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Pope Francis greets Archbishop Vincenzo Paglia during a meeting with members of the Pontifical Academy for Life in the Clementine Hall of the Apostolic Palace at the Vatican Sept. 27. (CNS/Vatican Media)



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On Sept. 27, American Cardinal Raymond Burke, a prominent vaccine skeptic, issued a statement saying that he is still having breathing difficulties after being hospitalized for COVID-19. That same day in Rome, where Burke lives, the Vatican's Pontifical Academy for Life opened its General Assembly where the message could not have been clearer: Catholics need to get vaccinated and help make it possible for others to do the same.

Less than 24 hours later, Cardinal Pietro Parolin, the Vatican's secretary of state, issued a decree formalizing an earlier announcement that all Vatican employees must be vaccinated or show proof of a negative COVID-19 test. While it notes the possibility of a medical exemption, no mention of a religious exemption is offered.

During its Sept. 27-28 assembly, the Pontifical Academy of Life, which works on issues at the intersection of bioethics and moral theology, used its spotlight at the center of the global church to advocate for equitable distribution of vaccines and to combat vaccine skepticism.

The academy's message offered a stark contrast to a vocal minority of vaccine skeptics, some of whom, like Burke, are fellow Catholics. Even after contracting and nearly succumbing to COVID-19, Burke and others have yet to use their large platforms to encourage fellow Catholics to get vaccinated.

"We are actually witnessing the greatest vaccination effort ever made in history," Italian Archbishop Vincenzo Paglia, president of the Pontifical Academy for Life, said during a press conference Sept. 28, as he pleaded for Western countries to combat global disparities when it comes to vaccine access.

Paglia's words echoed that of Pope Francis, who met with the academy on Sept. 27, where he again added his support for global vaccination efforts.



Archbishop Vincenzo Paglia, president of the Pontifical Academy for Life, speaks at a news conference at the Vatican Sept. 28. He spoke to journalists about the challenges amid the pandemic, including health care inequality and vaccine hesitancy. Also pictured is Cristiane Murray, vice director of the Vatican Press Office. (CNS/Paul Haring)

"It is necessary to overcome not only the vaccination divide," Paglia said, discussing the issue of vaccine skepticism, "but also the unequal access to public health, removing barriers such as the lack of facilities and managing more wisely the resources for treatment."

According to American bioethicist Therese Lysaught, who is a corresponding member of the Pontifical Academy for Life, only about 10% of U.S. Catholics are vaccine-hesitant, many of whom she said simply want a space to "sit down face-to-face with someone and talk about their concerns."

But then there is the vaccine hesitancy, particularly in the English-speaking Catholic world, as expressed by some Catholic bishops, such as Burke and Bishop Joseph Strickland of Tyler, Texas, and also Catholic organizations, including the National

Catholic Bioethics Center.

"As far as I can tell, the resistance from some church officials and organizations is coming from a very different place," Lysaught told NCR.

"Their statements consistently reflect a deep resistance to the legitimacy of government, often a veiled resistance to the papacy and leadership of Pope Francis, a troubling resistance to reason, and an unfortunate resistance to dialogue," she said.

For her, that's where the work of the academy can be effective.

"The Pontifical Academy for Life has been doing exactly what it should to try to overcome this by modeling the church's commitments to the absolute value of every human life, to truth, science, and reason, to cooperation with governments and other social organizations to promote the common good and to the constant process of dialogue," she said.



Members of the Pontifical Academy for Life listen to Pope Francis in the Clementine Hall of the Apostolic Palace at the Vatican Sept. 27. (CNS/Vatican Media)

Daniel Sulmasy, director of the Kennedy Institute of Ethics at Georgetown University and also a member of the academy, offered a similar assessment, noting that both the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and the Pontifical Academy for Life have made it clear that the vaccines are morally acceptable.

"The Academy, and the church, also emphasize that vaccines not only protect the vaccinated but also protect others from being infected and that charity and respect for the common good argue for a moral duty to be vaccinated. Pope Francis has also said this," he told NCR via email.

"Education, persuasion, the encouragement of local parishes to work with public health authorities to combat vaccine hesitancy and even sponsor health fairs in which unvaccinated persons can be vaccinated are all constructive ways forward that the Academy can endorse," he said. "This is not ethical laxity. It is faithful, common sense, thoroughly Catholic reasoning."

While the loudest voices of Catholics in the United States have weaponized the debate over vaccines by using political language, which has only deepened ecclesial divides, the message in Rome has been more disciplined: Vaccines are medically safe and ethically sound.

At a Vatican press conference on Tuesday, Sept. 28, Paglia was joined by Dr. David Barbe, president of the World Medical Association, who told journalists that when it comes to those that are vaccine-hesitant, "we must continue to promote valid and transparent information, stress the benefits of the vaccine and continue to point out the significantly greater risk of the natural disease."

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Meanwhile, in the United States, some Catholic moral theologians and prominent clergy derided the "fake theology" behind the vaccine mandates and claimed they are a violation of religious liberty.

During her address to the Pontifical Academy of Life on Sept. 28, Lysaught addressed these criticisms directly, citing a recent statement by the Colorado Catholic Bishops in opposition to mandates.

"Here members of the Roman Catholic magisterium echo secular arguments about individual freedom and social control that have been mobilized to resist public health efforts since the beginning of the pandemic," Lysaught said.

"These statements offer no reasons that would morally justify conscience-based vaccine exemption from a Catholic perspective," she continued, adding, "The basis for moral argument no longer is reason, but rather individual feeling, the emotivism of personal preference championed by neoliberalism."

Following the two-day symposium, Msgr. Renzo Pegoraro, a physician and chancellor of the Pontifical Academy for Life, told NCR, "There is a priority of vaccination because it is very useful to prevent disease."

"Prevention is very important for everyone in the world," he said, making it clear that "all Catholics can take the vaccines as an ethic of responsibility for yourself and for the community to protect your health, your life and for other people."

His words echoed Paglia's closing argument from earlier that day: "Let's not forget the first and most important lesson: To take care of our health, we must first of all be alive!"

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