



FROM CRISIS TO HOPE:
WORKING TO ACHIEVE
THE COMMON GOOD



The Council for Justice and Peace of the Irish Episcopal Conference

'The current crisis obliges us to re-plan our journey, to set ourselves new rules and to discover new forms of commitment, to build on positive experiences and to reject negative ones. The crisis thus becomes an opportunity for discernment, in which to shape a new vision for the future.'

(Pope Benedict XVI, *Charity in Truth*, 21)

Foreword

Any analysis of the impact of the current economic, social and political crisis on the island of Ireland, or examination of its causes, will inevitably raise fundamental questions of social justice.

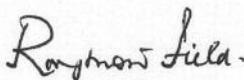
In addressing these issues, the Council for Justice and Peace seeks to move beyond the statistical analysis to focus on the human cost. As the full extent of the impact of the crisis on individuals, families, communities and society as a whole is revealed, the need for a response founded on the common good and the protection of the human dignity of all members of our society becomes clear.

The frequent references to the common good in political discourse in recent months compel us to provide an examination of this principle, and its implications for all of us at both an individual and a societal level, from the perspective of the Catholic Church. Pope Benedict XVI's 2009 Encyclical Letter *Caritas in Veritate* (*Charity in Truth*) provides a useful framework for a reflection on our current situation in Ireland, and the choices we face in the future.

With elections fast approaching on both sides of the border, there are real opportunities for political change. If this change is to be meaningful and contribute to the building of a better future for everyone in Ireland, we need to be willing to examine past mistakes and ensure they are not repeated.

The message of the Council for Justice and Peace is fundamentally one of hope – there is a better way possible if we take responsibility for our actions – past, present and future – and make a firm commitment to work for the common good of all in our society.

I wish to sincerely thank all the members of the Council for Justice and Peace for their contribution to this document. I hope it will make a valuable contribution to the debate at this critical time in the history of our country.



Bishop Raymond Field
Chair

Council for Justice and Peace of the Irish Episcopal Conference

Executive Summary

1. At a time of considerable **financial and political turmoil throughout the island of Ireland**, which has brought suffering and despair for many people, the Council for Justice and Peace of the Irish Episcopal Conference offers a vision for the future, based on Gospel values and Catholic Social Teaching.
2. This vision is inspired by a belief in the **inalienable worth of every individual** as created in the image and likeness of God, and offers a response to the current situation in Ireland that is founded on hope and a **commitment to the common good**. This understanding of the common good should not be confused with the greatest good for the greatest number, but is a reminder of the duty of every one of us to respect the human dignity of all persons.
3. In Ireland today, we once again emphasise the importance of supporting, protecting and strengthening the **family** based on marriage between a man and a woman as well as promoting human life at all its stages.
4. For Catholics, the protection of the **inalienable right to life** of the unborn constitutes a non-negotiable element of fostering the common good. Abortion is the denial of that inalienable right.
5. The starting point for this analysis is a recognition of the **devastating impact of the financial crisis** on individuals and families throughout Ireland and an acknowledgement of the **breakdown in trust in core institutions**, North and South – including the Catholic Church – that contributed to our current situation. The real **cost of the crisis** cannot be understood in terms of figures and statistics alone, without reference to the human cost – the impact on people's lives.

6. A key element of the causal analysis presented in the statement is the **growth of a more radical individualism** in Ireland, and the impact of this change on our society. Particular attention is paid to the significance of the **'bonus culture'** of recent decades and the resultant inequality and damage to social cohesion.
7. In charting a way forward out of the current crisis, the statement draws inspiration from Pope Benedict XVI's Encyclical Letter *Caritas in Veritate* (*Charity in Truth*), emphasising that the crisis offers a valuable opportunity to bring about change and shape a new future. The Encyclical highlights the principle of **gift** as a fundamental principle of social life; not everything is earned, not all actions are motivated by self-interest.
8. The **forthcoming elections**, North and South, are highlighted as a key opportunity for political change. The task of those in positions of **leadership**, particularly in Government, is to serve the common good. **Financial institutions**, notwithstanding their importance, should be at the service of society. Lessons must be learned from the **wrongs of the past** and measures put in place to ensure they cannot be repeated.
9. We all need to take responsibility and work to achieve the correct **balance between freedom and solidarity**.
10. Our ultimate source of **hope in times of suffering** is our belief in God's unfailing love: 'Yes, I am with you always, until the very end of time' (Mt 28:20).

1. Introduction: Fostering a culture of hope

- *The danger of social unrest obliges us to respond;*
- *This statement should not be confused with a political manifesto. The focus is not on individual policies but rather on a vision for the country.*

The present time is, undeniably, one of considerable financial and political turmoil throughout the island of Ireland. For many people it is a time of suffering and despair and this suffering needs to be adequately acknowledged and addressed. Alongside the expressions of suffering are calls for change, appeals for us to look critically at the values that have conditioned our society in recent decades and what the consequences of those value-systems have been. In solidarity with all those who are suffering as a result of the economic crisis, both in Ireland and throughout the world, the Council for Justice and Peace wishes to add its voice to those calling for positive change in our society. This statement represents our contribution to shaping a new vision for the future, one which is based on Gospel values and Catholic Social Teaching. It is a vision inspired by a belief in the inalienable worth of every individual, from the moment of conception, as created in the image and likeness of God: ‘Being in the image of God the human individual possess the dignity of a person, who is not just something, but someone.’ⁱ

The core value at the heart of this vision is the common good, a value that emphasizes the essential equality of all persons irrespective of gender, race, colour or creed. This vision of the common good should not be confused with the idea of the greatest good for the greatest number. Rather it is a reminder of the duty of care on all of us to respect and to take account of the human dignity of all persons – as groups or individuals. All are to be respected and their basic needs to be met so that they may reach their fulfilment more fully and easily’ⁱⁱ

ⁱ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par. 357.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, par. 1906.

In placing emphasis on the dignity of *all* persons the Church reminds us that every social group must take account of the needs and legitimate aspirations of other groups, and even of the general welfare of the entire human family.ⁱⁱⁱ

With elections to both Dáil Éireann and the Northern Ireland Assembly imminent, this is a crucial moment of political change; change which is taking place against the background of justifiable anger. It is our belief that the wounds generated by the crisis run deep and, if allowed to fester, could engender a cultural climate in which the spectre of social fragmentation and violence cannot be ruled out. As we who live on the island are all too aware, if such violence were to be unleashed, it would cause incalculable suffering and herald a period of political and social instability which could take a long time to heal. It is the acknowledgement of this sobering truth that prompts our statement. As Pope Benedict XVI reminds us, ‘the current crisis obliges us to re-plan our journey’ (21); and this is our starting point. Love of neighbour and of country prompts us to offer the statement at this difficult time as a contribution to fostering a culture of hope on the island of Ireland.

In issuing this statement we are acknowledging the role that religion plays in political and social life in reawakening the spiritual energy which empowers people to work for justice in the world.^{iv} This is not a political manifesto. On the contrary, it is our hope that this statement will contribute to focusing attention on the larger issue as to the type of country we want. Our objective is to hold up a vision of a society which is working to achieve the common good, and to do this through an analysis which comprehends the essential elements of a political equation: economic efficiency, individual freedom, protection of the environment and social justice. There are many other factors which impact on the common good in society from the perspective of the Catholic Church, and the analysis presented here is not intended as exhaustive, but rather as an overview of some key considerations that we should bear in mind as we attempt to chart a new way forward.

ⁱⁱⁱ Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*), par. 26.

^{iv} See Pope Benedict XVI’s Encyclical Letter, *God is Love (Deus Caritas Est)*, 28B

2. The Common Good in Ireland Today

- *This statement is written from the perspective of hope rather than crisis management;*
- *The core value at the heart of this statement is the common good.*

Described by Pope Benedict XVI as the political path of charity,^v the importance of the common good in catholic social teaching is never in doubt. Furthermore, the concept of the common good can be found in many faiths and cultures throughout the world. Prompted by this vision of the character and worth of human society, Catholics share common concerns about human dignity and justice, not only with Christians and those of religious faith, but also with all men and women of good will. Although it must be recognized that there are different views within our society of what constitutes the common good, the issues raised in this statement will be central to any understanding of its meaning at a political level.

While the ethical character of the Church's social doctrine is unchangeable, every generation has to interpret and re-fashion catholic social teaching to meet the needs of each new age. In his most recent Encyclical Letter, *Charity in Truth (Caritas in Veritate)*, Pope Benedict continues this work of his predecessors. Published on 29 June 2009, at the height of the current socio-economic crisis, the Encyclical offers a valuable perspective within which to situate the analysis of the current situation in Ireland. Not only does it draw our attention to the inseparability of both love and truth in this quest for justice in the world,^{vi} but it also highlights the inspirational character of love as gift, in drawing people to dedicate their lives to the struggle for justice and peace: *'the earthly city is promoted not merely by relationships of rights and duties, but to an even greater and more fundamental extent by relationships of gratuitousness, mercy and communion'* (32).

^v See Pope Benedict XVI's encyclical letter, *Charity in Truth (Caritas in Veritate)* 7, which in the same passage describes the common good as "no less effective than the kind of charity which encounters the neighbour directly."

^{vi} These opening phrases from the encyclical of Pope Benedict XVI *Charity in Truth* offer a powerful proclamation of the link between love and truth: *'Charity in truth, to which Jesus Christ bore witness by his earthly life and especially by his death and resurrection, is the principal driving force behind the authentic development of every person and of all humanity. Love — caritas — is an extraordinary force which leads people to opt for courageous and generous engagement in the field of justice and peace'*. (*Charity in Truth*, 1)

For the Ireland of today, this principle of gift (gratuitousness), which is presented in *Charity in Truth* as a fundamental principle of social life, is an insight whose importance should not be minimized. In common with many countries in the so-called developed world, which are increasingly shaped by the cultural mindset of advanced capitalism, we can forget that not everything is earned and that not all actions are motivated by self-interest, albeit enlightened self-interest. For example, one's health, personality, physical and intellectual endowments, not to speak of the love which one received as a child, one's early schooling environment and those friendships that shape the quality of our adult lives, are all received as gift. Place alongside this the reality of parental love and the myriad forms of voluntary work that constitute the world of active citizenship, and one has before oneself a powerful picture of the importance of what has been described as the gift economy. The gift economy drives civil society, promotes the idea of active citizenship, and supports civic virtues such as the ideal of public service. If forces were therefore to combine to undermine the gift economy, the repercussions would extend far beyond the economic forum.

Combine confidence in the self-sufficiency of the individual – the conviction that everything that one receives is earned/merited – with a complimentary set of beliefs which hold that one can measure the worth of one's endeavour by the size of the monetary reward. In this mix, one has a set of conditions which are ideal for the creation of what has been described as a bonus culture and extremely difficult for the promotion of the civic virtues of active citizenship and public service that are the life-blood of a functioning participatory democracy. It is our firm conviction that the neglect of this gift dimension of personal and societal living lies at the root of what has gone wrong in Irish society. If this proves to be the case, there is a need to critique exaggerated claims of independence/self-sufficiency which give rise to and sustain a 'bonus culture'.

The conviction which underpins this statement and is reflected in its title, *From Crisis to Hope: Working to Achieve the Common Good*, is that, notwithstanding the current malaise in Irish society, the present moment can and should be viewed through the lens of hope rather than crisis management. However, this will only be possible if we can learn from past mistakes and challenge the capitalist cultural model that has dominated in recent decades – a consumerist model of personal and societal fulfillment, where everything and everybody has an economic price, a stance which has little or no sensitivity to the simple truth that the really important things such as love and indeed life itself are received as gifts – they are literally priceless.

There are historical precedents which offer some hope that the excesses of advanced capitalism can be checked – the emergence of a robust regulatory environment and a concern for the welfare state in the decades after the 1929 Wall Street crash and the Second World War being a case in point. Alongside the successes of the Labour movement in the post-war years, one can also highlight the remarkable achievements of Christian Democracy which emerged from the ruins of Germany at the end of World War II, motivated by a desire to keep in balance the core principles of freedom, enterprise and social responsibility. In the decades that followed, up until the early 1980s, both the Social and Christian Democrats provided an important counterbalance to the excesses of consumerism/capitalism.

In today's society, however, it has become increasingly difficult to challenge the dominant individualist/consumerist societal ethos. Ironically, the very public nature of the distress caused by this most recent economic crash may indeed prompt such a review. In any event, it is our opinion that a critique of society's over-reliance on the model of cost/benefit analysis to adjudicate on all issues of value/worth is long overdue.

3. The impact of the crisis

- *There is a need to acknowledge the interconnectedness of the economies on the island of Ireland;*
- *There is a need to go beyond mere expressions of sympathy and concern.*

The speed with which the consequences of the financial crisis have been felt by individuals and families throughout Ireland has been both striking and frightening. The impact on the economy, North and South, is very serious, with little prospect of improvement, at least in the short term, and recent economic developments have served to highlight just how inter-connected both economies are. Of course the real cost of the crisis cannot be expressed in figures alone, without reference to the impact, on a human level, on those who have lost their jobs, their life savings and even their homes, or those who have been forced to migrate in search of work, leaving behind family and friends.

There are very few who have not suffered financially. We repeat our concern about those who did not prosper in the period of the ‘Celtic Tiger’^{vii} and we express a new concern about those who are now experiencing financial insecurity and poverty due to the recession. The present crisis has left large numbers of people out of work on both sides of the border, giving rise to insecurity and even despair amongst some. Not only have unemployment rates in the Republic increased almost threefold in the past three years but the numbers on the live register have increased in the last two years alone by over 40%.^{viii} Over this same period, and notwithstanding the so-called peace dividend, Northern Ireland continues to record the highest rates of economic inactivity in the UK.^{ix}

The impact of the economic downturn on the lives and on the health of employers as well as employees should not be minimized. All are struggling to survive in this challenging business environment and some older people fear that they may never find employment again as a result of increased competition for jobs. It is this painful reality which gives rise to an understandable fear of a return to hardships last experienced during the 1980s; a view that is reinforced by rising levels of emigration.

Many of those who have lost their jobs are the same people who have seen the value of their houses halve over the past three years, including young couples who are finding it increasingly difficult to pay their mortgage, and that is before the almost inevitable rise in the UK and European Central Bank interest rates which remain for the moment at historically low levels. For many people in Ireland today, the home, which should provide a place of warmth and security, has become a burden, a source of insecurity and a constant reminder of insurmountable debts.

^{vii} See the position paper from the Irish Commission for Justice and Social Affairs, *In the Wake of the Celtic Tiger: Poverty in Contemporary Ireland* (Dublin: Veritas, 2009).

^{viii} CSO statistics reveal that in the last three years, the number of unemployed people in the Republic of Ireland has risen from 4.8% (2007) of the working population to 13.2%, (2010) and now stands at over 280,000. Furthermore, the number of people on the live register stands at 435,000 – approximately 20% of the total adult population of working age (16 – 65).

^{ix} In 2006 the economic inactivity rate in Northern Ireland, at 27%, was the highest in the UK. Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (2006) *Lifetime Opportunities: Government’s Anti-poverty and Social Inclusion Strategy for Northern Ireland* (Belfast, OFMDFM). In the intervening years this picture has not improved. The figures for October 2010 reveal that the NI economic inactivity rate for those aged 16-64 stood at 28.8%. This is significantly higher than the UK average rate (23.2%) and remains the highest of the twelve UK regions. *DETI (UK) Labour Market Summary (seasonally adjusted), October 2010*

For many, the losses go way beyond financial matters and affect the fabric of family and social lives. It can be an extremely difficult time for parents, many of whom are attempting to provide for all the needs of their children in changed economic circumstances.^x As a result of mounting economic pressures many parents may be ‘time poor’ as well as materially poor and this can have a negative impact on child-parent relationships. Particular mention must be made of the situation of lone-parent families, a disproportionate percentage of whom live in poverty. Catholic social teaching places particular emphasis on the importance of the family, as outlined in the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (211): ‘Enlightened by the radiance of the biblical message, the Church considers the family as the first natural society, with underived rights that are proper to it, and places it at the centre of social life’.^{xi} Acknowledging the centrality of the family unit to Irish society – as enshrined in our Constitution^{xii} – we call for adequate analysis of the impact of social and economic policies, to ensure that they contribute to the protection and strengthening of family life, rather than causing fragmentation.

All these people deserve much more than mere expressions of sympathy and concern. As a matter of urgency, we need to explore ways that we can all move forward together towards a society that is more prosperous in the fullest sense of that word. This will require:

- i support for enterprise through responsible lending and investment practices;
- ii a just, fair and compassionate response to the situation of those with outstanding debt; and
- iii the introduction of appropriate measures to ensure that the mistakes of the past are not repeated.

^x A 2009 report from the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) revealed that almost one in four children in Northern Ireland could be considered to be living in poverty, with 12% of children living in ‘absolute poverty’, where the household income is less than half the national (UK) average OFMDFM Report (11 February 2009), quoted in *Challenging Poverty in Northern Ireland* (St. Mary’s University College Belfast, 2010), p. 21.

^{xi} Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Hereafter: *Compendium*) (Dublin: Veritas, 2005), No. 211.

^{xii} *Bunreacht na hÉireann*, Article 41. <http://www.taoiseach.gov.ie/upload/static/256.htm>

4. The betrayal of trust

- *A breakdown of trust in societal institutions could lead to the undermining of the very fabric of democracy itself;*
- *There is a need to acknowledge and take responsibility for the wrongs of the past.*

How often have we heard comments which suggest that a major part of the responsibility for the Republic's current woes can be laid at the door of the international banking crisis, or that we should not be too alarmist in our prognosis of recovery prospects because in essence all that has happened is that we have reverted to 2002 levels of prosperity. What they have in common is the assumption that the current malaise in Ireland is simply an economic crisis which can be solved by the appropriate use of economic levers of power. We believe that future generations of Irish men and women will be destined to repeat the mistakes of today if assumptions such as the one just outlined remain unchallenged.

It must never be forgotten that the collateral damage from this crisis is much more than our comparative advantage as a country. In the last three years Ireland (including Northern Ireland as part of the UK regulatory system) has suffered a significant failure of its institutions – a loss of trust in the banks, the regulatory agencies and many other state agencies, including even Government itself. The bonus culture, which regrettably is still a feature of banks and financial institutions in both Ireland and the UK, has let us down badly, and has given rise to what can only be described as reckless gambling practices. These have caused immense suffering to many Irish men and women and should have no place in a renewed Ireland. Furthermore, as *Charity in Truth* (32) reminds us, the increase of social inequality, which is an inevitable consequence of this bonus culture and the accompanying institutional failure, brings with it the serious risk of causing a breakdown of social cohesion – the bedrock of both a properly functioning democracy and an orderly economy.^{xiii}

^{xiii} See the following passage: *‘Through the systematic increase of social inequality ... not only does social cohesion suffer, thereby placing democracy at risk, but so too does the economy, through the progressive erosion of “social capital”, the network of relationships of trust, dependability, and respect for rules, all of which are indispensable for any form of civil coexistence.’* (*Charity in Truth*, 32)

If the current crisis offers us the opportunity re-plan our societal journey towards a new and more just vision of the future, it is the breakdown in trust arising from this institutional failure that obliges us to do so. In addressing this issue, we are acutely aware that the Catholic Church is one of those core institutions in which there has been a breakdown of trust in Ireland in recent years. As we present this statement calling for the development of a culture of hope towards a more equitable society, we do so conscious of the need for the Church to take account of its own failings and to put into practice the principles of social justice that we teach. We commit ourselves to addressing the wrongs of the past and ensuring that they will not be repeated.

The Encyclical *Charity in Truth* is a reminder to us that our attempts to shape a new vision for the future will only be successful to the extent that we acknowledge that by our actions or inactions we contributed to the cultural climate that generated the current crisis. It needs to be recognised that there are different levels of responsibility within society, and that the main burden of responsibility for our current predicament lies with those who have in the recent past, and in some cases still do, exercise positions of leadership in our society. Nevertheless, we will never even begin to be able to address the root causes of the crisis and chart a way forward unless we acknowledge the truth that we are not just simply victims, but have made some contribution to the culture which has generated this crisis. A lack of critique by those who benefited from the prosperity of recent years, a lack of critical engagement with political processes, an excessive preoccupation with local issues at a political level which ignored the demands of solidarity and the common good are all factors which contributed to the situation we are experiencing today.

5. Losing balance: freedom, efficiency, solidarity and the protection of the environment

- *We must resist the temptation to press the reset button to bring the country back to a state of economic efficiency that existed prior to the property boom;*
- *Banks and other financial institutions must be at the service of society and contribute to the common good.*

With elections imminent on both sides of the border, we are conscious of the importance of seizing this ‘opportunity for discernment, in which to shape a new vision for the future’ (*Charity in Truth*, 21). However, this will be possible only to the extent that we resist the temptation to press the reset button to bring the country back to a state of economic efficiency that existed prior to the property boom. Such a narrow focus on competitiveness has, in the recent past, shown little comprehension of the practical implications of the idea that the economy should be at the service of society.

With the growth of the market economy and the perceived failures of state-sponsored socialist economic alternatives, capitalism has become progressively more embedded in our culture. This economic model has not been without its benefits. Capitalism fosters the ideals of a meritocracy, which rewards efficiency, hard work and success and has engendered a cultural optimism which is founded on technological mastery of the environment. In promoting mass market access to reasonably priced goods, the consumerist culture of advanced capitalism has brought immense benefits to mankind. However, not all aspects of the capitalist model can be viewed in such a positive light. The recent economic crisis offers evidence to suggest that, with the increasing cultural dominance of the consumerist ethos of advanced capitalism, we have lost the correct balance between the four essential elements of a just and sustainable economic model: freedom, efficiency, solidarity and the protection of the environment. Instead of the historically normal patterns of subordinating the economy to society, capitalism effectively operates under a political system whereby self-regulating markets subordinate society to the logic of the market.

By its very nature the focus of consumerism is on short term pragmatic goals. However, in such a cultural milieu, there is always the danger that the goal of economic effectiveness will crowd-out vital ethical considerations and core values, such as solidarity and the common good. It is a cultural environment which can regrettably foster the mistaken belief that human happiness is achievable without the need to attend to those ethical issues which connect us to the larger context of our lives, such as the consideration of duties or responsibilities to the wider community. In such a consumerist milieu, efficiency will always be perceived to be more important than fairness, and the economic need to down-size will take precedence over concern for the welfare of employees. Taken to extremes, such an environment leaves little room for those values that respect fair trade, either at home or in the developing world, nor does it place much premium on faithful service and/or life-long commitment to an employer.

Perhaps the most damaging consequence which flows from the increasing cultural dominance of consumerist capitalism is the emphasis which it places upon monetary success as a measure of personal worth – an emphasis which has given rise to the so-called bonus culture. But, what if the money economy needs gift to function properly? What if Adam Smith was mistaken in his belief that the economy functions on the basis of enlightened self-interest and obligations to the state? What about the motive of job satisfaction or the pleasure of giving a service to another or contributing to the good of society? Pope Benedict has argued that, *‘economic activity cannot prescind from gratuitousness, which fosters and disseminates solidarity and responsibility for justice and the common good among the different economic players. It is clearly a specific and profound form of economic democracy’* (*Charity in Truth*, 38).

Banks and other financial institutions are an essential component of a functioning economy and a successful culture, and, consequently, need to be supported. However, they must be at the service of society and contribute to the common good.

6. Looking to the future from the perspective of the Common Good

- *We must be alert to the danger in the current climate that concepts like the common good may be exploited in the context of calls to “share the pain” of the economic crisis;*
- *The task of every government is to serve the common good by protecting the weak and vulnerable, and by promoting integral human development for everyone.*

In the midst of the current crisis it is clear that, as a society, we have shared concerns and anxieties, shared anger about the absence of adequate regulation and the abdication of responsibility, and out of this shared discourse of anger and concern we see emerging shared hopes based on a desire to identify a more just way forward. The challenge of the crisis we face is that it offers us an opportunity to explore how we envisage the dignity of the human person, the justice of society and the development of a renewed sense of the common good.

There is a danger in the current climate that concepts like the common good may be exploited in the context of calls to “share the pain” of the economic crisis. The link between politics and ethics is important for understanding any discussion of the common good, for ‘the task of every government, local and central, [is] to ensure that their policies serve the common good by protecting the weak and vulnerable, and by promoting integral human development for everyone.’^{xiv} The concept of the common good gives a clear definition of the purpose of politics, the centrality of justice and equity in any form of governance, and the need for those in power to pay special attention to the more vulnerable members of society, i.e. those who are at a disadvantage in terms of defending their rights and advocating their legitimate interests.^{xv}

In suggesting a response that will chart a way forward to a renewed Ireland, there is nothing abstract or opaque about proposing a vision that is grounded in the concept of the common good. What must not be forgotten is that reference to seeking to promote the common good forms part of the preamble to *Bunreacht na hÉireann* and this current crisis calls us back to re-examine that constitutional commitment to ‘the dignity and freedom of the individual ... and true social order’.^{xvi}

In today’s Ireland, the common good will only be served to the extent that a major effort is made to restore trust in our institutional framework, through attention to the place of ethics in governance and by acknowledging that the common good is damaged by economic policies that target the most vulnerable in our society. The importance of this latter point is highlighted by the increasing international focus on what has come to be described as a ‘threshold of decency’ – a level below which no citizen should be expected to live.^{xvii} In this context, there are questions to be asked regarding the reduction in the minimum wage announced in the Republic’s budget for 2011 which affects a very small proportion of the working population – mainly migrants who are not represented by unions and have no power.

^{xiv} Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales, *Vote for the Common Good*, 2001.

^{xv} ‘[T]o desire the common good and strive towards it is a requirement of justice and charity. To take a stand for the common good is ... to be solicitous for ... that complex of institutions that give structure to the life of society, juridically, civilly, politically and culturally, making it the polis [the authentic community], the city.’ (*Charity in Truth*, 7)

^{xvi} *Bunreacht na hÉireann*, Preamble.

^{xvii} See *Charity in Truth* (62).

There are many other issues which surface once the common good is invoked. These include:

- i. the right to life, which derives from the dignity of every human person as created in the image and likeness of God, from the moment of conception until its natural end;
- ii. the balance between equality of opportunity and equality of outcomes; equality of opportunity is of course a public good. However, not everyone is endowed with good health or even the same talents and therefore a more equal society will never be truly fostered in the absence of a concern for equality of outcomes;
- iii. an incomes policy informed by the principle of solidarity. Such a policy would find it difficult to countenance the present position whereby large six figure salaries continue to be awarded to senior executives of semi-state companies at the same time as cuts are being made to the minimum wage, disability allowance and state pensions;
- iv. the relationship between public services and taxation: can we have European standards of public services on taxes that are appreciably lower than most of our continental neighbours?
- v. issues surrounding respect for the rights of migrant workers and their spouses – employment and family reunification issues which clearly flow from the idea of a global common good remain to be resolved;
- vi. responsible use of the earth's resources, taking into account the needs of the world's poorest and most vulnerable populations and the future generations throughout the world;^{xviii}
- vii. finally, an acceptance of the global common good obliges us, even in times of economic difficulty, to maintain levels of Overseas Development Aid and protect the global common good through the defence of the poorest and most vulnerable populations.

^{xviii} See *The Cry of the Earth: A Pastoral Reflection on Climate Change from the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference* (2009) www.catholicbishops.ie.

7. The challenge: Finding the correct balance between freedom and solidarity

- *There are signs in Ireland today of the growth of a more individualist societal ethos;*
- *The potential impact on Irish society of this cultural change should not be ignored.*

How often have we heard the following: ‘I am only an individual and I am not responsible for the ills of Irish society (both North and South). It is up to the Government to get us out of the crisis.’ Or again, ‘how can bankers and politicians ruin the lives of those who go about their work minding their own business and not seeking to harm anyone?’

Representative of a whole range of opinion on the crisis, what they broadly have in common is a sense of outrage that the public, the average person in the street who has done nothing wrong and who is in a real sense a victim of other people’s failings or wrongdoing will end up paying the price. What they also have in common is the unquestioned assumption that, although Irish citizens, they are primarily individuals. In this, they share the cultural mores of a liberal age which in turn increasingly shapes the beliefs and values of the western world.

The benefits of liberal individualism need little rehearsal. In giving birth to the idea of liberal democracy and in fostering human rights, liberal individualism has not only promoted a more tolerant society but one that enshrines respect for hard-won human freedom. However, as with all cultural developments, none are immune from critique and the link between capitalism and individualism is a case in point. For well over a hundred years, various strands of socialism were united in challenging the priority which capitalism accords to economic efficiency and individual liberty over social justice and a concern for societal cohesion. With the diminishing influence of socialism on the political landscape over the past thirty years there is some evidence to suggest that we are witnessing for the first time the emergence of a more radical individualism which has little sensitivity to the nature and significance of belonging to a society.

The persistence of a strong sense of solidarity amongst Irish people with the most vulnerable at this time is a reminder of the insufficiency of the word ‘individual’ to capture the broad resonance of the human spirit.

As Pope John Paul II put it, “Solidarity...is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good, to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all”^{xix}

Despite the solidarity/active citizenship manifested in the relatively high level of volunteerism that currently exists in Ireland today, however, there is evidence to suggest that Irish society is not immune to the cultural forces in western society which promote a more radical individualist culture. For example, it could be argued that the current crisis in Ireland can, at least in part, be explained by reference to the perception of increasing societal acceptance – if admittedly from a very low base in comparison with other European countries – of what has been described as a radical or expressive individualism.^{xx} To the extent that this perceived cultural trend is borne out in practice, it will almost inevitably be followed by a loss of the proper balance in our self-understanding as individuals and as members of society – a loosening of the bonds of solidarity. Lest we be deceived into presuming that this is an issue with little practical relevance to people’s day to day lives, the relationship between public services and taxation should not be forgotten. In the recent past, it was widely believed that we could afford to have low taxes and world class publically funded social services. Today we know better. There are choices to be made, and it is by no means certain that Irish people today would choose social solidarity over a low tax policy.

Thanks to a continuing strong sense of identity with the local parish/community and the remarkable contribution to the voluntary sporting and community groups^{xxi} one would not wish to exaggerate the extent to which we, in Ireland, have adopted the individualist/consumerist cultural model. Nevertheless, as the continual high levels of popularity enjoyed by a wide range of celebrity television shows reveal, the adulation of individual success and the fear of individual failure is not something that is confined to the world of high finance. If indeed this proves to be the case that a significant number of young adults have uncritically accepted the individualist and highly competitive cultural paradigm of late capitalism, it is not something that can be ignored as of little consequence. Self-esteem is at the best of times a fragile accomplishment, and as the tragic vista of suicide among young people reminds us, a sense of belonging is essential to personal as well as societal well-being.

In this context in Ireland today, we once again emphasise the importance of supporting, protecting and strengthening the family based on marriage between a man and a woman as well as promoting human life at all its stages.

^{xix} Pope John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis* (1987), 38.

^{xx} See the statistics on volunteerism in Ireland, North and South, in *The Common Good in an Unequal World*, ed. Eoin Cassidy, (Dublin: Veritas, 2007), p. 24

^{xxi} *Ibid*

“The family is present as the place where communion – that communion so necessary for a society that is increasingly individualistic – is brought about.”^{xxii}

For Catholics, the protection of the inalienable right to life of the unborn constitutes a non-negotiable element of fostering the common good. Abortion is the denial of that inalienable right. “Openness to life is at the centre of true development. When a society moves towards the denial or the suppression of life, it ends up no longer finding the necessary motivation and energy to strive for man’s true good.”^{xxiii} Furthermore, as the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* states, abortion spreads, “a mentality against life, representing a dangerous threat to a just and democratic social coexistence.”^{xxiv}

In the light of the crisis that grips Ireland today, are we not forced to review the self-confident portraits of radical individualism, which has no way of comprehending the importance of a sense of belonging for individual or societal fulfilment? It renders people deaf to the chorus of voices that call for a more socially equitable society, and worst of all, it has little sensitivity to the interconnectedness of the universe in which we live, a stance that renders us blind or indifferent to injustices in the wider world. To the extent that such an ethos has contributed to the current crisis in Ireland, it needs to be challenged in favour of one that gives legitimate space for social solidarity and for actions which will foster a value-driven model of society that promotes the common good, and in terms other than the greatest good of the greatest number. *Rich people who see a brother or sister in need, yet close their hearts against them, cannot claim that they love God* (1 Jn 3:17)

8. Conclusion: Fostering a culture of hope on the island of Ireland

“The great challenge before us, accentuated by the problems of development in this global era and made even more urgent by the economic and financial crisis, is to demonstrate, in thinking and behaviour, not only that traditional principles of social ethics like transparency, honesty and responsibility cannot be ignored or attenuated, but also that in commercial relationships the principle of gratuitousness and the logic of gift as an expression of fraternity can and must find their place within normal economic activity. This is a human demand at the present time, but it is also demanded by economic logic. It is a demand both of charity and of truth.” (Charity in Truth 36)

^{xxii} *Compendium*, No. 221.

^{xxiii} *Caritas in Veritate* 28.

^{xxiv} *Ibid.* No. 233.

Ireland, North and South, has, in recent years, been a source of inspiration and given signs of hope to many in both political and economic terms. Now, in changed circumstances, the eyes of the world are on Ireland to see how we will respond to these new challenges. The present time is one that calls for strong leadership rooted in justice, a concern for the common good and a commitment to defend the most vulnerable in our society.

As we stressed at the beginning of the statement, there must be an end to the bonus culture which is so destructive of civic virtue. In the words of Pope Benedict XVI quoted above, it *'is a human demand at the present time, but it is also demanded by economic logic. It is a demand both of charity and of truth.'* It is our firm conviction that this will only be achieved if we can successfully challenge the validity of a 'bonus culture' through a societal re-awakening to the importance of *'the principle of gratuitousness and the logic of gift as an expression of fraternity ... is a human demand at the present time, but it is also demanded by economic logic. It is a demand both of charity and of truth'* (*Charity in Truth*, 36).

The misguided acceptance of the so-called merits of a bonus culture by many policy makers in Government, as well as business, is one of the principal causes of the current malaise in Irish society. Not only does it continue to undermine a belief in the value of the ideals of public/civil service, but it also directly gives rise to the existence of unacceptably large income gaps between different sectors of society, something that does more than anything else to undermine social solidarity, which in turn, is the bedrock of a stable society.

Yes, we are in the midst of a crisis. Many people are suffering, struggling and afraid. But we should not lose hope. Our history is one of a resilient people and that spirit is with us still. Furthermore, the long tradition of attachment to the Christian faith tradition on the island of Ireland gives us resources which make it feasible to conceive of the possibility of re-creating the conditions that would foster good neighbourliness and develop a more just society. Now, more than ever, we need to recognise our own ability to make a difference and work to contribute to positive change in our society. It is time to place more stress on responsibility-taking and on solidarity, which should commence with each one of us.

Finally, we need to acknowledge that, as Christians, we are shaped by the belief that it is only in and through God's love for us that any change for the better is possible. We believe that, even in times of suffering, hope and love remain in our hearts through the Holy Spirit^{xxv} as we remember Christ's promise of his enduring presence:

'Yes, I am with you always, until the very end of time' (Mt 28:20).

^{xxv} Romans 5:5



The Council for Justice and Peace of the Irish Episcopal Conference