



THE NATIONAL CATHOLIC BIOETHICS CENTER

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COVID, The Common Good, Conscience, and Charity

The National Catholic Bioethics Center (NCBC) is an institution that strives to serve the Church and faithful Catholics who face difficult ethical dilemmas. The COVID-19 pandemic has provided quite a few, the most recent related to COVID vaccine mandates. We have tried to balance several goods that are sometimes ignored or placed in false opposition to each other: the common good, conscience, and charity. The NCBC thought this important enough to justify a [press release](#) in August.

We are strictly charged by Christ to love one another as He loves us. (John 13:34) Furthermore, Saint Paul makes it very clear in his discourse on love (1 Corinthians 12:31-13:8) that even when we have or do many useful things, these are worthless if they are not motivated by charity or love. We are called to be patient and kind and not rude or quick tempered or brooding over injuries. This kind of selfless love is especially needed during the pandemic. Many are yielding to the temptation to scapegoat or lash out at others with whom they disagree. Calling someone “Hitler” or a “covidiot” resolves nothing and only makes dialogue more difficult. Journalists and politicians have a special responsibility to avoid demonizing people who hold points of view that they do not share. Some individuals may indeed speak in bad faith, but that should not be our assumption just because our perspectives differ.

Another danger is to harp on one valid point to the exclusion of others. It is well worth noting that many Christological heresies began with the error of focusing exclusively on either the divine or human nature of Jesus. One must affirm both. In the case of COVID-19 vaccines and vaccine mandates, the two aspects that need to be affirmed together are respect for conscience and furthering the common good. At the NCBC we are very impressed by the way the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) so authoritatively united these topics in the [December 2020](#) document on COVID-19 vaccines.

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.

The CDF looked at the issue of conscientious discernment regarding vaccines and also at the different ways we may further the common good and justice. Their conclusion continued in the same vein.

Finally, there is also a moral imperative for the pharmaceutical industry, governments and international organizations *to ensure that vaccines, which are effective and safe from a medical point of view, as well as ethically acceptable, are also accessible to the poorest countries in a manner that is not costly for them.* The lack of access to vaccines, otherwise, would become another sign of discrimination and injustice that condemns poor countries to continue living in health, economic and social poverty.

Americans are so blessed to have resources and choices that do not exist for so many others in poor countries. How terribly ironic that mandates in the United States try to force persons to take vaccines to which they object when billions elsewhere have no access to them at all.

The common good was given clear expression by Pope Saint John XXIII as “the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily.” Promoting the common good presupposes certain basic elements. The first is respect for human rights, the second is the security of peace, and the third is to meet the basic needs of the people.

The exercise of moral conscience is centered on discerning what is good and what is evil and choosing to do the good and avoid what is evil. If everyone within society were truly free to make informed conscientious judgements, the sum total of their decisions would serve the common good. Not all people will choose well, of course, but it is also true that the common good will never be advanced if the rights of conscience are trampled upon. A basic condition of improving the well-being of humanity is vigilantly upholding basic human rights like those of conscience.

The NCBC wants to reaffirm that our society cannot come through this pandemic well if we do not keep the common good of all people in mind and respect their well-formed consciences. If we yield to the temptation to slander and punish others, a bad situation will only grow worse. Amid our great Civil War a call was made to have malice towards none and charity for all. This should indeed be the goal for all Catholics and people of good will.

Dr. Joseph Meaney, President of the NCBC