



## WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

### **MEDIA RELEASE**

**August 20, 2021**

### **WISCONSIN BISHOPS ADDRESS VACCINATION AND CONSCIENCE PROTECTION**

Wisconsin's Catholic bishops have issued a statement to address the ability of individuals to seek exemption from COVID-19 vaccination mandates based on conscience objection.

#### **Vaccination is permissible and serves the common good.**

The bishops affirmed that it is morally permissible to receive COVID-19 vaccination under Church teaching and that vaccination has proved to be the most effective way to combat COVID-19 infection. They therefore urge Catholics who are eligible to seek out vaccination as a means of protecting one's own life and the lives of others.

#### **The Church recognizes the right of individual conscience.**

While recognizing the value of vaccination, the bishops also emphasized the importance of adherence to conscience. As the bishops note, a well-formed conscience is God's law written on an individual's heart, "Therefore, a human being must always obey the certain judgment of his or her conscience." They affirm that a person should not be coerced into receiving vaccinations in violation of his or her conscience.

#### **Civil authorities must recognize and protect the right of individual conscience.**

Church teaching requires that civil authority recognize and protect the right of conscience. The bishops therefore noted that government authorities must provide an exemption for those who object to vaccination based on moral or ethical convictions. When seeking an exemption, the bishops note that the law requires "the individual to raise moral or ethical objections to vaccination based on the dictates of his or her conscience." Therefore, formal documentation by pastors is not required or recommended. The bishops also urged that "all local, state, and federal governments maintain the protection of individual conscience."

#### **The unvaccinated and their employers have responsibilities.**

The bishops emphasized that responsibilities come with conscientious objection. "Every decision has consequences; and in this case, the person claiming a religious or ethical exemption should be ready to properly assume other scientifically recommended means of avoiding infection and contagion: face-coverings, social distancing, hand sanitizing, periodic testing, and quarantine."

Beyond maintaining compliance with federal law, which requires that employers make reasonable accommodations for employees who object to vaccination on moral or ethical grounds, employers also have responsibilities. They must maintain general safety standards for all employees by continuing COVID-19 mitigation measures.

**Need for prayer and reflection**

The Wisconsin bishops concluded their statement urging all to reflect upon how they can best serve their families and communities during these challenging times. “As we strive to emerge from this pandemic, we pray and faithfully encourage everyone to enter their inner room of conscience and make the best decision for themselves, their loved ones, and the larger community.”

Wisconsin Catholic Conference (WCC) Executive Director, Kim Vercauteren, highlighted the nuances in the bishops statement, “During this difficult time, it’s important to stress how vaccination can help aid a suffering world, while at the same recognizing that many individuals struggle with receiving COVID-19 vaccines.”

Vercauteren highlighted that religious accommodation in this area is not necessarily tied to a specific denomination or doctrine. “Current law recognizes the ability of employees to avoid acting contrary to sincerely held moral or ethical beliefs. This is true even when there is no religious group that espouses such beliefs or even when those beliefs are not accepted by a religious group to which an individual professes to belong. These factors do not determine whether a belief is the sincerely held religious belief of an individual.”

Vercauteren noted that conscience objections are often mixed with health concerns, but that it is important to know the difference. “If you think a particular vaccine might have negative impacts on maternal health or your heart, that’s a health concern, not a moral one.” Individuals with these types of concerns may still have recourse under the law, but those health exemptions are frequently tied to other laws, such as those that protect pregnant women or individuals with disabilities.

She added that employers are required to make reasonable accommodations when they receive requests based on religious objection, but the employer does not have to endure undue hardship in accommodating the request. Vercauteren notes, “Some flexibility may be required on the employee’s part in terms of using mitigation measures and making workplace adjustments.”

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For more information, contact Kim Vercauteren at 608-257-0004. A copy of the [Bishops Letter](#) is attached.