

Compassion to Solidarity

Jesuit Peter McVerry lives in Ballymun and is well known for his advocacy on housing and other social issues.



A free food service outside the GPO building on O'Connell Street

Irish people have, deservedly, a wonderful reputation for compassion. Most Irish people are genuinely touched by stories and images of people suffering and will give extremely generously to those in need and to the charities that support them. Our generosity and the willingness of Irish people to volunteer to work with those in need has been the envy of many other nations. I, too, experience the compassion of Irish people for those who are homeless, whose plight touches many hearts and makes people aware of how fortunate they themselves have been.

However, despite the extraordinary compassion of Irish people and the enormous wealth that we now enjoy, many Irish people and children continue to live in poverty. Homelessness is at record levels, food centres are experiencing unprecedented demands, children are going to school hungry, and the St Vincent de Paul has never been busier. Perhaps the challenge for us in Ireland now is to move beyond compassion to solidarity.

Compassion is a feeling of distress at the pain and suffering of another human being and a desire to do

something to alleviate it, usually something concrete and immediate. We choose how to respond to their suffering, and we may decide to donate money to a charity or give our time as a volunteer.

Solidarity is a radical expression of compassion. In solidarity, our response to the suffering of others is chosen not by us but by those who suffer. Thus our compassion for those who are homeless may lead us to donate generously to an appeal for funding, which will alleviate a lot of suffering, but we may at the same time oppose the construction of a hostel for homeless people in our neighbourhood. Our solidarity with those who are homeless, however, may compel us to support such a project, if that is what homeless people need, despite the cost (real or imagined) to ourselves, or to our property values solidarity compels us to support projects and policies in favour of the poor which may be detrimental to our own interests. A commitment to solidarity challenges our comfort zones. It is a willingness to respond to the suffering of others with a love that is prepared to see life changed, even radically, in order to bring change to those who suffer.

Compassion derives from our sense of generosity. But solidarity derives, rather, from our sense of justice, from an acknowledgement that we are all united in our common humanity and the pain of others is our responsibility. Solidarity, therefore, is a recognition that my concern for others is also, ultimately, a concern for myself. As the Nigerian proverb says, 'If your neighbour is hungry, your chickens aren't safe!' Solidarity is a commit-

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St John Paul II, troubled by the poverty and injustice in our world, gave a new impetus to the biblical message of solidarity. 'Solidarity is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good ... because we are all really responsible for all'.

He sees such solidarity as a test of the Church's commitment. 'The Church is firmly committed to the cause [of solidarity of the poor and with the poor], for she considers it her mission, her service, a proof of her fidelity to Christ, so that she can truly be "the Church of the poor".'

The death and resurrection of Jesus calls us to go beyond compassion to solidarity. God did not just reach out to us human beings in compassion, but, in the person of Jesus, chose to live in radical solidarity with us, even to the point of death. Indeed, it may not be too much to say that a commitment to solidarity with those who suffer is a defining characteristic of the follower of Jesus.