



*Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam*

**70 YEARS OF UNUM OMNES AND CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING:  
TIME TO ACT ON CHALLENGES AND DIRECTIONS” WITH A FOCUS  
ON YOUTH AND THE FAMILY**

**Keynote Address to the Unum Omnes General Assembly, Rome  
September 2018**

**By**

**Niall M. Kennedy KCSG Past President**

I wish to thank President Eddie Prah for his invitation to me to address the opening of this general assembly on the occasion of the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of Unum Omnes. Mind you when the invitation came my initial reaction was not necessarily one of gratitude. It is a wide subject with many tributaries and avenues to be explored. Over the next while I hope to cover at least some of those.

You have heard about the origin and history of Unum Omnes just now from Ernesto. It is a proud history. It is breath-taking to look at the scope and subject matter of the various themes discussed, and seminars organised by Unum Omnes.

It is not in itself an active public body. It is an umbrella organisation which assists national organisations in the work of evangelisation. It should be noted that Unum Omnes is also charged with speaking out to public opinion on the thinking of Catholic men.

The basis of many if not all of these themes is Catholic social teaching. It is worthwhile to remind ourselves of the encyclicals which dealt with this subject in its various aspects. And as we examine each one, albeit superficially, bear in mind something said recently by Mitch Pearlstein,

**an American educator who has worked with many universities and with federal government in the US, he said “we have a rugged individualistic society where self-interested people strive for personal fulfilment. We have a throwaway culture: meet my needs, and if the product or person doesn’t, I will look elsewhere”**

**There have been 13 Documents on Social Justice. Eleven are encyclicals and two are synodal documents. Briefly they are:**

**Rerum Novarum (on the condition of labour). Leo XIII 1891.**

**The terrible exploitation and poverty of European and North American workers at the end of the nineteenth century prompted the writing of Rerum Novarum. The document was inspired by the work of the Fribourg Union, a Catholic Social Action movement in Germany, and by request from the hierarchy in England, Ireland, and the United States.**

**Quadragesimo Anno (after 40 years) Pius XI 1931**

**The Reconstruction of the Social Order commemorates the fortieth anniversary of The Condition of Labour. Pius wrote and issued this encyclical during a time when major depression was shaking the economic and social foundations in society worldwide. He strongly criticized the abuses of both capitalism and communism and attempted to update Catholic social teaching to reflect changed conditions. He broadened the Church’s concern for poor workers to encompass the structures which oppress them.**

**Mater et Magistra (Christianity and Social Progress) 1961**

**Pope John XXIII issued Christianity and Social Progress in response to the severe imbalances between the rich and the poor which exist in the world. The encyclical commemorates the seventieth anniversary of Leo XIII’s The Condition of Labour. John XXIII “internationalizes” the Catholic social teaching by treating, for the first time, the situation of countries which are not fully industrialized. He articulates an important role for the laity in applying the Church’s social teachings in the world.**

**Pacem in Terris (Peace on Earth). Pope John XXIII 1963**

**Written during the first year of Vatican II, Peace on Earth was the first encyclical addressed to “all people of good will.” Issued shortly after the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 and the erection of the Berlin Wall, this document spoke to a world aware of the dangers of nuclear war. Its optimistic tone and development of a philosophy of rights made a significant impression on Catholics and non-Catholics alike.**

**Gaudem et Spes (Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World). Vatican Council II 1965**

**This document represents the opinion of the overwhelming majority of the world’s Bishops. Originally, the material contained here was not scheduled to be considered separately by the Council. Cardinal Joseph Suenens of Belgium, however, intervened at the end of the first session to urge consideration of issues more “external” to the Church than the role of Bishops or the use of the vernacular in the liturgy. The document is the product of a commission and was altered by a 2,300 member deliberative assembly. In final form, it represents a significant break from the rigid traditionalism of the Council’s preparatory commission.**

**Populorum Progressio (On the Development of Peoples) Pope Paul VI. 1967**

**Pope Paul said “Today it is most important for people to understand and appreciate that the social question ties all men together, in every part of the world. John XXIII stated this clearly, (6) and Vatican II confirmed it in its Pastoral Constitution on The Church in the World of Today. (7) The seriousness and urgency of these teachings must be recognized without delay.**

**The hungry nations of the world cry out to the peoples blessed with abundance. And the Church, cut to the quick by this cry, asks each and every man to hear his brother's plea and answer it lovingly**

**Octogesima Aveniens. (A Call to Action). Pope Paul VI. 1971**

**A Call to Action is an open, apostolic letter from Pope Paul VI to Cardinal Maurice Roy, president of the Pontifical Commission on Justice and Peace, to commemorate the eightieth anniversary of the publication of Pope Leo XIII's The Condition of Labour. It broke new ground by developing a theory of the role of individual Christians and local churches in responding to situations of injustices.**

**Justicia in Mundo. (Justice in the World). Synod of Bishops 1971**

**This document illustrates the powerful influence of native leadership of the Churches of Africa, Asia, and Latin America. It is the first major example of post-Vatican II episcopal collegiality and reflects a forceful, concrete, and realistic refinement of previous papal pronouncements.**

**Laborem Exercens (On Human Work) Pope John Paul II 1981**

**Laborem Exercens represents a clear and succinct statement of John Paul II's thoughts on the social question. Written almost entirely by the Pope himself, the encyclical reflects statements made while he was a Polish prelate and those made during the first years of his pontificate. Laborem Exercens develops and refines the Church's teachings on property and its criticism of capitalism and Marxism.**

**Sollicitudo Re Socialis (On Social Concern) Pope John Paul II. 1987**

**Twenty years after The Development of Peoples, Pope John Paul II celebrates that encyclical of Paul VI with a strong statement updating the Church's teaching on international development. The document reflects the severity of global economies at the end of the 1980s, with debt, unemployment, and recession seriously affecting the lives of millions not only in the developing countries but also in the more affluent countries. It echoes several of the justice-related themes addressed by the Pope in his worldwide travels.**

## **Centesimus Annus (The Hundredth Year) Pope John Paul II 1991**

**Centesimus Annus was promulgated in May 1991, after the collapse of socialism in most of Eastern Europe and the conclusion of the Persian Gulf War, but before the collapse of the Communist Party in the Soviet Union. The encyclical, the ninth of John Paul II's pontificate, commemorates the one hundredth anniversary of Rerum Novarum.**

## **Deus Caritas Est (God is Love). Pope Benedict XVI 2005**

**We could ask ourselves Why, at this time in history, is Benedict XVI stressing that our God is a God of love?**

**Why are we called to respond with both love and justice to human needs?**

**What is the role of lay people in the Church in promoting social justice? (See section 29.)**

## **Caritas in Veritate (Love in Truth). Pope Benedict XVI 2009**

**Caritas in Veritate addresses the social themes vital to the well-being of humanity and reminds us that authentic renewal of both individuals and society requires living by Christ's truth in love. Truth in love is the heart of the Church's social teaching. In this encyclical, Pope Benedict does not offer technical solutions to social problems, but rather focuses on the principles indispensable for authentic human development. The document draws on the past tradition of Catholic social thought and provides an ethical foundation that must both include and transcend politics in addressing the current crises and emerging signs of the times.**

*(Historical notes courtesy of Centre for Social Concern)*

**Between 2009 and 2012 I attended on behalf of Unum Omnes a number of sessions of the Forum for Catholic Inspired NGO's. Early on I became a member of a sub-group called the Expert Committee on the**

**Family and Social Issues. I chaired two of the sessions. The committee was composed of representative of a number of International Organisations which worked with or represented various aspects of the Family. The Forum has revived these committees in recent times and I remain on this committee. I represent the International Alliance of Catholic Knights but I have also agreed to represent Unum Omnes so that information can be fed back to you.**

**The fundamental concept of the Catholic family is that a particular married couple participates in Christ's marriage to his Church. As Vatican II put it, Christ "fills the Church, which is His body and His fullness, with His divine gifts so that it may expand and reach all the fullness of God." So in the family that participates in Christ's marriage to his Church, Christ works through each member of the family so that each gifts the others with the fullness of God's gifts. *(Brevil Bramwell OMI)***

**Marriage as we understand it is under threat in many countries of the world. Forgive me for being parochial but may I use my own country as a European country, a member of the EU, to illustrate my point.**

**In Ireland**

**Same Sex marriage is lawful**

**Abortion is lawful for any reason up to 12weeks**

**Divorce is allowed**

**A working husband and wife are allowed far greater tax allowances than a family where only one is working and the other stays home to look after the children.**

**This is the country which sent missionaries all over the world in former years. It is now a post-Catholic country. Indeed it is post-Christian. It subscribes to the sanctity of individualism – a subject spoken of by Pope Benedict many times. There is no longer objective truth – truth is whatever you hold it to be. What is right is what feels right for you. Ireland is now a cold country for Catholics. The Family can no longer be isolated from the culture of the day.**

**This brings a challenge to us as an organisation of Catholic men. That challenge may be different in each of the countries we represent but I doubt if there is one country represented here today that does not face a challenge.**

**Northern Ireland is currently under attack because of its pro-life stance. France has completely removed the minimum age of consent. There are many other examples. Of course, occasionally we hear good news. Recently Argentina refused to allow abortion to become available.**

**To live is to suffer and there is real and unavoidable suffering in this world, There is also real and unavoidable evil in this world. Professor Jordan Peterson, interestingly, reasons the existence for the reality of God from the presence of Evil.**

**In his homily to us at the Opening Mass of the 2012 General Assembly here in Rome, Cardinal Stanislaw Rylko said**

**“We Christians must go out from the confines of our parishes and into society, for people are awaiting the proclamation of the Gospel... Unfortunately, many Catholic men today abandon this task. Their presence is missing. Society needs their witness of faith as Catholic men who are husbands, fathers, workers and professionals... Sociologists speak of modern society as being a “society without fathers”, without father figures! This is a dangerous situation, especially for the education and transmission of the faith to future generations... There is a need for Catholic men - in parish communities as well as in their families, in the workplace and in public life - to feel fully responsible and to give Christian witness!... They must not give in to the pressure of our society that wants to confine faith to the private sphere. Radical secularism aims to eliminate all manifestations of faith - especially by Christians - from public life.”**

**I ask you these questions : Are we as Catholic Men living up to that challenge? What is happening in your country? Is the family supported by government? If not what are you doing about it?**

**A word about our youth. Again, using Ireland and in many other European countries, the religious formation of our young people is sadly lacking. The home no longer provides basic Faith knowledge and the school, which used to formally build on that knowledge can no longer be trusted to do so.**

**The Initiation Sacraments, Baptism, Eucharist and Confirmation have become cultural events rather than religious events. If this is not**

**happening in your country you should thank God but also be vigilant. If it is happening we need to identify suitable programs and sponsor them where possible. In countries where priestly vocations have fallen, we need to encourage vocations to the priesthood, the permanent diaconate and the training of catechists.**

**The youth, of course, are our future. While many do not practice, I see in most young people I meet a sense of fair play, a sense of social justice. In Ireland the Knights of St. Columbanus organize yearly an All-Ireland Schools Public Speaking competition where teams of three discuss subjects concerning Faith in an articulate and frequently profound way. They are an inspiration. One could argue that they are in the minority, and maybe they are, but, look at the affect they can have on their friends. They are evangelists. Pope Francis says that evangelization is one person to one person. These hundreds of young people will meet hundreds of young people. Look at the possibilities! Member organisations of Unum Omnes need to look at their outreach to youth. In your own situation in your country – do you reach out to young people? If yes, can you do it better? If no, why not? These questions need at least to be asked. In many countries I have visited people tell me “oh, that’s the responsibility of the Church”. They forget that they are the Church. It is their responsibility also.**

**In my address today I have not tried to give any answers because the answers may be different in each country – and I don’t have all the answers anyway. I have merely tried to examine the problems that face Catholics today. It is not all doom and gloom. There is much good work going on and we will hear some of these good stories in the country reports later on in this meeting. Catholic theology understands that teaching, to be sound, ought to listen to the “sense of the faithful”, which should both inform the teaching and then act as a barometer of its reception. And how does one access this “sense of the faithful”? By listening, having conversations, setting up systems and structures like assemblies and meetings like this to tap into the faith of the baptised.**

**Of my own country I could say – we must move from a cultural Catholicism to a Catholicism of conviction.**

**What would you say of your country?**

**In your opinion, what are some of the current “signs of the times” in your country?**

**Why is it important that you and your organization identify and interpret the “signs of the times”?**

**Rejoice and be glad / Gaudete et exsultate (Mt 5:12)**

**Thank you.**

---

**Acknowledgements**

*Pope Francis  
Pope Emeritus Benedict XVII  
Holy See  
HE. Cardinal Rylko  
Mitch Pearlstein  
Father Gerry O'Hanlon SJ  
Brevil Bramwell OMI  
Centre for Social Concern  
Professor Jordan Peterson*

