

The Vaccine Mandates and Ethical Principles

As a Catholic health care ethicist, this past year has presented countless ethical dilemmas. Ethical dilemmas arise when values clash. For example, in the context of this pandemic, the right to life and the ethical obligation to defend life clashes with autonomy, especially regarding the use of masks or taking the vaccine. This is further complicated by the expectation that institutions mandate vaccines or the use of masks.

Ethically, the Catholic Church affirms that taking the vaccine or wearing a mask is a good thing. This is true even though there is a very remote connection with abortion (I explain this in an article published in *National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly* and represented here earlier using the Principle of Cooperation). At the same time, the Church, in principle, defends the right for an individual, by conscience, to refuse to get the vaccine. By implication, the Catholic Church is against vaccine mandates. It is not right for institutions to force someone to do something against his or her conscience, regardless of how good one's intention may be.

What further complicates this for clergy is that since the Church supports an individual getting a vaccine, one may not have recourse to a religious exemption. This is because if a person objects to getting the vaccine, their objection is not based on their faith (since the Church supports and even encourages people to get the vaccine), but on a decision based on conscience. At the same time, it is possible that individuals choose not to get the vaccine for medical reasons.

We should remember the words of John Paul II in *Evangelium Vitae*, “Certainly the life of the body in its earthly state is not an absolute good for the believer, especially as he may be asked to give up his life for a greater good” (*Evangelium Vitae*, 47). “Earthly existence is not an absolute good” (*Evangelium Vitae*, 47). If it were, the Church could not condone martyrdom. Moreover, if earthly life were an absolute good, then clinicians would be obliged to use all available means to keep people alive at the end of life. Any argument that elevates earthly life above all other values turns it into a false god or idol. As we encourage people to get the vaccine, even as an act of charity (which it undoubtedly is), we must not trample on the rights of other people who, for various reasons, may conscientiously object to getting the vaccine.

To some, this position of apparent contradiction may seem absurd. But we should remember the words of Socrates “It is better to suffer evil than to do it.” Saint Paul says that one may not do evil that good may come of it (Romans 3:8). These respective concepts constitute the Socratic Principle and the Pauline Principle. In Christian ethics, it is nearly as basic as the First Principle of Natural Law—do good and avoid evil. When the rights of individuals are trampled upon, an evil is perpetrated. Once one violates this basic principle of ethics, there is no limit to what evil may be done for the sake of any so-called good.

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