



### CONSCIENCE AND COVID VACCINATION

Bishop Liam Cary  
26 August 2021

In the past year the Catholic Church has repeatedly endorsed the moral acceptability of COVID-19 vaccines and actively encourages people to receive them.

Now controversy is swirling over whether to make COVID vaccination mandatory. To address this question properly, it will be good to review key components of Catholic moral guidance for this time of pandemic.

1. Vaccination against COVID-19 is a lifesaving, pandemic-quelling measure which the Church encourages Catholics to take in good conscience in order to protect their own health and the health of the community in which they live. In the words of Pope Francis, “Vaccination is a simple but profound way of promoting the common good and caring for each other, especially the most vulnerable.” The decision to be vaccinated, the Latin American bishops say, should be seen as a direct act of care for life—for one’s own life, for the life of one’s family, for the lives of one’s neighbors.
2. Catholics must *form* their conscience by carefully thinking through their situation in light of the revealed wisdom of God and the teaching of the Church. They should seek to align their decision about vaccines with the mind of the Church, paying heed to official

statements that approve and encourage the reception of COVID-19 vaccines out of concern for the common good.

3. Nonetheless, official Catholic teaching also makes clear that vaccination is not a universal moral obligation. Each person must evaluate his or her own health situation and personally decide which medical interventions to accept or not to accept. In light of one’s personal medical history an individual Catholic may legitimately question the appropriateness of a newly developed vaccine for his or her own health as well as its long-term effectiveness for the health of the community. Such considerations may lead the person to decide in conscience not to receive the vaccine.

4. A person who reaches sure judgment of conscience must follow it. For this reason, the Church teaches, vaccination should not be mandatory. Governments, institutions, and employers should not force people to go against their conscience nor penalize them for acting on it. Rather, faithful to American tradition, they should provide exemptions for religious, medical, or conscientious objection to vaccines. In a democracy like ours, the health of the individual conscience is a vital aspect of the common good.

5. Those whose conscience directs them to decline vaccination do not cease to share responsibility for the common good; they must conscientiously avoid transmitting the virus to others, especially the elderly, those with weakened immune systems, and co-workers.

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On 25 August 2021 the Oregon Health Authority published the “COVID-19 Vaccine Religious Exception Request Form,” which asks the applicant to “describe your religious belief and how it affects your ability to receive a COVID-19 vaccination.” To be granted a religious exemption from the Governor’s vaccine mandate, the applicant must submit a signed personal response on this form to the Oregon Health Authority for approval. No other documentation is required.

Catholics who wish to file for religious exemption would do well to consult a document from the National Catholic Bioethics Center and adapt it to their circumstances. The “NCBC Vaccine Exemption Template Letter” (<https://www.ncbcenter.org/ncbc-news/vaccineletter>) explains Catholic teaching in a way that will help applicants give personal expression to the beliefs and reasoning that underlie their petition, especially those who are concerned about the role of abortion-derived materials in vaccine development.