

**Catholic Vaccine Exemption Requests:  
A Resource for Organizations**

August 28, 2021

M. Therese Lysaught, Ph.D.

*The following form is designed for mission leaders, chaplains, and others within Catholic health systems as they work with associates to implement COVID-19 vaccine requirements within their systems. Designed as a basis for dialogue with Catholics, this formatted script helps underscore the teaching of Pope Francis and bishops around this question at this time. It outlines the process of Catholic moral reasoning, indicating how principles of Catholic bioethics and Catholic social teaching are always grounded in our broader sacramental formation and ecclesial identity. As such, it may also be helpful for systems' broader ongoing formation efforts around Catholic identity. Other Catholic organizations may wish to adapt this material to their own contexts.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Dear [Name]:

You have requested an exemption from [name of organization]'s requirement that all be vaccinated against the COVID-19 virus by [date]. You are claiming that as a Roman Catholic, to receive any of the COVID-19 vaccines would violate your religious beliefs. You are invoking the Catholic principle of conscience to refuse [name of organization]'s requirement. While [name of organization] respects your right to follow your conscience, we disagree that your request for exemption follows the teachings and moral guidance of the Roman Catholic Church on this question. As a Catholic organization, we would like to use this opportunity to dialogue with you about Catholic teaching and the COVID-19 pandemic in order to help you form your conscience.

As a Catholic health system, we are committed to continuing the healing ministry of Jesus. In fact, we are mandated to do so by the USCCB's [Ethical and Religious Directives for Healthcare Organizations](#) (6-7). With the bishops, we expect all of our employees—both Catholic and non-Catholic—to share that commitment. All Catholics are called to participate in this ministry as part of our baptismal identity as members of Christ's body. This identity is renewed each week as we participate in the Eucharist. There, as Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI noted (quoting St. Augustine), "[we become what we consume](#)"—we become people sent forth to embody Christ's self-emptying, healing love in the world. He says this so beautifully:

...in the case of the Eucharist...it is not we who assimilate it but it assimilates us in itself, so that we become conformed to Jesus Christ, a member of his Body, one with him.... In fact, precisely because it is Christ who, in Eucharistic communion changes us into him, our individuality, in this encounter, is opened, liberated from its egocentrism and inserted into the Person of Jesus who in his turn is immersed in Trinitarian communion. The Eucharist, therefore, while it unites us to Christ also opens us to others, makes us members of one another: we are no longer divided but one in him. Eucharistic communion not only unites me to the person I have beside me and with whom I may not even be on good terms, but also to our distant brethren in every part of the world. Hence the profound sense of the Church's social presence derives from the Eucharist, as

is testified by the great social saints [for example, Mother Teresa or St. Vincent DePaul] who were always great Eucharistic souls. Those who recognize Jesus in the sacred Host, recognize him in their suffering brother or sister, in those who hunger and thirst, who are strangers, naked, sick or in prison; and they are attentive to every person, they work in practice for all who are in need. Therefore, our special responsibility as Christians for building a supportive, just and brotherly society comes from the gift of Christ's love.

So, as Catholic, you and [name of organization] are called to put egocentrism aside, to strive for unity with others, and to do what we can to promote the life, health, and dignity of all persons, especially the poor and vulnerable (USCCB, [ERDs, Part I](#)). In other words, the Catholic commitments to the common good, solidarity, and participation both at home and across the globe, are rooted in charity and the sacramental life of the Church.

This is the starting point for forming our consciences and the overarching framework for understanding Catholic teaching on both medical treatments and conscience. Let us review this teaching.

First, for Catholics, our consciences must be formed in open and respectful dialogue with the Church's magisterial teaching authority. A number of offices of the Holy See, the USCCB, and the Holy Father himself have all provided guidance that all of the currently available COVID-19 vaccines are morally acceptable and that Catholics have a moral responsibility both to be vaccinated and to assist the global community in achieving vaccination levels sufficient for herd immunity. You can find links to the relevant documents at the end of this form. Recently, Pope Francis and a number of Spanish-speaking bishops reiterated this moral and theological guidance in a powerful public service announcement, reminding the world that getting vaccinated is "[an act of love.](#)"

Second, as Catholics, because of our commitment to the sacredness of each human life, we are morally obliged to use ordinary means to preserve our health (ERDs, Directives 32, 56). Ordinary means are those that "provide a reasonable hope of benefit without imposing excessive risks and burdens on the patient or excessive expense to family or community." In other words, while all medical interventions are, of course, always voluntary, the Church has long held that at the same time, Catholics are (voluntarily) morally obliged to use them.

The COVID-19 vaccines are highly effective at preventing serious illness, hospitalization, and death from what is currently a highly infectious disease for which there is no current effective treatment that can have serious, long-term or even fatal outcomes. For those without adverse medical indications, these vaccines do not impose an excessive risk or burden on recipients, and they are free of charge in the US. The authoritative magisterial guidance has concluded that there are no overweighing moral considerations that outweigh these factors.

In determining whether a particular means is ordinary, one should take into account its burdens on one's family and community. Normally, these burdens are questions of expense. But unlike any other treatment, vaccines also protect our immediate families and those we encounter in our communities, particularly those who are more vulnerable, preserving their health and life as well. And they help prevent new and potentially more deadly strains of this virus from developing. Thus, the case for understanding COVID-19 vaccination as ordinary—and therefore morally obligatory—is even stronger than for most other medical treatments.

Third, in spite of the Church’s moral guidance that there is no moral connection between the current COVID-19 vaccines and abortion, some Catholic voices continue to suggest that the vaccines might somehow be “morally compromised” based on the principle of moral cooperation. Dr. Melissa Moschella, who teaches at Catholic University of America, has recently provided [a very careful analysis and rebuttal](#) of these complex arguments. We encourage you to study her article as you continue to form your conscience.

Fourth, there seems to be some confusion about the Catholic position on whether or not organizations can impose vaccine mandates. [Vaccine mandates are not new](#). For decades, state and local governments as well as organizations in the US—particularly educational organizations—have mandated a variety of vaccines in order to protect members of their community from devastating infectious diseases. The Catholic Church has never opposed these mandates.

Finally, let us reflect on Catholic teaching on conscience. You may have recently seen some statements that mostly consist of sentences about conscience taken out of context from a variety of different sources. One of the most authoritative sources of Catholic teaching on conscience is the Second Vatican Council’s document *Gaudium et Spes*, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. We encourage you to prayerfully read the whole document from start to finish, in order to understand how Catholic teaching on conscience fits into the Church’s understanding of itself in the modern world. As you read [paragraph 16](#) where the Council Fathers note that conscience is our “most secret core and sanctuary,” you will see that they also emphasize that conscience unites us with others and is always directed toward the common good. As they note, “In fidelity to conscience, Christians are joined with the rest of men in the search for truth, and for the genuine solution to the numerous problems which arise in the life of individuals from social relationships.” Conscience is, per the Council, the “law written by God” on our hearts, but *Gaudium et Spes* states clearly that this “law...is fulfilled by love of God and neighbor.” In other words, the content of this law is revealed in Christ—it is the “law” of self-emptying love for the good of others, of charity. We invite you to read more here [[link to op-ed](#)] on how the religious exemption template you have submitted distorts Catholic teaching on conscience.

We have come full circle to charity—that perfect love that through grace dispels fear and enables us to practice that love toward others. In the current pandemic, to be vaccinated is, as Pope Francis says, a small but profound act of love, for oneself and others. It is also an action aligned with the healing mission of the Church and [our organization] and our deep commitment to protect human life. Dialogue is also an act of love. Thus, if you wish to continue to request a religious exemption, even in light of all of the above, we invite you to continue this dialogue by outlining the reasons, grounded in Catholic teaching, that would supersede the above sources of the Catholic tradition.

Blessings on you as you read through these documents and continue to prayerfully inform your conscience.

In Christ,

[Name]

[Date]

[Title: CEO/Director of Mission Integration]

## **Catholic Teaching on the COVID-19 Vaccines**

Pope Francis, Archbishop José H. Gomez of Los Angeles, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops; Cardinal Carlos Aguiar Retes of Mexico; Cardinal Óscar Rodríguez Maradiaga of Tegucigalpa, Honduras; Cardinal Cláudio Hummes, retired archbishop of São Paulo; Cardinal Gregorio Rosa Chávez, auxiliary bishop of San Salvador, El Salvador; and Archbishop Miguel Cabrejos Vidarte of Trujillo, Peru, "[Unity Across the Americas](#)" (August 17, 2021).

Vatican Covid-19 Commission in collaboration with the Pontifical Academy for Life, "[Vaccine for All. Twenty Points for a Fairer and Healthier World,](#)" (December 28, 2020).

Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "[Note on the Morality of Using Some Anti-Covid-19 Vaccines,](#)" (December 12, 2020).

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