

[Date]

To Whom It May Concern,

[Name] is a baptized Catholic seeking a religious exemption from an immunization requirement. This letter explains how the Catholic Church’s teachings may lead individual Catholics, including [name], to decline certain vaccines.

The Catholic Church teaches that a person may be required to refuse a medical intervention, including a vaccination, if his or her conscience comes to this judgment. While the Catholic Church does not prohibit the use of most vaccines, and generally encourages them to safeguard personal and public health, the following authoritative Church teachings demonstrate the principled religious basis on which a Catholic may determine that he or she ought to refuse certain vaccines:

- Vaccination is not morally obligatory in principle and so must be voluntary.¹
- There is a moral duty to refuse the use of medical products, including certain vaccines, that are created using human cells lines derived from abortion; however, it is permissible to use such vaccines only under case-specific conditions—if there are no other alternatives available and the intent is to preserve life.²
- A person’s assessment of whether the benefits of a medical intervention outweigh the undesirable side-effects are to be respected unless they contradict authoritative Catholic moral teachings.³
- A person is morally required to obey his or her conscience.⁴

A Catholic may judge it wrong to receive certain vaccines for a variety of reasons consistent with these teachings, and there is no authoritative Church teaching universally obliging Catholics to receive any vaccine. An individual Catholic may invoke Church teaching to refuse a vaccine that used abortion-derived cell lines at any stage of the creation of the vaccine. More generally, a Catholic might refuse a vaccine based on the Church’s teachings concerning therapeutic proportionality. Therapeutic proportionality is an assessment of whether the benefits of a medical intervention outweigh the undesirable side-effects and burdens in light of the integral good of the person, including spiritual, psychological, and bodily goods.⁵ The judgment of therapeutic proportionality must be made by the person who is the potential recipient of the intervention,⁶ not by public health authorities or by other individuals who might judge differently in their own situations.

¹ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), “Note on the Morality of Using Some Anti-COVID-19 Vaccines,” December 17, 2020, n. 5: “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.”

² See Pontifical Academy for Life, “Moral Reflections on Vaccines Prepared from Cells Derived from Aborted Human Foetuses,” June 9, 2005; Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Instruction Dignitas personae*, 2008, nn. 34-35; Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Note on the Morality of Using Some Anti-COVID-19 Vaccines,” nn. 1-3. When there is a sufficiently serious reason to use the product and there is no reasonable alternative available, the Catholic Church teaches that it may be permissible to use the immorally sourced product under protest. In any case, whether the product is used or not, the Catholic Church teaches that all must make their disagreement known and request the development of equal or better products using biological material that does not come from abortions.

³ See United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), *Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services*, 6th ed. (Washington, DC: USCCB Publishing, 2018), n. 28. Hereafter “ERDs.”

⁴ “A human being must always obey the certain judgment of his conscience. If he were deliberately to act against it, he would condemn himself...” *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993), www.vatican.va, n. 1790. Hereafter “CCC.”

⁵ See ERDs, nn. 32-33; nn. 56-57; Part Three, Introduction, para. 2; Part Five, Introduction, para. 3.

⁶ See ERDs, nn. 56-57. Both of these directives state that the proportionality of medical interventions is established “in the patient’s judgment.”

The Catholic Bishops of Colorado have affirmed this in two letters dated December 14, 2020 and March 17, 2021, concerning COVID-19 vaccines, stating:

“The bishops of Colorado affirm that the use of some COVID-19 vaccines is morally acceptable under certain circumstances.... However, if individuals have serious moral objections or health concerns about vaccines, those concerns should be respected by society and government, and those individuals should not be forced into vaccination, contrary to their conscience. The government should not impose the COVID-19 vaccines on its citizens.”⁷

Furthermore, the free-exercise clause of the U.S. Constitution’s First Amendment requires state accommodation of individuals who object to vaccinations on religious grounds. Government neutrality also requires religious accommodation when the state offers secular exemptions, which is the case in Colorado for medical and non-medical exemptions⁸ and exemptions through the Americans with Disabilities Act and Civil Rights Act of 1964.⁹

Vaccination is not a universal obligation and a person must obey his or her own conscience. Therefore, if a Catholic comes to an informed judgment that he or she should not receive a vaccine, then the Catholic Church requires that the person follow this judgment of conscience and refuse the vaccine. The *Catechism* is clear: “Man has the right to act in conscience and in freedom so as personally to make moral decisions. ‘He must not be forced to act contrary to his conscience. Nor must he be prevented from acting according to his conscience, especially in religious matters.’”¹⁰

Sincerely,

[Name and Title of Pastor]

⁷ *A Letter to the Faithful from the Colorado bishops on Covid-19 Vaccines*. Colorado Catholic Conference. (2020, December 15). <https://cocatholicconference.org/a-letter-to-the-faithful-from-the-colorado-bishops-on-covid-19-vaccines/>.

⁸ *Vaccine Exemptions*. Department of Public Health and Environment. <https://cdphe.colorado.gov/vaccine-exemptions>.

⁹ *Pandemic Preparedness in the Workplace and the Americans with Disabilities Act*. U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. <https://www.eeoc.gov/laws/guidance/pandemic-preparedness-workplace-and-americans-disabilities-act>.

¹⁰ CCC, n. 1782, citing Second Vatican Council, *Dignitatis humanae*, December 7, 1965, n. 3.