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Statement from Bishop Felton on Vaccine Mandates

In recent weeks, I have urged priests, deacons and staff for our diocese who are eligible for one of the available COVID-19 vaccines to get vaccinated. I make this same plea to all the faithful. The ongoing loss of life and other hardships, now escalating with a new variant of the virus, make this all the more urgent.

As I do so, I also recognize that due to remote connections to abortions that took place decades ago, there are Catholics who may have a serious conscientious objection to the way the available vaccines were tested and/or produced. For many, this complicates a decision that ought to be as simple and straightforward as possible, and it contributes to the reluctance of many to receive the vaccine.

In response, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith¹, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops², the National Catholic Bioethics Center³, the Catholic Medical Association⁴, and other experts faithful to sound Catholic moral theology have, after thoughtful moral analysis, assured us that due to the very remote connection with abortion and the gravity of the situation with the pandemic, it is morally acceptable for Catholics to receive the vaccine despite objections.

These same analyses also make clear that receiving such a vaccine should be voluntary and not mandatory. While I again urge all who are able to do so to prayerfully consider receiving the vaccine in pursuit of the common good, I also recognize that there are people who for reasons of conscience will choose not to receive the vaccine and must not be mandated to do so. I would emphasize, as the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith indicates, that those who in conscience choose not to be vaccinated must take the necessary steps to reduce the risk of transmitting the infection.

As the above-mentioned Note from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, #5, clearly states:

Practical reason makes evident that vaccination is not, as a rule, a moral obligation and that, therefore, it must be voluntary. In any case, from the ethical point of view, *the morality of vaccination depends not only on the duty to protect one's own health, but also on the duty to pursue the common good.* In the absence of other means to stop or even prevent the epidemic, the common good may recommend vaccination, especially to protect the weakest and most exposed. Those who, however for reasons of conscience, refuse vaccines produced with cell lines from aborted fetuses, must do their utmost to avoid, by other prophylactic means and appropriate behavior, becoming vehicles for the transmission of the infectious agent.

Given that some Catholic and non-Catholic employers, colleges and universities are now beginning to consider or to enforce vaccine mandates, I wish to underscore the conscience rights of our faithful to remain unvaccinated. Those who, on the basis of being a conscientious objection, decide that they cannot receive the vaccination should receive a religious exemption.

Many employers have documents available to request a religious exemption. For those whose employers do not, the National Catholic Bioethics Center has a template available at www.ncbcenter.org which a person could use to make a request.

Since this is a decision of the individual conscience, and not a grant of the Church, the signature of a priest is not necessary. Again, this is a request of an individual, who in conscience decides they cannot accept the vaccine. As such, no priest should issue or sign a document giving an exemption, but they should aid those who seek out their assistance in examining the issues and informing their consciences so that a sound decision may be reached by that individual. I encourage priests to be familiar with the documents cited in this communication so that they may give proper guidance.

Even though these are challenging times, we remain as Catholics a people of divine mercy who regardless of our personal convictions are sincerely seeking to accompany one another as disciples of Jesus Christ; a people of divine hope, who firmly believe in the Paschal Mystery of despair and darkness being transformed into hope and light in the person of our Savior; and a people of divine love, who seek to put into practice the words of Jesus himself, *just as I have loved you, you also must love one another (John 13:34)*.

May the healing power of Jesus Christ come upon us and remain with us forever,



Most Reverend Daniel J. Felton
Bishop of Duluth

Footnotes

¹ Note on the morality of using some anti-Covid-19 vaccines, issued Dec. 17, 2020.

² See Moral Considerations Regarding the New COVID-19 Vaccines, issued Dec. 11, 2020, and Answers to Key Ethical Questions About COVID-19 Vaccines, issued in January 2021.

³ See Points to Consider on COVID-19 Vaccines and Abortion-Derived Cell Lines, updated March 30, 2021, and NCBC Statement on COVID-19 Vaccine Mandates, issued July 2, 2021. The NCBC also has a template for a letter seeking a religious exemption.

⁴ See Information Regarding Degrees of Responsibility of Vaccine Usage, issued Dec. 16, 2021, and Catholic Medical Association Opposes Vaccine Mandates without Conscience and Religious Exemptions, issued July 28, 2021. See also Joint Statement: Physician Support for Ethical Vaccines.