



THE DIOCESE OF ROCKVILLE CENTRE
**Office of Human Life,
Family and Bioethics**



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS
COVID-19 VACCINE “RELIGIOUS EXEMPTIONS”

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What does the Church say about the COVID-19 vaccine?

The Catholic Church does not have authority to comment on the medical or scientific aspects of the COVID-19 vaccines. It relies on medical and scientific experts for this information. Likewise, you should consult with your physician for any medical advice regarding the vaccines. Moral guidance the Church provides on the vaccines is based on the generally accepted views of safety and effectiveness put forth by experts in the field and other officials. The Church does speak on the morality of vaccines as follows:

First, we may ask does the Catholic Church have a moral opposition to vaccines in and of themselves? The answer is no. The Catholic Church has never taught that the use of vaccines is morally wrong. We have no moral or religious objections to vaccines in general (as, for example, Jehovah's Witnesses have to receiving a blood transfusion).

In brief, when a vaccine has been produced using a compromised cell line, it may be morally permissible to receive that vaccine under certain circumstances, but one has a duty then to protest the use of the compromised cell line with the manufacturer. (Those circumstances, which may differ between individuals, are grave risk to health and no morally superior alternatives to the vaccine.) In general, vaccines are not morally obligatory. Any vaccination should be received with fully informed and voluntary consent—not by mandates.

Second, although taking vaccines is morally permitted by the teaching of the Catholic Church, is there an objection to this vaccine in particular?

The answer to the second point may be found in the Office of Human Life, Family and Bioethics Memo of March 3, 2021. Simply put, a Catholic can morally and licitly receive all of the COVID vaccines currently out, although there are differences between them. On moral grounds, it was suggested to avoid the Johnson and Johnson vaccine and Astra

Zeneca if another was available. When Catholic health care providers are only given J & J to dispense, it can be used licitly.

Therefore, a request for a vaccine exemption really has to do with a secular civil liberties question: whether or not the government can require someone to show proof of vaccination to be permitted to do something. For example, it is well known that in New York State, the following vaccines are required for day care, pre-K, and all school attendance:

- Diphtheria and Tetanus toxoid-containing vaccine and Pertussis vaccine (DTaP or Tdap)
- Hepatitis B vaccine
- Measles, Mumps and Rubella vaccine (MMR)
- Polio vaccine
- Varicella (Chickenpox) vaccine

Essentially, the request for a religious exemption is to avoid the vaccine on civil liberties grounds. As outlined above, we can't say there is a Catholic religious objection to the vaccine when there isn't. Hence one should properly fight this on civil liberties grounds, which is why we recommend pursuing a conscience exemption.

Can I get a “religious exemption” for the COVID-19 vaccine signed from the Diocese?

No. In the Catholic Faith, there are no grounds to request a “Catholic” religious exemption for the COVID-19 vaccine, because the Catholic Church does not categorically condemn vaccines, and in particular, it does not condemn the COVID-19 vaccines currently available to the public. Therefore, we cannot supply a letter requesting such on diocesan letterhead. As well, priests are advised to refrain from writing a “religious” exemption request on parish letterhead and parishioners should not ask this from them. You can read more [here](#).

Doesn't the Church teach that abortion is wrong and that we should not cooperate in this evil?

It is true that as Catholics we object to the use of the morally compromised cell line (e.g. “HEK293” developed from aborted human fetal tissue) in the design, testing and/or production of all available COVID-19 vaccines. Abortion is an intrinsic evil, but people seeking protection from a vaccine did not have a direct role in the abortion leading to the cell line and had no choice in the use of this compromised cell line during the development of the vaccines.

As in the case of vaccines, because we live in a fallen world, it may be impossible at times to avoid all connection to evil. Then, guided by prudence, we may *tolerate* an evil situation if greater goods may be lost or greater evils could ensue outside of this course. And while we may tolerate an evil (done by another and outside of our influence), we may never, ourselves, *commit* evil to bring about a greater good (or avoid greater evil). Hence, in receiving a vaccine, one is tolerating a remote connection to, not committing, the evil of abortion, and so it may be morally permissible.

Therefore, the Church teaches that under certain circumstances (e.g. conditions described as a pandemic without morally superior, generally accepted, and reasonably available alternatives to these vaccines), it may be morally permissible to receive these vaccines, despite their remote connection to abortion. If one receives a vaccine it should be under protest, meaning there is a duty to voice objection to the use of these cell lines with the manufacturer. At the same time, the Church also teaches that it is not morally obligatory to receive a vaccine, but then one has a duty to take other precautionary measures to protect his or her own health and that of others.

Why is there no Catholic religious exemption?

It may be easier to first consider when there would be grounds for one to seek a Catholic “religious exemption.” Suppose an employer required a pregnant woman to have an abortion before returning to work. Since abortion is intrinsically evil and the Church condemns *all* procured abortions under *all* circumstances, the Church directs that no Catholic can have an abortion without committing grave sin, i.e. there are ***no circumstances*** under which someone in

good conscience could have, condone, or assist an abortion. Therefore, there would be grounds for a (Catholic) religious exemption from this policy. It should be noted that the employer imposing the mandate would be the entity which grants the exemption, not the Church.

On the other hand, with the COVID-19 vaccines, the Church allows that an individual with a well-formed conscience, can consider his or her own particular situation (including medical history, risk factors, etc.) and decide whether to receive the vaccine. Church teaching will support that in **some circumstances** it is morally justifiable to receive the vaccine and in **some circumstances** it is morally justifiable to decline the vaccine. That is, the Church allows *the conscience* of an individual to determine whether it is morally justifiable to receive that vaccine—two faithful Catholics can come to opposite conclusions about receiving the vaccine and both may remain in good standing. As you can see in this scenario, Church teaching informs the individual's conscience. It does not designate a specific response.

Therefore, the exemption sought by one avoiding the COVID-19 vaccine mandate (because of the vaccine's remote connection to abortion) is more accurately described as a conscience exemption, even though it may be based on firmly held religious convictions. ***It is not a Catholic religious exemption because the Catholic Church does not dictate the decision, one's conscience does.***

Of note, avoiding the vaccine because you are concerned about its long-term safety, effectiveness against new variants, natural immunity from previous infection, etc. are not Catholic *religious* reasons that support an exemption. However, they are reasons that may contribute to your decision of conscience because they have a direct bearing on your responsibility to be a good steward of the one life God has given you. Under a more loose interpretation of "religion" these may be allowed, but they do not constitute a Catholic "religious exemption."

Can I get a conscience exemption from the Diocese?

No. Since a conscience exemption is based on your very personal reasons (whether faith-based or not), the Diocese cannot prepare a conscience exemption for you. Only you can describe what factors shaped your conscience by which you arrived at your decision. Moreover, legal experts of religious liberty issues indicate it is unconstitutional for an employer or school to require the signature of a priest or spiritual leader to validate your firmly held convictions. As noted previously, a vaccine exemption is granted by the entity imposing or enforcing the mandate.

What do I need to do to get a conscience exemption?

To get a conscience exemption, you prepare a statement that articulates your firmly held beliefs which led you to the decision to decline the vaccine. These reasons may be faith-based, but they need not be limited to moral concerns. Submit this letter to your school or employer as per their instructions and make sure to obtain a written response.

Of note, legal experts say it is not lawful to require the signature or verification of a spiritual leader. Remember, a conscience exemption reflects your personally held convictions, not the directive of an organized religion.

How do I write a conscience exemption?

A conscience exemption describes your firmly held convictions that led you to decline the vaccine. It is best to write this in your own words so that it truly expresses the process by which you made this decision of conscience. It may be helpful, although it is not necessary, to refer to other resources including Church documents which provide support for your views. You can find examples of conscience exemptions below.

- [National Catholic Bioethics Center example](#)
- [Liberty Counsel example](#)
- [Personhood Alliance example](#)

It is advised that you **do not cut and paste** samples because a letter written by you on your own behalf more strongly demonstrates that these are uniquely your personal beliefs and that you took the time to express them. As you might expect, multiple redundant letters reduce the efficacy of one's argument that this is a personally held belief.

You might also find it useful to view the following links:

- [The World Over](#) (August 19, 2021): Fr. Tad Pacholczyk with Raymond Arroyo on the Ethics of Vaccine Mandates. This is an excellent discussion regarding mandates and use of the NCBC template
- [Vaccine Exemption Guide](#) from Liberty Counsel. This is an informative video on pursuing a religious/conscience exemption by Mat Staver, founding attorney with Liberty Counsel. You can find many more resources on their website.
- [Interview with Fr. Cristino Bouvette on Vaccine and Conscience](#) This is a helpful video on the process of arriving at a well-formed conscience and a sure judgment
- First Liberty [video #1](#), [video #2](#), [more](#), and [article](#) on protecting religious liberties for students (also relevant for employees) with helpful points for responding to mandates
- Health Freedom Defense [resources](#) outlines civil liberty rights which may be violated by school or employer mandates.

Finally, do not forget the power of prayer! Go to Mass regularly, pray the Rosary, etc.

Where can I find further resources to help me defend my conscience exemption request?

Other materials to elucidate authentic Catholic Church teaching by which one may make a well-informed decision to decline a specific vaccine (understanding that this is not a broad condemnation of vaccines in general) can be found at these sites:

- [National Catholic Bioethics Center](#)
- [Catholic Medical Association](#)
- [Office of Human Life, Family and Bioethics](#)
- [Letters](#) to protest using cell lines from aborted human fetal cells in vaccine production

What if my request for a conscience exemption is denied?

With increasing regulatory pressures, mandates are becoming more restrictive so your request may be denied. Make sure to get a rejection in writing. If reasonable, make any adjustments and re-submit your request.

At some point you may determine that you need more help—that is, legal counsel. Although we make no official endorsements here, there are some resources and organizations which may be helpful to you in pursuing a conscience exemption or civil liberties approach.

These organizations provide resources, legal counsel, and/or contacts to pursue litigation:

- [Alliance Defending Freedom](#)
- [First Liberty Institute](#)
- [Liberty Counsel](#)
- [Thomas More Society](#)
- [We the Patriots USA](#)

Are there other types of exemptions?

You may pursue a medical exemption with documentation from your physician. Often legal experts will advise pursuing both medical and conscience exemption simultaneously.

Letters of protest against use of morally compromised cell lines

Whether vaccinated or not, ***we should all protest the use of the fetal-derived cell lines used in the testing, design, and/or production of these vaccines by writing letters to the vaccine makers.*** For skeptics of the efficacy of such a campaign, a few years ago, boycotts against Pepsi's use of Semonyx flavor-enhancing technology (which is based on these cell lines from aborted human fetal cells) resulted in Pepsi's discontinuation of the Semonyx technology. So do not underestimate the power of your voice in these matters!

This may be accomplished with template letters you can find [here](#). (USCCB resource)