

Questions to Help Form our Conscience in the Context of COVID-19 Vaccination

1. Moral Conscience

Our Catholic Tradition teaches that a person “*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’.*” (CCC, 1782)

This teaching presumes the fundamental expectation that the individual conscience of the person is *well formed* (in light of God’s Word, upright, truthful, assisted by the gifts of the Holy Spirit, etc.) and *informed* (by the light of reason, guided by authoritative teaching, aided by information from legitimate sources, the witness and advice of others, etc.).

The formation of one’s conscience is a lifelong task and a person must always remain vigilant in this responsibility lest the “moral conscience remains in ignorance and makes erroneous judgments about acts to be performed or already committed.” (CCC, 1790)

As this pertains to a proposed mandatory vaccination program against COVID-19, a person may seek to inform their conscience based on the following questions as they seek greater moral certainty using their reason:

- a) Have I availed myself of all the most relevant and recent medical and scientific information available concerning the nature, spread and risk of the disease?
- b) Have I learned everything there is to learn about the provenance, effects and effectiveness of the vaccines?
- c) Are there ethical concerns supported by reason with the vaccines themselves, the vaccination program, or the authoritative sources proposing the program?
- d) Do I understand recent Church teaching about the moral permissibility of the vaccines and their reception?

2. The Common Good

One is obligated to act in good conscience. This demands referring to the common good of society and the needs of others in the community. We are individuals living in society. As social beings, our actions affect others and thus involve responsibilities towards them. Our concern must always be for the welfare of both others and ourselves. A proper balance between rights and responsibilities is essential to a well-ordered society, which upholds the

common good, and for individuals to have a well-formed conscience, which respects this good for the sake of others.

It is equally imperative and important that “authority is exercised legitimately if it is committed to the common good of society” (CCC, 1903, 1921).

As this pertains to a proposed mandatory vaccination program against COVID-19, a person may seek to inform their conscience based on the following questions as they seek moral certainty using their reason:

- a) Does the program proposed seek the greater good of persons, of the healthcare and social systems, or the communal nature of society as a whole?
- b) Will my participation in this program lead proportionally to a greater harm or good to myself and/or others?
- c) Does the legitimate authority that seeks to enact the program of vaccination have the common good of society in mind and measures that respect the dignity and freedom of an individual conscience?

3. Pastoral Considerations

We know that the vaccines currently available to combat COVID-19 do not provide a cure for the disease nor the absolute prevention from contracting or spreading the virus. What is understood through medical evidence, however, is that if the virus is contracted, the individual normally has less adverse health symptoms and the potential for being hospitalized is reduced proportionately. Given this reality, a prudential and precautionary principle can guide an individual’s decision-making such that:

- individual vaccination is considered as a means to mitigate the effects of the disease (if contracted personally), and
- the vaccination of the majority of people in society is considered as a means to mitigate an overload on the health care system itself and prevent fewer deaths.

As this pertains to a proposed mandatory vaccination program against COVID-19, a person may seek to inform their conscience based on the following questions as they seek moral certainty using their reason:

- a) What is the impact (for me, my family, my employer, the public, the healthcare system) of my participation or nonparticipation in a mandatory program of vaccination?
- b) By participating or not in a mandatory program of vaccination, how can I best mitigate against the spread and adverse effects of the disease:
 - Personally and for my family?
 - Toward persons that I serve or contact through my employment/ministry?

- Upon the health care system itself?
- c) Are there reasonable alternative accommodations (e.g. self-isolation, masking, regular testing, working from home, etc.) available to persons who opt out of mandatory vaccination programs? Am I willing to accept such alternatives and the consequences of such decisions (for myself, my family, my employment, my engagement in public activities, etc.)?