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**Theme: "Practical Dimensions of Christian Solidarity in the World"**

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- **Opening Statement and welcome address by President Edward Prah. KSG**
  - **at the Virtual Executive Committee Meeting 27<sup>th</sup> October 2020**

My dear friends of Unum Omnes, I greet you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, through whose graciousness and goodness we are alive today, especially in this period of the Covid-19 pandemic.

First I wish to thank each and every one of you for making time to be with us today. When we parted from Luxembourg last year, we did not know where the next meeting would be held because no country had offered to host us. We were therefore very pleasantly surprised when Ukraine, through our honorary member Willie Fuchs informed the Bureau of their willingness to host the 2020 XCOM.

Unfortunately the sudden appearance of Covid-19 in the world, made it impossible to honor this very welcoming gesture, the reason we find ourselves meeting virtually today. Hopefully, we can meet again in person for the General Assembly in 2021 at a date and venue yet to be decided to among other things elect a new Bureau.

Not only did the Covid pandemic prevent the holding of this XCOM in person, it also prevented your Bureau from meeting in person for the first time in as many years as I have served on it. But thank God, we were able to hold at least three virtual meetings that kept us informed of issues of our organization.

Unlike our normal in person meetings that go for about three days we are holding this virtual meeting in just about three hours which means we have to squeeze a number of items into a short period. We ask therefore that you bear with us. Fortunately, the Secretary General has already circulated the documents and reports for the meeting which I hope you have had some time to read. Many of the reports contain quite useful information which could inform future activities of your local organization. It could be work being done with the youth in Romania or the reform process of the men's' group in Germany, or working with school children to raise awareness of the dangers of corruption on society in Ghana or working with other Catholic groups in the Political and Social training Institute to spread the Catholic Social Teaching in Argentina. We will therefore only highlight some of the issues and allow time for discussions or clarifications of any issues that remain unclear from the documents.

Our theme for this meeting is. **"Practical Dimensions of Christian Solidarity in the World"** The keynote speaker will be our own friend Anatolly Babinsky, who previously served on the Bureau for one term. And what a coincidence the theme has with the most recent Encyclical launched by Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*. Having already drawn attention to the interconnectedness of people and everything on earth in his second encyclical *Laudato Si*. Pope Francis continues his push in *Fratelli Tutti* for a world built on solidarity and fraternity, calling on people everywhere for a renewed commitment to universal brotherhood, friendship, solidarity

and peaceful coexistence. Here please permit me to quote a few passages from *Fratelli Tutti* to link the theme and set the tone for the keynote address with apologies to Anatoly, the Keynote speaker.

Says the Pope, “we live in a world with an imposed culture that appears to unify the world but divides people and nations, where individuals are reduced to mere consumers and spectators; where globalized society makes us more like neighbors, but not brothers and sisters. (FT12). Under the dark shadows of this ever more tightly closed world, precious words like democracy, freedom, justice, and unity are manipulated and emptied of meaning (FT14). We see people sowing despair and discouragement in a system that dominates and controls people and denies the right of others to exist or to have an opinion. (FT 15). Persons considered no longer productive or useful are disregarded and discounted by this throwaway culture (FT 18). Inequality of rights (FT 22) and new forms of slavery (FT 24) continue to exist. We no longer have common horizons that unite us (FT 26). New fears and conflicts are arising, and new walls being built to prevent our encounter with others (FT 27). There is a moral deterioration and a weakening of spiritual values and responsibility; there is a growing sense of frustration, isolation and despair (FT 29). We are victims of the illusion that we are all-powerful, while failing to realize that we are all in the same boat (FT 30). The absence of human dignity is clearly evident at some national borders, where countless thousands of refugees trying to escape war, persecution, and natural catastrophes to seek opportunities for themselves and their families are prevented by some political regimes from entering their borders (FT 37), considering them unworthy of fraternal love (FT 39).

These, my dear friends are challenges that many of us face in our Apostolate in our various countries. The words of Pope Francis in *Fratelli Tutti*, can be seen in reality in many of our countries. They challenge not only our Christian faith but also call us to action in this history shaping moment to build a better world.

As an International Catholic lay organization which believes in and associate strongly with the foundational principles of The Catholic Social Teaching, namely the **Dignity of the Human person, the Common Good, Subsidiarity and Solidarity**, “isolating ourselves and withdrawing into our own interest, cannot be the way to restore hope and bring renewal to people. The path we must follow is being closer to others; it is the culture of encounter (FT 30).” It is the path of showing practical solidarity to others.

In the 1970s and 80s, at the height of the Liberation Theology movement in Latin America, a popular question that some protagonists of the theology, considered communists at the time, used to ask was “how do you preach the Gospel to the poor, the oppressed and marginalized? In other words how do you tell the hungry or homeless person that Jesus loves you, without taking concrete action to help alleviate their suffering?”

Today, with the theme of our meeting in mind, I ask of you a similar question: “How do you preach the principles of the Catholic Social Teaching to the poor? How do you preach these principles born out of the encounter with the gospel message and its demands in the supreme commandment of love of God and neighbor to people divided by economics, politics and who suffer systemic racism? How do you preach it to people who suffer inequality of rights or suffer

the many new forms of slavery? How do you preach them to people whose whole lives are dominated and controlled by others, to poor farmers in Africa whose rights are abused and made landless by corrupt transnational corporations who exploit the mineral wealth of their land and pollute their drinking water sources? How do you preach to people who are disregarded because they are considered no longer productive or to migrants fleeing from wars, violence and persecution but are not welcomed outside their country's borders?

Friends, members of Unum Omnes, as an ecclesial group in the Catholic Church and as Christians we have work to do. We must be awakened to our responsibility to being the voice of the Church in what the Pope calls "the dark clouds over a closed world" (FT9). Let us therefore raise our voices in our various countries and help to create the environment in which the Gospel can be preached and Christ made alive and present to people, especially the "many wounded by the roadside, discarded and rejected".

And not only must the voice of the Church be heard through us, more than that, we must get into action by selfless deeds that serve the common good and place the dignity and welfare of the human being at the center. That way we shall be demonstrating in action, some "practical dimensions of Christian Solidarity". And what better forum to learn and share experiences of Christian solidarity than when we meet on the International stage such as provided by our organization, Unum Omnes at this meeting.

One thing the COVID-19 pandemic with all its negative impacts has succeeded in doing is to remind and revive in humanity the sense that we are a global community (FT 32). This calls us to rethink our lifestyles, our relationships, the organization of our societies, and above all the meaning of our existence as a people (FT 33). Let us note though that "love, justice, and solidarity are not achieved once and for all; they have to be built day by day (FT 11)". We have to keep working at it with every opportunity we have as individuals and as ecclesial groups.

I trust and hope that as we listen and digest more on the theme from the keynote address, this meeting will awaken in us the need for us to grow even stronger as an organization and through our actions at both international and local levels, give voice and meaning to who "my neighbor" is in the real Biblical sense, while responding to God's call with a new vision of fraternity and social friendship (FT6).

Before, I bring my address to a close, let me on behalf of your Bureau express condolences to all our members who may have lost family or friends in their local organisations to the Covid pandemic. May their souls rest in the peace of the Lord. We also commend those who may have suffered in other ways in the pandemic, including loss of jobs or businesses, to the grace of God for restoration.

Concluding, I thank you once again for making time for this meeting and now warmly welcome you to the 2020 Executive Committee Meeting wishing us all, a fruitful meeting.

Thanks for your attention.

**Edward Prah KSG**