



AUSTRALIAN
CATHOLIC
MEDICAL
ASSOCIATION

Clarification on the importance of Conscience and Vaccine Mandates

In the Catholic tradition, conscience is respected as the intimate core and sanctuary of the human person; the place of encounter with God whose voice echoes within one's depths¹. It is a voice which urges us to do good and to avoid evil, that speaks the truth, and guides us in judgement of particular acts. The voice of conscience is, therefore, to be heeded and followed, since those who do not act on conscience condemn themselves.²

The dignity of conscience also requires that one is free to follow its dictates. This demands that society respects and makes room for rational and sincere judgments of conscience. One should not be restricted from enacting the dictates of conscience through unjust laws, or forced or coerced to act contrary to conscience.³

Within the sphere of medical practice, it is expected that one should give informed consent before submitting to any treatment. In line with consent, what one allows to have done to one's body also pertains to the dictates of conscience. Thus, in the current context, the administration of a COVID vaccine necessarily falls within this domain of concern. And it should be acknowledged, as with any case of conscience, that it is possible for individuals to have legitimate qualms of conscience with regards to particular vaccinations. Such concerns may include:

a) A moral objection to the production of the vaccines in question.

Although the Magisterium of the Catholic Church has deemed that the cooperation with evil (in the production of the vaccine, either its development or testing) is material and remote⁴, this does not preclude that some individuals could sincerely object in conscience to *any* participation in evil, or that the risk of COVID would justify such participation.

b) A reasoned objection to the risk of side effects of vaccination, both immediate and long-term.

There is also a responsibility to care for the health of the body, and so before any medical procedure the person must undertake a process of examination of literature and consultation

¹ Vatican Council II, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et spes*, n. 16.

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1790: "A human being must always obey the certain judgment of his conscience. If he were deliberately to act against it, he would condemn himself."

³ Vatican Council II, Declaration on Religious Freedom *Dignitatis humanae*, n. 3: "In all his activity a man is bound to follow his conscience in order that he may come to God, the end and purpose of life. It follows that he is not to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his conscience. Nor, on the other hand, is he to be restrained from acting in accordance with his conscience, especially in matters religious."

⁴ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Note on the morality of using some anti-Covid-19 vaccines", December 21, 2020, n. 3;

https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20201221_nota-vaccini-anticovid_en.html

with their doctor. With regard to vaccinations, the willingness to risk serious side effects should be balanced against the reasonable risk of disease. Individuals may conceivably object in conscience to vaccination, either essentially or circumstantially (e.g., at this time, or with this vaccine). Lack of proper information, lack or absence of thorough testing and research, and unknown future side effects, constitute reasonable sources of objection to accepting vaccination.

In the case of an infection, one is also obligated to consider how best to reduce or mitigate the risk of their transmitting the disease to others. This forms part of our duty to promote the common good. Yet as the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith makes clear, there is no essential contradiction between upholding the legitimacy of conscientious objection *and* concern for the common good. In other words, there is no overriding moral obligation on the part of the common good to be vaccinated. As it states:

“[P]ractical reason makes evident that vaccination is not, as a rule, a moral obligation and that, therefore, it must be voluntary.⁵ 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. 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 behaviour, 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.”⁶

However, the Church does assert that freedom of conscience is a principle that must be respected and protected. The dignity of conscience and the legitimacy of conscientious objection must be upheld.

The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference echoed these sentiments, stating that “the Vatican’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith is clear that ‘vaccination is not, as a rule, a moral obligation’ and ‘must be voluntary’. No one should be coerced to receive any vaccine.”⁷ Similar statements have been produced by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops⁸, and the National Catholic Bioethics Centre⁹.

⁵ As an official document of the magisterium, the determination that vaccination should be voluntary and subject to conscience, holds sway over the Pope’s personal opinion, expressed in an interview on January 10, 2021 for Italy’s TG5 news program, that “I believe that morally everyone must take the vaccine”; <https://www.ncronline.org/news/vatican/pope-francis-suggests-people-have-moral-obligation-take-coronavirus-vaccine>

⁶ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Note on the morality of using some anti-Covid-19 vaccines”, December 21, 2020, n. 5; https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20201221_nota_vaccini-anticovid_en.html

⁷ Australian Catholic Bishops’ Conference, *FAQs and Guidance for the Catholic community in Australia regarding a COVID-19 vaccine*, April 2021; https://www.catholic.org.au/images/FAQs_and_Guidance_on_COVID-19_Vaccination.pdf

⁸ <https://www.usccb.org/resources/Answers%20to%20Key%20Ethical%20Questions%20About%20COVID-19%20Vaccines.pdf>

⁹ <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5e3ada1a6a2e8d6a131d1dcd/t/60f85922ae6a2d324b74741e/1626888482625/NCBC+Vaccine+Exemption+Resource+updated.pdf>;

In light of recent government vaccine mandates in health and aged care it is critical that those working in these essential areas clearly understand the importance of conscience and act according to their conscience in making a decision about whether to take a particular vaccine.

The Catholic Medical Association of Australia, solicitous of the rights and dignity of its members and all people of conscience, and following Catholic teaching, calls for respect for the legitimacy of conscientious objection to vaccination, and urges protection against coercion and unjust sanctions for those who sincerely choose that path.

Chaplains of the Australian Catholic Medical Association

Fr Paschal Corby

Fr Anthony Bernard

Fr Michael McCaffrey

Fr Bavin Clarke