



August 26, 2021

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

I write, first of all, to express my love and concern for all of you as the COVID-19 virus continues to create challenges and complications for all of us. I pray, in particular, for families who lost loved ones from COVID. I pray for the safety of every member of the Archdiocese. May the Holy Spirit keep us physically, emotionally and spiritually strong. I also pray for wisdom and strength for government officials and spiritual leaders who must make difficult decisions for the health and safety of their communities.

One of the current challenges posed by the pandemic is the imposition of COVID-19 vaccination mandates by large numbers of employers, institutions and some governmental authorities. While the Church has made it clear that it can be permissible to receive vaccines that have a remote connection to cell lines developed unethically from victims of abortion, she has not been as clear about the morality of mandates that require people to take these vaccines.

The Catholic Church has stated at many levels, from the Pope as well as statements from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, that it can be an act of love to undergo COVID-19 vaccination in view of protecting oneself as well as others, especially the vulnerable. Evidence is mounting that these vaccines frequently lead to less severe cases of COVID-19, even if they do not always prevent infection and transmission.¹

Even though I contracted and recovered from COVID-19, I chose in April to become vaccinated, in part, to encourage others to receive the vaccine. The sound moral analysis by the Church supporting the permissibility of receiving the vaccines as well as the public health crisis evidenced by the many COVID deaths, the mental, emotional and economic stress suffered by so many, and the ensuing social isolation harming especially our young people motivated me to be vaccinated.

The natural law requires all of us to discern carefully right from wrong in conscience as well as to pursue the common good. A society that fails to respect the rights of conscience lacks a key element of the common good. The foundational international human rights instrument, *the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, asserts: “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.”²

I urge all to exercise charity towards others regarding COVID-19 vaccination mandates. Solid facts are helpful. Name-calling and shaming are not. To punish people who have a sincere difference of opinion is not Christian. Unfortunately, our society is badly divided and wounded. We have

¹ Centers for Disease Control (CDC), [COVID-19 Vaccine Breakthrough Case Investigation and Reporting](#)

² [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#), Article 18.

a duty to be compassionate and empathetic towards others. We must never lose sight of the marvelous God-given dignity of every human person. The Church must be a source of love and respect for both those who are in moral distress about COVID-19 vaccine mandates and those frustrated by resistance to these vaccines.

A good analogy to our current situation is conscientious objection by draftees in wartime. If a war is not intrinsically unjust, the Church requires Catholics to discern in conscience whether combat service is right or not. Both judgments, conscientious objection or active military roles, can be acceptable to the Church. Public pressure to override conscientious objection increases during popular wars and recedes during unpopular wars. The most charitable and just posture is to seek to accommodate the consciences of all persons. If they are not intentionally punitive, noncombatant roles or civil service are good ways to respect the rights of conscientious objectors just as COVID-19 testing is a possible alternative for those exempted from mandates.

The Church has reaffirmed in her authoritative teaching documents, including *the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, that persons have a serious obligation to form their consciences well and to obey a well-formed conscience under the pain of sin.³ The Second Vatican Council affirms that the moral conscience is God speaking to us. “For man has in his heart a law written by God; to obey it is the very dignity of man; according to it he will be judged. Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a man. There he is alone with God. Whose voice echoes in his depths.”⁴

It is important that we reflect on the gravity of the violation involved in coercing a person to do something that he or she believes to be wrong. The Second Vatican Council, in its declaration, *Dignitatis Humanae*, asserted that both religious and civil authorities have a duty to respect the consciences of persons as a civil right. “In all his activity a man is bound to follow his conscience in order that he may come to God, the end and purpose of life. It follows that he is not to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his conscience.”⁵

Currently, all available COVID-19 vaccines have used abortion-derived cell lines to a greater or lesser extent.⁶ We are blessed that the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) in December of 2020 provided authoritative guidance regarding COVID-19 vaccines.⁷ The CDF strongly rejected any “moral endorsement of the use of cell lines proceeding from aborted fetuses” and urged pharmaceutical companies and government health agencies to produce, approve and distribute “vaccines that do not create problems of conscience for either health care providers or the people to be vaccinated.”⁸

³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)*, n. 1776–1802.

⁴ Vatican Council II, Pastoral Constitution of the Catholic Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, December 7, 1965, n. 16

⁵ Vatican Council II, Declaration on Religious Freedom, *Dignitatis Humanae*, December 7, 1965, n. 3.

⁶ [U.S. Bishop Chairmen for Doctrine and for Pro-Life Address the Use of the Johnson and Johnson Covid-19 Vaccine](#), March 2, 2021.

⁷ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), [“Note on the Morality of Using Some Anti-COVID-19 Vaccines.”](#) December 17, 2020.

⁸ *Ibid.*, n. 4.

Most importantly, the CDF stated: “At the same time, practical reason makes evident that vaccination is not, as a rule, a moral obligation and that, therefore, it must be voluntary.”⁹ It is indeed a fundamental pillar of medical ethics that there should be free and informed consent and no coercion when deciding on a medical intervention. Pandemics and epidemic diseases may create a situation where public health and safety can justify enforced quarantines and other safety measures. The unique difficulties of today, however, include approval of only a few vaccines, all of which have some ethical problems. Also, their use of new techniques, accelerated development and clinical trials, and only recent widespread use mean that many questions cannot be answered as to the long-term safety and efficacy of these vaccines.¹⁰

I do not claim specialized knowledge of the vaccines. I encourage you to rely on the best information available from authoritative sources in the fields of medicine and public health. I wholeheartedly agree with the CDF, however, that those who decline for reasons of conscience must do their utmost to use other means to protect the health of others, especially those who are particularly vulnerable to COVID-19.

The Church upholds the permissibility of receiving the vaccines, because vaccination is by itself not evil. In fact, it is normally a virtuous act, attempting to protect the health of others as well as your own health. The intrinsic evil of an abortion committed almost 50 years ago or the grave injustice almost a half of century ago of a researcher taking cells from an aborted child without donor consent are not aided or encouraged by the individual receiving the vaccination.

However, the grim reality that we live in a society that asserts the killing of an unborn child as a right and allows for the harvesting of cells and organs of aborted children for economic profit creates a context in which an individual could reasonably choose not to give even the appearance of indirect encouragement or support to the *Culture of Death*. The choice to give such prophetic witness also requires the individual to take precautions not to spread the virus, just as those receiving the vaccines are obligated to advocate to pharmaceutical companies and government officials to provide vaccines that are not morally tainted.

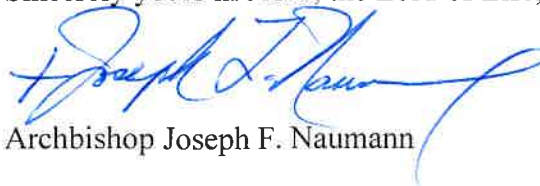
I agree with the Bishops of Wisconsin, Colorado, South Dakota and many other individual dioceses who urge employers to respect their employees’ consciences and make necessary accommodations, substituting other reasonable safety measures for mandated vaccination. In pastoral care, priests are called to help Catholics to form their consciences well and obey their conscientious judgments. However, priests need not feel compelled to sign exemption letters. Lay Catholics can and should insist on their conscience rights and religious liberties based on the authoritative teachings of the Church found in the Catechism, papal and ecumenical council documents, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and other sources. Bishops, priests and the entire Church should support the right and duty of Catholics to obey their consciences.

⁹ Ibid., n. 5.

¹⁰ CDC, [COVID-19 Vaccine Booster Shot](#). Recent discussion about possible fading vaccine effectiveness and the need for booster shots is a case in point.

With so many others, I pray for an end to the COVID-19 Pandemic. I also pray that in combatting this epidemic, we do not create an additional victim, the rights of conscience. Come Holy Spirit, enlighten our minds and hearts, giving us wisdom and courage as we strive to protect our loved ones and communities while also laboring for the common good!

Sincerely yours in Jesus, the Lord of Life,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Joseph F. Naumann". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long, sweeping tail that extends to the right.

Archbishop Joseph F. Naumann