



October 7, 2021
Our Lady of the Holy Rosary

Vaccines and Religious Exemption Requests

To All the Faithful of the Diocese of Prince Albert:

May the pure love of Christ reign in our hearts!

The beginning of October brought new anti-COVID regulations in the Province of Saskatchewan. We have seen the introduction of vaccine mandates for some places of work and the use of vaccine passports to enter certain public places or events. From the vaccination statistics, I think that most people in the Church and society welcome these measures as necessary means to combat the COVID-19 virus and get the 'fourth wave' under control. But I do know that these regulations have been felt to be burdensome for some who, in conscience, are opposed to vaccines for various reasons and, for others, who are concerned that their personal freedom is being impeded by the government or their employer.

Catholics should be watchful that the dignity and freedom of conscience is upheld and respected by the State even when drastic measures need to be implemented to protect the vulnerable. With the question of mandatory vaccinations and employment, so far there are provisions for medical and conscience exemptions according to the Canadian Human Rights Act.

That being said, by this letter, I do want to *strongly encourage both priests and people to get the double vaccination against COVID-19* (unless your doctor recommends otherwise, e.g. a dangerous allergy to some component of the vaccine.) Based on information from the health authority, the vaccine, while not completely eliminating the possibility of contracting COVID-19 or one of its variants, offers the best protection against the virus and mitigates its symptoms. As we have seen dramatically in the last few weeks, the health care system in Saskatchewan is seriously overburdened by COVID cases in Intensive Care Units. According to government statistics, these are mostly unvaccinated persons. The situation is so dire that other serious surgeries and treatments are being cancelled to tend these COVID patients.

The Morality of the Vaccine

Some worry that vaccinations are immoral because vaccine research now often uses lines of cells developed from aborted human remains. The Church certainly repudiates the use of cells obtained in this way in scientific research and calls upon the scientific community to always maintain strict ethical practices. Nevertheless, in traditional moral theology, the Church also distinguishes between a *formal* and a *material* cooperation in evil. The decision of a scientist to use these stem cells in research is already distinct from the decision of the person who chose to have an abortion and was not the reason for the abortion. The choice of the scientist to use such cells in research is also distinct from the eventual product of their research. For these reasons, we can see that the original evil is *remote* from the people who finally receive the vaccine. At most,

the reception of a vaccine would be a *remote* and *material* cooperation in another person's sinful choice, not a *formal* or freely-willed cooperation. But other considerations are also relevant for *our* moral choice that can help us to make a good decision: there are currently no other treatments against COVID-19, there is a serious need to end the pandemic in a time of real public emergency, and people do not always have access to a vaccine without a stem cell connection or history. Based on all these considerations, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in its *Note on the Morality of Using Some anti-COVID-19 Vaccines* from 21 December 2020, states that it is ethically just for Catholics to receive the anti-COVID vaccinations. This expression of the Church's *magisterium* or teaching authority on behalf of the Holy Father was given precisely to help Catholics to form their consciences about this question.

We all have the *duty* to prayerfully inform our conscience with the help of Sacred Scripture, prayer, and the Church's *magisterium*. Our conscience can be *in error*, so it is important to continue to educate our conscience through life with the Church's help. In situations like this question of the vaccine, when we have a dilemma before us, the Church's *magisterium* is a particularly helpful guide with her long tradition of moral reflection. There are many irresponsible social media websites and articles that are fostering fear in people and undermining the teaching authority of the Church. I encourage all to keep calm in this time, to refrain from judging others in your family and parish, to make good and safe decisions, and to trust in the presence of God in this difficult time.

It is true that vaccinations are not normally a moral obligation. People cannot be forced to get a vaccine. But hopefully the considerations above and the Vatican document can help people to resolve any concerns they have about the vaccine. I should repeat that conscience demands that we consider not only ourselves but the *common good* of society and the *needs* of others around us. My right relationship with God is affected by my treatment of my neighbour. If people's consciences will still not allow them to receive the vaccine, they have a *moral obligation* in charity to do all they can to act for the common good and to protect others and themselves from contracting the COVID-19 virus.

Requests for Letters of Religious Exemption

Recently, some people have asked me or their parish priest to write them a letter of religious exemption when required by the government or their employer to be vaccinated. A very few Bishops in the USA have given so-called 'letters of religious exemption.' I know that these Bishops are trying to help defend people's conscience by writing such letters. However, we cannot endorse requests for vaccine exemptions that are *based on religious grounds*, because the role of the Church is to *inform conscience* through her teaching and to support the respect for individual conscience, *not to legitimize* the judgments made by an individual person's conscience. As noted above, there are provisions in human rights law in Canada that protect an individual from being required to take the vaccine for *reasons of conscience* and such individuals should go that route with their employer rather than asking for a letter from a church minister. Exemption letters for Catholics from Catholic bishops and priests would imply the Church authorities are not encouraging her people to be vaccinated, or that the Church has judged vaccination *immoral* based on principles of the Catholic faith. This is *not* the case, as I have indicated above. On the contrary, the Church's authorities are strongly encouraging Catholics to be vaccinated against COVID-19 while recognizing that people cannot be forced.

Sincerely in Christ,



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