

Are Vaccines Ministry?

A Mission Reflection on the Opportunity of Our Times

We are interconnected by our humanity. In the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.,

“We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”

Human beings are made for connection. Some, like Dr. King, refer to our connectedness as mutuality. This is the way God created us. This network we experience as human beings is known as solidarity, one of the revered seven themes of Catholic social teaching. Solidarity conveys wisdom about the building of a just society and living a life of holiness amidst the challenges of modern times. Accepting the reality that our private actions produce public consequences is undeniable.

Our ministry, the Franciscan Missionaries of Our Lady Health System, has decided to require COVID-19 vaccination for all team members, employed providers, residents, students in clinical rotations, volunteers, and contract staff. As a Franciscan Ministry, this is a decision rooted in our call to be a healing presence. Ultimately, we see vaccination for COVID as an act of love toward our neighbor, our loved ones, and an act of charity toward the wider community. Other ministries and even secular organizations have concurred.

While we respect the fact that this requirement may be difficult for many, as people of faith we invite and encourage each person to reflect upon the part that we all play in keeping the whole of our community safe and healthy. We are therefore advocating for a self-less approach to vaccination, which directs actions toward the interests and welfare of others above that of our own. Autonomy is not absolute because we have a shared responsibility toward one another, especially those who cannot decide or care for themselves such as children, those not currently eligible to be vaccinated, and the most vulnerable among us.

We believe that vaccines are the best means, supported with masking and social distancing, of combatting this current COVID-19 surge, of ensuring that our communities are as safe and healthy as possible, and for ending this pandemic. We can and must protect each other from this fast-spreading delta variant and from exposing vulnerable populations to the virus. Receiving the vaccine and encouraging others balances compassion and wisdom. Therefore, getting vaccinated, if you are able, fulfills part of our shared moral responsibility to one another. We cannot wait any longer.

Getting the vaccine is an expression of realizing the common good, “the sum total of social conditions which allows people, either as a group or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily.”¹ Simply stated, our actions and their results are intended to support the common good. We also believe we take this step now in faithful support of our mission and core values.

So, yes, vaccine is ministry much as Jesus asks of his followers, “To love your neighbor as yourself.” St. Francis and St. Dominic modeled this for us. Our humanity is connected and interdependent - we are all dependent upon one another. COVID-19 has illuminated this truth. In love of neighbor and as people of good will and charity, we seek and pray for the well-being of all.

Our mission spells out, “We are, with God’s help, a healing and spiritual presence for each other and for the communities we are privileged to serve.” Indeed, and Amen.

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