



CATHOLIC DIOCESE OF FORT WORTH
THE BISHOP'S OFFICE



Pastoral Letter
To All Priests, Deacons, Seminarians, Religious Men and Women,
and Faithful Laity of the Diocese of Fort Worth
Regarding
Proposed Mandates & Religious Exemptions
for
COVID-19 Vaccinations
&
A Proper Formation of Conscience

September 28, 2021

Dear Friends in Christ,

On December 14, 2020, I wrote to you to clarify and to reaffirm the judgment of the Doctrine Committee and the Pro-Life Committee of the USCCB (December 11, 2020) on the moral permissibility of being immunized by the available vaccines despite their morally compromised but distant origins in connection with the grave evil of abortion. While these statements speak to the moral permissibility of being immunized, they do not speak to a mandate for people to be so immunized. These judgments were reaffirmed by the Congregation of the Doctrine for the Faith (CDF) in the publication of a *Note on the Morality of Using Some Anti-Covid-19 Vaccines* on December 21, 2020. Furthermore, on August 18, 2021, Pope Francis released a video in Spanish in which he was accompanied by the Most Reverend Jose Gomez, Archbishop of Los Angeles, and President of the USCCB, and several other prelates from other nations exhorting people to be vaccinated against COVID-19.

During the past several months I have received questions from members of the Catholic faithful in the Diocese of Fort Worth both directly and indirectly as communicated to me through our priests, deacons, and school administrators regarding other issues of morality around the vaccine for COVID-19 and the possibility of offering religious exemptions to mandates issued by employers and government offices at the federal, state, and local levels. I have very seriously taken these matters to prayer and to consultation with other bishops, theologians, administrators, medical experts, and my priests and legal counsel. I wish to address in this letter some of these questions as they formed amidst our current circumstances and to provide for some assistance in the sound formation of conscience by faith and reason.

Q1 Does the Catholic Church teach that medically required immunizations are in principle immoral?

A1 The Catholic Church does not teach that medically required immunizations are in principle immoral and thus does not grant exemptions for any theological reason. The Diocese of Fort Worth and its institutions do not grant nor endorse such religious exemptions.

Yet, the Church does teach and recognize that there exists the natural human right for a person

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to refuse a medically necessary immunization on the well-founded judgment of one's own conscience. As the CDF wrote on December 21, 2020, "At the same time, practical reason makes evident that vaccination is not, as a rule, a moral obligation and that, therefore, it must be voluntary."

Q2 Does the video made by Pope Francis mean that it is a moral imperative for faithful Catholics to comply with vaccination mandates imposed by businesses, schools, and governments?

A2 No. These exhortations by Pope Francis and other prelates do not create a moral imperative to be vaccinated nor do they introduce a new doctrine of the faith that replaces the teaching of the Church and the principle of Natural Law to form one's conscience well and to follow it. These exhortations are meant to encourage people not to exclude being vaccinated out of unfounded fears and to emphasize the moral responsibility to pursue the common good.

Q3 May a faithful Catholic decide to forgo immunization from the available COVID-19 vaccines because of their morally compromised but distant origins in connection with the grave evil of abortion as a witness and act of solidarity with the unborn?

A3 A faithful Catholic could decide morally to forgo immunization for the reasons stated above provided that the Catholic fulfill the obligation to pursue the common good by considering how his or her decision affects the health of others especially the vulnerable. As the CDF wrote on December 21, 2020: "Those who, however, for reasons of conscience, refuse vaccines produced with cell lines from aborted fetuses, must do their utmost to avoid, by other prophylactic means and appropriate behavior, becoming vehicles for the transmission of the infectious agent. In particular, they must avoid any risk to the health of those who cannot be vaccinated for medical or other reasons, and who are the most vulnerable."

Q4 Is there a strict moral obligation for Catholics to be immunized by the available COVID-19 vaccines?

A4 Catholics have a strict moral obligation to protect their own health and to protect the health of their neighbors, especially those most prone to illness and death from infection, in pursuit of the common good. The strict obligation is to appropriate self-love and the pursuit of the common good. Vaccination is a means towards that end. As the CDF wrote on December 21, 2020, "In any case, from the ethical point of view, *the morality of vaccination depends not only on the duty to protect one's own health, but also on the duty to pursue the common good.* In the absence of other means to stop or even prevent the epidemic, the common good may recommend vaccination, especially to protect the weakest and most exposed."

Please note that the CDF currently says that the common good *may* recommend vaccination, especially to protect the weakest and most exposed. The CDF does not say that the common good requires currently that one *must* be vaccinated as the only means to prevent human beings from becoming vehicles of transmission of the infectious agent especially to those who are most vulnerable. In deciding whether to be vaccinated, Catholics are obliged to consider how their decision will not only affect their health but that of others.

Q5 How do we appropriately form our consciences regarding the decision to be immunized by the available COVID-19 vaccines?

A5 Each person should begin with prayer for the clarity offered by the Holy Spirit who drives away every fear and attunes our minds to the Truth. Each person should consult their family physician about being vaccinated and any side effects that vaccination might cause for one's own health especially given the novelty and rapid development of the available COVID-19 vaccines. One should consider the good of their own health as well as the health of others in keeping with our obligations to the common good. Whether one is vaccinated or not, one still has obligations to their own health and that of others. Immunization with the available vaccines, while mostly effective, still requires ongoing study of any side effects by members of the scientific community. Scientists and physicians have an ethical obligation to avoid conflicts of interests brought about by financial investment in pharmaceutical companies entrusted with the development of vaccines. Such conflicts of interest create doubt and fears among members of the larger community.

Q6 Will the Diocese of Fort Worth impose mandates to be vaccinated for persons to attend Mass or to perform liturgical ministries at Mass?

A6 No. As we have stated, the protocols that we have utilized since the pandemic began have proven to be effective in preventing the spread of the COVID-19 virus and its variants even before the development of a vaccine. The commandment of the Gospel of Jesus that we love God and our neighbor, body and soul, obliges each of us to protect our own health and that of others by appropriate and effective means.

Q7 Does the common good demand that businesses, schools, and the government impose mandates on people to be vaccinated for the sake of the common good?

A7 It is important for government, businesses, and schools currently to consider thoroughly and thoughtfully all available information and factors before proceeding with any mandate for vaccination because of the still emergency and experimental character of the COVID-19 vaccines currently. It is also important to note that the side effects of the COVID-19 vaccines are still being studied, as well as those that are yet to be known and to be studied—as has been the case with other proven and trusted vaccines. Entities imposing mandates should explain the reasons for their decisions in language that is understandable by those affected by the mandate, or they should allow for alternatives such as weekly testing in lieu of vaccination. (NOTE: it is anticipated that weekly testing in lieu of vaccination would be an option under the OHSA ETS).

The decision to be vaccinated requires informed consent on the part of a patient and should in principle be voluntary. Before mandating vaccines, it is important to maintain other protocols that have proven to be effective means for protecting the common good, while any side effects of the COVID-19 vaccines that are yet to be known might be studied—as has been the case with other proven and trusted vaccines. As more is known about the effects of these vaccines, the circumstances might change that would require mandates for the sake of the health of the vulnerable and for the safe functioning of our hospitals and healthcare facilities in providing

other emergency and essential health care services. Yet, the circumstances that would require the impositions of mandates must be based in reliable science and principles of public health and not for other financial, political, or ideological reasons.

In conclusion, I would like to encourage five basic dispositions in each of you: be prayerful, be calm, be reasonable, be accountable, and be safe. **Be prayerful.** It is the guidance of the Holy Spirit that has been ours since baptism that is indispensable for our deliverance and for the formation of our conscience. **Be calm.** The Providence of God sustains us and protects us throughout this pandemic and the accompanying social unrest. God will never abandon us, so fear is useless and only makes us prone to sin against God and against our neighbor. **Be reasonable.** Rely on the right reason of the virtue of prudence in the formation of your conscience and on sound counsel from your family physician in making decisions. The relationship between a physician and his or her patient is a covenanted and imbalanced personal relationship directed towards good health. **Be accountable.** The decision to be immunized with the current vaccines does not immunize a person from accountability to be considerate of the health of one's neighbor. Each of us is accountable in making decisions about our health to ourselves, to our families, and to our neighbors. **Be safe.** The current fear and accompanying anger in our local communities can prompt rashness in our behavior without reliance on the Grace of the Holy Spirit who offers us His gifts, and the infused moral and theological virtues to excel in life. Avoid listening to voices on social media and in the larger media that counsel rash behavior on insufficient information.

Please be assured of your presence in my prayers as I seek the same from you. May the Lord continue to bless us with good health and His peace which the world cannot give. I remain,

Sincerely Yours in Christ,

+ Michael F. Olson

Most Reverend Michael F. Olson, STD, MA
Bishop of Fort Worth

E. James Hart

Reverend Msgr. E. James Hart
Chancellor/Moderator of the Curia

