



## **FORMING CONSCIENCES ON COVID VACCINES**

### **Addressing Youth Concerns: Things to Know About Requirements and Exemptions**

*With the availability of new COVID vaccines, along with the competing voices surrounding the issue of vaccination, many people are raising thoughtful moral and medical questions. In order to help us form our Catholic consciences regarding our decision-making about whether to receive a COVID vaccine, the Diocese of Worcester has issued a helpful document called “Forming Consciences on COVID Vaccines: What Catholics Should Know”. We encourage all to read it thoroughly and visit our website [www.worcesterdiocese.org/vaccines](http://www.worcesterdiocese.org/vaccines) for additional information which explains some of the relevant issues in greater depth. As more colleges and universities begin to require students be vaccinated prior to the fall semester, students and parents are becoming concerned. Here are some of the more common questions people are asking:*

#### **CAN ONE REFUSE VACCINATION, EVEN IF A COLLEGE OR EMPLOYER REQUIRE IT?**

Yes. Massachusetts law allows both medical and religious/conscience exemptions, and federal law allows exemptions for any drug or vaccine that is only approved by an Emergency Use Authorization (EUA). The Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith recently noted, “Practical reason makes evident that vaccination is not, as a rule, a moral obligation and that, therefore, it must be voluntary.”<sup>1</sup> Each individual has the right to accept or decline a vaccine.<sup>2</sup>

#### **HOW DOES ONE REQUEST AN EXEMPTION FROM THEIR COLLEGE OR UNIVERSITY?**

Some colleges may make exemption forms available to their students. If an exemption form is not publically available, you may have to inquire of the college directly as to their procedure. Students in secular colleges and universities may be able to request assistance from their campus ministry office if they have difficulty finding out the school’s exemption procedure.

#### **WHAT ARE SOME OF THE MORE COMMON REASONS PEOPLE MIGHT REQUEST AN EXEMPTION?**

People may validly choose to seek an exemption for medical, religious, and/or conscience reasons. Some examples include the following:

- Health issues. People with health issues such as allergies, past adverse reactions to medications, immune systems that can’t tolerate vaccines, or other medical conditions may be reasons for which vaccination may be contraindicated. Sometimes a simple letter from one’s health care provider is requested to support a medical exemption.
- Connection with abortion. Not all vaccines are morally equivalent. The currently available vaccines all have some connection with fetal cells obtained from abortion, some more direct than others. While the Pfizer and Moderna used the aborted fetal cell line only in its testing phase, the Johnson & Johnson vaccine used the abortion-derived cell line in both the testing and production of the vaccine. As new vaccines come on the market, these will also have to be evaluated ethically. Since abortion is the taking of innocent human life, and human life possesses inherent dignity from the moment of conception to natural death, the use of abortion derived cell lines is morally problematic for Catholics and for many people of good will.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Note on the Morality of Using Some Anti-Covid-19 Vaccines*, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, December 2020

<sup>2</sup> *Vaccines and Conscience Protection* – Joint Statement of the Catholic Medical Association, American College of Pediatricians, Christian Medical and Dental Association, and National Association of Catholic Nurses <https://www.cathmed.org/vaccines-and-conscience-protection/>

<sup>3</sup> See *Moral Considerations Regarding the New COVID-19 Vaccines (USCCB)* and the *USCCB Statement on the use of the Johnson & Johnson Vaccine* for a more thorough discussion of the use of aborted fetal cell lines in the available vaccines. Both documents can be found at [www.worcesterdiocese.org/vaccines](http://www.worcesterdiocese.org/vaccines).

- The COVID vaccines are still new, and currently approved only on an Emergency Use Authorization (EUA) which means in effect that they are experimental. Many people, especially younger people, are rightly concerned about whether there may be long term effects on health or effects on fertility. While some otherwise well-respected medical entities downplay or even deny these possibilities, the truth is that no one knows at this time. The vaccines have simply not been around long enough to have reliable data based on long-term studies to give us an answer to these questions. The number of adverse events reported by people receiving COVID vaccines to the FDA’s Vaccine Adverse Events Reporting System (VAERS) indicates that these possibilities are worthy of consideration, especially for younger people who are at a much lower risk of complications and serious illness from COVID infection, and for whom the risks of vaccination may outweigh the benefits. Further research is needed and it will take time and thorough study before these questions can be answered.
- Certain populations, such as otherwise healthy college-age students, are at much lower risk of complications from COVID infection. Many who have already tested positive have had only mild symptoms, or have been asymptomatic. They have acquired some immunity and therefore may decide to decline or delay vaccination.

### **IF MY COLLEGE REQUESTS A WRITTEN STATEMENT ON THE REASON FOR TAKING A RELIGIOUS/CONSCIENCE EXEMPTION, HOW DO I KNOW WHAT TO SAY?**

You will have to formulate the statement in your own words. Reading this document along with the document “Forming Consciences on COVID Vaccines: What Catholics Should Know” found on our website at [www.worcesterdiocese.org/vaccines](http://www.worcesterdiocese.org/vaccines), as well as the additional resources linked on the website may be helpful. Becoming familiar with what the Church teaches through these sources will help you to form your conscience and better articulate your exemption request.



#### **SUMMARY THOUGHTS:**

It is helpful to keep some of the basic principles of medical ethics in mind when making difficult decisions. The principle of *stewardship over the gift of life* requires us to appreciate our own human nature, with its biological, psychological, social and spiritual capacities, grounded in our creation in God’s image and likeness. The gift of human life must be used with profound respect for its intrinsic ends.

The principle of *respect for autonomy* implies that one should be free from coercion in deciding to act. We exercise our autonomy through *informed consent* which presupposes an adequate disclosure of information, and the ability to carefully consider all of the expected benefits, burdens, risks, and reasonable alternatives.

Decisions about vaccination should not be made out of fear, or in a state of doubt, but rather must be made prayerfully and thoughtfully with an informed Catholic conscience, carefully weighing the risks and benefits, along with the moral and medical facts, and applying these principles to the person’s individual health circumstances.

***For more information visit [www.worcesterdiocese.org/vaccines](http://www.worcesterdiocese.org/vaccines)***