



WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

August 20, 2021

STATEMENT OF THE CATHOLIC BISHOPS OF WISCONSIN ON COVID-19 VACCINATION AND THE PROTECTION OF CONSCIENCE

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

On December 11, 2020, the Committee on Doctrine and the Committee on Pro-Life Activities of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops published the statement “Moral Considerations Regarding the New COVID-19 Vaccines,” in which it clearly states that it is morally permissible to receive these vaccines.¹ On January 13, 2021, we published the “Statement of the Catholic Bishops of Wisconsin on the Morality of COVID-19 Vaccines,” and we reiterated “that the use of current COVID-19 vaccines is morally permissible because of the remoteness of material cooperation.”² We encourage those eligible to receive the COVID-19 vaccine to do so because it is the most effective way to combat this virus. We are all morally responsible to protect our lives and the lives of others. This is an imperative of natural law that we treasure in our faith. “To defend and promote life, to show reverence and love for it, is a task which God entrusts to every man, calling him as his living image to share in his own lordship over the world...”³ By protecting ourselves against the variants that cause COVID-19, we fulfill this blessed task.

However, the Church also treasures her teaching on the sanctity of conscience: “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 In light of these teachings we ask ourselves: should the Church or any other organization force a person to receive the COVID-19 vaccine?

No. Nobody should violate the sanctity of conscience by forcing a person to do something contrary to his or her conscience. There are many health or ethical reasons why a person may refuse COVID-19 vaccination. We understand the urgency of this pandemic and the frustration some may experience because of the number of unvaccinated people; but even when someone’s decision may look to others as erroneous, conscience does not lose its dignity.⁵

A well-formed conscience stands not solely upon ecclesiastical authority, but also upon the law of God written in an individual’s heart.⁶ Therefore, a human being must always obey the certain judgment of his or her conscience.⁷ Additionally, “the Christian faithful, in common with all other men, possess the civil right not to be hindered in leading their lives in accordance with their consciences.”⁸ Consequently, someone who

¹ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Committees on Doctrine and Pro-Life Activities, [Moral Considerations Regarding the New COVID-19 Vaccines](#) (December 11, 2020).

² [Statement of the Catholic Bishops of Wisconsin on the Morality of COVID-19 Vaccines](#) (Jan. 13, 2021).

³ Saint John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, no. 42.

⁴ Saint Paul VI, *Dignitatis Humanae*, no. 3.

⁵ Saint Paul VI, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 16.

⁶ Saint Paul VI, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 16.

⁷ [Catechism of the Catholic Church](#), no. 1800.

⁸ Saint Paul VI, *Dignitatis Humanae*, no. 13.

in conscience decides that he or she should not receive the COVID-19 vaccine should be granted an exemption based on his or her beliefs or convictions.

It is the responsibility of the individual to raise moral or ethical objections to vaccination based on the dictates of his or her conscience. Pastors should not feel compelled to issue documentation recognizing this conscientious objection and are recommended not to do so. Moreover, human conscience is dynamic; it is an ever-seeking truth reality. A person may claim an exemption of conscience today and later may change his or her mind.

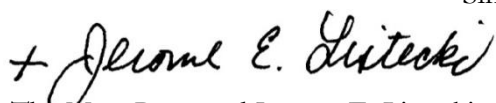
As of today, the State of Wisconsin protects the person for whom state-required “vaccination is reasonably likely to lead to serious harm” or “for reasons of religion or conscience, refuses to obtain the vaccination.”⁹ We firmly and constantly request that all local, state, and federal governments maintain the protection of individual conscience.

We also stress that a person’s decision to refuse the COVID-19 vaccine finds its limits as we apply the Principle of the Common Good. In other words, the refusal to receive vaccination is also, for the conscientious person, a decision to use other means to protect his or her life and the lives of others against COVID-19. Every decision has consequences; and in this case, the person claiming a religious or ethical exemption should be ready to properly assume other scientifically recommended means of avoiding infection and contagion: face-coverings, social distancing, hand sanitizing, periodic testing, and quarantine.

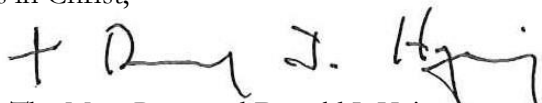
Employers should respect their employees’ consciences and make necessary accommodations, but they are also responsible for the protection of the common good. Consequently, employers should maintain safety by requiring other ways of preventing the spread of infection by conscientious objectors.

The Vatican COVID-19 Commission in collaboration with the Pontifical Academy for Life issued the document, “Vaccine for all. 20 Points for a Fairer and Healthier World.” As stated therein, “We consider it important that a responsible decision be taken in this regard, since refusal of the vaccine may also constitute a risk to others.”¹⁰ As we strive to emerge from this pandemic, we pray and faithfully encourage everyone to enter their inner room of conscience and make the best decision for themselves, their loved ones, and the larger community.

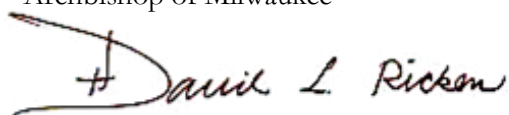
Sincerely Yours in Christ,



The Most Reverend Jerome E. Listecki
Archbishop of Milwaukee




The Most Reverend Donald J. Hying
Bishop of Madison



The Most Reverend David L. Ricken
Bishop of Green Bay



The Most Reverend William P. Callahan, OFM Conv.
Bishop of La Crosse



The Most Reverend James P. Powers
Bishop of Superior

⁹ Wisconsin Statutes ss. [252.04\(3\)](#) and [252.041](#).

¹⁰ Vatican COVID-19 Commission and the Pontifical Academy for Life, “[Vaccine for all. 20 Points for a Fairer and Healthier World.](#)” (December 29, 2020).



WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

MEDIA RELEASE

August 20, 2021

WISCONSIN BISHOPS ADDRESS VACCINATION AND CONSCIENCE PROTECTION

Wisconsin's Catholic bishops have issued a statement to address the ability of individuals to seek exemption from COVID-19 vaccination mandates based on conscience objection.

Vaccination is permissible and serves the common good.

The bishops affirmed that it is morally permissible to receive COVID-19 vaccination under Church teaching and that vaccination has proved to be the most effective way to combat COVID-19 infection. They therefore urge Catholics who are eligible to seek out vaccination as a means of protecting one's own life and the lives of others.

The Church recognizes the right of individual conscience.

While recognizing the value of vaccination, the bishops also emphasized the importance of adherence to conscience. As the bishops note, a well-formed conscience is God's law written on an individual's heart, "Therefore, a human being must always obey the certain judgment of his or her conscience." They affirm that a person should not be coerced into receiving vaccinations in violation of his or her conscience.

Civil authorities must recognize and protect the right of individual conscience.

Church teaching requires that civil authority recognize and protect the right of conscience. The bishops therefore noted that government authorities must provide an exemption for those who object to vaccination based on moral or ethical convictions. When seeking an exemption, the bishops note that the law requires "the individual to raise moral or ethical objections to vaccination based on the dictates of his or her conscience." Therefore, formal documentation by pastors is not required or recommended. The bishops also urged that "all local, state, and federal governments maintain the protection of individual conscience."

The unvaccinated and their employers have responsibilities.

The bishops emphasized that responsibilities come with conscientious objection. "Every decision has consequences; and in this case, the person claiming a religious or ethical exemption should be ready to properly assume other scientifically recommended means of avoiding infection and contagion: face-coverings, social distancing, hand sanitizing, periodic testing, and quarantine."

Beyond maintaining compliance with federal law, which requires that employers make reasonable accommodations for employees who object to vaccination on moral or ethical grounds, employers also have responsibilities. They must maintain general safety standards for all employees by continuing COVID-19 mitigation measures.

Need for prayer and reflection

The Wisconsin bishops concluded their statement urging all to reflect upon how they can best serve their families and communities during these challenging times. “As we strive to emerge from this pandemic, we pray and faithfully encourage everyone to enter their inner room of conscience and make the best decision for themselves, their loved ones, and the larger community.”

Wisconsin Catholic Conference (WCC) Executive Director, Kim Vercauteren, highlighted the nuances in the bishops statement, “During this difficult time, it’s important to stress how vaccination can help aid a suffering world, while at the same recognizing that many individuals struggle with receiving COVID-19 vaccines.”

Vercauteren highlighted that religious accommodation in this area is not necessarily tied to a specific denomination or doctrine. “Current law recognizes the ability of employees to avoid acting contrary to sincerely held moral or ethical beliefs. This is true even when there is no religious group that espouses such beliefs or even when those beliefs are not accepted by a religious group to which an individual professes to belong. These factors do not determine whether a belief is the sincerely held religious belief of an individual.”

Vercauteren noted that conscience objections are often mixed with health concerns, but that it is important to know the difference. “If you think a particular vaccine might have negative impacts on maternal health or your heart, that’s a health concern, not a moral one.” Individuals with these types of concerns may still have recourse under the law, but those health exemptions are frequently tied to other laws, such as those that protect pregnant women or individuals with disabilities.

She added that employers are required to make reasonable accommodations when they receive requests based on religious objection, but the employer does not have to endure undue hardship in accommodating the request. Vercauteren notes, “Some flexibility may be required on the employee’s part in terms of using mitigation measures and making workplace adjustments.”

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For more information, contact Kim Vercauteren at 608-257-0004. A copy of the [Bishops Letter](#) is attached.