

# Catholic Union of Great Britain



## Saint Thomas More Circle

### Report to Donors 2024



*Catholic Union Acting Chairman Richard Collyer-Hamlin, with our Craigmyle Lecturer for 2023, Dame Rachel de Souza*

Dear Members of the St Thomas More Circle

It is a pleasure to be sending you this report to thank you for your generous support and to show you what you have achieved through your membership of the St Thomas More Circle.

The Circle was launched in 2019 and its members have been the key reason why the Catholic Union has grown in its output and impact over the last five years. New members have continued to join the Circle and we have been especially pleased that, following a new fundraising campaign last autumn, our members now include supportive charitable trusts and foundations in addition to individual members. We have also been able to find sponsors for many of our events. We would of course be grateful for information about, or introductions to, any other charitable trusts or potential sponsors known to members of the Circle.



*Public  
Engagement  
by Catholics  
for the  
Common Good*



A crowded room at the Windsor Castle pub for one of our "Pub Talks"

### Events

Thanks to your support, we held a very successful Craigmyle Lecture last year with Dame Rachel de Souza, the Children's Commissioner for England. We have also continued our well-attended series of "Pub Talks" and popular webinars. Our speakers have included Ann Widdecombe, Catherine McKinnell MP, Sir Iain Duncan Smith MP, and Jon Cruddas MP.

To extend the in-person reach of our lectures, we launched a new series of lectures with an inaugural lecture at Ampleforth, at which Lord Deben spoke engagingly to an attentive audience, many of whom had travelled to the event having not been able to attend one of our lectures in-person before. A former

Chair of the Committee on Climate Change, Lord Deben, said that there is a clear Gospel imperative for looking after our natural environment and moving away from fossil fuels.

Adding that "we are supposed to be stewards of what we have been given", Lord Deben claimed that Britain had seen the biggest decline in biodiversity of any country in the world. He praised the contribution of the Catholic Church to the discussion around climate change and described Pope Francis's encyclical, *Laudato si'*, as a "remarkable document."

### Our team

The last year has also seen some important changes in our team with Baroness Hollins succeeding Sir Edward Leigh as President and Tristan Feunteun succeeding Nigel Parker as Interim Director. We also have some new talent on our Council, notably Professor Francis Davis, who has become a Vice-Chairman and brings with him a wealth of academic and political experience.



Ampleforth Headmaster; Peter Roberts, Chair of the Ampleforth Society; Lord Stafford, Lord Deben, and Catholic Union Secretary; Michael Pritchett



Sir Edward and Lady Leigh with the Papal Message

We gave Sir Edward Leigh a proper send off at a reception in Parliament earlier this year, hosted by Lord Brennan. It was a wonderful occasion, attended by several members of the St Thomas More Circle, parliamentarians, and senior clergy. Cardinal Vincent Nichols was guest of honour and the Papal Nuncio presented Sir Edward with a special message from Pope Francis.

### Our work

The past twelve months have seen our public affairs and communications work go from strength to strength. Building on the work that we have been doing to increase our capacity and profile, we are now beginning to see results and changes that will bring benefits to the Catholic community in this country and beyond.



A delegation of MPs and peers from the APPG on the Holy See visit the Ukrainian Catholic Cathedral in London

In March, the Catholic Union became the secretariat for the All-Party Parliamentary Group on the Holy See. This is a cross-party group of MPs and peers with an interest in relations with the Vatican. The appointment of the Catholic Union as secretariat of the group is testament to the strength of our relationship with parliamentarians from different parties and parts of the country.

### Campaigns

Following our efforts to reopen churches during the pandemic, we turned our attention to the UK Covid-19 Inquiry. Thanks to our increased reach, almost 1,000 people took part in our survey on Covid and Places of Worship. Almost two in three respondents said that the closures had impacted their health negatively, while 90 percent of people said that churches should never be forced to close again.



Baroness Hollins addresses our AGM last year

Using our network in Parliament, we were able to highlight the results of our survey with those in Government. In response to a parliamentary question, the then Local Government Minister, Simon Hoare, said that the Government recognised "the importance of our places of worship to the spiritual, mental and physical health of our communities." We also

submitted the survey results as evidence to the Covid Inquiry and secured a guarantee that the closure and reopening of places of worship will be considered as part of their work.

In the Budget earlier this year, we were able to secure a major concession in how child benefit changes are calculated. The decision to phase out the High Income Child Benefit Charge is something we have long called for on the basis that it discriminates against single-earner households.

In the next Parliament we will be turning our attention to lifting the two-child cap on benefits, something which punishes larger families and is making child poverty worse.

One of our most high-profile campaigns this year has been our efforts to finally allow Catholic free schools to open by lifting the faith cap that restricts the number of pupils who can be admitted on the basis of religion. Our open letter to the Education Secretary, calling on her to "scrap the cap" was signed by over 1,000 people. We presented the letter to her in person and had a separate meeting to discuss why lifting the cap is so important.



James Somerville-Meikle, Sir Edward Leigh, and Paul Barber from the Catholic Education Service with Gillian Keegan



*James Somerville-Meikle on a visit to No 10 Downing Street*

The campaign has raised our profile in the Church and on the political scene and we were invited to brief the Bishops of England and Wales about our work on this and other issues including the forthcoming general election, at their plenary meeting in Leeds last November. Using our network in Whitehall, we made sure that key people in Government were briefed on the campaign, including the Prime Minister's education adviser.

We warmly welcomed the news that the Education Secretary intended to lift the cap, and the Department for Education press release on the announcement carried quotes from two of our office holders (Sir Edward Leigh and Ruth Kelly). The General Election has put these plans on hold, but we will be working hard in the next Parliament to make sure that this remains on the agenda of the Department for Education.

## General Election

We will be working hard to make the voices of lay Catholics heard during the General Election. In March, St Thomas More Circle members were given a special election briefing by our Deputy Director, James Somerville-Meikle, and we hope to provide further such webinars in the next few months.

Our "Calls for Candidates" document will help our members and supporters engage with the campaign by providing some suggested policy calls and action points for their candidates. This was based on the results of a survey we carried out earlier this year, which found that care for the poor, religious freedom, education, family life, and dignity of life were the areas of most concern to our members and supporters. This will also help as a useful starting point for our engagement with MPs in the next Parliament.



*Members of the St Thomas More Circle at our Mass and Reception last year*

This work is only possible with your support. We hope that this report demonstrates that your support really does make a difference and that you will continue to help us through your donations and legacies as we work to strengthen the Catholic voice in our society.

We hope to see many of you at our Summer Gathering at Worth Abbey on Saturday 6 July!