



OFFICE OF THE ARCHBISHOP

ARCHDIOCESE OF WASHINGTON

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Dear Brothers in Christ,

With the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, including dangerous variants, there is much discussion surrounding vaccination: whether it is moral, whether it should be imposed, and if it is imposed, whether we, as pastors of the local Church, should provide religious exemption letters to those who request them.

Motivated by the desire to protect us from the virus, civil authorities are strongly urging that people within their jurisdictions be vaccinated. Some private employers are requiring vaccination as a condition of employment, and several educational institutions are doing so as a condition of enrollment or attending classes in-person. In response to such requirements, for different reasons, some Catholics have been seeking letters from their pastors to use as they request exemptions from vaccination.

After prayerful examination, I ask that our pastors not provide religious exemption letters.

We, as Catholics—clergy and laity—must avoid any implication that vaccination against Covid-19 goes against Catholic moral principles. A religious exemption letter cannot be issued based on a supposition that the Church opposes the use of these vaccines.

The Catholic Church encourages vaccination against a variety of illnesses. Regarding vaccination against the Covid-19 virus, our Holy Father, Pope Francis, has said, “Thanks to God’s grace and to the work of many, we now have vaccines to protect us from Covid-19. They grant us the hope of ending the pandemic, but only if they are available to all and if we work together.”

At the same time, it is true that certain permitted exemptions must exist for those individuals who choose not to be vaccinated for medical or moral reasons. Catholic moral teaching holds that the reception of any type of vaccination must always be voluntary. In the end, the decision to receive a vaccine rests with the individual according to his or her reasoned and well-formed conscience.

There has been expressed concern that aborted cells from years ago have been used in the development and testing of the Covid-19 vaccines. In December 2020, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith assured us that, under the present circumstances, “when ethically irreproachable Covid-19 vaccines are not available ... it is morally acceptable to receive Covid-19 vaccines that have used cell lines from aborted fetuses in their research and production process.”

This statement makes clear that in using these vaccines, there is no implied approval of the evil of abortion. The Church teaches that such remote passive material cooperation is justified by the present danger represented by the virus.

The Holy Father shares with us that “Being vaccinated with vaccines authorized by the competent authorities is an act of love. And contributing to ensure the majority of people are vaccinated is an act of love...Vaccination is a simple but profound way of promoting the common good and caring for each other, especially the most vulnerable.”

The vulnerability of others places a special obligation on the rest of us. Our neighbors are depending on us to help keep them safe from possible infection.

It is my prayerful hope that our generous cooperation in the vaccination of our people will help to end the immense suffering and pain of this virus.

I am grateful for your selfless commitment and love for those in our care. Please be assured of my continued prayers for you and your ministry.

Faternally yours in Christ,



✠Wilton Cardinal Gregory,
Archbishop of Washington