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For Release

May 4, 2004

(Note to Editors: The following Pastoral Statement by The Most Reverend John J. Myers, Archbishop of Newark, will appear in the May 5, 2004 edition of The Catholic Advocate, the newspaper of the Archdiocese.)

A Time for Honesty

A Pastoral Statement by The Most Reverend John J. Myers, Archbishop of Newark

Our times demand honesty. It is possible to value sincerely one's Catholic heritage and to revere one's Catholic forebears and yet not to have Catholic faith.

Faith is a free and personal act inspired by the Holy Spirit, by which we entrust ourselves to the living God and to Jesus Christ his Son and our Lord. While intensely personal, the act of faith is always at the same time *ecclesial*. This means that the act of faith embraces the Church to which Christ Himself has entrusted His mission. According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, "Whoever says 'I believe' says 'I pledge myself to what *We believe*.'" In other words, faith, while free and personal, is also a commitment to make one's own faith the faith of the Church.

It is always a temptation to emphasize the personal aspect of faith with the intent of "reducing" the faith to those elements with which we are comfortable in our life. This is deeply erroneous. The commitment of faith is a commitment to grow not only closer to Jesus Christ but also to continue to grow, sometimes through questions and struggles, into the full faith of the Church.

It is clear in the constant teaching of the Church, and recently articulated in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, that protecting the fullness of the proclamation of the faith in any generation is a task entrusted to the bishops of the world in union with the Bishop of Rome. Through the grace of the Holy Spirit, the bishops are charged in each era and in each culture with proclaiming the truth of the Gospel and maintaining that truth in good times and in bad.

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Cardinal Christoph Schonborn of Vienna has pointed out that perhaps the most powerful words in the Creeds of the Church are those that come first: “I believe in God the Father Almighty *Creator* of Heaven and Earth...” With these words we acknowledge that God is the source of the universe and of our existence. It is God’s world in which we live and it is our task to come to understand and respect that and live in the world as God intended. Authentic Christians know that it is not ours to define our own being in an absolute way, but rather it is ours to discover and live with joy the being in the world, which God has given us.

This is also true for the human conscience. Clearly each human person has a conscience and should follow it because by definition conscience is the intellectual act of judgment of what is right and wrong to do or not to do. It is the last best judgment of what one ought to choose. Thus, conscience must be formed through education and prayer, and be informed by the teaching of Christ. We cannot form our conscience in solitary isolation or simply with reference to cultural practices or convictions. Conscience can only be formed *authentically* by reference to the truth. Truth and conscience go together. Following an authentic conscience builds the truly human. Following a conscience without reference to truth sets an individual and society adrift on a sea of hopelessness.

There are many implications of these principles. We profess our faith not merely in a formula of words, but rather in the realities to which those words refer. And that certainly applies in the matter of abortion, euthanasia, cloning and other issues which are before the American people and the world public at this time. Long before science made clear that each individual is genetically new and unique from conception, the Church taught that abortion is a great evil. She still teaches this even in the face of the tragedy in our country where respect for the sanctity of human life has been eroded.

There is no right more fundamental than the right to be born and reared with all the dignity the human person deserves. On this grave issue, public officials cannot hold themselves excused from their duties, especially if they claim to be Catholic. Every faithful Catholic must be not only “personally opposed” to abortion, but also must live that opposition in his or her actions. In Robert Bolt’s play *A Man for All Seasons*, St. Thomas More remarks, “I believe, when statesmen forsake their own private conscience for the sake of their public duties...they lead their country by a short route to chaos.” Sadly, too few follow the example of St. Thomas More. **As voters, Catholics are under an obligation to avoid implicating themselves in abortion, which is one of the gravest of injustices. Certainly, there are other injustices, which must be addressed, but the unjust killing of the innocent is foremost among them.**

At the same time, I point out that this is not simply a Catholic issue, but a basic moral issue of justice and human dignity. It applies to all persons. Some justify their actions by saying that they must respect the consciences of others. But this “respect” for another’s conscience should never require abandoning one’s own properly formed conscience. Conscientious opposition to abortion,

rooted in an understanding of the sanctity of human life, may not be sacrificed simply because others, whose consciences are gravely mistaken, would unjustly take the life of an unborn baby.

I have already said this before, in a previous Pastoral Letter in 1990:

“Although we must all follow our conscience, the task of conscience is not to create moral truth, but perceive it. It is quite possible for an individual to perceive the moral reality of a particular situation erroneously. Such a person may be sincere, but he or she is sincerely wrong.

“Catholics who publicly dissent from the Church’s teaching on the right to life of all unborn children should recognize that they have freely chosen by their own actions to separate themselves from what the Church believes and teaches. They have also separated themselves in a significant way from the Catholic community.

“The Church cannot force such people to change their position; but she can and does ask them honestly to admit in the public forum that they are not in full union with the Church.

“One who practices such dissent, even in the mistaken belief that it is permissible, may remain a Catholic in some sense, but has abandoned the full Catholic faith. For such a person to express ‘communion’ with Christ and His Church by the reception of the Sacrament of the Eucharist is objectively dishonest.”

This is not a new teaching of the Church. From the earliest years, it has been pointed out that one cannot claim to be a Christian and yet believe other than what the Church teaches. In the second century St. Justin Martyr described the Eucharist in this way: “No one may share the Eucharist with us unless he believes that what we teach is true, unless he is washed in the regenerating waters of baptism for the remission of his sins, and unless he lives in accordance with the principles given us by Christ.”

The law and discipline of the Church recognizes this fact in various ways. It *is* a time for honesty. I ask and urge that Catholic voters and Catholics in public life carefully consider their position if they find themselves in opposition to Church teaching in these matters. Sadly, I must point out that to continue down this road places them in danger of distancing themselves even more from Jesus Christ and from His Church.

Perhaps it is also time to remind ourselves of the meaning and purpose of communion. No one has an absolute right to the Eucharist. It is a gift given to us by a merciful and gracious God. In fact, the Eucharist is God’s gift of Himself to us. In receiving Him we are made one flesh with him. This reception also symbolizes and makes real our union with the whole Church. To receive unworthily or without proper dispositions is a very serious sin against the Lord. St. Paul explicitly

teaches this in his letter to the Church at Corinth when he wrote, “This means that whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily sins against the body and blood of the Lord. A man should examine himself first; only then should he eat of the bread and drink of the cup. He who eats and drinks without recognizing the body eats and drinks a judgment on himself” (1 Cor 11: 27-29). “Without recognizing the body” refers both to recognizing the presence of Christ in the Eucharist and recognizing the Body of Christ, which is the Church. Obviously this means that no Catholic should approach communion unless properly disposed (without unconfessed mortal sin on one’s conscience, having fasted at least one hour in accordance with the Church’s discipline, etc.).

But, receiving the Eucharist also means that one is in fact in full communion with Christ and His Church. To receive communion when one has, through public or private action, separated oneself from unity with Christ and His Church, is objectively dishonest. It is an expression of communion by one’s action that is objectively not in accordance with one’s heart, mind, and choices.

Communion is Not Private

Because the Eucharist is the source and summit of our faith, the most sacred action of our Church, to misuse the Eucharistic symbol by reducing it to one’s private “feeling” of communion with Christ and His Church while objectively not being in such union is gravely disordered.

This is particularly true when it comes to the area of protecting human life. Abortion and infanticide are, as Vatican Council II stated, “abominable crimes” (*Gaudium et Spes*, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, 51). The fact that all too many U.S. citizens have grown comfortable with the on-going injustice of abortion on demand is quite upsetting. **That some Catholics, who claim to believe what the Church believes, are willing to allow others to continue directly to kill the innocent is a grave scandal. The situation is much much worse when these same leaders receive the Eucharist when they are not objectively in communion with Christ and His Church. Their objective dishonesty serves to compound the scandal.**

Some might argue that the Church has many social teachings and the teaching on abortion is only one of them. This is, of course, correct. The Church’s social teaching is a diverse and rich tradition of moral truths and biblical insights applied to the political, economic, and cultural aspects of our society. All Catholics should form and inform their conscience in accordance with these teachings. But reasonable Catholics can (and do) disagree about how to apply these teachings in various situations.

For example, our preferential option for the poor is a fundamental aspect of this teaching. But, there are legitimate disagreements about the best way or ways truly to help the poor in our society. No Catholic can legitimately say, “I do not care about the poor.” If he or she did so this person would not be objectively in communion with Christ and His Church. But, both those who propose welfare

**“A Time for Honesty,” Pastoral Statement
by The Most Reverend John J. Myers, Archbishop of Newark**

Page 5 of 5

increases and those who propose tax cuts to stimulate the economy may in all sincerity believe that their way is the best method really to help the poor. This is a matter of prudential judgment made by those entrusted with the care of the common good. It is a matter of conscience in the proper sense.

Injustices Are Impermissible

But with abortion (and for example slavery, racism, euthanasia and trafficking in human persons) there can be no legitimate diversity of opinion. The direct killing of the innocent is always a grave injustice. One should not permit unjust killing any more than one should permit slave-holding, racist actions, or other grave injustices. From the perspective of justice, to say “I am personally opposed to abortion but...” is like saying “I personally am against slavery, but I can not impose my personal beliefs on my neighbor.” Obviously, recognizing the grave injustice of slavery requires one to ensure that no one suffers such degradation. Similarly recognizing that abortion is unjust killing requires one—in love and justice—to work to overcome the injustice.

Among my most important responsibilities is that of pastor and teacher. In light of recent developments in our nation, I wish once again to affirm the teaching of the Church. **Human life is a gift from God and as Catholics we have a most grave obligation to defend all human life from the moment of conception until natural death. God help us if we fail in this most fundamental obligation.**

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