behalf of SVP. The template and 'script' for this is available on request (becca@svp.ie).

The second part of the day provides extra information, resources and skills for members wishing to become a local Mentor to students / schools engaging in SVP activities / running Young SVP Conferences within the school setting.

- Any member wishing to engage with students in this capacity must attend this training session and be registered as a 'Youth Support Mentor'.

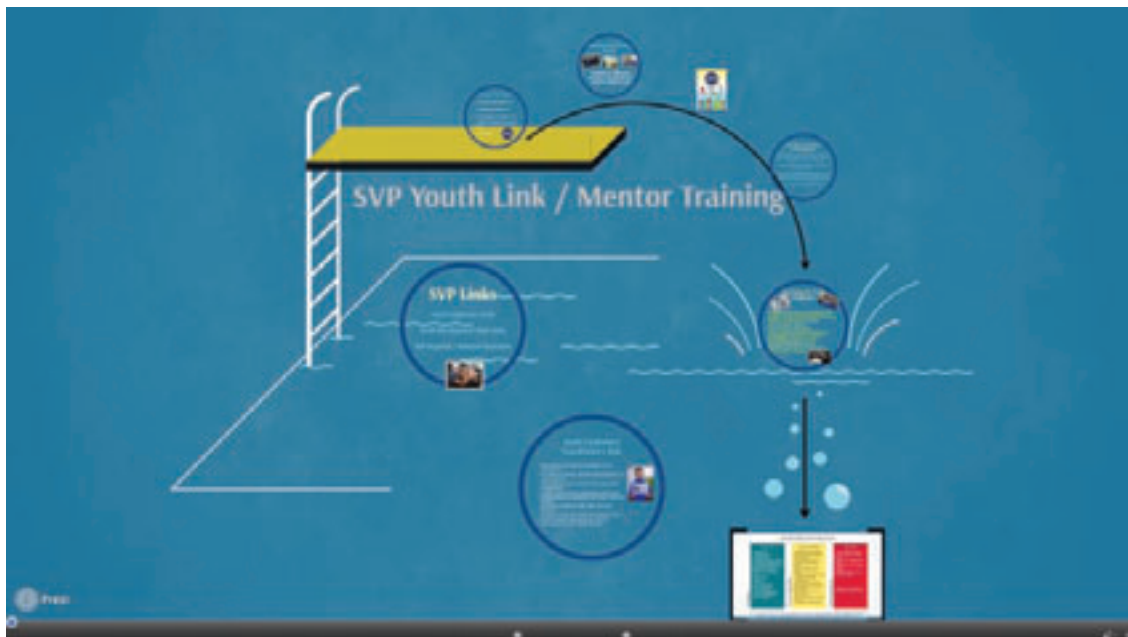
I hope that we will be able to develop a strong SVP member base that will engage with schools across the country providing students with consistent and relevant information about

SVP, both our origins and our current works, in the hopes that students will be inspired to themselves get involved and take action.

Young SVP activity and our Youth Programme have been developing over the past number of years, in order to ensure that it continues to grow and develop we need the membership to embrace it; we now have the support, the resources and the expertise in place so please use these to your advantage and help promote Young SVP across your region / local area.

I look forward to meeting many SVP members across the country in the coming months at the 'Youth Programme Support' training days!

Becca Gallagher - National Youth Development Coordinator





MULLAGH SCHOOL CHILDREN SUPPORT SVP CAVAN

Every year the 6th class at St. Kilian's School, Mullagh, Co. Cavan, raise funds for the local SVP Conference which is also named after St.Killian.

This fundraising is very much welcomed by our Conference. Events which the pupils undertook included plant sales, from their own tunnel in which they grew the plants themselves, 'cash

for clobber,' a 'tea party' and 'Mufty Days.'

Our very great thanks for the commitment of the class and the school, pupils and teachers towards the work of the Society of St.Vincent de Pau.

- From Philomena Osborne, Preside of St. Killian's Conference

THIRTY YEARS OF SERVICE AT ST. PETERS NIGHT SHELTER COMES TO AN END

CAVAN Report: Albert Perris

After almost thirty years of service to the people of Cavan and the North East, St. Peter's Night Shelter in Cavan town will this Autumn close its doors for the last time. The service has assisted literally thousands of men over those years and helped address their most immediate and most basic need - shelter.

The service provided a welcome and practical response to the most basic needs of those out of home in the North-East at the time. But times have changed; the numbers and profile of people using night shelters have changed; and the way in which effective social services respond to the needs of people out-of-home has changed over those decades. The numbers of people using the service had declined significantly in recent years and the needs of those presenting to the service have become far

more complex, demanding a more holistic, therapeutic and multi-disciplinary response.

Over those thirty years the Society has built up a substantial stock of high quality Social Housing in the town. After reviewing and monitoring the service over the past number of years, the Conference has taken the difficult decision to discontinue the service.

The facilities will not sit idle however and the SVP in Cavan town are currently exploring other potential uses for the facilities and what other presenting needs may in future be best responded to by the SVP. All current residents of the service will be offered alternative SVP housing in the town, or supported to move on to independent living.

Thirty years of valuable service, to the most vulnerable people in the North East is a legacy, of which all involved in the service over those years, can justifiably be proud!



NEW SOCIAL JUSTICE TEAM MEMBER DUBLIN

There is a new member of the National Social Justice and Policy Team based at Head Office in Dublin. Liz Kerrins is replacing Caroline Fahey during Caroline's maternity leave.

She will be dealing with Social Policy Development. Liz has a wealth of experience, having worked as Senior Policy Officer; Children's Research Centre, Trinity College, Dublin;; Policy and Projects Officer with the End Child Poverty Coalition and in carrying out independent research. She has also worked in research with the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) and Threshold, the private rented tenants' charity and has a Masters' Degree in Sociology from UCD.



NATIONAL DIRECTOR LEAVES DUBLIN

SVP National Vice-President, Kieran Stafford, on left, makes a presentation to former National Director, Kieran Murphy, on behalf of the National Management Council, members and staff to mark his service to the Society. Kieran has left to pursue other professional interests. Many tributes were paid to him at a farewell gathering in Dublin, for his dedication, commitment and professionalism during the eleven years he worked with the SVP. Kieran said he would be continuing to work "with people and organisations," motivated by his belief which had driven the work of the Society, that every person should have an opportunity to realise their full creative potential, through equality of opportunity, aided by the Society's focus of working to achieve social justice.

VINCENT'S 'BOWLED' OVER BY ROADSHOW SURPRISE DOWNPATRICK

When Pat McVeigh, Manager of Vincent's Downpatrick shop, came across an ornate little silver bowl he knew there was something special about it. It was donated to the shop earlier this year and Pat recognised that there was something special about this piece of silverware. As he was cleaning it, Pat discovered three markings on the bottom of the elegant bowl but not knowing what they meant he took them to three different jewellers. None of them could decipher the markings leaving Pat mystified.

But help was at hand from the experts on the famous Antiques Roadshow, the long-running BBC programme, which visited Hillsborough Castle to provide valuations.

Pat took the bowl along and, while he was hopeful of finding out a little about it, did not expect to find the bowl was valuable. This little silver bowl is in fact an 1860 Dutch brandy bowl popular in Holland and widely used as a wedding gift during the



19th century. Both the bride and the groom would drink brandy from the small bowl as a part of the rites of marriage.

The beautiful little bowl was then valued at a tremendous £300-£500.

Delighted, Pat is planning on putting the silver bowl up for auction at Wilson's Auction Rooms in Belfast with the hope of achieving the reserve value of £300 and, at best its top valuation price of £500.

• Article and photo from 'Vincent's Charity Shops SVP Northern Region' Facebook page



ASYLUM SEEKER PROJECT

GALWAY-MAYO

Report: Loretta Needham

Galway-Mayo project SOLAS (Support, Orientation and Learning for Asylum Seekers) was selected to present its policy submission to the Cross-Departmental Group on Integration at the Department of Justice. The SOLAS project was developed under a tri-partite partnership of Mayo Intercultural Action, Croí na Gaillimhe/SVP, and the Health Services Executive West. As a result of this partnership a regional support structure has been established across Mayo and Galway to address the many varied needs of persons in the asylum process. The SOLAS project received 12 month funding under the European Refugee Fund to carry out its work plan.

The SOLAS project's policy submission highlights the detrimental impact that long stays in Direct Provision have on the ability of asylum seekers to integrate. The issues for asylum seekers in terms of integration are multi-fold. Firstly; while in the asylum process they are physically segregated from the majority community in Direct Provision Centres, in some cases for up to a decade. During their time in the asylum process they are unable to engage in employment which is a cornerstone of integration.

Furthermore Asylum Seekers and their children are further excluded from community integration by a process of financial exclusion. Asylum seekers receive an allowance of 19.10 per adult and 9.60 per child. Children in the asylum process, including those born in Ireland, are precluded from receiving Child Benefit due to their parents status as asylum seekers.

Representatives from the Asylum community, both past and present highlighted these issues on behalf of the SOLAS project at the Cross Departmental group's meeting in Hanover Street, Dublin, in September:

- If you require further information on the SOLAS project's integration submission or information on the work of the SOLAS project, you can contact Suzanne McKane (SOLAS Galway Project Worker) by email at smckanesolas@gmail.com or by telephone at 091- 895203/086-4053602 or Patricia Luby (SOLAS project Co-Ordinator) by email at patricia_luby@yahoo.com by telephone on 094 9044511/086-0406134.



'VOLUNTEER OF THE YEAR' AWARD

ARMAGH

Armagh City woman, Mrs Anne McArdle, scooped the Lord Mayor's Award for volunteer of the year 2014 for her work with the Society of St Vincent de Paul. Lord Mayor of Armagh City and District, Councillor Robert Turner said, "Anne and the other winners of the various categories are examples to us all. Volunteers are extremely important to civic society supporting community activities, creating job opportunities and promoting environmental, educational, sporting and cultural projects. Armagh is a better place for having people like Anne working in the local community."

- Photo and article courtesy of Armagh News

The Lord Mayor and Deputy Lord Mayor of Armagh City and District present Anne McArdle with the Volunteer of the Year.



NEW REGIONAL PRESIDENT

SOUTH WEST

Donal Kelly makes a presentation to former Cork Regional President, David Holden

Donal Kelly has taken office as the new Regional President in the newly-formed South West Region, covering Cork and Kerry. From the Beara Peninsula he has been Regional President in Kerry. Donal is well-known in the farming community after many years in a senior role with the IFA. With the reputation of a strong community activist, he has been involved in many community groups and with the GAA. "I am a people's person which is why I set up St Finian's Conference in Castletownbere in 2006," he said. "We have a very active visitation Conference along with a youth Conference. I have always had broad com-

munity involvement. The Society is great in promoting our youth to reach out to help others less fortunate in our community. There are hundreds of very committed members in our 140 Conferences throughout the expanded South West Region of counties Cork and Kerry from Dingle to Youghal, Kinsale to Listowel who, week-after-week, unselfishly devote their time and energy voluntarily to SVP. Let's continue together this work that has happened in Ireland for the past 170 years of SVP, providing vital support in a non-judgemental way to individuals and struggling families in need in our communities.

NORTHERN PRESIDENTS MEET PRESIDENT HIGGINS

DUBLIN

Northern Region Area Council Presidents meet President Higgins at the Dublin SVP Conference. Included are SVP National President, Geoff Meagher and Northern Region President, Aidan Crawford



ELECTRIC PICNIC

LAOIS

"I was at the Electric Picnic in Stradbally where I took the attached photograph of which showed great initiative by the local SVP Conference for the occasion. Well done to them."

- Michael Wall



CASTING A SHADOW OVER EDUCATION

THE FAILURE TO RESOLVE THE COSTS OF SENDING CHILDREN TO SCHOOL

by Audry Deane, SVP Social Justice Team

The 'back-to-school' season has swung into top gear with what have become the perennial calls by what might be termed, 'the usual suspects,' making those usual calls for change, in order to help parents.

The SVP has been one of those voices for a long time now as we try to get the message home about how the cost of preparing children for school pushes many families into hardship, stress and at times debt. This inability to afford the back-to-school and also the year-long participation costs of school casts a long shadow over the futures of many of our young people. Not being able to afford the many costs associated with school (voluntary contributions, books, uniforms, equipment, travel, tours, extracurricular and curricular costs, such as swimming and sport, has a long-term impact on children's experience of and attitude to education.

The cutbacks in recent years also have long-term consequences, in particular the reduction in funding for school guidance posts which has hit second-level schools in poorer areas particularly hard. As an example of an ill-thought-through decision this one is hard to beat.

Career Guidance teachers working in disadvantaged schools have a critical role to play in engaging young people and their parents to consider progression to Third or further level education. Cutting back on the numbers of these teachers deprives those most in need of essential support whereby they can discuss, consider and explore how going on with their studies could literally be a transformative step in their young lives, with beneficial lifelong results.

I have been lucky enough to sit in on a meeting with SVP members in the Dublin 15 area and see at first-hand how committed motivated members work with excellent teachers to identify and support families to make that life changing decision. This is the SVP at its best -- offering practical support in a sensitive, appropriate way to vulnerable young people to help them fulfil their potential. SVP members instinctively know how valuable and life-changing being able to stay in education can be. It is not just about the value of having an education, having a job, contributing to society. People who continue their education are less likely to smoke, be obese or suffer from chronic diseases. Those who progress their studies are more likely to earn more too. We know who these groups are and who is not included:

- Young people from higher professional backgrounds are five times more likely to go on to Higher Education than those whose parents are semi-skilled or unskilled manual workers. Farmers' children are nearly seven times more likely to progress to Third Level than children from lower socioeconomic groups.
- 99% of young people from the Dublin 6 district area go on to Third Level College while only 15% cent from Dublin 17 do.
- Regional disparities are clear, with students from Laois and Donegal less likely to go on to Third Level than those from Galway and Mayo.
- Recent Government reports restate what we already know - that young people from middle-class schools and socially-mixed schools are much more likely to progress their studies.
- So why is it that given all we know about these sobering statistics that it is still the case that access to Third Level is still the preserve of the same groups?

The Higher Education Authority launched a wide consultation process inviting interested stakeholders to contribute to the development of a new National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education. The aim of this consultation process is to stimulate thinking and bring together the combined wisdom and perspectives of all stakeholders so that the next National Access

Plan will make a difference and begin to dismantle the obvious education apartheid which stunts the life chances of so many young people purely because of the socio economic status of their parents.

SVP members will agree with Tom Boland, CEO of the HEA when he speaks of the "deep reservoirs of educational disadvantage, mirroring in large part economic disadvantage" apparent in Ireland. The SVP is well-positioned, with its privileged position of trust in so many homes in Ireland, to contribute in a meaningful way to this consultation. The Social Justice team in SVP National Office is collating members' views, observations, concerns and most importantly their suggestions for what can improve the current inequitable situation. Data on financial support is also being compiled, with the new SVP member-portal playing an important role in supplying information. So we can make a difference.

- Our 170 years fighting inequality of opportunity can be translated into a meaningful input into this most important process.
- The SVP can influence the future of how access to Third Level is structured by telling its story of compassion, commitment to social justice and friendship to those who need help.

The SVP will be focusing even more effort and energy into supporting students from low income families and those with disabilities to make that all important decision to go on to third level education. This year the SVP is partnering with College Awareness Week which will take place from November 24-30. Over the coming weeks the Social Justice & Policy team will be getting the message out to members who visit households with young people / children doing the Leaving Cert to inform them that there are two schemes available which may help them get into and stay in college. These schemes are called DARE and HEAR and the schemes and offer very specific and targeted help to students who fulfil certain criteria. Members will be asked to circulate information on these schemes to families they think would benefit. SVP will develop this new relationship with DARE and HEAR into the future, enabling brighter futures for students from socio-economically disadvantaged background and students with disabilities. Further information on DARE and HEAR is available at www.accesscollege.ie

- Please email in any thoughts comments you have on this article to audry@svp.ie



Audry Deane



'THE SVP HOMELESS SHELTER'

This was the title of the TV3 series broadcast in September about the work of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul in providing and operating hostels.



By Albert Perris

Albert Perris, as National Hostels and Homes Coordinator; has spent the last five years co-ordinating the work of the SVP's Homeless Services nationally. As he prepares to take up a new role within the Society and pass the baton to a new National Manager for Homeless Services, he reflects on the changes and development of SVP Homeless Services over that period.

In August 2009 - 18 months into the greatest economic calamity that has ever befallen the country - I was fortunate enough to take up the post of National Hostels and Homes Coordinator for one of the largest providers of homeless services in Ireland - the Society of St. Vincent de Paul.

The demand on homeless services was increasing by the week. The needs of those presenting to our services were becoming more complex, and resources - specifically statutory funding - were declining by the quarter. Legislation and public scrutiny around governance, charity and accountability was growing. The trends apparent in 2009 have continued over the past five years. This was going to be a challenging role - but a challenge I was up for; a challenge, thankfully, that many Conferences, volunteers and managers have also embraced.

I had thought, back in 2009, that in five years' time, given the emerging challenges, we would all be doing rather well if we managed to sustain our services to those in need of them. And yet, reflecting back on the past five years, with demand up, expectation of our funders up, regulation up and funding down, the wonder is not that we simply sustained our services, but the extraordinary development of and improvement in them. Over that period the Society has decommissioned the old Lady Lane Hostel in Waterford and replaced it with a new purpose built facility, McGwire House. We have extended St. Martha's in Longford and acquired ten 2-bed apartments in Limerick connected with St. Patrick's Hostel. While two night shelters have, or are in the process of being decommissioned, we have developed over 100 units of housing, many of them attached to our homeless services. We have secured funding for more housing in Longford, Foxford, Malahide and Ennis and plans for their purchase or construction are at an advanced stage. But 'Bricks and Mortar' are the more easily recognised developments.

The orientation of many of our services to provide a 'pathway to home' model of support; the on-going professionalisation of our services, the development of tenancy sustainment services; these are some of the things that are more difficult to show. The quality and essence of our homeless services was most recently captured by 'The Homeless Shelter', a two-part special documentary on SVP Homeless Services, filmed in the Spring and broadcast by TV3 in September. The documentary captured not just the stories of some of those using our services, but the ethos and philosophy of SVP services:

The values of Acceptance; Non-Judgemental attitude; the principles of Client Self-determination and Persistence; the persistence of the clients and the services, all shone through, throughout the TV 3 programmes.

One reflection that the programme left me with was something I had heard many years ago: 'There can be no growth, without change'. And this is as true for services as it is for individual people. Our services have changed much in recent years and will continue to grow in the coming years. Our services will not necessarily become larger, or more numerous, but will grow in effectiveness, in responsiveness and in resilience.

After two years of national consultation with Conferences, volunteers, managers and funders, the implementation of a new national management structure is at an advanced stage, and with the support of all stakeholders, will be in place in the coming months.

After 100 years of providing homeless services in Ireland, by January 1, 2015 all SVP Homeless Services throughout the country will be united under a single management structure.

This will enable the Society to standardise supports and supervision for its Service Managers and staff, ensure consistency in service standards and delivery and enable the Society to centrally negotiate with the Health Service Executive, the Local Authorities and other funders. While change invariably involves challenges, sometimes tension and a degree of ambiguity, as new roles and responsibilities are established- for Conferences, for staff and for trustees, these changes will also deliver strength, clarity and opportunities.



Participating in the development of the new structure over the past two years has been a challenge for all parties, but I think in time to come, will be seen as one of the most rewarding and fruitful challenges, that all of us involved in Homeless Services have faced and embraced together.

We have many people - staff and volunteers - working in great services often under very challenging circumstances. I am confident, as I move on from our homeless services after five years, that they are better placed now, than at any time in the past, to respond to the challenges they face.

I would like to thank everyone - Volunteers, Conferences, Managers and Staff. It has been a challenge, but one which was expected. It has also been a pleasure and an education. To sit in a hostel on a wet and windy Wednesday night with volunteers, some of whom may have been involved in the service for 50 years; to be poured tea and to be told about the history, the heritage and origins of the service; to hear the memories of those whose initiative it was to begin such services in the first place; these were rare and rewarding moments.

And to those who use our services, who have shared with me their own stories, views and priorities. Thank you. If our services are to remain truly 'client centred', they will be led primarily, not by the Society and not by the Staff, but by the needs and experience, of those who need them.

The newly created post of 'National Manager for Homeless Services' is currently in the process of being filled. Albert Perris has been appointed to the new post of National Manager, Specialist Services, SVP, to support the management of the Society's Social Housing and other specialist services.

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A Personal View on Social Justice

President Higgins' Ethics Initiative: Responses to the call



**By Johnmark McCafferty,
Head of SVP Social
Justice and Policy Team**

What do you think of when you hear the word 'ethics'?

Do you make associations with morals, or with science and medicine, or law or business conduct?

Perhaps it sounds a bit abstract? Do you glaze over or disengage? How about 'values' or indeed 'vision'? Are they easier to talk about – or are they just as far removed as 'ethics'? The fact that you are reading this probably means that, apart from curiosity, you're working from some 'base' of values, either as an SVP member, staff member, donor or friend to our causes – so you have a sense of why the organisations does what it does and what kind of change in peoples' lives are envisaged when the SVP helps a person or a family, or advocates a position.

Our National President, Geoff Meagher, has commenced a national conversation on the kind of values that should underpin Irish society and Ireland's tentative economic recovery, as we approach the centenary of the 1916 Rising and also as the next general election looms.

In order to bring momentum to this conversation, we took the opportunity to respond to the President of Ireland's general call this year to engage with his Ethics Initiative, by hosting a meeting in Dublin in late September to launch our initiative specifically among civil society groups recognising SVP as a partner in the this initiative. Given our profile as a national charity and our values, we are providing a platform so that the Initiative is highlighted amongst our own membership, staff and other community and voluntary organisations.

At the event, importantly, we also launched our research on the experiences of one-parent families in Ireland who are assisted by SVP.

While we are the first voluntary organisation to officially work with President Higgins in this area, there are in fact various relevant consultations, events and processes taking place around the Ethics Initiative and matters and aspects related to it.

These include:

- The Wheel's 'Peoples Conversation': The Wheel, of which we are a member, is an umbrella body of community and voluntary organisations. It is partnering with various organisations to host a series of consultations regarding what is shaping our future, and the role of citizens in society

- Dochas, the overseas development umbrella organisation, is hosting events during the 2015 EU Year of Development, where members and associates will consider what 'development' means now, both for Ireland and the wider world. The SVP is an associate member of Dóchas.

- Claiming Our Future, a loose network of activists, launch a 'Declaration of Values' for 2016 soon.

- Social Justice Ireland; the National Women's Council and the Irish Congress of Trade Unions are all considering how to best engage with the Ethics Initiative, and there may be others

So there is a lot happening, or planned. The risk is that resources go into the same conversations being had multiple times, or the same people are consulted over-and-over, or lessons and themes from these are not shared or learned. In order to avoid these scenarios, the SVP is will be working at bringing these groups together. Over the next 15 months we will be meeting with all the other organisations and umbrella groups who are working on or considering some kind of activity or public conversation regarding ethics, values and social justice considerations on a regular basis.

Where we go from there, regarding the Ethics Initiative, is yet to be decided, and depends on the work, plans and what emerges from other organisations having similar conversations. We do not wish to replicate what is already being planned by others.

Another event we will be involved in, responding to President Higgins' call, is in mid-November, with the Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice. This gathering will host members of SVP alongside the Daughters of Charity, Holy Faith Sisters and Vincentian Fathers. With a number of engaging speakers, delegates will be asked to consider what kind of values and vision need to be central to public discourse and our decisions and actions, from individual, family and community to Government and societal.

So what is your vision?

Dawn Breaks

The night is spent, a new day dawns.... but what will it bring for the many families and individuals in Ireland whose hopes and futures have been destroyed by austerity, caused by the greed of those who have no concern for anyone except themselves, those whose only aim is to gain more for themselves, through their own greed, while ignoring those who have suffered and continue to suffer because of that greed?

A FIXED STAR



SVP SEEKS URGENT MEASURES TO ADDRESS IRISH HOUSING CRISIS

SVP SEEKS URGENT MEASURES TO ADDRESS IRISH HOUSING CRISIS

There is an urgent need to increase the rent supplement allowance to help reduce the risk of homelessness among tenants in private rental accommodation. Rent supplement limits need to be increased to reflect the increased cost of housing in the private rented sector in order to prevent homelessness and to allow recipients to move out of homelessness and access housing in their local community.

The crisis in private rents is partly due to, and is made worse by, a lack of supply of social housing. Those most affected by affordability problems in the private rented sector need access to social housing but this is not forthcoming to the levels required. Private rented housing will never be the answer to housing need while rents are unaffordable. Social housing investment needs to be ramped up in Budget 2015 and substantial units need to be made available, as well as changes to rent supplement policy.

The use of county by county limits should be reviewed as housing markets do not necessarily conform to county or local authority boundaries. Local considerations, such as increased employment opportunities now or in the near future, third level institutions, the building of new schools, proximity to centres of employment and improvements in transport and other infrastructure, which are likely to drive up demand for and the cost of housing in particular areas, should be taken into consideration in the setting of maximum rent supplement limits.

SVP CALLS FOR A 'PERIOD OF REFLECTION' ON IRISH WATER CHARGING STRUCTURE

The final public consultation on the pricing and charging structure for the new utility Irish Water took place in August. SVP has remained outspoken about the rushed and overtly political process that had led to a pricing structure for Irish Water which may not stand up to long-term scrutiny. Taking our concerns directly to the regulator SVP and colleagues in the Community and Voluntary Pillar questioned the timing of the consultation process but also the long-term viability of the present pricing structure.

In its submission on Irish Water the SVP proposed that the so-called fixed price period covering 2014-2016 should be considered a formal transition period where stakeholders reflect on the best way forward for the new utility and its customers. The SVP believe that the opportunity to consider information that will come from consumption and billing data will be crucial for a better understanding of the impact of water charging on customers. SVP has also called for a social impact analysis to be undertaken to better understand the impact of charging on low-income households. The SVP has stressed that all options must remain open to best mitigate consumption costs for low income households.

In the meantime SVP remains concerned that there are no additional financial measures proposed to alleviate the costs for low income 'working age' households. We will be meeting representa-

tives from the Department of Social Protection to press the case for some financial allowance that recognises the needs of customers who are already experiencing poverty.

GOVERNMENT'S GREEN PAPER ON ENERGY FAILS TO PRIORITISE ENERGY POVERTY

In our response to the recent Government paper on energy the SVP has stated that Government needs to prioritise the reality of fuel poverty and energy affordability in its policy making. The Green Paper sets out a comprehensive context for the energy environment in Ireland with the objective of developing a white paper that "sets out a balanced and workable energy policy framework for the medium and long terms". However, the document is mainly focussed on market, infrastructural and environmental factors and fails to articulate the goal for the end-customer and how the success of these policies will be measured for the citizens of Ireland.

The SVP has stated to Government that customers in financial hardship, energy arrears and debt, many of whom are identified through their uptake on existing budgeting schemes and allowances, make up a significant portion of the Irish domestic market. The SVP submission further urges caution and awareness of the effects of instruments such as the PSO levy and carbon tax on low income households. In recognising the extensive ground work undertaken by the Dept. of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources in the provisions of the Affordable Energy Strategy SVP argues that there is sufficient cause and necessary actions to warrant energy affordability and poverty being recognised as a priority pillar for Government energy policy.

UNIVERSAL HEALTH INSURANCE

The social determinants of health play an important part in the stark health inequalities in Ireland with poorer people experiencing more ill health and dying younger than more well off people. Our members witness at close hand just how anomaly ridden the current medical card scheme is, in particular the discretionary medical card. It is common knowledge that the discretionary medical cards system has been operating unfairly and inconsistently for years. The current system while supposedly predicated on avoiding 'undue hardship' simply does not operate in the best interests of well-being and equity.

The SVP welcomed the stated intent in the Programme for Government to develop a single tier health service seeking to end the current unfair, unequal and inefficient two-tier health system. We have also noted that payments for Universal health Insurance will be 'related to ability to pay' with Government paying insurance premiums for people on low incomes and subsidising premiums for people on middle incomes. The absence of detail with regard to this worries us.

The SVP sees the introduction of Universal Health Insurance as an opportunity to create a pathway to a comprehensive basket of supports and health services for vulnerable groups. We regret the current transaction costs administering the various eligibility criteria and schemes within various Government Departments and witness the anomalies in access between various groups in need. We want access to the new single tier health system to be seamless, easy to navigate for all groups regardless of their income and free from the conditionality which hinders access by various vulnerable groups to the services and supports they need. The SVP social justice and policy team will have a further opportunity to press home its concerns with the new Minister for Health at a special meeting to be held in Autumn.

Want to make a difference in your community?

Get Involved Now

Whether you want to volunteer, fundraise for us,
make a donation or get involved in one of our campaigns,
there are loads of ways you can help.



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79



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