



22 September 2020

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

The Archdiocese of Saint Paul and Minneapolis is blessed with many fine priests. We have reason to expect them to teach the truth of the Gospel, faithfully passing on the teachings of our Church. None of our priests or bishops, however, is an expert in public health, infectious disease, epidemiology or immunology. It would be a mistake to attribute any expertise in these areas to us simply on the basis of our ordination.

I have spoken with Fr. Robert Altier about a recent sermon posted online as “*The Coronavirus: the Truth Revealed*.” He remains firm in his opinions on the pandemic situation, but he has acknowledged that his remarks were inappropriate in the context of a homily during Mass. The General Instruction on the Roman Missal (n. 65) directs that the homily “should be an explanation of some aspect of the readings from Sacred Scripture or of another text from the Ordinary or the Proper of the Mass of the day and should take into account both the mystery being celebrated and the particular needs of the listeners.” Pope Francis has said that it is to be “a consoling encounter with God’s word, a constant source of renewal and growth” (*Evangelii gaudium*, 135).

The use of a homily to present medical or scientific speculation does not serve that noble purpose and could be seen as an abuse of the cleric’s position of authority to address an issue unrelated to the liturgical celebration. In the context of the liturgy, no member of the assembly, even if the world’s greatest expert in this area, would have been in a position to contradict Fr. Altier or to offer alternative points of reference.

I have consulted with the Minnesota Department of Health and they provided a critique of some of the points mentioned in the sermon. I have attached those comments to this letter. I also consulted the local chapter of the Catholic Medical Association and learned that they too considered some of Fr. Altier’s affirmations to be “erroneous” and that they essentially shared the critique by the Minnesota Department of Health (other than the section on vaccinations). They referred me to the excellent resources available at the website of the national Catholic Medical Association (See <https://www.cathmed.org/programs-resources/cma-resources/coronavirus-resources/>).

Allow me to note that the Catholic Church has long recognized that there are at times ethical questions involved in the production of vaccines. Back in April, bishops serving as committee chairmen at the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops voiced to the Food and Drug Administration that, “It is critically important that Americans have access to a vaccine that is produced ethically: no American should be forced to choose

between being vaccinated against this potentially deadly virus and violating his or her conscience.” The bishops stressed that there was no need to use ethically problematic cell lines to produce a COVID vaccine, or any vaccine, as other cell lines or processes that do not involve cells from abortions are available and are regularly being used to produce other vaccines. (See <https://www.usccb.org/resources/Letter-to-FDA-urging-ethical-COVID-vaccines.pdf>).

Catholic theologians and ethicists continue to rigorously study developments in this area. Those looking for reliable resources would do well to consult the website of the National Catholic Bioethics Center (NCBC) (<https://www.ncbcenter.org/ncbc-resources-for-covid19>). A recent podcast can be found at <https://www.ncbcenter.org/bioethics-on-air-podcast-cms/episode-43-further-ethical-perspectives-on-covid-19-vaccines>. There will surely be more teaching in this area from the Holy See, the USCCB, and the Archdiocese in the months to come. Just this week a statement was jointly issued by the NCBC and Catholic Medical Association on this topic: (<https://www.cathmed.org/cma-ncbc-issue-public-comment-re-covid-19-immunization-practices/>).

Additional materials on the vaccination question will be provided as they become available. In the meantime, please join me in praying for all those who are sick with COVID-19, those who care for them, those who are working on vaccines, and all those individuals and families affected in any way by the pandemic. Our Lady, Health of the Sick, pray for us.

With the promise of my prayers, I remain,

Sincerely in Christ,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "+Bernard A Hebda".

Most Reverend Bernard A. Hebda
Archbishop of Saint Paul and Minneapolis

Attachment:

***Unedited response from the Minnesota Department of Health
after reviewing the claims made in Fr. Altier's sermon.***

[1] Event 201, October 18, 2019 Global Pandemic Exercise

<https://www.centerforhealthsecurity.org/event201/about>

Note: nothing concerning about the date of this exercise in that it took place shortly before the recognition of SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19 virus) circulating in Wuhan, China. Exercises using disease scenarios have been taking place for decades and occur at the local, state, national and international levels. Minnesota and every state in the U.S. was required to develop and participate in exercises following the 9/11 and anthrax attacks of 2001.

The fictional coronavirus that was used to cause a pandemic in this exercise was used because it is a virus that could be in the same family as other new coronaviruses, SARS and MERS. Both SARS and MERS are caused by viruses in the same family, the coronavirus family, as COVID-19.

[2] Claim: SARS-CoV-2 was man-made in a lab in North Carolina. False.

This false rumor was circulating in the spring of 2020 and suggested that the virus was created in a lab of a researcher at University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill. The researcher has been studying the family of coronaviruses (of which SARS-CoV-2 is in) and the lab was one of the first labs in the U.S. to get a sample of SARS-CoV-2 earlier this year to study. See:

<https://www.newsobserver.com/news/local/article241996426.html>

[3] Claim: People are getting bacterial infections from wearing masks. False. There is no evidence that wearing a mask could cause someone to get an infection. When we wear scarfs or face coverings in the winter, there is no risk of getting a bacterial infection. See: <https://apnews.com/afs:Content:9072351115>

[4] Claim: 2 candidate vaccines are using cells from aborted babies. Maybe true, he didn't mention which ones. However:

The Archbishop will be aware that the Vatican issued a statement (in 2017, but not translated into English until 2019) supporting the use of vaccines made using fetal cells. The Vatican statement clarifies that the use of such vaccines is moral and that individuals have a moral obligation to use them for the safety of others, and especially for vulnerable people such as pregnant women and immunosuppressed persons who cannot be safely vaccinated. *[Note from the Archbishop: The moral issues involved in this area are complicated: the Catholic perspective is presented in the materials cited above from the National Catholic Bioethics Center and the Catholic Medical Association.]*

[5] Claim: inflated deaths due to COVID-19. False. Misunderstanding of how cause of death is reported by doctors/coroners, and CDC indicating if death was due to COVID-19 as underlying or main cause of death. See: <https://www.cnn.com/2020/09/01/fauci-debunks-theories-of-low-cdc-coronavirus-death-toll-there-are-180000-plus-deaths-in-us.html> and <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-covid-19-deaths-are-counted1/>

[6] Claim: Moderna's vaccine is designed to change the RNA in your body so the very cells in your body change. False. Moderna's vaccine is allowing targeted cells in the body to turn on certain proteins to prevent or fight a disease.