

Concerned Catholics Tasmania (CCT) statement regarding Archbishop Porteous' public stance on 'conscientious objection' to vaccination and his intended application for an 'exemption' for unvaccinated priests to visit nursing homes

Given the concerns expressed and disquiet felt by members and followers of CCT in relation to the application made to the State government by our Archbishop Julian for exemption from the requirement for clergy visiting aged care facilities to be vaccinated, we thought we should write to you to make our position clear.

Background

The Archbishop has asked the Tasmanian Government to grant an exemption so that priests who are not vaccinated will continue to be allowed to visit aged care facilities.

Attached to the *Ad Clerum* publication, which is produced by the Archbishop and is addressed to "Fathers, Deacons and Seminarians", of Monday 6 September 2021 was a document headed "Advisory for Clergy on Aged Care Vaccine Mandate" (a copy of that document is appended). In that Advisory, the Archbishop wrote,

On the best available information it would....appear that clergy are required by the Tasmanian State Government to have at least received the first COVID-19 by 17 September in order to continue undertaking pastoral work in aged care facilities. There is currently no exemption from this mandate for reasons of conscience; and

I am therefore obligated to respect the decision of those members of the clergy who have a conscientious objection to receiving one of the COVID-19 vaccines currently available in Australia and would ask that those with such an objection contact me directly to discuss how to manage this issue with regard to provision of ministry in aged care facilities within their parish.

Many of our members and followers would echo the sentiments shared with us today to the effect that our Archbishop's request of the government is inconsistent with Pope Francis' words describing getting vaccinated as 'an act of love'. Further his approach runs contrary to the views expressed recently by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (ACBC) in its media release dated 20 April 2021 appended which states

"Catholics in Australia are encouraged to receive a COVID-19 vaccine when it becomes available to them.....it is morally permissible to accept any vaccine.

The ACBC acknowledged "that there are ethical concerns about the way some of the vaccines have been developed or tested.....Despite those concerns, the Commission follows the guidance of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in urging people to be vaccinated for their own health, and for the health of the wider community.

***There is a particular imperative to protect the health of those who are vulnerable."** (our emphasis)*

Our considerations have also been aided by the ACBC document *FAQS and Guidance for the Catholic community in Australia regarding a COVID-19 vaccine* also issued in April 2021 which is appended and an article published in Eureka Street written by Bill Uren S.J. entitled 'Church and Modern Science' see <https://www.eurekastreet.com.au/article/the-catholic-church-and-modern-science>

Our Response

Our conclusions are these:

- 1 Catholics do have the right to exercise 'conscientious objection', acting according to their informed conscience, in circumstances that present moral dilemmas. So we would support our Archbishop in seeking to protect the freedoms of all Catholics.
- 2 Subject to 3 below, we understand that the moral dilemma for those Catholics objecting to being vaccinated is often based on their received knowledge (via traditionalist church networks) that some traces of stem cell research and DNA residue, taken from an identified, aborted human embryo that was used for medical research in the 1970's, is still being utilised in current vaccine research and development. This applies especially in the 'Oxford' varieties (which include Astra Zeneca). These are documented facts. (The scientific details as outlined by Bill Uren SJ in his article are technically complicated but well worth reading).
- 3 The Australian Catholic Bishops Commission for Life, Family and Public Engagement has made it clear in its statement on this that it supports the view from the Vatican that the length of time that has expired since the 1970's, while not erasing the original moral dilemma, obviates the need for any believer all these years later to feel morally implicated through receiving vaccines now that might have benefited from or have continuing links to that scientific research in the 1970's.

To quote from the ACBC FAQs document mentioned above

The HEK-293 cell line was used in the development, production and testing of the AstraZeneca vaccine. The HEK-293 cell line was used to test the efficacy of the Pfizer and Novavax vaccines, but not in their development or production.

The HEK-293 cell line was derived from the kidney of an aborted baby girl in the 1970s, and cell lines derived from these cells continue to be used in a broad range of scientific research, including in the production and testing of vaccines.

Given that all the vaccines available in Australia have some link to the HEK-293 cell line, is it ethical to use any of them?

Given the very remote connection of the cell line to its origins, a person may receive a vaccine that uses the HEK-293 cell line or any other cell line derived from aborted fetal cells in its production, development or testing. To do so would not be to co-operate in any abortion occurring in the past, nor would it be co-operating in further abortions occurring in the future, and so it can be received with a clear conscience.

- 4 So it would seem to us that a sensible approach for our Archbishop to adopt would be to REASSURE any priest, who is expressing reservations about being vaccinated, that he can be vaccinated with moral impunity, and can in good conscience be open to accepting what Pope Francis has said, to encourage us all to be vaccinated, namely, that it is an 'act of love'. It advances the common good. Surely making these points with

those opposed to vaccination on the grounds described above would help the development of a more fully ‘informed’ conscience.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church provides this at paragraph 1783

*Conscience must be informed and moral judgment enlightened. A well-formed conscience is upright and truthful. It formulates its judgments according to reason, in conformity with the true good willed by the wisdom of the Creator. The education of conscience is indispensable for **human beings who are subjected to negative influences and tempted by sin to prefer their own judgment and to reject authoritative teaching.** (our emphasis)*

In discerning what the will of God may be in all of this, recalling the Parable of the Good Samaritan, Luke 10: 29-37. In particular these verses,

29 *But because he wished to justify himself, he said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”*

30 *Jesus replied, “A man fell victim to robbers as he went down from Jerusalem to Jericho. They stripped and beat him and went off leaving him half-dead.*

31 *A priest happened to be going down that road, but when he saw him, he passed by on the opposite side.*

- 5 For us, anyone who visits an aged care facility in a pastoral/professional capacity without a vaccine would be morally derelict and our Archbishop needs to tell our priests that he will appoint vaccinated priests/chaplains to minister in those circumstances in the aged care space and ask the unvaccinated ones to stand aside from their usual duties in aged care or any other ministry that requires them to have close contact with people.
- 6 We are disappointed that our Archbishop’s advice to “Fathers, Deacons and Seminarians” was not as complete as it could have been. He could have appended the ACBC 20 April 2021 media release rather than being selective in the excerpts he chose which seem to highlight his personal view.

Our Proposed Action

- 7 CCT will be writing to Minister Rockliff to convey our reservations about granting exemptions to “conscientious objectors”.
8. We will be expressing our concerns to our Archbishop, but this should not stop individuals doing so also if they feel so inclined.