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on

## **“The Social Media Magisterium”: Where Popularity & Reliability Collide!**

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presentation by

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Moral theology is a practical science. It is a field that requires a sound knowledge of both facts *and* moral principles. Both have unfortunately become muddled in a day of social media and instantaneous global communication. I have often told my classes that the Catholic Church is the sole surviving coherent institutional voice of morality in a world under the tyranny of relativism. That remains true but that voice is becoming more difficult to hear and heed in the face of numerous, bewildering claims to Catholic authority one encounters on the internet.

A Cardinal one time told me of a conversation he had with an Episcopalian bishop. The bishop told him how envious he was of Catholic leaders since they had a guide which helped them navigate through the complexities of such issues as reproductive technologies or embryonic research. The bishop told the Cardinal that the Protestants had nothing but a variety of opinion whereas the Catholic Church was able to provide clear guidance to the faithful. That sure and certain guidance comes of course from the magisterium, the teaching authority of the Catholic Church.

However, we have all sadly witnessed how social media can contribute to confusion in the minds of Catholics about moral truth and moral choices. The current COVID pandemic has produced a cacophony of medical claims and

counter-claims spread over social media, most all of which the average Catholic would be in no position even to understand. Yet in the face of public health claims, various types of COVID vaccines and mandates from public leaders or educational authorities, the Catholic still has to make moral choices.

There are those who are suspicious not only of vaccines but particularly of governmental authority and this suspicion is stoked through social media. There is the knowledge among pro-life Catholics and other pro-life individuals that some COVID vaccines were produced or tested in cell lines developed from tissue from an aborted fetus decades ago. This will lead some to refuse to receive a COVID vaccine on moral or even religious ground despite the fact that the Holy See has said repeatedly since at least 2005 if one received a vaccine from such cell lines he or she would not incur moral guilt. Some Catholics will accept the truth of that teaching but will still refuse the vaccine as a matter of prophetic witness – even though they may put others at risk as they make their own prophetic witness.

It has to be admitted that the legitimate moral authority that the Catholic Church possesses in her magisterium has actually been undermined by the barrage of conspiracy theories and moralistic exhortations delivered through social media. The highest doctrinal body in the Church, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, is now just one voice among many offering opinions on the moral legitimacy of receiving the COVID vaccine. The Pope himself has become just one voice among many urging Catholics either to receive the vaccine or to reject it. Through social media the Bishop of Tyler, Texas now appears to have the same authority as the Bishop of Rome, one voice among many appealing to each person's prejudices. Blogs have drawn up lists of good bishops who are ready to grant a religious exemption from a vaccine mandate or bad bishops who will not grant such a religious exemption.

It must be said that a Catholic cannot technically receive a "religious" exemption from a vaccine mandate because the Catholic Church does not teach that one would incur moral guilt receiving the vaccine.

But what does a Catholic do when one state will provide only for a religious exemption from governmental vaccine mandates while another provides only for a conscience exemption. One factor that complicates the matter in the United States is that this is principally a Protestant/ secular country where religion is not generally understood as requiring adherence to tenets formally taught by a religious body. In the United States religion is generally understood very subjectively and individualistically in terms of a sincerely held belief or

conviction. This is not how the Catholic Church understands religion, however. The Church does provide definitive guidance in many areas of the moral life while she also provides for conscientious prudential judgment on the part of the faithful in other areas.

Because of this general cultural understanding of religion as sincere, individual belief in American culture, the attempt is made by some Catholics to broaden Catholic teaching in such a way that they can claim a religious exemption from vaccine mandates. They do this by pointing to Catholic teaching on the inviolability of conscience. They then in conscience refuse the vaccine and thereby claim a religious exemption. The inviolability of conscience is indeed a Catholic teaching, but it is also a truth of the natural moral law applicable to everyone, not just Catholics. It may be that a state or public authority will allow only medical and so-called religious exemptions. If that is the case, then any “religious” exemption that would be claimed by a Catholic would have to be understood very broadly, in terms of current cultural usage, as a conscientious exemption. And no Catholic clergyman can, in the final analysis, attest to the conclusions of anyone’s private conscience.

Regrettably the Church has been pulled into the culture wars arising from vaccine production and use, masking, social distancing, and mandates, and social media have certainly facilitated that. But, fortunately, the same technology that has spread moral confusion can also be a great aid to Catholics seeking guidance from the Church by searching for authentic, authoritative magisterial teaching on such moral matters. With a few strokes on a computer keyboard one can immediately pull up the 2005 and 2017 statements of the Pontifical Academy for Life on vaccine use or the authoritative 2008 instruction *Dignitas Personae* from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith or its Note on the Morality of Using Some Covid Vaccine issued in 2020. The same technology which can sow moral confusion can also provide Catholics with dependable moral guidance from the magisterium of the Church.

“. . . 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.*”