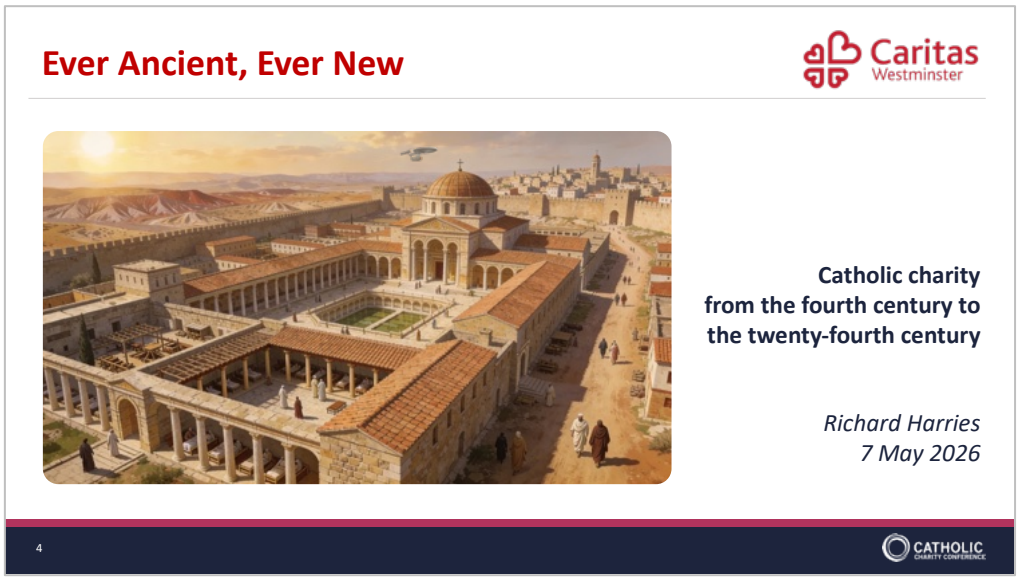
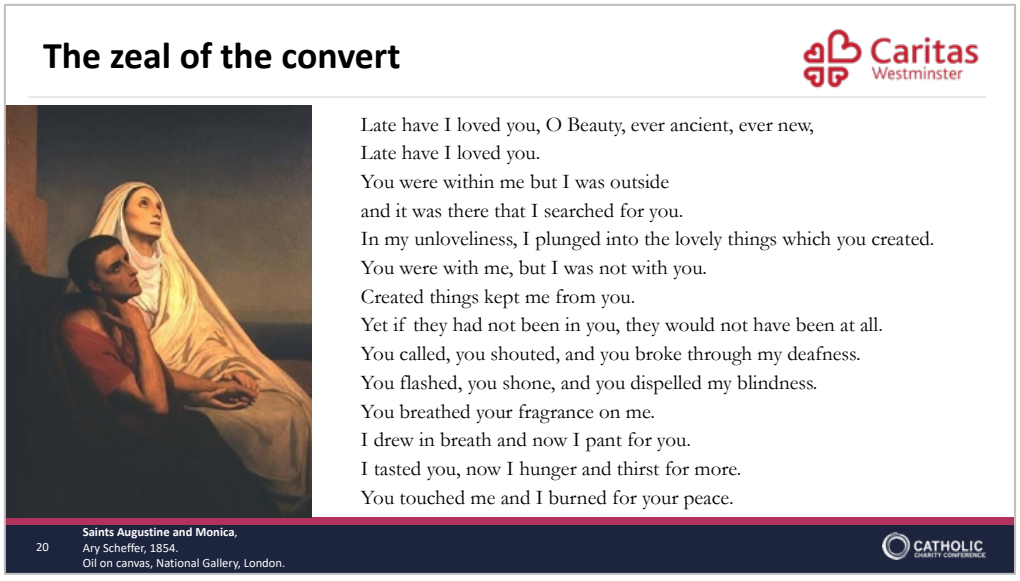
EVER ANCIENT, EVER NEW:
A SPEECH TO THE CATHOLIC CHARITY CONFERENCE, 7 MAY 2026



"Late have I loved you, O Beauty, ever ancient, ever new. Late have I loved you."

Ladies and gentlemen, I am your worst nightmare. A new Catholic with strong opinions; I have the zeal of the convert. And just like Saint Augustine – a somewhat more famous convert to Christianity – I find myself in awe of God's divine presence, realising late in life the purpose to which He had for so long been calling me.

It was not always this way.



"In my unloveliness, I plunged into the lovely things which you created. You were with me but I was not with you." Yes, I was that obnoxious young man who thought he knew better than his elders, that hard core atheist who had no time for stone age mumbo jumbo, whose faith in scientific materialism was deeper than that of any Bible thumper. I knew where I was going. I was the master of my own destiny.

But as the old Jewish proverb goes: *"If you want to make God laugh, tell Him your plans."*

And so, even as I stumbled through my early career, God was nudging me slowly and gently toward my true vocation. A graduate mathematician, I discovered that the most important things in life elude measurement. A career civil servant, I saw first-hand the shocking faith illiteracy that distorts so many policy decisions. (And, *mea culpa*, I participated in many of those decisions.)

But God was always there. And over the years, he introduced me to people I would never have expected. People clearly motivated by something beyond themselves. Something transcendent.

Later in my career, as a grantmaker, I saw how people can achieve incredible things when motivated by love of place and love of neighbour. Slowly, over the decades, I accrued a network of contacts that stretched far and wide. Academics and policy makers; social researchers and frontline practitioners; funders and social investors; saints and sinners.

But even then, the message hadn't got through. And so, when I was approached by the Diocese of Westminster and asked to run Caritas, my first reaction was: *"Oh no, no! I am a civil servant. I am a social researcher. I tell other people how they should do their jobs. I don't do things myself!"*

And yet, as I thought about it and as I prayed about it, I realised that this was always where God was leading me from the moment of my baptism.

As G.K. Chesterton put it: *"The spike of dogma fitted exactly into the hole in the world – it had evidently been meant to go there – and a strange thing began to happen ... I could hear bolt after bolt over all the machinery falling into its place with a ... click of relief."*

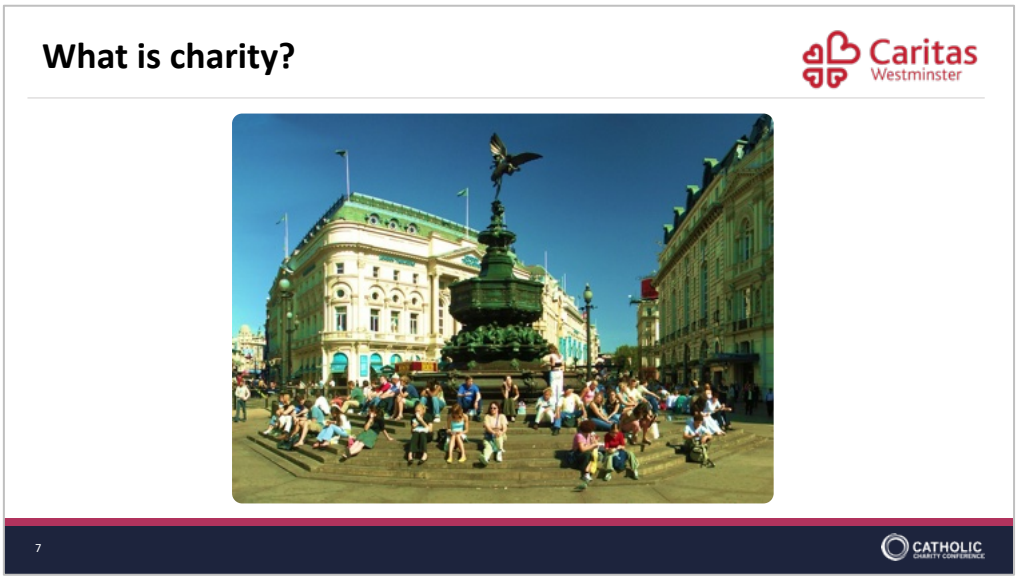
All of which means I really shouldn't be standing here today. I am a fraud. I have been at the helm of a Catholic charity for less than three years. What can I possibly tell you that you don't already know?

Well, too bad! The Bishop's Conference asked me to do it, and I am a man under authority. So here I am.

The theme for the conference today is *"Staying up to date in a Time of Change: Governance, Technology and Mission"*. And if there is a theme to my speech this afternoon, I suppose it is this: that Catholic charity stays up to date not by becoming less Catholic but by holding firmly to the great traditions of the Church whilst becoming more intelligent in our methods. So, what could be more appropriate than Saint Augustine's framing of *"ever ancient, ever new"* as a lens for discussing this?

Now of course, as a mathematician, as a logical civil servant, I must begin by defining my terms. What is charity? And how have our ideas of charity changed over time?

'Charity' of course is merely the modern English version of the Latin word *caritas*, which itself is a translation of the Greek word *agape*. All of them refer to Christian love. Or as Saint Thomas Acquinas put it, *"willing the good of the other as other"*.



Definitions matter. I don't think there is a better metaphor for the importance of clear definitions than the famous statue of Eros – the god of erotic love – in Picadilly Circus. Because it is *not* a famous statue of Eros. It is a statue of his brother, Anteros, and symbolizes selfless love and charity. It was erected by public subscription in 1893 in honour of the great Christian reformer Anthony Ashley Cooper, the seventh Earl of Shaftesbury.

How on earth did a testament to Christian love transform into a symbol of erotic love?

Of course, as a Catholic, I would pin the blame on original sin; on our natural tendency to turn inward on ourselves, *incurvatus in se*, rather than outward toward God and toward our neighbour. To an assumption that charity can be divorced from the faith that inspired it.

The Church witnessed this as early as the fourth century when the Emperor Julian the Apostate sought to turn Rome away from Christianity. *"It is disgraceful"* he wrote, *"that no Jew ever has to beg and the impious Galileans support not only their own poor but ours as well."* Julian tried to build his own welfare state, distributing millions of bushels of grain and wine to win over the pagan temples. He failed.

Fifteen hundred years later, as the post-War UK government established its own 'cradle-to-grave' welfare system, an opinion poll in 1948 found that over 90% of the British population believed there was no longer any role for charity. Yet as Pope Benedict wrote in his first encyclical in 2005, *"There is no ordering of the State so just that it can eliminate the need for a service of love."*

But the temptation to excommunicate charity from its Christian roots – to exile it from the public square – remains. *"Ever ancient, ever new."*

As the Latin American Archbishop Câmara famously said in 1970s: *"When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist."* In a similar, if somewhat more pedestrian vein, our own Civil Society Minister back in 2014 demanded that charities *"stick to their knitting"* and keep out of *"the realm of politics."* A demand that might have carried more weight if his own political judgement had not been called into question.

So, what is the Church's role in charity? I want to take you back again to the fourth century. To a contemporary of Emperor Julian. Indeed, they were at school together. But where Julian wanted to put himself and the Roman Empire at the centre of the universe, Saint Basil the Great chose another course. The Basiliad was built by Saint Basil around AD 372, just outside the walls of Caesarea in Cappadocia. It was arguably the first hospital in the Western world.

But it was not just a hospital. It was a vast, purpose-built campus encompassing a church, a hospice for lepers, a poorhouse for the elderly, a hostel for travellers, a refuge for orphans, and a collection of trade schools where residents could learn skilled work.

In his funeral oration for Basil, Saint Gregory of Nazianzus said: *"Go forth a little way from the city, and behold the New City, the storehouse of piety ... where disease is regarded in a religious light, and disaster is thought a blessing."* The Basiliad continued to function for over 150 years after Basil's death. Even when Caesarea itself had fallen into ruin, Saint Basil's new city continued on. Indeed, it is said to be the heart of the modern city of Kayseri in Turkey.

This is a vision of charity worthy of the name. A bishop more famous for his theological insights into the nature of the Trinity. Who nevertheless threw himself into the service of charity. Another quote from Pope Benedict comes to mind: *"For the Church, charity is not a kind of welfare activity which could equally well be left to others, but is a part of her nature, an indispensable expression of her very being."*

"Ever ancient, ever new."

Let us leap forward in time to 1900. To a speech given by Father Doctor Lorenz Werthmann: parish priest, papal chamberlain, and founder of the first Caritas organisation in the world in Frieberg in Germany. Here was another holy man who knew that Catholics must always and everywhere attend to the mission of charity. That they must respond with love to the immediate need in front of them.

And he was proud:

- Proud of the 6,405 members of the St Vincent de Paul Society in the Diocese of Breslau who between them supported 10,611 families and housed 2,120 orphans.
- Proud of the 1,567 sisters and 342 brothers from the Knights of Malta, whose nurses cared for 62,000 soldiers in the Franco-Prussian War – equivalent to two army corps.
- Proud of the 3,400 Little Sisters of the Poor who cared for 25,000 elderly men and women, providing 130 million days of care over 55 years.

But as Father Werthmann's statistics demonstrate, he was equally passionate for charity to be properly structured and professionally run. *"Our charity work," he said, "must be published more, studied more, and organised more."* Anticipating Pope Benedict by over 100 years, Father Werthmann insisted that Christian charity must be *"the steam in the social machine."*

And his drive for a more professional approach to charity did not mean the exclusion of lay participation. Quite the opposite. Father Werthmann saw the regeneration of the Christian family as the primary purpose of charitable activity. He gives a beautiful parable to make his point. And I quote from his pamphlet:

> *"In the 1850s, a young political economist from Provence came to Paris to meet the great Catholic sociologist Frédéric Le Play. This young economist had devised a plan for how to overcome the deforestation of the mountains in his homeland, and he wanted to present these ideas to the great sociologist. Le Play listened to him, made several quite appropriate remarks, but at the end he said: 'My dear friend, it is not primarily about restoring the forests, but about restoring the people, about restoring the families.'"*

The idea of Caritas spread like wildfire across the Catholic world. In America it is called 'Catholic Charities'; in France, 'Secours Catholique'; but everywhere it is Caritas.

The Directory for the Pastoral Ministry of Bishops – the official instruction manual for new Bishops – could not be more clear: *"To facilitate aid for the needy in the most effective manner, the Bishop should promote a diocesan branch of Caritas ... which, under his guidance, animates the spirit of fraternal charity."*

Sadly, it seems the memo from Rome did not make it across the English Channel. Despite great champions of Catholic social action from Cardinal Manning to Cardinal Hume, it was only under the leadership of Cardinal Nichols that the Church in England & Wales began to dip its toes into the Pool of Caritas. Here in the Diocese of Westminster, we have had a Caritas agency since May 2012. (Providentially, the same month and year that I was received into the Church.)

We are composed of six functions or service areas. We run a safe house for women who have been trafficked and exploited. We ensure Deaf Christians receive vital pastoral and spiritual support that helps them to live full and dignified lives. We promote enterprise as a path out of poverty and social exclusion. We provide learning activities for people with physical and intellectual disabilities. And we provide faith-based, trauma-informed counselling and psychotherapy.

And underpinning everything we do, we support parishes, schools and Catholic charities across the diocese. To make it easy as possible for as many Catholics as possible to do as much good as possible.

Things like:

- Convincing a group of wealthy parishes in West London to send their food donations direct to a less affluent parish in their deanery – literally loving their neighbour.
- Securing free office space for a Polish Catholic charity's street outreach team.
- And lobbying the government on behalf of two parishes who had been excluded from applying for the recent Ending Homelessness in Communities Fund. (I'll come back to that last example a bit later.)

But do you know what? This list of six services is *not* what we do at Caritas Westminster.

This is what we do: We reduce social isolation, tackling the epidemic of loneliness across the diocese. We promote physical and psychological safety for the most vulnerable. We increase financial independence. We help everyone in the diocese to lead flourishing and fulfilling lives. And we seek to grow participation in the life of the Church.

These are the things that priests and parishioners tell us matter to them. These are the long-term outcomes that cap our theory of change. The previous slide was ‘what we do’. This is ‘why we do it’.

And it informs everything we do. Of course, we have to fundraise for each service individually. But we do so to fulfil our remit to make a positive difference overall. Not just replanting the forest but restoring the people.

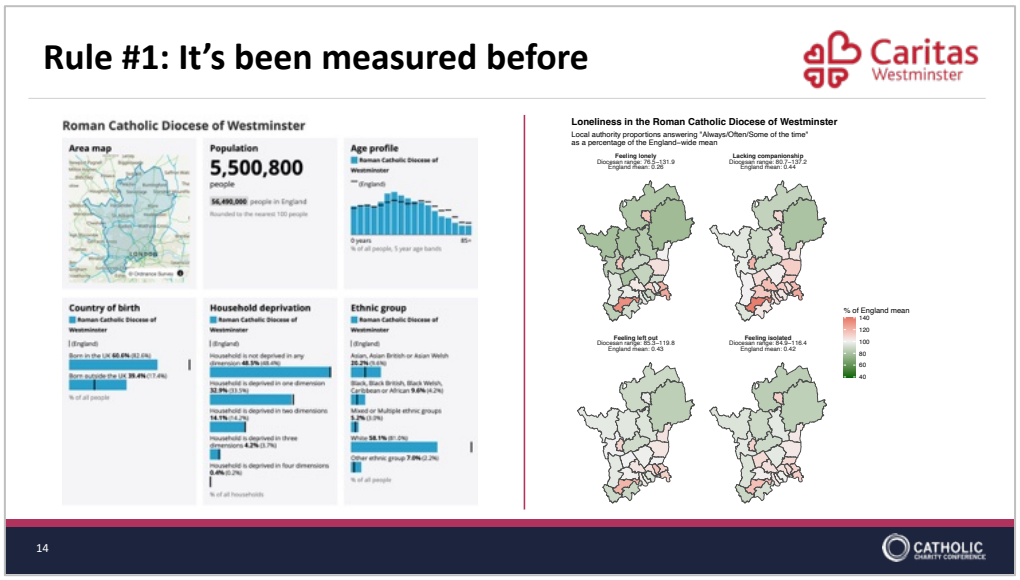
“Ah! But how do you know you are making a difference?” I hear you cry. I said earlier how I had discovered that the most important things in life elude measurement. And it's true. But too many in charity land use this as an excuse to do no data collection at all. Or they pay consultants to come up impressive looking Social Return on Investment ratios that convince no-one. *“It's too difficult to measure things,” they say, “the complexity of human behaviour cannot be captured by numbers.”* They are wrong.

Now it is true that many important things elude measurement: the way of the eagle on the wing; the way of the serpent upon the rock; the way of the ship in a storm. These are all difficult, if not impossible, to measure analytically. But the income deprivation of a town? The loneliness of a neighbourhood? These things *can* be measured. And for those who really want to know if their charity is making a difference there are some simple rules to guide them.

Those four rules are:

1. It's been measured before.
   Someone else has been where you are and has found a way through.
2. You have far more data than you think.
3. You need far less data than you think.
4. There is a useful measurement that is much simpler than you think.

Rule Number One: whatever it is, it has been measured before.



It's remarkable how much information is already available and free to use. On the left-hand side, data from the Office for National Statistics. From the 2021 Census. Tailored precisely to the boundaries of the Diocese of Westminster. I know exactly how many people live here, how their age profile differs to the rest of England, which country they were born in, what their ethnicity is, and so much more.

And I can zoom right in to areas as small as 40 households. So that, when I am asking myself, *"are my funeral grants reaching the most deprived pockets in the diocese?"* Well, now I have no excuse if they aren't.

On the right-hand side: data about where people feel most lonely; where they lack companionship; feel left out; feel isolated. Data this time from the government's Community Life Survey; again, freely available. Without it, I would never have guessed that the loneliest part of the diocese was Hounslow, some 10 miles south-west of where I am standing right now. Want to reduce loneliness? Great. Now we know where to start.

Rule Number Two: You have far more data than you think.

For example, every organisation collects administrative data. In the Diocese of Westminster, we collect financial data for audit purposes through an Annual Financial Return that every parish must submit. A few extra questions tagged on and now we know all about where and what types of social action are happening in the diocese, and with whom.

The third rule is in some ways the most profound. It's one I learned many years ago, working in central government. *"Ever ancient, ever new."* And that rule is: You need far less data than you think. Too often I find senior colleagues holding out for that elusive extra data point that will resolve everything. Here is the bitter truth. No amount of data is ever going to give you 100% certainty. As senior leaders, it is our duty to assess the data we do have and then take a decision.

Rule #3: Far less data than you think

Caritas Westminster

"You already know enough. So do I. It is not knowledge we lack. What is missing is the courage to understand what we know and to draw conclusions."

Lindqvist, S. (2018). *Exterminate All the Brutes: One Man's Odyssey into the Heart of Darkness and the Origins of European Genocide* Granta, ISBN 978-1847081988

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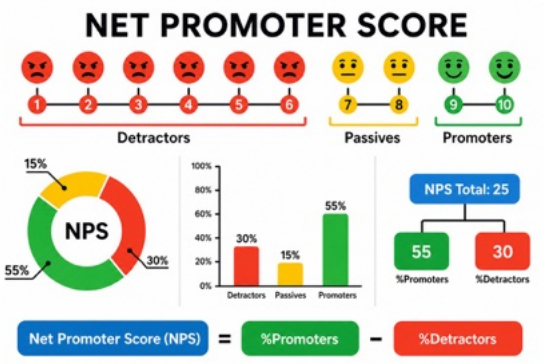
Finally, Rule Number Four: There is a useful measurement that is much simpler than you think. This is the rule that upsets most people. Because it does exactly what they fear: it appears to iron flat the rich tapestry of life. Take parish satisfaction: a vital measurement for Caritas Westminster. If we are here to serve parishes, then a robust measure of satisfaction gets to the very heart of the matter. And here is how we do it: the Net Promoter Score.

We ask parishes to score us from one to ten against the statement: *"I would recommend the services of Caritas Westminster to others."* Everyone who scores us nine or ten is a promoter; everyone who scores us one to six is a detractor. We ignore everyone else. We then subtract the percentage of detractors from the percentage of promoters. In the example on the screen, the difference is 25. That is the Net Promoter Score. In reality, in Caritas Westminster, our score is a very respectable 44.

Rule #4: Much simpler than you think

Caritas Westminster



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Now is this really a measure of parish satisfaction? Does it capture all the subtle nuances and judgements in the mind of every parishioner? Of course not. But there is substantial evidence that the Net Promoter Score is 'good enough'. That this one-question survey is highly correlated with much more complicated measures of satisfaction.

And that's the point. In this messy world of ours, there is no perfect measure of anything. We know in part, and we prophesy in part – we see through a glass darkly – and we trust to the Holy Spirit to guide our decisions. And goodness, do we need the guidance of the Paraclete now more than ever! Across the country – across the world – it feels like we are in uncharted territory.

A quick PESTLE analysis for those who like such things. Our Prime Minister promised back in 2024 that his would be a government *"unburdened by doctrine"*: a political promise I think we can all agree he has delivered in spades. The economy is flatlining at best. Heading for deep recession at worst. With one in three households struggling to pay energy bills. And one in ten people saying they or a close family member received food, financial or medical help from a charity last year.

Communities fractured and split down the middle: with Union Jacks flying at one end of the street, Palestinian flags at the other. The rise of artificial intelligence threatening jobs and livelihoods. The narrow defeat of the assisted suicide bill marking a rare victory in a legal landscape where abortion is in the process of being decriminalised up to birth and priests will soon be required by law to break the seal of confession. The temptation to despair can seem overwhelming. Yet, as Pope Francis reminded us, we are nothing if we are not pilgrims of hope.

On the grand scale, the scrapping of the two-child benefit cap will lift hundreds of thousands out of poverty. And even on the small scale, I believe there are reasons to be cheerful. I mentioned earlier how Caritas Westminster had been working on behalf of two London parishes excluded from applying for the government's latest homelessness fund. Excluded even as their Anglican counterparts were actively encouraged to apply. An outrageous situation that captures perfectly the faith illiteracy of Whitehall.

Yet patient, respectful dialogue with my former civil service colleagues is beginning to bear fruit. Pointing out that behaving in this way fails to deliver best value for public money, risks causing detriment to individual homeless men and women, and stokes needless division between different faith traditions. It is still early days, but I have good reason to expect positive news soon.

Now I realise that – compared with scrapping the two-child cap – this example sounds somewhat trivial, vague, ambiguous. But it captures perfectly one of the gifts I wanted to share the Church when I started at Caritas Westminster. As a former civil servant myself, I have seen first-hand some of the more clumsy attempts by charities to lobby central government. The temptation to take on the role of the Old Testament prophet and cry out to heaven against injustice. I prefer instead the path of Saint Basil: *"A good deed,"* he said, *"is never lost. He who sows courtesy reaps friendship, and he who plants kindness gathers love."*

And so I assemble datasets that demonstrate the power of Catholic social action. And I use my networks of academics and policy makers, social researchers and frontline practitioners, to build a business case. Inspired by faith and grounded in reason.

But as I reach the end of my time with you this afternoon, let us shift gear and boldly go where no speech about Catholic charity has ever gone before: to the twenty-fourth century. I talked at the start of my speech about the Emperor Julian the Apostate. Who sought to turn Rome away from Christianity. To retain charity but dispose of the source and summit of that charity. I told you he failed. And I have found the reason why.

It seems that, no matter how far into the future we go. No matter how far across the universe we travel, some things never change.[1]

Ladies and gentlemen, I warned you at the outset that I had the zeal of the convert. And so it is only right that I conclude my talk with the words of our Lord: *"Behold, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."*

Ours is a faith that is *"ever ancient, ever new."* The world before us may be confused, wounded and changing fast. But our call is the same call that stirred Saint Basil, inspired Father Werthmann, and still sends us out into the world today. So let us be ambitious in love, intelligent in method, and unashamed of the Gospel that gives our work its meaning.

Thank you.

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[1] Source: https://youtu.be/bnD-rjPJ3Xw?si=jrDFB5Y6yyEYaLQ6

KIRK: Gentlemen!
MCCOY: Captain, I see on your report Flavius was killed. I am sorry. I liked that huge sun worshiper.
SPOCK: I wish we could have examined that belief of his more closely. It seems illogical for a sun worshiper to develop a philosophy of total brotherhood. Sun worship is usually a primitive superstition religion.
UHURA: I'm afraid you have it all wrong, Mister Spock, all of you. I've been monitoring some of their old-style radio waves, the empire spokesman trying to ridicule their religion. But he couldn't. Don't you understand? It's not the sun up in the sky. It's the Son of God.
KIRK: Caesar and Christ. They had them both. And the word is spreading only now.
MCCOY: A philosophy of total love and total brotherhood.
SPOCK: It will replace their imperial Rome, but it will happen in their twentieth century.
KIRK: Wouldn't it be something to watch, to be a part of? To see it happen all over again? Mister Chekov, take us out of orbit. Ahead warp factor one.
CHEKOV: Aye, sir.