Frequently asked questions regarding Covid vaccines
Answers given by Fr. Ryan Ford, pastor of St. John's and St. Joseph parishes, Ishpeming

What is my moral obligation during a pandemic? As a matter of justice toward God, we have a duty to take reasonable care of our health. We also have an obligation to pursue the common good. We have a duty not only to care for our own health, but also to take into account the needs of others.

Does that mean I have to get vaccinated? The Church has long supported science, medicine, and research that serves the good of human persons, and the use of vaccines as a crucial means of protecting the health of communities. But there is no universal moral obligation to accept or refuse a vaccine. It should be a voluntary decision by the individual. Getting vaccinated is one way to fulfill the obligation to care for our health and to pursue the common good, especially to protect the weakest and most exposed.

How do I decide to get vaccinated or not? Like every choice that is not universally obligatory, we need to weigh the risks and benefits. Every day, we make choices involving risks and benefits. We choose to drive to work, even with the risks, because we judge that the benefits outweigh the risks. Researchers and drug agencies are responsible for judging the safety and effectiveness of vaccines. It takes time and study to provide answers many people need to make a decision. One person may choose not to get vaccinated because they judge that the risks outweigh the hoped-for benefits. Another person may choose to get vaccinated because they judge that the benefits outweigh the risks. Factors include age, comorbidities, medical history, allergies, how many vulnerable people they are around, what job they are in, the effect of the virus on society (how deadly it is, how virulent it is, etc.), and the effectiveness of a vaccine. Each person needs to make a free and informed decision, considering not only their own good, but also the needs of others and the common good.

Why has there been so much controversy? The controversy comes because there's no 'one size fits all' answer to the question 'Should I get vaccinated?' People think everybody needs to come to the same conclusion. But two Catholics can come to *different* conclusions, and both still be good Catholics. One may judge the benefits outweigh the risks, another may judge the risks are too great for them. Each person is responsible for gathering information, discerning risks and benefits, and making a decision. What is *not* OK is to think, "This isn't my problem. I'm young and healthy, what do I care? Nobody can tell me what to do!" We need to take time to think, reflect, discern, and judge, and not just dismiss the whole thing as not my problem. Those who choose not to be vaccinated have an obligation to do all they can by other means and appropriate behavior to avoid becoming vehicles for transmission of disease.

What about vaccine mandates? Vaccine mandates are not in principle morally objectionable, but they do exert pressure that can inhibit free and informed decision-making. In the absence of other means to stop or prevent an epidemic, vaccination can be required for the common good, especially to protect the weakest and most vulnerable. There should, however, be robust protections and accommodations for those who refuse vaccination because of medical complications or because they judge it wrong for them to receive it. Safeguarding the judgement of conscience of all individuals helps establish trust and avoid undue pressure. Respecting the conscientious judgment of employees is also an indispensable dimension of the common good. Those who receive exemptions from vaccination will need to accept other restrictions on their interpersonal interactions at work, but these should be the least burdensome possible. If an exemption is not granted, a person will need to weigh again the risks and benefits. The risk of losing their job or not being able to further their education will need to be factored into their judgment.