

August 20, 2021

Dear friends,

Today the Church celebrates the memorial of Saint Bernard. In the Office of Readings, we read from one of his sermons where he says “Love is sufficient of itself, it gives pleasure by itself and because of itself. It is its own merit, its own reward.” The whole sermon is edifying – and relatively brief – it is a worthy and timely read.¹

As you know, the recent days and weeks have seen a significant increase in COVID-19 cases. The Delta variant has proven to be a serious complicating factor. You may have also heard that both our governor and Archbishop Etienne have issued new guidance to continue our efforts to care for each other and the common good. It is with that guidance in mind that I am writing to you.

First, please join me in **as we return to wearing masks at all indoor gatherings**. This will start on Monday, August 23rd. Wearing a face mask continues to be an effective way to screen particles in the air, keeping us from touching our mouths & noses, and help to keep surfaces in our various spaces clean. By virtue of a generous donation from a parishioner, we have an abundance of extra hospital masks – if you are in need of a mask, one will be happily provided to you. This simple step is an easy way to demonstrate and implement our desire to protect everyone.

Second, **I want to encourage everyone who is able to get vaccinated**. In examining all of the currently available vaccines, the Church has declared that it is not only morally licit (legal) to take them, but that it is one of the most important ways for us to effectively care for each other – especially the most vulnerable.² Just this last week, [Pope Francis released a video encouraging everyone to be vaccinated](#).³

I’d like to speak particularly to concerns around morality of these vaccines, which has elicited anxiety in the consciences of some. The Church explicitly speaks to the crucial nature of one’s well-formed conscience and the voluntary nature of vaccination.^{4, 5}

¹ *From a sermon by Saint Bernard, abbot*, Liturgy of the Hours (Memorial of Saint Bernard, second reading), August 20, 2021, <http://www.ibreviary.com>

² *Catholic moral teaching & vaccines series*, Father Maurer, 2020-2021, <https://saintmarkshoreline.org/2021/08/13/catholic-moral-teaching-vaccines-series-by-father-maurer/>

³ *Unity Across the Americas | Covid-19 Vaccine Education*, Ad Council, August 17, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zY5rvTnJF0U>

⁴ *Moral Conscience*, Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1777-1802, <https://www.usccb.org/sites/default/files/flipbooks/catechism/440/index.html>

⁵ *Note on the morality of using some anti-Covid-19 vaccines*, Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, December 21, 2020, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20201221_nota-vaccini-anticovid_en.html

However, conscience and freedom do not exist in a vacuum – especially when we must live together in society. And so, our moral considerations involve at least three factors: conscience, freedom, and the common good.

When it comes to a question of conscience, a key qualifier is ‘well-formed’. There are many who claim as a matter of conscience positions on things we know to be morally problematic at best, intrinsically evil at worst. One only needs to look as far as our society’s stance on abortion, contraception, marriage, and gender issues (to name a few) to find seemingly endless voices that are convinced that their consciences are clear even as they embrace ideas and actions that are deeply disordered and damaging.

So how do we ensure that our consciences are well-formed? The Catechism reminds us that “Everyone must avail himself of the means to form his conscience” (CCC 1802). As Catholics, we know that this must always include the authoritative teaching of the Church – and there has been no shortage of teaching on vaccines. On the universal level, we have *Moral Reflections on Vaccines Prepared from Cells Derived from Aborted Human Fetuses* (2005)⁶, *Dignitatis Personae* (2008)⁷, *Note on Italian vaccine issue* (2017)⁸, and *Note on the morality of using some anti-Covid-19 vaccines* (2020)⁹. At the more local level, the United States Bishops released a statement titled *Moral Considerations Regarding the New COVID-19 Vaccines* (2020)¹⁰ and the Washington State Bishops released a statement titled *The Washington State Catholic Conference, Catholic Charities and Catholic Health Care Support COVID-19 Vaccinations* (2020)¹¹.

In short: from Pope Francis to Archbishop Etienne, in magisterial teaching and personal exhortations, **the Church teaches us that we can – ought – to vaccinate.**

If a person’s discernment of conscience tells them that they can’t take the COVID-19 vaccine for religious reasons, I would make this assertion: **perhaps that conscience is not well-formed** – placing a decision not to vaccinate on shaky foundations.

⁶ *Moral Reflections on Vaccines Prepared from Cells Derived from Aborted Human Fetuses*, Pontifical Academy for Life, 2005, [https://www.pdcnet.org/C1257D43006C9AB1/file/B3945E0E17A0025085257D94004A597D/\\$FILE/ncbq_2006_00_06_0003_0145_0154.pdf](https://www.pdcnet.org/C1257D43006C9AB1/file/B3945E0E17A0025085257D94004A597D/$FILE/ncbq_2006_00_06_0003_0145_0154.pdf)

⁷ *Dignitatis Personae*, Congregation of the Doctrine of Faith, 2008, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20081208_dignitas-personae_en.html

⁸ *Note on Italian vaccine issue*, Pontifical Academy for Life, 2017, <http://www.academyforlife.va/content/pav/en/the-academy/activity-academy/note-vaccini.html>

⁹ *Note on the morality of using some anti-Covid-19 vaccines*, Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, 2020, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20201221_nota-vaccini-anticovid_en.html

¹⁰ *Moral Considerations Regarding the New COVID-19 Vaccines*, USCCB, 2020, <https://www.usccb.org/moral-considerations-covid-vaccines>

¹¹ <https://www.wacatholics.org/ui/img/heros/The-Washingto-State-Catholic-Conference-Catholic-Charities-and-Catholic-Health-Care-Support-COVID-19-Vaccinations.pdf>

Moreover, choosing not to vaccinate when one can safely do so unnecessarily puts others at risk – especially the most vulnerable in our communities.

Vaccination is a free choice not because there is ambiguity but because we ought to choose the good rather than be forced to it. The Lord Himself does not impose upon us, despite being the fount of goodness! How tragic if we choose otherwise – and all the more so if our conscience has wrongly steered us away from Him and His will.

I recognize that I am wading deeply and emphatically into the heart of this issue. I want to emphasize that it is not my intention or desire to judge the character of those who choose not to vaccinate. There will be some who so choose for medical reasons, others who do so for reasons unrelated to religious conviction. Regardless of vaccination status, we are called to accompany each other, take appropriate steps to protect the vulnerable, and look after the common good. **We remain one in Christ.**

Given Church teaching on the morality of vaccination and the necessity of serving the common good – particularly in protecting the most vulnerable – the archbishop has instructed all clergy not to provide or sign documents claiming a religious exemption. Individuals remain free to pursue such an exemption on their own, but that will be an exchange that happens exclusively between the individual and their employer. For those who work in parish schools, we will observe the state mandate that all employees and volunteers be fully vaccinated by October 18, 2021.

There is a lot packed into this letter and these points may newly stir up the hurts, frustrations, and sorrows that we have been experiencing for nearly a year and a half. While I may not be able to address every objection or answer all questions, I can give you this assurance: you are my people and I am your priest. I care for you deeply and pray for you daily. If I can be there for you – even if just to let you give vent to your thoughts & feelings – I am committed to doing so.

Please pray for me and for each other. If you haven't returned already, I hope you'll consider coming to Sunday Masses so that we can pray together and celebrate our union in Christ with the graces that only the Eucharist gives. In the meantime, know of my prayers for you all.

Sincerely,

Father Maurer