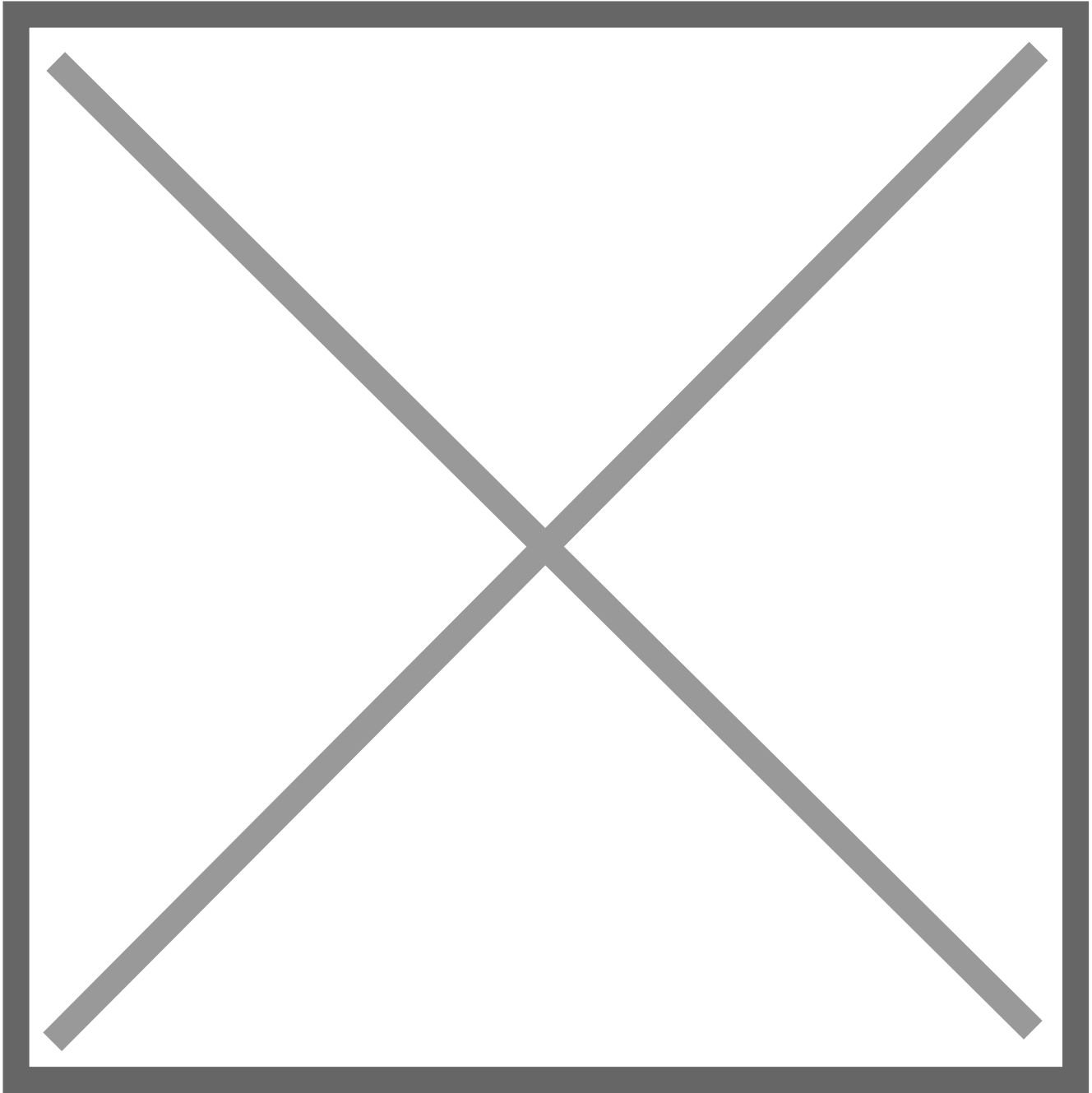


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A file photo shows students at Cardinal Gibbons High School in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., receiving Communion during a Mass and rally for the opening of the school year. In an Aug. 7, 2026, letter, Florida Catholic bishops pushed back on Florida Attorney General James Uthmeier's demand that Catholic schools in the Sunshine State adopt religious exemptions to vaccine requirements or risk their ability to participate in the state's school voucher program. (OSV News/Tom Tracy)

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Tallahassee, Fla. — August 18, 2026

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The Catholic bishops of Florida issued a staunch defense of their ability to determine policies for Catholic schools after Florida Attorney General James Uthmeier sent them a letter demanding that Catholic schools in the Sunshine State adopt religious exemptions to vaccine requirements or risk their ability to participate in the state's school voucher program.

Michael Sheedy, executive director of the Florida Conference of Catholic Bishops, wrote in an Aug. 7 letter to Uthmeier, "We are prepared to protect our students, defend our rights, and preserve religious freedom. While we are confident in our position, we remain willing to meet with you or your staff to see if there is a productive and amicable way to resolve our differences." The FCCB published the letter Aug. 17.

In his original letter, which was addressed to the FCCB, Uthmeier argued that Florida law required Catholic schools to make religious exemptions to their vaccine requirements.

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But in their letter responding to Uthmeier, Sheedy wrote that "the Catholic bishops in Florida do not have to justify to your office their position on Catholic teaching and their reasons for the current vaccine policies. They will, however, do so out of respect for you and your office and with the understanding and expectation that your office will respect the Catholic bishops' constitutional rights and religious freedom."

Identifying himself as a Catholic, Uthmeier had argued in his original letter that while Florida law permits a religious school "to claim an exemption from the requirement to grant religious exemptions if granting such an exemption would violate the religious tenets of the school," Catholic schools have no "legitimate religious reason to refuse."

But in the FCCB's letter, Sheedy disputed that claim, citing both the bishops' teaching authority and the First Amendment.

"Where we differ is on your interpretation and application of Catholic teaching, an interpretation (and right) exclusively vested, by United States and Florida constitutional law, in the bishops of Florida's dioceses," Sheedy continued.

"Respectfully, any insinuation that a government official can dictate to the Catholic Church (or any religion) how to apply her tenets and dogma, violates well-established constitutional religious freedom rights. It is beyond cavil that the bishops, not the state, decide how to interpret and apply Catholic principles and theology."

In his letter, Uthmeier implied that some Catholics may seek a religious exemption from taking "vaccines derived from the tissue of aborted children" and quoted from a December 2020 instruction from the Congregation (now Dicastery) for the Doctrine of the Faith stating that "practical reason makes evident that vaccination is not, as a rule, a moral obligation." However, the Church has consistently stated that Catholics may undergo vaccination despite remote degrees of connection to such cell lines where alternatives are not available.

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During the COVID-19 pandemic, Catholic bishops in the U.S. generally encouraged Catholics, where they had such a choice, to seek some brands of vaccines over

others due to the varying degrees of remote connection to cell lines believed to be derived originally from unborn children aborted in the mid-20th century, such as the HEK-293 fetal cell line. A host of common medications, such as over-the-counter pain relievers and antacids, have also been tested against this cell line.

In the FCCB's response, Sheedy pointed to a 2017 document from the Pontifical Academy for Life, when they issued updated moral considerations on vaccinations, telling Catholic parents they should vaccinate their children for the good of their children and the community, and they can do so with a "clear conscience."

Uthmeier's office did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

A spokesperson for the Florida Conference of Catholic Bishops declined to comment beyond the letter.

In an Aug. 14 column, Archbishop Thomas Wenski of Miami wrote Uthmeier's letter contained a "not-so-veiled threat that if we did not change our policies, our participation in state educational scholarship programs could be put at risk."

"This was an unprecedented and unexpected 'overreach' by a state official that intrudes upon our religious freedom under the protections afforded us by the First Amendment: The bishops, not a state functionary, decide how to interpret and apply Catholic principles and theology," Wenski wrote.

Wenski wrote that "The vaccinations in question are required for students by Florida law. Our Catholic schools do not grant 'religious exemptions' for student vaccinations because the vaccines as presently developed and administered do not violate Church teachings."

"The Church does not force or coerce parents to vaccinate their children," he continued. "No one must go to a Catholic school. At the same time, we do try to accommodate those children whose physicians indicate that a medical exemption is necessary."

While Florida has recently expanded its school voucher program and officials there have stated their intention to include religious schools, Muslim advocates have also expressed concern about the ability of Islamic private schools to participate in the program.

Rick Garnett, a professor of law at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana, previously told OSV News that Uthmeier's letter "reflects a misunderstanding of Americans' fundamental right to religious freedom and is a glaring and dangerous government overreach."