News
Vatican
People protest against the implementation of the coronavirus disease "green pass" in the wor

People protest against the implementation of the coronavirus disease "green pass" in the workplace in demonstration at the Unity of Italy Square (Piazza Unita d'Italia) Oct. 18, 2021. (CNS photo/Borut Zivulovic, Reuters)

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Rome — October 20, 2021
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In Italy, where almost 86% of people over 12 had received at least one dose of the COVID-19 vaccine as of Oct. 20, proof of vaccination or a negative COVID-19 test are not required to go to Mass, but some dioceses are requiring them of priests, catechists, eucharistic ministers and even choir members.

The presiding council of the Italian bishops' conference urged individual bishops and regional bishops' conferences to consider drawing up such norms as "a response to the mandate of the Lord to serve one another as he served us (and) as a sign of accepting his call to care for one another as he cares for us."

Beginning Oct. 15, Italian law required workplaces to ask employees for a "green pass" proof of vaccination, negative COVID-19 test or recent recovery from the

coronavirus. The pass had already been required since August to eat indoors at restaurants, enter a movie theater or visit museums, including the Vatican Museums. And Vatican offices, including the press office, began requiring the pass Oct. 1.

Paid church employees, although not priests, are required to show the government-issued pass at their workplaces.

To visit the sick, distribute Communion, sing at Mass or teach catechism classes, the Archdiocese of Milan requires priests, deacons, most liturgical ministers and volunteers to have had at least one dose of the vaccine or a negative test in the previous 48 hours or proof of having recovered from COVID-19 within the past six months. For cantors and choir members, proof is required for rehearsals as well as for Mass and other liturgies.

An exception is made for visits to a person on the point of death when a fully vaccinated person is not available.

The nonordained volunteers are asked to sign a declaration affirming they meet the guidelines, but the archdiocesan vicar general said priests are not required to put their compliance in writing "since they already have a particular obligation of obedience by virtue of the bonds of their ordination."

"Care for the salvation of souls cannot be separated from the commitment to safeguard the health of bodies," wrote Msgr. Franco Agnesi, archdiocesan vicar general, in announcing the measure in September. "Even in this time of emergency, the church has always continued to proclaim the Gospel, celebrate the sacraments and help the poor by adopting adequate protocols capable of preventing SARS-CoV-2 infections."

The Diocese of Pistoia, in Tuscany, issued almost identical rules, adding to the list volunteers in the church's charitable programs.

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Archbishop Renato Boccardo of Spoleto and Norcia told priests in his archdiocese that they are the first called to respond with "an act of love for ourselves and the communities entrusted to us" by getting vaccinated.

In addition, he said, "as a measure of prudence and responsibility, those pastoral workers — catechists, extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist, Caritas volunteers, members of liturgical groups and parish choirs — who have not received or do not intend to receive at least the first dose of the vaccine should refrain from their service until the pandemic is eradicated."

As the Italy law requiring the green pass was coming into force, Bishop Francesco Beschi of Bergamo, an area especially hard-hit at the beginning of the pandemic in 2020, was trying to defuse the efforts of three priests in his diocese to support the anti-vaccination campaign and to raise money to pay for the COVID-19 tests workers who refused vaccination needed to continue working.

Reaffirming that the diocese and its priests were obliged to follow the law regarding employees who needed a green pass and the obligation to wear masks and observe social distancing at Masses, the bishop said priests have a "moral obligation," and often a legal one, to act in "a spirit of ecclesial harmony and responsibility."

"Protecting the weakest has always been considered an integral part of the church's mission. Pope Francis has said that 'getting vaccinated is an act of love for oneself, for family and friends, for everyone,'" Bishop Beschi said. Doing everything possible to stop the spread of COVID-19 is an obligation for everyone, "especially those who are particularly involved in encounters with children, the elderly and the frail."

The bishops of Lazio, which includes Rome, did not issue vaccine mandates, but rather "very firmly" urged priests, deacons, catechists and other church workers and volunteers to get vaccinated.

"Far beyond obligations, we are aware that the common good is at stake," the bishops said.

They asked religious, catechists, liturgical ministers and other volunteers to abstain from providing services in parishes unless they had been vaccinated at least two weeks or tested negative in the previous 48 hours or recovered from COVID-19 in the previous six months.

"We know that in our work we must always pay attention to the care of the person in his or her entirety," the Lazio bishops said. "For this reason, including in the circumstances that we are experiencing, it is our task to educate and train consciences to understand the value of the cures and other instruments made available by (scientific) research."