News

San Francisco Archbishop Salvatore J. Cordileone speaks with patrons during a visit to St. Ant

San Francisco Archbishop Salvatore J. Cordileone speaks with patrons during a visit to St. Anthony's Dining Hall in San Francisco's Tenderloin district Nov. 6. Cordileone has revealed he is not vaccinated for COVID-19. (CNS/David Maung)



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San Francisco Archbishop Salvatore Cordileone has revealed he is not vaccinated against the coronavirus and suggested — incorrectly — that the inoculations the federal government approved to prevent COVID-19 "are not really vaccines."

"We think of a vaccine as a shot that gives you immunity to a disease for life or at least for a very long time. And these actually don't give any immunity at all. They give protection," Cordileone told The San Francisco Chronicle Dec. 1.

Cordileone, an archconservative prelate who is no stranger to controversy for his outspokenness on culture war issues like abortion and same-sex marriage, also told the newspaper that his "immune system is strong," and that his personal physician had told him "it's probably not necessary for me to be vaccinated."

"I'm stepping into another controversy, I guess," Cordileone, aged 65, told the Chronicle.

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The archbishop's comments, which echo conservative skepticism about the COVID-19 vaccines often amplified in right wing media, sharply contradict guidance from Pope Francis, who last summer urged people to get vaccinated and has expressed exasperation with anti-vaccine skeptics.

Cordileone's statement also drew criticism from some San Francisco residents and Catholics in the Bay Area, as well as public health experts who accused the archbishop of spreading dangerous misinformation about the available vaccines to prevent COVID-19.

"He's just wrong. That's my first point. The second is that this bad, ill-informed advice that he's putting out there could lead to people dying unnecessarily. We just have to counter that with the truth," said Dr. Philip Landrigan, director of the Program for Global Public Health and the Common Good at Boston College.

Cordileone told the Chronicle that is "not an anti-vaxxer." In a statement provided to NCR, the archbishop said he previously advised people to consult their physicians when he joined California's other Catholic bishops in urging people to get vaccinated .

"It is also important to make that decision based on as complete and accurate scientific information as one can obtain," Cordileone said in the statement. "That is what I have done in my own case. It is always a very personal decision."

Cordileone also noted that the Archdiocese of San Francisco in October posted a Q&A regarding the COVID-19 vaccines on its website. He added that the archdiocese "has consistently followed protocols" to protect the local community.

"This includes staying home if one is feeling ill, which I would certainly do in my own case," Cordileone said. "And, as I have also emphasized, we all have a responsibility for the common good, and so should take all reasonable precautions to protect public health, regardless of vaccination status."

The archdiocese does not require vaccinations to attend Mass, according to a June 14 memo.

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>
> —Edna Mira Raia, San Francisco resident
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The archbishop's reassurances did not satisfy San Francisco residents like Edna Mira Raia, a local theater artist.

"Seeing this selfishness from an archbishop is as disturbing as a Christian stepping over a homeless person with no regard for human life. I wish leaders would check their priorities in the name of sparing humanity some hypocrisy," Raia told NCR.

Joseph Murphy, a former employee in the San Francisco archdiocesan chancery, told NCR that he was "furious" with Cordileone, whom he accused of "setting a bad example" for his flock.

"It is disturbing that the shepherd of one of the most prominent archdioceses in the world would claim his own alleged strong immunity is sufficient reason to shun the vaccine," said Murphy, the former music coordinator at the National Shrine of Saint Francis of Assisi in San Francisco.

"The archbishop's stand is unwise and dangerous in the interests of public health," Murphy said.

Cordileone had recently traveled across the country to attend the U.S. bishops' meeting in Baltimore from Nov. 15-18, where he was in close contact with hundreds of other prelates, as well as journalists and various diocesan and conference staffers. Like other bishops, Cordileone wore a mask throughout the event, but took off his mask when speaking on the floor of the gathering.

The bishops' conference did not impose a vaccine mandate for attendees of their event, and instead required those coming to sign a waiver to "forever release" the conference and its leadership from any legal liability related to exposure, infection and spread of COVID-19.

Cordileone's revelation comes as the omicron variant is raising concerns about a new wave of infections, hospitalizations and deaths and as U.S. President Joe Biden announced new efforts to encourage vaccinations and booster shots.

After Cordileone's comments to the Chronicle, the San Francisco Health Department urged city residents to get vaccinated in an interview with a local television outlet.

San Francisco county is 77% fully vaccinated, according to a New York Times database. The county has a current daily average of 55 cases and 3 people hospitalized per 100,000 people, the database says.

Landrigan, from Boston College, accused the archbishop of "basically misleading his flock."

"People who are unvaccinated, if they get COVID, they have a 10 times greater risk of hospitalization and death than vaccinated people," Landrigan said. "Some of them might have said their immune system was strong, some might not have had any comment on their immune system, but the facts speak for themselves."

Landrigan also pushed back against Cordileone's claims that the vaccines manufactured by Pfizer/BioNTech, Moderna and Johnson & Johnson "are not real vaccines."

"What a vaccine is, is material that's put into the human body to stimulate the immune system to trigger the production of antibodies to protect against a disease, and that's exactly what these vaccines all do," said Landrigan, who added that the coronavirus "does not respect politics."

"It's always very worrisome when a public figure puts out scientific misinformation, whether it's [Archbishop] Cordileone in San Francisco or Aaron Rodgers with the Green Bay Packers," said Landrigan, referencing the NFL Pro-Bowl quarterback who also recently sparked controversy for making dubious claims about COVID-19 and vaccines.

"When a public figure with a big following puts out bad information, unfortunately some people will believe it," Landrigan said. "They may not get vaccinated, and as a consequence of the bad information that they've been given, they could die. And that's just wrong."

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