

Advisory for Clergy on Aged Care Vaccine Mandate

The Commonwealth Government in agreement with the States and Territories have established that from 17 September 2021 all full time, part time and casual residential aged care workers, as well as volunteers and students on placement are required to have received at least the first dose of a COVID-19 vaccination.¹

The Commonwealth Government has made it clear that “other workers not employed by a facility and who only provide in-reach services, are not required to get a COVID-19 vaccination”. This category of workers not needing a vaccination expressly included members of the clergy who undertake pastoral work in aged care facilities.²

However the Tasmanian State Government Health Order ‘Direction Under Section 16’ refers to “persons employed, or engaged, by or on behalf of the residential aged care facility” or “persons employed or engaged by or on behalf of the residential aged care facility to provide services, other than maintenance services, in respect of the residential aged care facility or one or more residents of the aged care facility..” needing to be vaccinated.³

While it is clear that clergy undertaking pastoral work in aged care facilities are not ‘employed’ by aged care facilities we have received legal advice which holds that pastoral work would qualify as being ‘engaged’ by either the facility or a resident.

On the best available information it would therefore 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.

¹ <https://www.health.gov.au/initiatives-and-programs/covid-19-vaccines/information-for-aged-care-providers-workers-and-residents-about-covid-19-vaccines/residential-aged-care-workers#do-i-need-to-get-vaccinated>

² <https://www.health.gov.au/initiatives-and-programs/covid-19-vaccines/information-for-aged-care-providers-workers-and-residents-about-covid-19-vaccines/residential-aged-care-workers/mandatory-covid-19-vaccination-in-residential-aged-care>

³ https://www.coronavirus.tas.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0025/181285/Mandatory-Vaccination-of-Certain-Workers-No.-1.pdf

The Holy See through the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has made clear in its document 'Note on the morality of using some anti-Covid-19 vaccines' that:

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.*

The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference has also issued a document in April 2021 confirming the Church's current teaching on the issue as set out in the CDF document and stating that "No one should be coerced to receive any vaccine".⁴

Both statements build on the Church's ancient and consistent teaching on the importance of conscience. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church makes clear:

In all he says and does, man is obliged to follow faithfully what he knows to be just and right. It is by the judgment of his conscience that man perceives and recognizes the prescriptions of the divine law: "Conscience is a law of the mind; yet [Christians] would not grant that it is nothing more; . . . [Conscience] is a messenger of him, who, both in nature and in grace, speaks to us behind a veil, and teaches and rules us by his representatives. Conscience is the aboriginal Vicar of Christ." (no 1777)

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.

I am currently engaging the Tasmanian Government about the possibility of Rapid Antigen Testing being used as part of an exemption protocol for those with conscientious objection in order for them to continue ministry in aged care facilities.

Archbishop Julian Porteous

⁴ https://www.catholic.org.au/images/FAQs_and_Guidance_on_COVID-19_Vaccination.pdf