



## THE NATIONAL CATHOLIC BIOETHICS CENTER

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### Vaccine Exemption Resource for Individuals

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*This resource explains how the Catholic Church's teachings may lead individual Catholics to decline certain vaccines. It is intended for Catholics who have made a sure judgment in conscience to refuse a vaccine. It is not a decision-making guide and does not address all legal, medical, and moral considerations. It is not a determination that an exemption will be granted.*

The Roman Catholic Church teaches that a person may be required to refuse a medical intervention, including a vaccination, if his or her informed conscience comes to this sure judgment. While the Catholic Church does not prohibit the use of any vaccine, and generally encourages the use of safe and effective vaccines as a way of safeguarding personal and public health, the following authoritative Church teachings demonstrate the principled religious basis on which a Catholic may determine that he or she ought to refuse certain vaccines:

- Vaccination is not morally obligatory in principle and so must be voluntary.<sup>1</sup>
- There is a general moral duty to refuse the use of medical products, including certain vaccines, that are produced using human cells lines derived from direct abortions. It is permissible to use such vaccines only under certain case-specific conditions, based on a judgment of conscience.<sup>2</sup>
- A person's informed judgments about the proportionality of medical interventions are to be respected unless they contradict authoritative Catholic moral teachings.<sup>3</sup>
- A person is morally required to obey his or her sure conscience, even if it errs.<sup>4</sup>

A Catholic may judge it wrong to receive certain vaccines for a variety of reasons consistent with these teachings, and there is no authoritative Church teaching universally obliging Catholics to receive any vaccine. An individual Catholic may invoke Church teaching to refuse a vaccine developed or produced using abortion-derived cell lines. More generally, a Catholic might refuse a vaccine based on the Church's teachings concerning therapeutic proportionality. Therapeutic proportionality is an assessment of whether the benefits of a medical intervention outweigh the undesirable side-effects and burdens in light of the integral good of the person, including spiritual, psychological, and bodily goods.<sup>5</sup> It can also extend to the good of others and the common good, which likewise entail spiritual and moral dimensions and are not reducible to public health. The judgment of therapeutic proportionality must be made by the person who is the potential recipient of the intervention in the concrete circumstances,<sup>6</sup> not by public health authorities or by other individuals who might judge differently in their own situations.

At the core of the Church's teaching are the first and last points listed above: vaccination is not a universal obligation and a person must obey the judgment of his or her own informed and certain conscience. In fact, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* instructs that following one's conscience is following Christ Himself:

In all he says and does, man is obliged to follow faithfully what he knows to be just and right. It is by the judgment of his conscience that man perceives and recognizes the prescriptions of the divine law: "Conscience is a law of the mind; yet [Christians] would not grant that it is nothing more; . . . [Conscience] is a messenger of him, who, both in nature and in grace, speaks to us behind a veil, and teaches and rules us by his representatives. Conscience is the aboriginal Vicar of Christ."<sup>7</sup>

Therefore, if a Catholic comes to an informed and sure judgment in conscience that he or she should not receive a vaccine, then the Catholic Church requires that the person follow this certain judgment of conscience and refuse the vaccine. The *Catechism* is clear: "Man has the right to act in conscience and in freedom so as personally to make moral decisions. 'He must not be forced to act contrary to his conscience. Nor must he be prevented from acting according to his conscience, especially in religious matters.'"<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), "Note on the Morality of Using Some Anti-COVID-19 Vaccines," December 17, 2020, n. 5: "At the same time, practical reason makes evident that vaccination is not, as a rule, a moral obligation and that, therefore, it must be voluntary."

<sup>2</sup> See Pontifical Academy for Life, "Moral Reflections on Vaccines Prepared from Cells Derived from Aborted Human Foetuses," June 9, 2005; Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Instruction *Dignitas personae*, 2008, nn. 34-35; Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Note on the Morality of Using Some Anti-COVID-19 Vaccines," nn. 1-3. When there is a sufficiently serious reason to use the product and there is no reasonable alternative available, the Catholic Church teaches that it may be permissible to use the immorally sourced product under protest. In any case, whether the product is used or not, the Catholic Church teaches that all must make their disagreement known and request the development of equal or better products using biological material that does not come from abortions.

<sup>3</sup> See United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), *Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. (Washington, DC: USCCB Publishing, 2018), n. 28. Hereafter "ERDs."

<sup>4</sup> "A human being must always obey the certain judgment of his conscience. If he were deliberately to act against it, he would condemn himself. Yet it can happen that moral conscience remains in ignorance and makes erroneous judgments about acts to be performed or already committed." *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993), www.vatican.va, n. 1790. Hereafter "CCC."

<sup>5</sup> See ERDs, nn. 32-33; nn. 56-57; Part Three, Introduction, para. 2; Part Five, Introduction, para. 3.

<sup>6</sup> See ERDs, nn. 56-57. Both of these directives state that the proportionality of medical interventions is established "in the patient's judgment."

<sup>7</sup> CCC, n. 1777, citing John Henry Cardinal Newman, "Letter to the Duke of Norfolk," V, in *Certain Difficulties felt by Anglicans in Catholic Teaching II* (London: Longmans Green, 1885), 248.

<sup>8</sup> CCC, n. 1782, citing Second Vatican Council, *Dignitatis humanae*, December 7, 1965, n. 3.