

**Responsibilities and Opportunities for the Clergy in Time of
COVID-19
Tenth Pastoral Letter during the COVID-19 Pandemic
Feast of St Lawrence, Deacon and Martyr, 10 August 2021**

Dear brother deacons, priests and bishops,

Vaccination of the Clergy

At a recent meeting of NSW Bishops, some bishops expressed concern about the degree of “vaccine hesitancy” within their communities, and even amongst some clergy, and asked what they might say to their people. I shared with them my reasons for believing we should encourage our people, and our clergy in particular, to be vaccinated and I’d like to share those reasons now with you, as my brothers in the ministry of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

Why should we encourage people to receive the vaccine and why should we do so ourselves? First, because the magisterium favours the use of these vaccines. The Pope,¹ several Vatican dicasteries,² Bishops Conferences around the world,³ the Australian Bishops⁴ and I personally⁵ have all taught that:

- The use of vaccines in general is morally permissible and is morally warranted for the protection of the recipient’s life and health, for the prevention of transmission to others, and for the common good
- The use of the COVID-19 vaccines is to be encouraged for these same reasons
- It is very disappointing that cell-lines ultimately derived from aborted foetuses have been used in the production of some COVID-19 vaccines (the Oxford/AstraZeneca and Johnson & Johnson vaccines), or in their development and testing (the Moderna and Sanofi/GlaxoSmithKline vaccines) or in related research (the Pfizer and Novovax vaccines); pharmaceutical researchers and manufacturers are strongly encouraged to produce vaccines with no morally compromising use of foetal cell lines
- Receiving these vaccines would nonetheless normally involve no formal cooperation or impermissible material cooperation in the evils of abortion and the exploitation of foetuses on the part of the recipients; the recipients would be chronologically and morally very remote from the abortions and the collection of foetal cells fifty years ago; and the recipients have no desire to profit from these or to have these repeated
- Where they have the option, some will prefer the Pfizer vaccine to the AstraZeneca on the basis that it is the less morally compromised.

Secondly, it is the elderly (and other especially vulnerable people) who are most at risk of dying from COVID-19 and so they should have some priority in the distribution of the vaccine. Those who care for them should also have some priority. But piety towards our elders (and other vulnerable people) should make those who are younger especially unwilling to expose them to the risks of contracting COVID-19. This means that the young and healthy, who might not be afraid for themselves, should nonetheless avoid contracting the virus as much or more for the protection of others with whom they might come into contact as for themselves.

Thirdly, the clergy as pastoral leaders in their communities, have an even greater duty to set a good example in this regard. The Pope, most or all of the Bishops of Australia, and most of the clergy have given this good example.

Fourthly, a normal part of the ministry of the clergy is to visit the sick – in hospitals, aged care facilities and their homes. Although vaccination certificates are not yet mandatory, they will surely become mandatory before too long in hospitals and aged care facilities, as flu vaccine certificates are already; the same may also come to apply to home visitation. For a clergyman to refuse vaccination in these circumstances would render it impossible for him to perform important parts of his ministry.

Fifthly, even were there no such legal or social expectation, the clergy have a responsibility to protect their priesthood and thus their life and health, and not to endanger the life or health of the people to whom we minister, especially the most vulnerable. Whilst it is true that vaccination does not guarantee that a person will not contract and transmit the virus, it does substantially reduce the risk of transmission.

Sixthly, unlike the previous lockdown and lockdowns in some other jurisdictions, the Government has this time around allowed clergy to leave their presbyteries and to visit homes to provide pastoral care. We must exercise this freedom wisely and be sure to reduce the risk of infection to ourselves and to others by ensuring we are vaccinated, are tested whenever appropriate, use masks, and practice personal hygiene and social distancing measures etc.

I am aware that many people, clergy included, have misgivings about the COVID-19 vaccines: the changing and sometimes confusing medical advice, the politicisation of the vaccine rollout, the fact that they are not 100% safe or 100% effective, the fear that they have been insufficiently tested and may have side-effects as yet unknown, the unjust distribution of the vaccine, the fact that foetal cell-lines were used in the ways described above – all these reasons and more are given for people's hesitancy about receiving the vaccines. The internet and social media are awash with extreme claims for and against the vaccines. But the fact is: few vaccines ever protect 100% of those who receive them and none is without risk. The annual flu vaccine protects most people, but some still get the flu, and some of those who do, die; but a much higher proportion of those struck down with flu have not been vaccinated, and when they get it they get sick and/or die

and/or transmit it to others. On presently available evidence it would seem to be that vaccination significantly reduces the likelihood of contracting COVID-19, the likelihood of suffering symptoms and especially serious illness if one does contract it, the likelihood of hospitalisation and early death as a result, and the likelihood of transmitting it to others. Very few of those who are dying of COVID-19 were fully vaccinated. Nevertheless people should not be coerced into vaccination but should be able freely to decide. Those who are nervous or unsure about whether to be vaccinated should discuss the matter with their GP so that they know what is the best course of action for them.

Some argue that we should vaccinate only the vulnerable in the community, and allow the young and healthy (clergy included) to go about their lives as usual. However, this would still put at risk older people who for whatever reason have not been vaccinated, and even some of those who have been vaccinated but are still at risk. It has also become clear that if the virus runs free in the community, more and more variants will emerge, some of which may be resistant to current vaccines, and this will endanger more lives. The only solution is to reduce the spread of the virus among the younger and fitter part of the population, while continuing to apply particular measures to protect the elderly and most vulnerable. What I am saying is that there is no “solution” to this pandemic that does not involve everyone, from every section of our community, and indeed every nation and community across the world.

As you know, I have now publicly engaged alone or in conjunction with other bishops or other faith leaders not just to promote vaccination, but also to raise the ethical concerns and to emphasise that protecting physical and economic health is not all that matters. We must also consider people’s liberties and consciences, their need for friendship and thus for person-to-person relations, the goods of learning, aesthetic experience, excellence at work and so on, and of course people’s spiritual needs including the need to congregate for worship. In considering vaccination and other measures at this time, public officials should take all these things (and more) into account. And so, of course, will we. But I ask you, my brothers, to **please get vaccinated**.

Pastoral Care by the Clergy

As discussed at our recent Zoom clergy conference, we won a major concession in the present lockdown in that clergy have been given permission to leave their presbyteries and visit homes for the purposes of giving pastoral care. This is a very significant opportunity that we must avail ourselves of fully, without exploiting it inappropriately or endangering people in the process. Here are a couple of examples of the pastoral creativity that I understand some clergy are presently exercising.

First, where it is safe to do so, some priests have been offering their daily Mass in a parishioner’s home as part of a pastoral care visit. This has allowed some people in parishes the great blessing of Mass and to receive Holy Communion. Of course, many will miss out but it is a great consolation to some. You or your staff could contact families

directly asking if you might offer Mass in their home on the occasion of a pastoral visit; or you could call for parishioners to volunteer their home for this purpose. Please be conscious of the importance of vaccination, masks, hygiene measures and social distancing and remind such families that they may not invite people from outside their household to join. We must make the best use of this freedom at the least risk to self and others.

Secondly, some priests have visited parishioners at their invitation or ‘on spec’ and offered them Confession and/or Holy Communion and/or a spiritual chat. Many would, I am sure, appreciate such an initiative from you – more, perhaps, than welcome us to their homes in ordinary times. You could invite parishioners to book you in for a visit.

Thirdly, I understand that some priests have offered themselves as a walking companion for parishioners needing exercise, and have used the opportunity to hear their Confession, have a spiritual talk or render other pastoral assistance and compassionate care. I commend this to you as another possibility. In regards to the Sacrament of Reconciliation, this **cannot** be done over the phone or video, the penitent must be in the presence of the priest to validly receive this sacrament.

Fourthly, as we saw last year and have seen again this year, you men have many good ideas of your own about how to reach out to your people in this hour of need. I understand that depression and loneliness rates are up dramatically, that people are anxious not just about health but about their financial security, relationships and more. We want to be there for them. With a little ingenuity we can find new ways of being so. I ask you, my brothers, to keep thinking of ways and applying yourselves generously. And I know that you will continue to offer Mass and other prayers for the safety of our people and an end to this pandemic.

I am enormously proud of the clergy of Sydney in their response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Proud, and also grateful. Thank you my brothers. You are an inspiration.

St Lawrence, Deacon and Martyr, pray for us!

Yours fraternally in Christ,



Most Rev. Anthony Fisher OP, DD BA LIB BTheol DPhil

Archbishop of Sydney

1 Pope Francis, “Address to the Banco Farmaceutico Foundation” 19 September 2020 https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2020/september/documents/papa-francesco_20200919_banco-farmaceutico.html; “Urbi et Orbi for Christmas 2020” 25 December 2020 <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/urbi/documents/papa->

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- [francesco_20201225_urbi-et-orbi-natale.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2020/documents/papa-francesco_20200805_udienza-generale.html); “To heal the world: Catechesis on the Pandemic” General Audience, 21 December 2020 https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2020/documents/papa-francesco_20200805_udienza-generale.html
- 2 Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dignitatis Personae: On certain bioethical questions*, 8 September 2008 https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20081208_dignitas-personae_en.html; *Note on the morality of using some anti-Covid-19 vaccines*, 21 December 2020 https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20201221_nota-vaccini-anticovid_en.html; Vatican COVID-10 Commission and Pontifical Academy for Life, *Vaccine for all: 20 Points for a Fairer and Healthier World*, 29 December 2020 <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2020/12/29/201229c.html>; Pontifical Academy for Life, *Moral reflections on vaccines prepared from cells derived from aborted human fetuses*, 9 June 2005 <https://mycatholicdoctor.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/vaticanresponse1.pdf>; *Note on the Italian vaccine issue*, 31 July 2017 <http://www.academyforlife.va/content/pav/en/the-academy/activity-academy/note-vaccini.html>; Vatican COVID-10 Commission and Pontifical Academy for Life, “Vaccine for all: 20 Points for a Fairer and Healthier World” <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2020/12/29/201229c.html>.
 - 3 E.g. US Bishops – Chairs of the Committee on Doctrine and the Committee on Pro-Life Activities of USCCB, *Moral considerations regarding the New COVID-10 vaccines*, 11 December 2020 <https://www.usccb.org/moral-considerations-covid-vaccines>; US Bishops – Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities of USCCB, *Answers to key ethical questions about COVID-19 vaccines*, January 2021 <https://www.usccb.org/resources/Answers%20to%20Key%20Ethical%20Questions%20About%20COVID-19%20Vaccines.pdf>
 - 4 Australian Bishops – Bishops Commission for Life, Family and Public Engagement, *Letter regarding development of a COVID-19 vaccine*, 14 September 2020 <https://mediablog.catholic.org.au/a-letter-to-the-faithful-regarding-development-of-a-covid-19-vaccine/>; *Letter accompanying advice from CDF*, 24 December 2020 <https://catholic.org.au/acbc-media/media-centre/media-releases-new/2303-note-regarding-the-use-of-covid-19-vaccines/file>; *FAQs and Guidance for the Catholic Community in Australia regarding a COVID-19 Vaccine*, April 2020 https://catholic.org.au/images/FAQs_and_Guidance_on_COVID-19_Vaccination.pdf?fbclid=IwAR2V7WjaH_vTstqoW-PAPECIXFiTF_C5kreTTghlb4ZIXII_B2o8IAI5UjI.
 - 5 Anthony Fisher OP, “Let’s not create an ethical dilemma,” *CW* 24 August 2020 <https://www.catholicweekly.com.au/archbishop-fisher-op-lets-not-create-an-ethical-dilemma/>; “Archbishop welcomes CDF statement on COVID vaccines,” 22 December 2020 <https://www.catholicweekly.com.au/archbishop-welcomes-cdf-statement-on-covid-vaccines/>; “We’re not anti-vaxers but we deserve a choice,” *Courier-Mail* 18 February 2021 <https://cathnews.com/cathnews/40290-we-support-vaccines-but-give-us-a-choice>; “Archbishop firm on call for ethical jabs,” *Daily Telegraph* 18 February 2021. See also *Statement from Pro-Life Catholic Scholars on the Moral Acceptability of Receiving COVID-19 Vaccines*, 5 March 2021 <https://eppc.org/news/statement-from-pro-life-catholic-scholars-on-the-moral-acceptability-of-receiving-covid-19-vaccines/>.