Good evening everyone and a very warm welcome to the 2026 AGM.

Prayers:

Catholic Union prayer

Lord, we come before you in thanksgiving
And with a desire to serve you.
We ask that the Holy Spirit, source of grace and truth
Will inspire us to listen to your call, to those around us, and bestow the gift of wisdom.
May our minds be enlightened,
our resolve be strengthened,
and our hearts be filled with your love,
as we come together to work for the Common Good.
May Jesus and Mary, his mother, watch over us and guide us.
Amen

Our Lady of Westminster *pray for us*
St Thomas More *pray for us*
Saints George, Andrew and David *pray for us*
We are keeping Bishop John Keenan in our prayers (who is unwell at present).

Thank you all for your membership and your contribution to the life of the Catholic Union.

Thank you to our President, Baroness Hollins, our former Presidents, our Vice Presidents for their leadership. Baroness Hollins is debating in the House of Lords and hopes to join us later on. We are grateful to the London Jesuit Centre for being wonderful hosts once again and to CCLA for their generous sponsorship of the reception to follow. As you know, after this meeting, we will be gathering for mass and then returning to this room for a glass of wine. I am very pleased that Archbishop Mark and Professor Philip Booth have kindly agreed to speak to us this evening.

My first and very happy task is to confirm the appointment of our two new episcopal Patrons: Archbishop Cushley and Archbishop Moth. The Council is grateful for their great generosity in accepting this honorary appointment and I ask you to show your appreciation to Their Graces.

Many of us are meeting for the second time in just over a week, having enjoyed the magnificent Craigmyle Lecture given by Sir Gabriele Finaldi. Every year, we are blessed with a superb talk but this one was particularly special, with its wide appeal to Catholic and non-Catholic listeners and also the privilege of gathering at the National Gallery's Piggott Theatre. I am most grateful to all those who were involved in bringing about this prestigious event which has been received very well.

In the afterglow of the Lecture, I have been reflecting on why the Catholic Union places so much emphasis on its public education programme, from the Craigmyle Lecture to Pub Talks to Webinars to the Weekly Briefing. Indeed, why was the Catholic Union Charitable Trust formed in 2015 to supercharge the educational aspect of our mission?

Well, experience has shown that the most effective way to promote the teaching of the Church, in wider society, is to do so in a positive and informative fashion. We do not need to be reminded of the tangles the church, and many people of goodwill, have found themselves caught up in over contentious societal issues.

We do not want again to be labelled unjustly, as uncaring or patronising or even bigoted, because the truth of Church teaching, underlying any particular ethical position, is simply not understood or even known. Indeed, do most of the wider population grasp the consistency in church teaching, between all the precious life issues, from conception to the grave, from abortion to the death penalty, and every horror in between?

Fortunately, we, and many others, did help to persuade our lawmakers in the recent assisted suicide debates. But beyond the obvious practical reasons for being against the provision of physician-assisted suicide, were the fundamental truths about human dignity sufficiently appreciated by non-Catholics?

Our best hope may be to try to articulate the Joy and Truth of "what we believe" rather protesting endlessly against the dismal story of "what we do not believe". Our public education programme is a small but meaningful contribution to this effort, we hope.

So, the famous the three Es of the Catholic Union - Education, Engagement and Encouragement – remain vital. We seek to share the teachings of the Faith among our lay brothers and sisters, and in wider society; we work to engage at local and national level with a multitude of groups, individuals and institutions, to support the work of the Bishops of England & Wales and Scotland; and, perhaps most importantly, the Union seeks to motivate our vast national lay community to get involved in the Public Square for the Common Good.

The Union endeavours to support all good works of the Church and its people. For example, we attend the WeBelieve festival, engage with our four Catholic universities, support university Cathsocs and chaplaincies and try to have representatives at the major conferences during each year. We exist to promote the hopeful and positive contribution our vast national faith community makes to the country in so many ways.

REVIEW OF THE YEAR

I hope that you will have had a chance to review the Annual Report and we are grateful to the private sponsor who paid for its printing and circulation. I propose to give a brief overview of our recent activities; a more detailed record can be found in the Report itself.

Parliamentary

Of course, our work this year quite rightly focused on the continuing fight against the threat of legalised assisted suicide, in the three parliaments, across Great Britain. Baroness Hollins and her colleagues in both Houses have been at the forefront of the campaign in Westminster. We salute them and thank them as we do the MSPs who worked tirelessly in the Scottish Parliament. The Catholic Union worked closely with many groups, with the bishops and a myriad of Catholic agencies. I would like us to

show our appreciation to the bishops of England & Wales and Scotland for their tremendous personal efforts in the public square. Many hundreds of our members wrote to their MPs and galvanised support in their parishes and schools. It is important to remember that when this threat originally presented itself, many of our lawmakers did not have a formed view on the matter, so careful and reasoned information from Catholics, will have brought many of them to our side. I also applaud the work of Fr Christopher Colven, Catholic Chaplain in the Westminster parliament, and all those tasked with the spiritual care of politicians across the country.

Governance

Earlier this year, we engaged the specialist charity law firm Stone King to examine and advise on our corporate set up. This piece of work, paid for by a private donor, has been a great help in determining how best the CUGB and the CUCT should work together in the years to come. You will have seen our end of year accounts for 2025 in the Annual Report that this advice has led some changes in the way we allocate our funds and Benedict shall we walking us through these shortly.

On the subject of funds, I want to fulsomely thank all donors and especially those who are members of the St Thomas More Circle. We simply cannot operate without your support.

I am also grateful for the huge work led by Martin Foley on updating our suite of operational policies, ranging from safeguarding to employment. Many hours have been given by colleagues in this key area of governance.

Events

We have a had another busy year of events including pub talks, webinars and other gatherings. Our events are open to all and we have noticed an increase in interest from non-members and new faces. The Catholic Union's mission to encourage Catholics to participate goes hand-in-hand with an attitude of looking outward and engaging with others. Our ever-popular pub talks have included speakers from Margaret and Barry Mizen to John Studzinski to Christopher Lamb. Our Summer Gathering was held at beautiful Buckfast Abbey and I would say it was one of the best we've had in the last twenty years. Our webinar programme has featured topics such as the threat of science to belief given by a priest-astrophysicist from the archdiocese of Cardiff-Menevia, the place of beauty in faith, the challenge of artificial intelligence and a special discussion for young people on the problem of spiritual loneliness.

Scotland

In Scotland, we have been led inspirationally by Professor Bart McGrettrick and it was very pleasing to see Bart honoured by Pope Leo earlier this year. We have continued to develop our work in Scotland, getting to know the wonderful bishops of Scotland and also the new Catholic MSPs. Our Committee is up and running, and we have a special event in Edinburgh planned for 7 February. It was a great honour for the Catholic Union to be invited to mass and a reception for Catholic MSPs in the Scottish Parliament. I am most grateful for the support and encouragement of Archbishop Leo and Anthony Horan in Scotland.

Parliamentary & Society Committee

In this second year of the re-formed committee, exclusively for Catholic chief executives, we have had some excellent meetings. The committee has been organised so that Catholic chief executives and directors may gather privately with their peers in an informative and challenging forum. We have been honoured by speakers including the late Ann Widdecombe, Celia Waring and James Corah of CCLA and Catherine Pepinster. I am grateful to Matt Gibbs and Louisa for their masterminding and management of this successful group.

Committees

Our Education committee has met regularly and we have seen the flourishing of the Events Committee and Tech Group under the leadership of Karen Singrayer. I would like to note the service of Dr Philip Howard, chair of our Joint Medical Ethics Committee, who was honoured by Pope Leo this year.

Weekly Briefing, Bidding Prayers and Reflections for Feastdays

Our Weekly Briefing, Bidding Prayers and Feastday Reflections are now received by thousands of Catholics across England, Scotland and Wales. These are contributions to national Catholic life which we are pleased to provide and our team takes great time and care over everything we publish. We have been blessed by guest editorials given by leading contributors in the Public Square including Pierpaolo Finaldi, the late Edward Stourton, Brendan O'Hara MP, Vincent Keaveny, Prof Claire Ozanne, Oliver Pawle and Ed Kessler. Our School of the Week feature has included secondaries and primaries from across the land.

Staff news

We are making good progress with the appointment of a new Director and we hope that the new Director will be in post by January. I would like to thank the recruitment team of Peter Hindmarsh, Karen Singarayah and Richard Harries for their considerable time commitment given to this process.

As things stand, our single full-time member of staff is Louisa Collyer-Hamlin who continues in her role as Head of External Affairs. Louisa is supported by two part time freelance consultants Yvonna Raftopoulos and Catherine Pepinster, who fulfil a wide range of duties within the Catholic Union. I would like to specially thank Louisa for the incredible job she has done since Nigel and James stood down in 2024. Louisa has been at the right hand of the President and Chairs, our lynchpin at the heart of the Union, worked all hours on the assisted suicide battle, has developed and maintains an outstanding Weekly Briefing, and run two years of exceptional events which have been a credit to the Catholic community. Thank you, Louisa!

Next year

A visit to Hexham & Newcastle diocese by the chairs will take place in a fortnight's time. The 2026 programme is already developing – we have pubs talks and webinars in the planning, we will hold events in Manchester and Birmingham and plan to visit three dioceses. Our Summer Gathering will be held at another venue of Catholic interest outside of the capital. Priorities include connecting with more individual parishes and working with schools and university chaplaincies. We will continue to promote Catholic Social Teaching in all three parliaments on the issues of the day. Your input and expertise are always welcome.

Support

I am immensely grateful to the generosity of our members and supporters. Donations have been coming in throughout the year and without these very little would be possible. The Catholic Union community includes those who give of their time as volunteers, those who share their professional expertise, those who are members of the Catholic Union of Great Britain and those who are members of the St Thomas More Circle. Donors may give to either the CUGB or the CUCT as they wish. All of this generosity is deeply appreciated and I would like to express my thanks again to each and every one of you. I also wish to acknowledge the vital support given by CCLA, Stone King and the Jesuits in Britain.

Before I hand back to our Secretary, I would like to mention some of the many who help the Catholic Union to be the force that is it:

- During the year we welcomed Canon William Agley, General Secretary of the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales as our new Ecclesiastical Adviser. He succeeded Bishop Hudson. My thanks to Canon William and our friends at Eccleston Square.

I cannot begin to fully express my gratitude to the following five individuals whose commitment, wisdom, kindness, patience and commitment are shining examples of the best in world of Catholic volunteers:

- Peter Hindmarsh – chair, CUCT
- Martin Foley – secretary, CUGB
- Benedict Jennings – treasurer, CUGB, CUCT
- Karen Singarayer – vice chair, CUGB
- Stuart Hudson – vice chair, CUGB

- I would like to acknowledge the retirement of Michael Pritchett and Veronica Fulton as trustees of the CUCT, both of whom also served as officers in the CUGB.

- My special thanks are reserved for President, Baroness Hollins, whose leadership and involvement in the work of the Catholic Union has been an incredible blessing. She reprimands me for using too many superlatives about her so you'll just have to imagine what I might say. Please keep Sheila in your prayers as she continues to give so much to public life.

- Thank you to the Executive Committee which meets every month, the Council which meets twice a year, and all those who participate in our committees.

- Our hosts, wherever we find ourselves, from here at Farm Street, to St Mary's Cadogan Street, to Parliament.

- As mentioned already, members of the St Thomas More Circle. Without your generous and dependable support we simply cannot operate.

- All members of the Catholic Union and Readers of the Weekly Briefing. You now number in your thousands and can be found in every part of this island. Thank you for your membership, for keeping in touch, and support of our events programme. Please continue to send in news items and announcements to Louisa for inclusion in the Weekly Briefing. At the heart of the Catholic Union is a drive to encourage the laity to participate. To be active and not passive. We can each play a part, at parish level or public level, this might be in educating or campaigning, this might be in giving, this might be in writing or speaking, this might be by voting. It's up to you.

The Catholic Union endeavours to be versatile and appropriate in all it does, to be useful behind the scenes, or on the stage, as a supporting act, or taking the lead. We try to help in each situation in whichever way is most useful. We walk in lockstep with our bishops and the magisterium and I hope give encouragement to the Catholic voice in the dialogue of the public square.

On behalf of the President, Vice Presidents and Council, I renew our commitment to you, our fellow members, that we will work tirelessly to serve the Catholic community, and wider society, in the light and hope which our Faith has inspired in us. Thank you.