



June 11, 2021
The Solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus

“If you remain in my word, you will truly be my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”
— *John 8:32*

“Remain in my love.”
— *John 15:9*

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

The world today is flooded with words, yet we thirst for truth.

From print publications, television, and radio, and especially from digital media, we see and hear a constant stream of messages pouring forth day and night, in virtually every place and situation of our lives. Words we see or hear have some consequence – psychological, emotional, or spiritual. That is the way God has made us.

It is a great sorrow that at a time when the quantity of words being expressed is at an all-time high, the consequences of ill-used words harm the cause of truth and the good of the human soul. As our society continues to make use of news and social media resources, it is not uncommon for people to become frustrated, confused, and discouraged. Sometimes, we even struggle with anger, bewilderment, and despair.

The uncivil nature of our civil discourse is one rotten fruit of this problem. People too often turn against each other in hatred, rather than merely disagreeing with one another. What could be a constructive conversation or charitable debate often devolves into declarations of “us” versus “them.” Bitter antagonism has taken root, even among Catholics, despite the truth that we are sacramentally united as members of the Body of Christ and are called to abide in God’s own charity.

In this pastoral note, I would like to offer the Church’s wisdom about what it means to speak the truth in love (cf. Ephesians 4:15), to seek and receive the truth, and to live in loving communion with him who is “the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6) by means of virtuous communication. Words matter. The consequences of words – in our individual lives, in society, and in the Church – matter. The truths words express, and the deceptions words perpetrate matter.

UNLEASH THE GOSPEL

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The Word became flesh

God reveals himself to us in words. Especially in and through the words of Sacred Scripture, God reveals himself to us and helps us to know his love and to love him in return. The Church's understanding of God's self-revelation in Scripture comes to us in the words of our Tradition, most especially in the creeds we profess at Holy Mass and in the dogmatic teachings of our popes and ecumenical councils.

The words of Scripture and Tradition bear witness to the Word of God himself, the beloved Son of the Father. The Gospel of John begins, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." The Prologue of John's Gospel further reveals that the Word of God has become Emmanuel, God-with-us: "And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, and we saw his glory, the glory as of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14).

"The Word became flesh." God's Word is a *spoken* word. The Word became flesh precisely to make the Father's love known to us, his children. Similarly, the truths of the Catholic Faith are "enfleshed" in human words. There are many ways we speak of God's words of revelation. The Psalmist describes the law of the Lord as "more desirable than gold, than a hoard of purest gold," and as "sweeter also than honey or drippings from the comb" (Psalm 19:11). He further calls the Lord's word "a lamp for my feet, a light for my path" (Psalm 119:105).

In the aftermath of the Bread of Life Discourse, when many had turned away from Jesus because of the difficulty of his teaching on the Holy Eucharist, Jesus asked whether the apostles also wished to leave. St. Peter testified in reply, "Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68). Saint Paul teaches that every word of Scripture "is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for refutation, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that one who belongs to God may be competent, equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

Jesus himself said during his trial before Pontius Pilate that to speak words of truth was essential to the purpose of his life and ministry. "For this I was born and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice" (John 18:37). Christ, who is the truth, came among us on a mission of testifying to the truth. Our call is to belong to him and listen to his voice.

Discerning minds and hearts

Unfortunately, hearing the voice of Jesus has become increasingly difficult amid a cacophony of other voices clamoring for our attention at all times. Seeking the truth is more challenging in a world awash in deceptions of all kinds. Never have the words of St. Paul been more urgent: "Test everything; retain what is good. Refrain from every kind of evil" (1 Thessalonians 5:21-22).

Especially in our use of digital media, we who are disciples of Jesus must approach what we see, hear, and read with discerning minds and hearts. There are innumerable media outlets, including many claiming to be Catholic, that threaten to steer us away from Christ and his Church if we accept their messages indiscriminately.

What are some of the warning signs of this problematic use of media and communication? Of the many we could name, I will offer five we see particularly often in social media, news outlets, blogs, and other discussion groups.

1. **Any proposition out of harmony with the teachings of Christ and his Church.** A simple way to test the claims of those who present questionable teachings is to consult the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which Pope St. John Paul II described as a “sure norm” for teaching the Catholic Faith. The truths of the Faith are not subject to revision. These truths draw us into closer union with God, whereas falsehood leads us away from him.
2. **Unsubstantiated claims or allegations.** In some corners of the media and among individual discussions, we have seen allegations of all kinds, even extremely grave accusations, leveled against people without the benefit of supporting evidence. Any person who makes a serious allegation has a correspondingly serious obligation to offer compelling evidence of his claim. Yet this responsibility is often ignored – by those making these claims in an effort to attract an audience or demonize one’s ideological opponents, and by those consuming these media without a discerning and unbiased eye.
3. **The manipulation of facts to deceive or harm.** Facts can be true in themselves and yet misleading when arranged and presented in a certain way. In video presentations, for example, the deft use of music and images can steer the emotional response of viewers, making them more or less sympathetic than they would have been if the facts had been presented on their own. Presenting information with inflammatory language or within prefabricated narrative contexts (e.g., alleged conspiracies or patterns of corruption) can also have a tremendous influence on the way that information is received. Video artistry and narrative context are valuable journalistic tools when used properly, but when abused they can contribute to significant deceptions and often significantly harm to the reputation of individuals and groups. Pope Francis wrote in his *Message for World Communications Day*, 2018:

An impeccable argument can indeed rest on undeniable facts, but if it is used to hurt another and to discredit that person in the eyes of others, however correct it may appear, it is not truthful. We can recognize the truth of statements from their fruits: whether they provoke quarrels, foment division, encourage resignation; or, on the other hand, they promote informed and mature reflection leading to constructive dialogue and fruitful results.

4. ***Ad hominem* attacks.** Catholics are no strangers to vigorous debate and fraternal correction. Unleashing the Gospel often requires that we challenge problematic ideas and call sinners to repentance and conversion. Yet neither evangelization nor any other cause requires or excuses gratuitous personal attacks – name calling, slurs, stereotyping, guilt-by-association, unfounded assumptions or conclusions. Charity must always animate our public communication. There is such a thing as “tough love,” but there can be no viciousness in true Christian charity. Remaining in Christ’s word, remaining in the truth, and remaining in his love are intimately united. We must remain with Christ ourselves and seek those communications that are both thoroughly true and charitable.

5. **The spirit of division.** God's Holy Spirit unites. Satan divides. Christ's Word of Truth will at times expose divisions that already exist within the human heart and between people (cf. Matthew 10:34-36), but the division itself is the rotten fruit of sin and the work of the Evil One. Zeal for a good cause neither requires nor excuses purposefully sowing seeds of division, especially division from and within the Mystical Body of Christ, the Church. It helps to remember that strength and gentleness are not antithetical. Christ himself was both strong and gentle in proclaiming the Kingdom of God and people's need to repent and believe in the Gospel (Mark 1:15). Saint John Henry Newman once described the evangelization of St. Philip Neri in sixteenth century Rome in terms that help us understand virtuous communication today. He compares St. Philip's evangelization with that of the harsher reform attempted a century earlier in Florence by the Dominican Girolamo Savonarola:

It is not by the enthusiasm of the multitude, or by political violence,—it is not by powerful declamation, or by railing at authorities, that the foundations are laid of religious works. It is not by sudden popularity, or by strong resolves, and demonstrations, or by romantic incidents, or by immediate successes, that undertakings commence which are to last. I do not say, that to be roused, even for a moment, from the dream of sin, to repent and be absolved, even though a relapse follow it, is a slight gain; or that the brilliant, but brief, triumphs of Savonarola are to be despised. He did good in his day, though his day was a short one. Still, after all, his history brings to mind that passage in sacred history, where the Almighty displayed His presence to Elias on Mount Horeb. “The Lord was not in the wind,” nor “in the earthquake,” nor “in the fire”; but after the fire came “the whisper of a gentle air.”

The beauty of truth

Each of these “warning signs” points us toward the same basic fact: The internet is not just a jumble of wires and tubes. It is a network of people – real, not virtual beings – who seek hope and long for salvation and who should be able, even in *the digital space*, to encounter Christ and experience the beauty of truth.

If we think of the internet in this way, we can successfully harness its power in our efforts to unleash the Gospel. Pope Benedict XVI pointed at our responsibility to evangelize “the digital continent” and to announce the Gospel to our contemporaries with enthusiasm. Just as St. Paul used the highly developed Roman road system and St. Maximilian Kolbe used the latest printing technologies to spread the Gospel in their times, so we recognize the advances in social media and information technology as God-given opportunities for spreading the Gospel in our time.

By nature of our baptism, every member of the Church is an ambassador of Christ, and our conduct – both on and offline – often helps others form their views of the Catholic Faith. When people communicate with us, let them see not only good content but a tone that is respectful, charitable, joyful, peaceful, and hopeful. “Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for edifying, as fits the occasion, that it may impart grace to those who hear” (Eph 4:29). Our goal is not to win arguments but to win souls.

In all times, the deepest reality of the Christian life is communion with God and one another. The words “communion” and “communication” have the same root: They both refer to the bonds that unite us as people and as members of the Body of Christ, and they both require a deep and abiding commitment to the truth and to love.

Unsurprisingly, the teaching of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* on social communications media is part of its larger teaching on the Eighth Commandment, “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” (paragraphs 2464-2513). The *Catechism* teaches, “This moral prescription flows from the vocation of the holy people to bear witness to their God who is the truth and wills the truth. Offenses against the truth express by word or deed a refusal to commit oneself to moral uprightness: they are fundamental infidelities to God and, in this sense, they undermine the foundations of the covenant” (par 2464).

We who are called to fidelity to the New Covenant in Christ Jesus must live as the “salt of the earth” and the “light of the world” (Matthew 5:13-14). Just as the light of Christ “shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (John 1:5), so Christ’s light shining in and through us can scatter the darkness of lies, deceptions, hatred, and division. Our mission of unleashing the Gospel requires that we confront and reject those elements of our culture that threaten to draw people away from Christ and his Church.

By remaining in Christ’s word in truth and love, we will not only abide in communion with him ourselves; we will also lead others to Jesus, who came precisely to save us from those who threaten to steal our life and joy in him: “A thief comes only to steal and slaughter and destroy; I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly” (John 10:10).

Sincerely yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Allen H. Vigneron". The signature is written in a cursive style with a small cross at the beginning.

The Most Reverend Allen H. Vigneron
Archbishop of Detroit