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by Catholic News Service

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The Catholic bishops of Colorado in a joint letter Aug. 6 reiterated their previous statements affirming "the use of some COVID-19 vaccines is morally acceptable under certain circumstances," but said they objected to mandating that Coloradans get vaccinated against the coronavirus.

The four bishops stated that a religious exemption announced by the city of Denver as part of its vaccine mandate "is appropriate under the laws protecting freedom of religion."

"We understand that some individuals have well-founded convictions that lead them to discern they should not get vaccinated," the prelates said. "We are pleased to see that in the case of the most recent Denver vaccine mandate there is accommodation for sincerely held religious beliefs."

"We always remain vigilant when any bureaucracy seeks to impose uniform and sweeping requirements on a group of people in areas of personal conscience," they said. "Throughout history, human rights violations and a loss of respect for each person’s God-given dignity often begin with government mandates that fail to respect the freedom of conscience.

"In the case of the COVID-19 vaccine, we are convicted that the government should not impose medical interventions on an individual or group of persons. We urge respect for each person’s convictions and personal choices."

The joint letter was signed by Archbishop Samuel J. Aquila of Denver; Bishop Stephen J. Berg of Pueblo; Bishops James R. Golka of Colorado Springs; and Auxiliary Bishop Jorge Rodriguez of Denver.

It was posted on the website of the Denver Catholic, the news outlet of the Denver Archdiocese, https://denvercatholic.org.

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On Aug. 2, Denver Mayor Michael Hancock announced a mandatory vaccination requirement for the city's 10,000-plus workers and certain private-sector workers in high-risk settings, such as hospitals, long-term care facilities, child care services and home health care.

His order also said employers must provide reasonable accommodations for employees with medical or religious reasons for not getting vaccinated.

Denver becomes the first major U.S. city to mandate COVID-19 vaccinations for private-sector employees. Those covered by the mandate must be fully vaccinated by Sept. 30 — and have proof. Enforcement measures are still being worked out, city officials said.

As of Aug. 5, officials of Colorado Springs and El Paso County, which includes the city, as well as El Paso County Public Health have not issued a vaccine mandate. The city of Pueblo also has not issued such a mandate.

"We, the Catholic bishops of Colorado, consistent with our previous letters on COVID-19 vaccines, affirm that the use of some COVID-19 vaccines is morally acceptable under certain circumstances," the prelates' letter said. "Throughout the pandemic we have cooperated with the various secular authorities and encouraged Catholics to help each other, and the broader society, remain healthy and safe during this challenging time."

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The bishops' letter included answers to a number of questions the faithful have had "about relevant Catholic teaching applicable to this issue."

"The Catholic Church teaches that a person may refuse a medical intervention, including a vaccination, if his or her conscience leads them to that decision," they said.

They also pointed out:

- "Vaccination is not morally obligatory and so must be voluntary."
- "There is a moral duty to refuse the use of medical products, including certain vaccines, that are created using human cells lines derived from abortion; however, it is permissible to use such vaccines only under case-specific conditions if there are no other alternatives available and the intent is to preserve life."
- "A person’s assessment of whether the benefits of a medical intervention outweigh the undesirable side-effects are to be respected unless they contradict authoritative Catholic moral teachings."
- "A person is morally required to obey his or her conscience."

"Taken as a whole, these points mean a Catholic may judge it right or wrong to receive certain vaccines for a variety of reasons, and there is no church law or rule that obligates a Catholic to receive a vaccine -- including COVID-19 vaccines," the bishops said.

Colorado's three Catholic dioceses, they said, "remain committed to working with public health and other secular authorities to protect the well-being of our communities, at the same time urging that personal freedoms of conscience and expression be fully supported, and the integrity and autonomy of religious institutions be respected."

"The vaccination question is a deeply personal issue, and we continue to support religious exemptions from any and all vaccine mandates," they said. "If any person comes to an informed judgment that he or she should receive or not receive a vaccine, that person should follow their conscience, and they should not be penalized for doing so.

The bishops also pointed Catholics to a statement from U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops on key ethical issues on the COVID-19 vaccines on the conference's website.

In a March 2 joint statement, 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, said that "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."

If a choice of vaccines is available, the USCCB commttee chairmen recommended "you pick one with the least connection to abortion-derived cell lines." The Pfizer and Moderna vaccines' connection is more remote than that of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine.

In conclusion, Colorado's bishops said: "We encourage any individual seeking exemption to consult their employer or school. The Colorado Catholic Conference also has a letter template available to be signed by pastors of the faithful if a Catholic wants a written record that they are seeking exemption on religious grounds."