News

A black and white picture from March 2020 showing coffins piled up inside the church of San

A black and white picture from March 2020 showing coffins piled up inside the church of San Giuseppe is seen on the wall of that church in Seriate, Italy, in this Feb. 28, 2021, file photo. (CNS photo/Flavio Lo Scalzo, Reuters)

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As coronavirus cases continue to increase across Italy, the country's bishops issued new guidelines and restrictions meant to curb the spread of infection among the faithful.

In a statement released Jan. 10, the general secretariat of the Italian bishops' conference said that with the pandemic "showing no signs of ending," it was important for clergy and laity to observe "prudence, a sense of responsibility and respect for the guidelines that are useful in containing the epidemic."

While not requiring a vaccination certificate to enter churches, the conference said protocols such as wearing masks, observing social distancing, eliminating the sign of peace during Mass and keeping holy water fonts empty remain in effect.

Catechism teachers and students must observe government-mandated protocols, including the use of high-filtering FFP2 masks as well as vaccination requirements, the notice said. Furthermore, university staff, as well as those teaching or studying at seminaries, must possess a vaccination certificate or proof of recovery from COVID-19.

However, Bishop Giacomo Cirulli of Teano-Calvi in Italy's southern Campania region went further, issuing a prohibition Jan. 8 that barred unvaccinated priests, deacons, religious and lay men and women from distributing Communion.

The diocese released a statement Jan. 10 explaining that the prohibition is meant to counter the "spread of the virus among the population and to protect the most fragile, even those who may not enjoy the benefits of vaccination coverage and who unfortunately — as evidenced by the growing cases in hospitals throughout Italy — suffer the damage caused by the disease."

The guidelines come as Italy's government introduced more restrictions on the unvaccinated in an effort to curb the rise in cases.

During a news conference Jan. 10, Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi largely blamed the unvaccinated for the surge in cases, citing recent data which stated that two-thirds of COVID-19 patients hospitalized in intensive care units in the country are unvaccinated.

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"We must never lose sight of the fact that most of the problems we have today are because there are non-vaccinated people," Draghi said. "I invite all those Italians who are not yet vaccinated to do so, and to get the third shot."

According to figures released by the Italian health ministry, as of Jan. 10, 1,606 people were in an intensive care unit. In Italy, there were an estimated 101,762 new cases and 227 deaths over the previous 24 hours, the Reuters news agency reported.

The Italian government recently introduced measures and restrictions aimed primarily at the unvaccinated, barring their access to bars, restaurants, as well as public transportation unless they provide proof of vaccination or recovery

from COVID-19 in the past six months.

Prior to the new restrictions, those unvaccinated could provide proof of a negative COVID-19 test to access public places or transportation.

Furthermore, the government has made proof of vaccination or recovery from COVID-19, commonly known as the "Super Green Pass," obligatory for all persons over 50.

In his annual meeting with members of the diplomatic corps Jan. 10, Pope Francis expressed concerns regarding the spread of misinformation while urging governments to engage in constructive dialogue with its citizens who are hesitant to receive the vaccine.

"Vaccines are not a magical means of healing, yet surely they represent, in addition to other treatments that need to be developed, the most reasonable solution for the prevention of the disease," the pope said.