

Religious Exemption Explained

Archbishop Paul D. Etienne

Some people have recently associated my actions in relation to the COVID pandemic with those of the state. While the state's guidance and declarations do have direct implications for us as Church and as an employer, I want to be clear — my actions are to protect life as a shepherd and pastor in the face of a worldwide pandemic that continues to take human life at an astonishing pace.

We are not yet living in a post-pandemic world, and we must remain vigilant.

We all have an obligation to love our neighbor, to protect our health and to protect the health of others. The immediate need to protect human life against the evil of the pandemic outweighs the remote connection to the evil involved in the testing and/or production of the vaccines.

According to our Holy Father and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, because the connection between receiving the vaccines and abortion is so remote, and the danger of the pandemic is so grave, the moral prohibition of cooperation with evil does not apply. Therefore, a Catholic may be vaccinated in good conscience.

Since the Catholic Church does not prohibit receiving a vaccine, a religious exemption to the COVID-19 vaccine mandate cannot be granted. However, in an effort to follow the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's (EEOC) language around "traditional religious views," I am willing to consider accommodations on moral grounds, but not exemptions on religious grounds.

While *in principle* there is no moral obligation to receive a vaccine, there can be reasons in *particular circumstances* for saying that there is a moral obligation to place more weight on the common good than on the individual. Today, the best life-saving defense against the pandemic is the vaccine. It is important that the formation of the individual conscience be informed by and directed toward the *common good*.

Catholics have the moral obligation to form their conscience with the mind of the Church, which encourages us all to be vaccinated, with the exception of those who have valid medical reasons for exemption.

Please hear me loud and clear: I strongly urge all of us to be vaccinated.

Once an employee has seriously considered the weight of the Church's teaching and still chooses not to be vaccinated, then that individual may request an accommodation to continue employment on *moral* grounds. If an accommodation can be provided, the employee will need to agree to an extra set of protocols to ensure the safety of all.