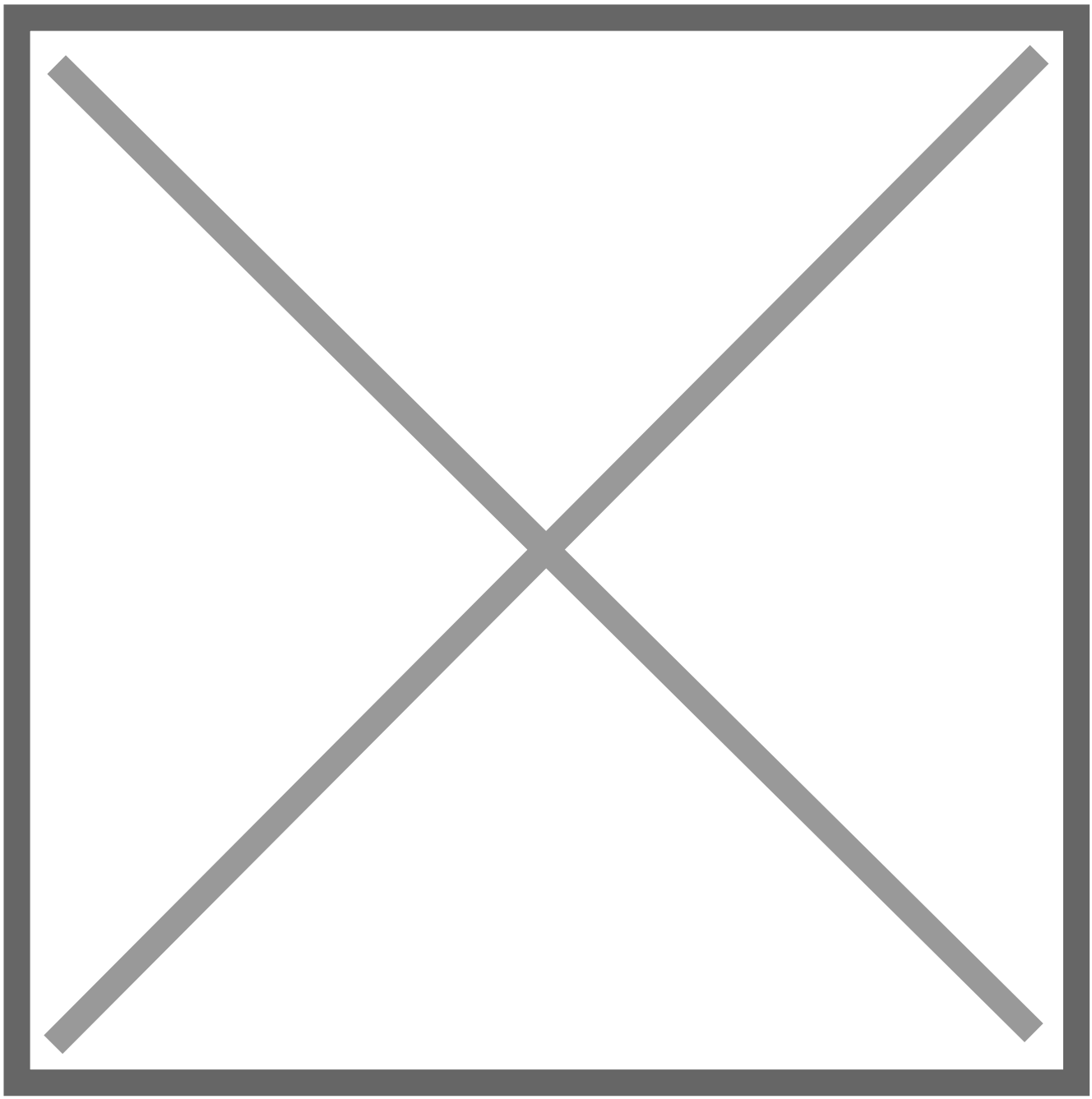
News



Students and faculty members at Marymount University arrive at one of the athletic buildings on the Catholic university's Arlington, Va., campus, to receive the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine during a coronavirus vaccine clinic April 21, 2021. (CNS photo/Chaz Muth)



Mark Pattison

View Author Profile

Catholic News Service

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Washington — August 2, 2021

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Two Catholic organizations issued statements in July urging against imposing a coronavirus vaccine mandate without conscience, religious or medical exemptions.

In a poll of its members, the Catholic Medical Association said in a July 28 statement that all who responded "voiced moral/ethical objection to the use of aborted fetal cell lines in development, testing and/or production of all three currently available vaccines."

"As an organization, CMA opposes mandatory COVID-19 vaccinations as a condition of employment without conscience or religious exemptions," the association said. "An individual Catholic's decision to be vaccinated should be informed by the clear and authoritative moral teaching of the church on vaccinations."

When it comes to health care organizations, "historically, a vaccinated workforce has been an effective means of fostering" a safe environment for its patients, CMA acknowledged.

"While we recognize the importance of this consideration medically and ethically," it said, "the church's teaching is clear, that 'as a rule' vaccination 'must be voluntary' and based on an individual's personal assessment in good conscience of the medical risks/benefits and morality of a particular vaccine. This is imperative."

The National Catholic Bioethics Center, in a July 2 statement, said it "does not endorse mandated COVID-19 immunization with any of the three vaccines" which received emergency use authorization July 1 from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

Both the NCBC and the CMA quoted from the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's Dec. 21, 2020, statement, "Note on the Morality of Using Some Anti-COVID-19 Vaccines."

The NCBC quoted the Vatican statement, in part: "Those who, however, for reasons of conscience, refuse vaccines produced with cell lines from aborted fetuses, must do their utmost to avoid, by other prophylactic means and appropriate behavior, becoming vehicles for the transmission of the infectious agent."

"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," said the CMA in quoting the document. "The moral duty to avoid such passive material cooperation is not obligatory... 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'"

The CMA, like the NCBC, also strongly emphasized that individuals who opt not to get vaccinated for reasons of conscience are obligated to avoid transmitting the virus.

"The NCBC's position is that we do not take a position on receiving a vaccine. We do not tell people (to) get a vaccine, we do not tell people not to get a vaccine," said Jozef Zalot, an NCBC staff ethicist, in a July 30 phone interview with Catholic News Service.

Zalot said NCBC developed its statement after receiving queries from parents of children about to attend college, "including Catholic colleges," that were requiring students to be vaccinated.

"We drafted this very short response for them, but in that time, the issue has kind of exploded," he added.

The Delta variant of the coronavirus is now responsible for the great majority of reported infections in the United States, and the number of infections has soared to a daily rate nearing 90,000, a number first reached last November, eight months into the pandemic.

"Catholic executives, health care systems and emergency rooms, and governments are mandating vaccines, but our position remains the same," Zalot said.

"As calls increase for universal vaccination as a condition of employment, a lack of accommodation will result in an individual's inability to work in their chosen vocation, lead to further shortages of essential health care workers, while exacerbating existing hesitancy and distrust regarding the COVID-19 vaccines," the CMA statement said.

"The exemption process should be clear and consistent while not placing an undue burden on those requesting an exemption, while protecting the health of all involved," it continued. "As has been true throughout this pandemic, procedures followed to minimize risk of contracting or transmitting SARS-CoV-2 should be clearly delineated and those in particular who choose not to be vaccinated must agree to adhere to these provisions."

"The call for mandates just started coming out a week and a half, two weeks ago, and we got four, five calls from members," said Dr. Michael Parker, president of the 2,600-member CMA, in a July 30 phone interview with CNS.

The CMA's poll found that unvaccinated members were bothered by the lack of conscience protections, Parker said. "Even the people who had gotten the vaccine had some concerns about the background and ethical testing" issues, he added. Parker said he has been vaccinated.

Advertisement

Millions of Americans have resisted getting vaccinated for reasons wholly unrelated to conscience or religious concerns.

"They have to weigh their risk-benefit for themselves and what the consequences for them are, and whether they're willing to tolerate the outcomes," Parker said.

"Any vaccination should be voluntary and not mandated, and there's no moral obligation to get a vaccine," he said. "But they do have some responsibility to the common good to take steps to avoid transmission of the disease."

Medical workers, Parker said, go beyond the social distancing dictum to prevent COVID transmission.

"If we're in with a patient who's COVID-positive, we wear N-95 masks and goggles and making sure that we have negative air flow in the room for those patients if we possibly can and disposing of our PPE equipment in a proper manner," said Parker, an OB-GYN. "We get screened every time we walk into the hospital for COVID."

Between the doctrinal congregation's declaration from last December and the two U.S. Catholic groups' July statements, U.S. bishops and scholars made known in March their positions on the permissibility of receiving the available vaccines.

Bishop Kevin C. Rhoades of Fort Wayne-South Bend, Indiana, chairman of the U.S. bishops' Committee on Doctrine, and Archbishop Joseph F. Naumann of Kansas City, Kansas, chairman of the bishops' Committee on Pro-Life Activities, in a March 2 joint statement, noted the Johnson & Johnson vaccine was made with the help of abortion-derived cell lines, but "given the worldwide suffering that this pandemic is causing, we affirm again that being vaccinated can be an act of charity that serves the common good."

On March 4, a YouTube video featured Rhoades saying, "There's no moral need to turn down a vaccine, including the Johnson & Johnson vaccine, which is morally acceptable to use." He cited an earlier Vatican statement that "has made clear that all the COVID vaccines recognized as clinically safe and effective can be used in good conscience."

A group of eight Catholic scholars issued a joint statement March 5 through the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington in which they said: "Catholics, and indeed, all persons of goodwill who embrace a culture of life for the whole human

family, born and unborn, can use these vaccines without fear of moral culpability" for abortion.