

***You Will Know the Truth and the Truth Will Set You Free***

A Pastoral Letter on Deepening our Understanding  
of the Truths of the Catholic Faith

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Feast of the Apostle Andrew

November 30, 2004

To the Faithful of the Church of Fargo

## **Introduction**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

1. Over the past several months, issues in public life have raised urgent questions about the moral responsibilities of Catholic voters and Catholic public officials. One aspect of the discussion has focused on the reception of Holy Communion by Catholics who support abortion. Bishops have issued statements about this matter, and I addressed it in my column in the May 2004 issue of our diocesan newspaper, *New Earth*. I received many letters of support but also a few that took issue with my column and with Church teaching. The election is now over, but the questions remain and require serious reflection. To respond adequately, we must address underlying problems that have become evident during the course of the discussion.
2. The discussion has made it clear that some Catholics today are more influenced by the secular culture in which we live than by the teachings of Jesus Christ and faith in him as the very revelation of the Father. The discussion also has shown that many Catholics have an inadequate understanding of the Catholic faith. Over the past thirty years some have taught the faith well, but all too often the catechetics practiced during this period have failed to hand on the Catholic faith. As your bishop I am concerned about both the profound influence of the secular world on the minds and hearts of the faithful and the failure of many to understand the clear teaching of Jesus Christ and his Church.
3. Jesus Christ is “the way, the truth and the life” (Jn 14, 6) who sets us free. He entered the world to reveal to us the love of the Father and to bring us the gift of salvation. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him” (Jn 3, 16-17). My ardent desire is that all people may come to know God’s love for them as revealed in Jesus Christ, and enter into a personal relationship with Jesus so that their every word and action may flow from their knowledge and love of him. I pray that for each of us this knowledge and love may well up to eternal life in the heavenly kingdom he promises to those who remain faithful.
4. This pastoral letter will address five areas of confusion in the hearts and minds of some of the faithful, in the hope that as a Catholic people we will come to a deeper understanding of the truth that sets us free.

## **The Truth That Sets Us Free**

### ***I. We must clearly present the deposit of faith entrusted to us by Jesus Christ in Scripture and Tradition.***

5. As Blessed John XXIII noted in his opening speech of the Second Vatican Council, the primary purpose of the Council was “that the sacred deposit of Christian doctrine be guarded and taught more efficaciously.” He also pointed out the need for the Church “to promote and

defend truth.” In our own time we have the gift of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) as “a sure norm for teaching the faith and thus a valid and legitimate instrument for ecclesial communion.”

6. Unfortunately, the discussion in the media and some of the letters I have received make it clear that many of the faithful have not read the *Catechism*, the encyclicals of Pope John Paul II, or the documents of Vatican II. Many even reject the principle that we must accept what the Church believes and teaches, and think they can pick and choose what to believe. Instead of trying to appropriate the faith and treating it as a standard for judging the values of the unbelieving culture that surrounds us, people all too often judge which Church teachings to accept on the basis of whether they conform to the values of the surrounding culture.
7. We must never forget that certain Church teachings can never change, regardless of whether or not people accept them or are faithful to them. These teachings are fixed in the very revelation of Jesus Christ and are transmitted through Sacred Scripture and the apostolic Tradition, and in faithfulness to Jesus Christ are upheld by the magisterium of the Church. They include the following:
  - The One God is a Trinity of divine persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit which “is the central mystery of Christian faith and life” (CCC 234).
  - “Jesus means in Hebrew: ‘God saves’” (CCC 430). He is the Savior of the world and no one can be saved apart from him (CCC 432).
  - There are seven sacraments of the Church (CCC 1113), and they include the Eucharist, in which Jesus is truly and substantially present (CCC 1374); Marriage, which is the union of one man and one woman (CCC 1603-05); and Holy Orders, which can be conferred only on men (CCC 1577).
  - Some acts are intrinsically evil and thus always wrong. Such acts include: euthanasia (CCC 2276-79), abortion (CCC 2270-2275), blasphemy (CCC 2148-49), murder (CCC 2258-2269), various “offenses against chastity” (CCC 2351-59), contraception (CCC 2370, 2399), and lying (CCC 2482-2486). They should never be chosen or approved by anyone who believes in Jesus Christ.
  - The virginity of Mary, her Assumption into heaven and her Immaculate Conception (CCC 487-507, 966).

The list could go on. Other examples can be found in the *Catechism*, which I urge you to read prayerfully from beginning to end.

8. Pope John Paul II explains in his apostolic exhortation, *Catechesis in our Time* (CT), that “the definitive aim of catechesis is to put people not only in touch but in communion, in intimacy, with Jesus Christ: only He can lead us to the love of the Father in the Spirit and make us share in the life of the Holy Trinity” (CT 5). We should teach the faithful everything Jesus has commanded us (Mt 28, 20) and urge them to live upright lives precisely because we wish to lead them into that intimacy and to grow in holiness. We must invite them to respond to Jesus’ call, “Come, follow me” (Mt 19, 21) by developing a personal relationship with him, which will draw them into communion with the Triune God and with the Church. Then they will experience the freedom that only truth can give.

## ***II. We must become more deeply convinced that we can find the truth that sets us free only in Jesus Christ.***

9. We live in a complex secular culture and are inevitably exposed to a variety of ideas that are incompatible with the truths of faith. Some non-believers are pure materialists who deny the existence of God and any spiritual reality at all. In their view, nothing has intrinsic value, not even human beings, since everything about them is thought to be just a more complex evolution of matter. For materialists, values arise from whatever people happen to think and want. Most contemporary materialists tend to value pleasant states of consciousness and to think that the point of life is to maximize pleasure and minimize pain.
10. Other non-believers recognize the existence of spiritual reality and specifically of the human soul. Many take this to an extreme by adopting a dualistic view of the human person: they identify the true person with the soul or conscious subject and consider the body as merely instrumental. This view has significant consequences. It inclines people to regard sexual differences as merely anatomical and to approve of homosexual activity. It inclines them to regard the reproductive dimension of human sexuality as purely biological and functional, and to approve of contraception, abortion, and sex outside of marriage. It inclines them to regard incurable illness as an indication that the body has outlived its usefulness and to approve of physician-assisted suicide.
11. Still other non-believers are relativists or subjectivists who deny that it is possible to reach objective truth at all. Some who do not go quite that far nevertheless assume that truth cannot be expressed and handed on but only gotten hold of in some mysterious way. As a result, they tend to think that the formulations used to express doctrine can be put aside. They also tend to regard moral norms as mere rules that can be dismissed when they become too demanding.
12. Although these different views are conceptually distinct, people tend not to be consistent in holding to one or the other of them. Rather, they tend to mix together elements of these and other systems in their own thinking, while also assimilating cultural values like our excessive emphasis on youth, self-sufficiency, and consumer goods.
13. We have only to look around our world to see the culture of death which these and other strains of secularist thought have produced. Abortion is commonplace and regarded by many as a “right.” Along with some other forms of wrongful killing, it is not only legal but even publicly funded. Much of the media, various well-heeled foundations, and some very competent people and organizations promote the further legalization and availability of such killing.
14. Christians are by no means immune to these influences. In fact, they sometimes adopt elements of secularist perspectives without recognizing their incompatibility with Christian faith. However, the Lord Jesus entered the world to proclaim the truth: “For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice” (Jn 18, 37b).
15. As human beings endowed with intellect and will, we are able to know the truth which will grant us true freedom. In teaching “you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free” (Jn 8, 32), Jesus affirms the relationship between truth and freedom. One kind of

freedom is free will: “Freedom is the power, rooted in reason and will, to act or not to act, to do this or that, and so to perform deliberate actions on one’s own responsibility.” When we exercise this kind of freedom, we shape our very character: “By free will one shapes one’s own life” (CCC 1731).

16. If we choose well and cooperate with grace, we orient ourselves to genuine and lasting fulfillment both here and hereafter: “Human freedom is a force for growth in truth and goodness; it attains its perfection when directed toward God” (CCC 1731). The proper exercise of free will, then, leads to freedom in an even fuller sense: the freedom of the children of God which is found only in Jesus Christ who is “the way, the truth and the life” (Jn 14, 6). We can never find this freedom by choosing something that is not ordered toward the good—toward God. This noblest sort of freedom is found only in choosing the good and thereby ordering our lives to Jesus and his Kingdom.
17. If, however, we choose what we know is gravely wrong and thus fail to cooperate with grace, we form our character in a way that is incompatible with the authentic fulfillment that God so much wants us to receive. Unless we repent, this leads to unhappiness not just here, but also hereafter. Whenever a person chooses to go against the law of God, “to disobey and do evil,” he or she abuses freedom and becomes a “slave to sin” (Jn 8, 34-36 and CCC 1733).
18. We see what slavery to sin does in our world when we consider terrorism, genocide, abortion, murder, war, divorce, and a host of other ills. Slavery to sin always brings with it darkness, death, confusion, and a rejection of God and his laws. Ever since the fall of Adam and Eve who rejected the truth of God’s law to follow their own way, the attempt to separate truth and freedom has proved disastrous for the human race, just as uniting them has given us many saints. Catholics, both laity and clergy, must rediscover the relationship between truth and freedom. We must refuse to be seduced by secularist thought. Rather, we must judge it according to the standard of the truth revealed in the person of Jesus Christ and live out that truth in our daily lives, so that we can enjoy the freedom of the children of God.

### ***III. We must develop a mature understanding of the meaning of conscience.***

19. Pastors must clarify what conscience is, show the faithful how to recognize an erroneous conscience, and help them form their conscience properly.
20. Conscience, in Catholic teaching, is God’s law written on the human heart (CCC 1777-1802). It is “the most secret core and sanctuary of a man” where “he is alone with God, Whose voice echoes in his depths.” To obey conscience “is the very dignity of man; according to it he will be judged” (*Gaudium et Spes* 16). We are always obliged to follow our conscience because it is our last and best judgment about the morality of a particular act.
21. Catholics sometimes say they are following their conscience when they choose to do something—for example, tell a lie, use contraception, have or recommend abortion, defraud someone, conceive a child through *in vitro* fertilization—that the Church teaches to be intrinsically evil. Some members of the clergy confuse the faithful by telling them, “Just follow your conscience.” Without proper explanation such guidance is misleading because it suggests that people are responsibly following their conscience when they knowingly replace Christ’s teaching with the world’s opinions.

22. Our conscience—our last and best judgment about what morality concretely requires—can be mistaken: “conscience can make either a right judgment in accordance with reason and the divine law or, on the contrary, an erroneous judgment that departs from them” (CCC 1786). We must nevertheless follow our conscience because we cannot know, here and now, that this last and best judgment is mistaken. The alternative to following our conscience would be to refuse to do what we sincerely believe morality requires. This dilemma makes it clear that having an erroneous conscience is a serious problem whether or not a person is responsible for the error.
23. If a person is responsible for the error, because he was negligent or self-deceptive in forming conscience, then he is also responsible for the wrong it leads him to do (CCC 1736). We should not dismiss this possibility lightly, for we all are tempted to rationalize when we form our consciences about the morality of things we strongly desire to do. But even if a person is not responsible for the error (CCC 1735), his mistaken conscience remains problematic because it leads him to do what is objectively wrong and harmful. A child killed through abortion is no better off when the one who chooses abortion is not subjectively culpable. The problem of mistaken conscience underlines the importance of proper conscience formation.
24. Proper conscience formation presupposes good will. We must be willing, no matter what the cost, to recognize moral truth when it becomes clear. We begin to discover moral truth by reflecting on the principles of natural law—the law God has written in our hearts. These principles are not externally imposed rules but the intrinsic requirements implied by true respect for everything that is humanly good. They include our awareness that we always should do what is morally upright, that we should love God and neighbor, that we should never intentionally harm ourselves or others, and that we should always treat others fairly.
25. We discover moral truth in greater detail when we reflect on the Ten Commandments, which are norms that flow from these principles. When we strive to understand these principles and norms in the bracing way that the Church understands them (CCC 2083-2557), we come to see more clearly what morality concretely requires of us. A properly formed conscience can never approve an evil or go against a law of God. Conscience recognizes objective truth which binds every human person. The “voice of God” and his law are never relativistic, telling one person “it is permitted to abort a child,” and telling another person “you may not,” for God never contradicts himself.
26. I urge the clergy, catechists, and laity of the Diocese of Fargo to read the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* to understand the true meaning of conscience. In order to facilitate this understanding, I am mandating today that every priest or deacon, who preaches on the first two Sundays in Lent of 2005, is to present a catechetical homily on conscience. The section on conscience of the *Catechism* is to be distributed to every Catholic in the pew on the First Sunday of Lent. Homily outlines will be provided to the clergy to assist them in their preparation.

#### ***IV. We must deepen our appreciation of the inalienable dignity of human life.***

27. John Paul II, in his encyclical *The Gospel of Life*, beautifully sets out the Catholic understanding of human life and the dignity of the human person. Unfortunately, the discussion of life issues in the media has made it clear that too few Catholics have prayerfully studied this document. Catholics all too often regard abortion and euthanasia primarily as

political issues on which they can legitimately take a position at odds with the teachings of Christ and his Church.

28. Persons with an authentically Catholic perspective recognize that *these are not primarily political but moral issues*, and that Church teaching on them is binding. Abortion and euthanasia are intrinsic evils that violate the inherent dignity of the human person, whose life must be protected from the moment of conception to natural death. To recognize this truth in law is emphatically not a matter of imposing a particular tenet of the Catholic faith on a pluralistic society; it is a matter of that society recognizing a principle of natural justice—the inviolability of innocent human life from the very beginning—which is crucial to the survival of any law-governed democracy. Thus “the inalienable right to life of every innocent human individual is a *constitutive element of a civil society and its legislation*” (CCC 2273).
29. Practices like abortion and euthanasia are morally abhorrent even when they are called “rights” and given the protection of law. They remain abhorrent even when such a law is agreed upon by a majority of persons. Sadly, we have only to consider recent history to find examples of unjust laws, some of which enjoyed significant popular support. Genocidal laws in Nazi Germany, Russia, and China, and laws upholding slavery in our own country were neither right nor just, for they denied the dignity of the human person with horrific consequences. Whenever people create laws which violate the inherent dignity of the human person, whether they be laws protecting slavery, abortion, euthanasia, or genocide, they violate the law of God and contribute to the culture of death. That is why abortion and euthanasia are the great civil rights issues of our day.
30. There is a tendency among some Catholics to equate all issues of life such that, for example, capital punishment and war are considered to have the same moral significance as abortion and euthanasia. Though all these issues are important, this tendency is misguided. It is possible in principle to justify putting a dangerous criminal to death in order to protect society, even if this can rarely if ever be justified in practice today because other ways of effectively preventing a criminal from doing further harm are almost always available (CCC 2267 and *The Gospel of Life* 56). As for the complex issue of war, “legitimate defense can be not only a right but a grave duty.” While arms should be taken up only as a last resort, “those who legitimately hold authority also have the right to use arms to repel aggressors against the civil community entrusted to their responsibility” (CCC 2265). By contrast, the consistent teaching of the Church makes it abundantly clear that abortion and euthanasia are intrinsic evils which can never be justified (CCC 2270-79 and *The Gospel of Life* 62, 65). Yet, three thousand to four thousand abortions take place every day in this country: *three to four thousand human lives destroyed daily!* Far more innocent lives have been brutally killed in this past century through the crime of abortion than all of the wars and capital punishment cases combined.

***V. We must deepen our understanding of what it means to live out our faith in the world.***

31. Jesus calls us to be a light in the world and salt for the earth. “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Mt 5, 13-16). Catholics are called to transform the world by the way they live their daily lives, bearing consistent witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

32. As I teach in my Confirmation homilies, the ways and thoughts of the human person are often far from those of God (Is 55, 8). As Catholics, we are called to remain faithful to Jesus the Christ and have his heart and mind (Phil 4, 7; 1 Cor 2, 14). I often pose the following question to the children to be confirmed: “If every Catholic in the world, your school, or your home, had the heart and mind of Jesus Christ and the ways and thoughts of God, would they not be different?” The young people always respond “yes.” They know that if every Catholic truly lived the faith, their homes, schools, and world would be much different because a culture of life would flourish.
33. Some Catholics say they are personally opposed to abortion but defend the alleged right to abortion and even approve when others choose it. They separate their personal conviction about fundamental truths from their public life. Whether they are culpable or not, such persons cooperate in a grave evil by their support of abortion.
34. Catholic politicians who vote specifically to fund abortions do not merely *cooperate* with a grave evil but are principal agents in a grave evil. For, despite any good ulterior ends they may have in view, in voting precisely to fund abortions they necessarily intend, even if only reluctantly, to promote the killing of innocent babies, some of whom would not be killed without the funding their votes help provide. By acting in this way, they fail to be the light of Jesus Christ and they cooperate with the father of lies.
35. Voting for a candidate who supports abortion can be justified only if one has a proportionate reason, that is, only if one honestly judges that all the other candidates who might be elected would be worse. One can make such a judgment only if one recognizes how horrendous abortion is and what a candidate’s support for abortion implies about his or her character. Although we cannot make subjective judgments about anyone’s moral condition, we can say that to support abortion is to support an injustice of the grossest kind and one that occurs on a grand scale: the killing, the tearing apart, of thousands of innocent babies day after day, along with the continuous assault on the dignity of women that this entails. It is no wonder that the Church calls abortion and infanticide “unspeakable crimes” (*Gaudium et Spes* 51). Those who are willing to support this attack on innocent human life are not likely to resist when they are under political pressure to support other attacks on human goods. It is hard to imagine a proportionate reason that could justify voting for such a person if one of the other candidates will vote to curtail abortion.
36. All too often, Catholic public officials and voters are more deeply committed to their political agendas than they are to the teaching of Christ. If Catholics, whether in Congress or at the polls, consistently voted in line with the Gospel of Life—with the mind and heart of Jesus Christ—we would not be where we are today in our society. The inherent dignity of the human person would be respected from the moment of conception through natural death and the world would be transformed.

## Conclusion

37. I highlight here only five areas of confusion and recognize that there are others that could be addressed at length. These include: the assumption that salvation is universal and automatic no matter what one says or does; the failure to celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation on a regular basis and to be properly disposed before receiving Holy Communion; the failure to

appreciate the truth, dignity, and meaning of human sexuality; the failure to understand the apostolic authority of bishops; and pastoral practices in dioceses which go beyond legitimate diversity. However, the five areas I have treated stand out to me, your bishop, as especially serious. I am convinced that if we conscientiously strive to address them, our efforts will also be helpful in addressing these other concerns.

38. Jesus Christ entered the world so that we might “have life and have it more abundantly” (Jn 10, 10). My fervent prayer is that we embrace and live out his teachings, and that our every word and action promote the Gospel of Life. As we approach the feast of Christmas, we remember the love God showed our world in sending Jesus, the Word made flesh, “full of grace and truth” (Jn 1, 14). Let us recall Pope John Paul II’s invitation to every Catholic in his apostolic letter on The Most Holy Rosary: to sit “*at the school of Mary* and [be] led to contemplate the beauty on the face of Christ and to experience the depths of his love.” May Mary, who gave birth to Jesus “the life of the world,” help us live in him! May she help us respond with her courage, openness, and receptivity to the Word of Life! May each of us have and live her holiness of life! My firm hope is that all Catholics will respond by studying their faith at a deep and profound level so that they may have the ways and thoughts of God and the heart and mind of Jesus Christ, and thus live the truth in freedom.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

Most Reverend Samuel J. Aquila, D.D.  
Bishop of Fargo

Given on November 30, 2004  
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