News
NCR Voices



The Rev. Tom Reese, left, receives a COVID-19 vaccine from Dr. Michael Markel, center, and nurse Dia Hannah at Georgetown University Hospital, Medstar Health, Thursday, January 21, 2021. (RNS photo by Tom Reese)



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When experts first began talking about a third vaccination shot against the COVID-19 virus, I was inclined to give it a pass — not because I didn't trust public health experts. I do. Rather, I was embarrassed by the possibility of getting a third shot when most of Africa has not gotten a first shot.

As a Christian, how could I justify taking a shot from someone who needs it more?

Three things convinced me that I had to get the booster.

First, though healthy, I am 76 years old, which classifies me as part of the vulnerable population. And even if I wanted to, I could not buy a vaccine and mail it to someone in Africa. The vaccine spoils quickly if not refrigerated. My one-man boycott would not have any impact on the structural problems keeping poor countries from getting and distributing the vaccine.

Second, I live in a community with 15 other Jesuits, some of whom have preexisting conditions. I don’t want to be responsible for killing one of them. Already, one resident came down with the virus early in the pandemic and we were quarantined by the District of Columbia. He did not have to go to the hospital, but he was extremely sick. (As I was writing this column, another member of my community came down with COVID-19.)

Back in January, having someone in our house sick from COVID-19 scared us into taking precautions against infection: getting vaccinated, wearing masks and social distancing. Despite those precautions, as the pandemic went on, too many Jesuits across the country died of COVID-19, mostly elderly in our assisted-living residences.

Like everyone else, we let down our guards as we got vaccinated and the number of cases in the surrounding community declined. Earlier this month, I was one of 40 fully vaccinated Jesuits who attended a day of recollection — three 15-minute sessions of prayer and reflection, followed by Mass, all without masks in a small chapel.

This week, our community responded to the omicron variant by reinstituting social distancing and N95 masks in chapel and around the house. I canceled my Christmas visit to California (the flight was too expensive anyway, and I felt guilty about adding to my carbon footprint).

All but two of us have gotten our boosters; one of them is scheduled to get the shot, and the other is the one who just got COVID-19.

The third reason I got the booster shot was that my religious superior told us we had to. St. Ignatius, who ruined his health through excessive penances, believed that one of the jobs of a religious superior was to protect his subjects from excessive zeal (or stupidity).

My life as a Jesuit is of course not typical of that for other Americans, but we all share some truths about this pandemic.

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If you are elderly or have preexisting conditions or have contact with someone who does, get vaccinated. This is a life-or-death matter. Most elderly understand this and have gotten vaccinated. They need to quickly get boosters, as do those in contact with them. The same applies to those in contact with children to young to be vaccinated.

Second, nothing focuses the mind like knowing someone who has gotten sick or died of COVID-19. This makes the pandemic personal, not just a set of statistics. As

COVID-19 becomes personal for more people, attitudes will change.

The media needs to help by reporting more personal testimonies from those who have been sick or lost loved ones to COVID-19. Those who will not listen to doctors and health professionals may listen to people who look and sound like themselves. Sadly, privacy laws prohibit the news media from showing the faces of people sick and dying of COVID-19 in hospitals.

Finally, though Americans are much less inclined to follow orders than Jesuits, mandates do appear to work. Most people get the jab after a mandate even if they swear they will not. I remember when New York City passed the “pooper-scooper” law some 40 years ago. No one believed anyone would heed it, but they did.

Employers, restaurants, bars and stores can and should mandate masks and vaccinations. There will be counterfeit vaccination cards, just as there are counterfeit IDs for drinking, but most people will comply.

In addition, companies should offer carrots, not just threaten with sticks.

Airlines could offer preferential treatment in boarding, free checked bags or additional mileage points to the vaccinated. Restaurants and bars could upsize drinks for the vaccinated. Credit card companies and banks could offer a one-time reduction in interest payments. Companies such as Walmart and CVS could offer gift cards to those getting vaccinated.

We are all suffering from COVID-19 fatigue, but unlike when the pandemic started, we now know what to do to end it: Get vaccinated with a booster, wear an N95 mask and keep socially distant.

We owe it to ourselves personally, we owe it to our vulnerable friends and family members, we owe it to our civic community.

If we want schools to stay open, if we want the economy to revive, we need to act now.