



DIOCESE OF FAIRBANKS

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OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

19 October 2021

Statement on COVID-19 Vaccine Mandates

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Over the last several weeks we have seen an unprecedented number of private businesses and the federal government mandating that employees receive one of the COVID-19 vaccines currently available. The universal Church and the diocese have encouraged the faithful to consider receiving the vaccine. This encouragement is based on the documents published by both the USCCB Committees on Doctrine and Pro-Life Activities as well as the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the highest doctrinal authority in the Church. Both have said that it is morally permissible to receive the COVID-19 vaccinations currently available in the United States.

With the proliferation of vaccine mandates from both the public and private sector a number of individuals have refused to take the vaccine and have requested a religious accommodation through the Religious Freedom Restoration Act.

This has raised the concern about whether the vaccine's moral permissibility precludes an individual from a sincerely held religious belief that receiving the vaccine would violate his or her conscience. It does not.

The Pfizer and Moderna vaccines were tested using an abortion-derived cell line. That type of link has been considered remote material cooperation with evil and is never sinful. The Johnson & Johnson vaccine was developed, tested, and is produced with abortion-derived cell lines and is, therefore, more problematic. If it were the only vaccine available, it would be morally permissible to receive it, but the faithful Catholic is to make known his or her preference for a more morally acceptable treatment.

Notwithstanding the moral permissibility of these vaccines, the Church treasures her teaching on the sanctity of conscience. "Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a man. There he is alone with God, Whose voice echoes in his depths" (Pope St. Paul VI, *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 16). Pope St. Paul VI wrote:

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 (*Dignitas Humanae*, n. 3).

Accordingly, no one should be forced to receive a vaccine if it would violate the sanctity of his or her rightly formed conscience.

Individuals possess the “civil right not to be hindered in leading their lives in accordance with their consciences” (ibid., n. 13). This belief permeates both Catholic moral theology as well as First Amendment jurisprudence. As stated by the Supreme Court, “[R]eligious beliefs need not be acceptable, logical, consistent, or comprehensible to others in order to merit First Amendment protections” (*Thomas v. Review Bd. of Indiana*, 450 U.S. 707, 714 (1981)). The denial of religious accommodation, or punitive or adverse personnel actions taken against those who raise earnest, conscience-based objections would be contrary to federal law and morally wrong.

Those who refuse the COVID-19 vaccine, however, must act in charity for their neighbors and for the common good by undertaking means to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 through wearing face coverings, social distancing, undergoing routine testing, quarantining, and remaining open to receiving a treatment should one become available that is not derived from, or tested with abortion-derived cell lines. In the words of St. Paul: “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others” (Philippians 2:3-4).

Sincerely in Christ,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Chad W. Zielinski". The signature is written in a cursive style with a cross at the beginning.

†Most Reverend Chad W. Zielinski
Catholic Bishop of Northern Alaska
Diocese of Fairbanks

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