



DIOCESE OF BUFFALO
Office of the Bishop

September 3, 2021

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has now been with us for what will soon be two years. It has upended our way of life, devastated finances of families and businesses, and tragically claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands of Americans and many thousands more across the globe. The reality is, the threat is far from over with the surge of the Delta variant and the potential of new variants which are frustrating our hopes and best efforts to contain the coronavirus and return fully to life as we once knew it.

Recently, the question of the role of a “religious exemption” from vaccination mandates has arisen as part of the conversation among Catholics who work in a variety of settings and professions. With so much uncertainty and conflicting information presented in a variety of forums, I feel that it is important to take this opportunity to clearly address the Church’s position on some key elements relating to the vaccinations and our responsibility to do everything we can to reduce its threat to the health of others.

Just two weeks ago, Pope Francis reminded us that, “Vaccination is a simple but profound way of promoting the common good and caring for each other, especially the most vulnerable.” It is an act of charity and a sign of care for not only each of individually, but for the whole community.

Pfizer and Moderna’s vaccines initially raised concerns because an abortion-derived cell line was used for testing them, but not in their production. The Johnson & Johnson vaccine, however, was developed, tested and is produced with abortion-derived cell lines raising additional moral concerns. Therefore, if one has the option, Pfizer or Moderna’s vaccines should be chosen over Johnson & Johnson’s.

According to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith: “The fundamental reason for considering the use of these vaccines morally licit is that the kind of cooperation in evil (passive material cooperation) in the procured abortion from which these cell lines originate is, on the part of those making use of the resulting vaccines, remote....It must therefore be considered that, in such a case, all vaccinations recognized as clinically safe and effective can be used in good conscience with the certain knowledge that the use of such vaccines does not constitute formal cooperation with the abortion from which the cells used in production of the vaccines derive.” (CDF, December 2020. It is worth noting that the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has also made it clear that the Johnson and Johnson vaccine can be received by Catholics when no alternative vaccine is available.



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While the Church has urged Catholics to get vaccinated for the common good, it also recognizes that a Catholic, whose conscience is properly informed on the subject and after prayerful reflection, can arrive at a personal decision to refrain from being vaccinated. Those who do not wish to be vaccinated must be mindful of their moral obligation to do whatever is reasonable and required by local authorities to avoid becoming infected and transmitting the virus to others, including wearing a mask. When individuals come forward requesting a letter of exemption from the vaccine, it is important for our priests and pastoral ministers to meet with those individuals and explore their reasons for this decision. The priest or parish staff member, however, is not authorized to provide a letter affirming a religious exemption, since no one can speak for the conscience of another person. Only the person who arrived at such a conclusion can attest to the basis of their decision to resist getting vaccinated.

It has been my consistent message to all Catholics of our Diocese to embrace the responsibilities that each of us has as Christians to demonstrate utmost care and concern for others, and to do everything possible to reduce the spread of infection of this dreadful virus. Toward this end, we have followed the directives of the New York Department of Health, the Erie County Department of Health and the Center for Disease Prevention and Control, and will continue to do so.

As our young people return to school and an increasing number return to regular worship in our parish communities, it is essential that we remain vigilant and diligent in our efforts to protect the health of ourselves and one another. Our best hope to finally move beyond this terrible episode is to heed the directives of scientific and medical professionals.

I encourage all to follow diocesan social media channels and consult our website, buffalodiocese.org for further updates in this ever-changing situation.

Please know of my fervent daily prayer for you and your family, and indeed all those entrusted to your care.

Sincerely in Christ,

Most Reverend Michael W. Fisher
Bishop of Buffalo