



COMMISSION FOR ECOLOGY, JUSTICE AND PEACE

15 March 2022

New Zealand Catholic Bishops Conference
PO Box 1937
Wellington

A really open letter to the New Zealand Catholic Bishops Conference

***“Let us not grow tired of doing good, for in due time we shall reap our harvest, if we do not give up.
So then, while we have the opportunity, let us do good to all” (Gal 6:9-10)
Theme of Pope Francis’ Message for Lent 2022***

***The coronavirus is showing us that each person’s true good is a common good, not only individual,
and, vice versa, the common good is a true good for the person... Health, in addition to being an
individual good, is also a public good. A healthy society is one that takes care of everyone’s health.
Pope Francis: Catechesis “Healing the world”: Love and the common good, 9 September 2020***

- **We recognise that the Covid-19 pandemic is a threat to the life and wellbeing of vulnerable people, that requires a prudential and ethical response from all of us.**
- **We support the position of the New Zealand Catholic Bishops Conference in your pastoral statement of November 2021 that vaccine mandates are an appropriate solution in the present circumstances, but must be monitored and reviewed.**
- **We believe the present state of the Covid-19 pandemic requires the continued practices outlined in your November 2021 pastoral letter, by church, government and by all of us and each of us.**

Response to “open letter”

On Monday 28 February the CathNews NZ website reported on an open letter written to you by a group of anonymous Catholic men, which asks you to advocate to the government that they review and remove Covid-19 vaccination mandates. Although we have not been able to find the text of the letter on any public website or otherwise, we have been provided with a copy. The authors remain unknown to us.

We are women and men writing our own open letter, to support your November 2021 pastoral letter that vaccine mandates are currently necessary to protect the most vulnerable members of our

communities. We believe that position is even more relevant now in March 2022 than it was four months ago. It is important that the voices of both women and men are heard in this discussion. We do not seek anonymity like the male correspondents in the letter mentioned above, but sign our names openly to this letter.

In summary, the anonymous open letter argues that the omicron variant of Covid-19 is only a mild illness for most people, that vaccinations are not very effective against omicron, and that for these reasons, and also because of the negative consequences of mandates – especially in our church – mandates should be abandoned. The “open letter” mischaracterises both the nature of omicron and the effectiveness of vaccinations. It selectively quotes from both church and scientific documents in a way that is misleading and inaccurate.

We support reviewing and removing mandates when they are no longer required. But that time is not now.

The open letter says that the morale of Catholics in New Zealand would be enhanced by the Bishops advocating for an early end to mandates (p.4). We do not agree. We are Catholics who would be dismayed if the Bishops were seen to abandon the precepts of solidarity, protection for the poor and vulnerable, and concern for the common good which are foundational to Catholic Social Teaching. It is in the light of those precepts that we, and so many others, whether people of any faith or none, have accepted the limitations of the last two years.

We thank you as our Bishops for recognising the Covid-19 pandemic is a threat to the wellbeing – and even the lives - of our most vulnerable parishioners and neighbours. We thank you for providing options that provide for all Catholics to attend Mass despite difficult circumstances. We thank all our sisters and brothers for making the sacrifices required to ensure the health and safety of all.

We would like the writers of the anonymous letter to know that we hear the pain, disconnection and alienation they and others are feeling at this time. We would like them to know that while we support the mandates and vaccine passes, we continue to recognise all our brothers and sisters as children of our loving God.

We hope you can assure the writers of the letter that our connection as Catholics goes beyond Mass attendance, and that there are people available within each local Catholic community to connect with, whether it is for practical assistance such as food and support, or for a listening ear for people who feel isolated because of the different choices and circumstances we each face during this time of pandemic.

We acknowledge openly that we are all tired of Covid and the restrictions we have been living with now for two years. However, Pope Francis reminds us this year in the theme of his Lenten message of St Paul's words to the Galatians: ***Let us not tire of doing good.*** We hope, pray and believe that our current restrictions will not be necessary for much longer. But we ask you, following the example of St Paul, to continue to exhort our whole community not to give up, but to continue with practices that protect the most vulnerable, for the good of all.

We now address some of the specific matters raised in the open letter.

1. Omicron and Vaccinations

The open letter acknowledges the value of vaccine mandates against the delta variant of Covid-19, but argues that they are no longer needed. Rather than arguing this on ethical or moral grounds, or from reflection on Catholic teaching, the claim is that omicron does not pose a serious threat to public health.

The letter suggests that omicron is not very serious for most people, and that vaccinations are not very effective against it. These claims are not supported by reputable epidemiologists, and indeed are not supported by some of the documents to which the open letter itself refers.

For example, this observation is quoted from a UK Health Security Agency report:

“Vaccine effectiveness against symptomatic disease with the Omicron variant is substantially lower than against the Delta variant, with rapid waning.” (p. 2).¹

But the very next sentence in the that report, not quoted in the open letter, is:

“However, protection against hospitalisation remains high, particularly after 3 doses’.²

The HSA report goes on to note that for omicron, there are insufficient data on the effectiveness of a third dose in preventing infection, but the third dose is between 50 and 75% effective in preventing symptomatic disease within three months, 80 to 95% in preventing hospitalisation, and 85 to 99% in preventing mortality. For delta, the respective figures are: insufficient data, 90 to 99%, 95 to 99%, and 95 to 99%.³

Some US data suggest that the third dose gives 62.5% protection against Omicron infection compared with 95.2% for delta. While less, this is far from negligible.⁴

So the third dose is less effective against omicron – but not ineffective. All the evidence is that it is effective against serious consequences – hospitalisation and death - for the vast majority of cases. As Auckland University’s Rod Jackson put it, "Paradoxically Omicron is a much bigger threat to New Zealand than any other previous variant. We keep on hearing it's mild, but what we should be saying is

¹ UK Health Security Agency, *COVID-19 Vaccine Surveillance Report*, Week 6, 10 February 2022, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1054071/vaccinesurveillance-report-week-6.pdf, p. 2.

² UK Health Security Agency, *COVID-19 Vaccine Surveillance Report*, Week 6, 10 February 2022, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1054071/vaccinesurveillance-report-week-6.pdf, p. 3.

³ UK Health Security Agency, as above, p. 12.

⁴ <https://www.health.govt.nz/system/files/documents/pages/3-february-2022-variants-update.pdf>

it's less severe if you're vaccinated". Professor Jackson went on to say that the critical thing is to slow the spread, if health services are not to be overwhelmed.⁵

A very recent modelling exercise, in New Zealand, suggested that 'when compared with boosted people, unvaccinated people were 3.1 times more likely to infect others and 2.4 times more likely to be infected'.⁶

A readily accessible explanation of some of these points appeared in Stuff newspapers and website on 10 January and is still available online.⁷

The anonymous open letter argues that vaccinations have been "wasted" as their efficacy has waned during the time that Covid has been kept out of New Zealand.

Vaccination efficacy does decline over time. But the vaccination buys time by reducing infection and therefore – in the now-familiar phrase – flattening the curve and, as Professor Jackson noted, saving an already stretched health system from being overwhelmed.

Let us illustrate this point. If half of those getting a severe infection (like delta) require hospital treatment, but only 500 people get that infection, that's 250 hospital cases. If one in twenty of people getting a 'milder' but more contagious infection (like omicron) require hospital treatment, but 20,000 people get the infection, that's 1000 hospital cases.

New Zealand is now seeing over 10,000 cases reported each day, with hospitalisations in the hundreds, and more deaths. With this information – easily available as it is – we think that there is evidently still every justification, indeed requirement, for mandates. Contrary to the assertion in the open letter that 'Whatever role mandates might have played in the past, they are no longer relevant' (p. 3), they are still entirely relevant and very necessary.

2. Spiritual and Social Consequences of Mandates

The open letter opens with a quote from paragraph 5 of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's 2020 instruction *Note on the morality of using some anti-Covid-19 vaccines*,⁸ which says that vaccinations are not a moral obligation and must be voluntary. However, it is important to read that single sentence in the context of the rest of that paragraph which makes it clear that those who refuse vaccinations must change their behaviour to prevent the spread of infection.

"... 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. Those who, however, for reasons of conscience, refuse vaccines... must do their utmost to avoid, by other prophylactic means and appropriate

⁵ <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/national/462795/we-need-to-slow-this-down-case-drop-too-soon-to-celebrate-epidemiologist-says>

⁶ <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/boosted-vs-unvaxxed-how-does-omicron-infection-risk-compare/>

⁷ <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/explained/127451238/covid19-will-the-vaccine-protect-me-from-omicron>

⁸ [Note on the morality of using some anti-Covid-19 vaccines \(21 December 2020\) \(vatican.va\)](#)

behavior, becoming vehicles for the transmission of the infectious agent. In particular, they must avoid any risk to the health of those who cannot be vaccinated for medical or other reasons, and who are the most vulnerable.”

The open letter expresses concern that mandates are causing ‘spiritual harm’.⁹ We offer some thoughts on that point here.

First, it is said that the mandates produce ‘bad fruit’ and should not be tolerated ‘given the new lack of clear-cut medical justification’. As we have said above, there is every medical justification for continuing the mandates at this time.

Specifically it is said that some have abandoned the church because, being unvaccinated, they are unable to attend Mass, or feel excluded from the church (in other ways that are not specified).

Your media release accompanying the November pastoral letter asked all parishes in New Zealand to provide Masses specifically for people with vaccine passes, and also to ensure Masses were provided which do not require a vaccine pass. Rather than seeing this as segregating our communities into vaccinated and non-vaccinated groups, we understand this as providing some Masses which are open to ALL members of our communities.

As noted above, the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, while recognising that some may choose not to be vaccinated, asked people in those situations to change behaviour to protect the most vulnerable. We see the Bishops’ guidelines as providing opportunities for this to happen.

We acknowledge that the present arrangements are not ideal, but are a temporary response to a pandemic that will pass. The great majority of people in New Zealand have now been vaccinated. We suggest that those who have left the church over mandates have chosen to do so, and we respect their choice. We have no idea how many have made that choice.

However, we are aware some people only feel safe and confident in attending Mass precisely because of the general application of vaccine mandates. At this time, people may not be attending Mass out of an abundance of caution, or having some other illness, or for reasons completely unrelated to the pandemic. In most parishes those unable to attend Mass for one reason or another are remembered in prayer.

While some people may feel excluded by the present arrangements, without them, other people would also feel excluded, particularly people who are immune-compromised, or are unable to be vaccinated. The youngest members of our parish communities (children under five), and older members of our congregations, and their family members and caregivers could feel they have to withdraw their attendance in the absence of such health measures.

⁹ These are discussed on p. 3 of the open letter.

The open letter also refers to division in the wider society as a consequence of mandates (p. 3). A recent opinion poll found that around half of those surveyed thought the government's various measures to contain the pandemic were about at the right level, while a quarter thought them insufficient and a quarter too rigorous.¹⁰ Three quarters of those polled do not think the measures too rigorous. Thus we do not think that there is 'unprecedented divisiveness' in our society, especially compared to other periods in New Zealand history, such as the Springbok tour of 1981, the waterfront lockout of 1951, or the New Zealand wars of the 19th century.

3. The Way Ahead

The open letter calls on the bishops to advocate with the government to identify the conditions under which mandates can be lifted. This expects an impossible level of foresight.

The future course of the pandemic is not known. We thought we'd got through the first – alpha – wave, and then along came delta. We thought we'd got through delta, and then along came omicron.

However, the government has pointed to easing of mandates, to some extent, on the other side of the omicron peak, and further easing well beyond the peak.¹¹ We do not think that there can be more certainty than that.

In saying all this, we again acknowledge that everyone's sick of Covid. Everyone's experienced some consequences, and some have experienced significant consequences. We would all like to be able to resume 'normal life'. We'd all like to be able to attend Mass without masks, to be able to sing again, to be able to receive Communion under both kinds, to be able to shake hands at the Sign of Peace, to enjoy a cup of tea after Mass. All that, as well as to enjoy social and civic life, and to pursue our occupations, without those sorts of restrictions.

But we are also aware how damaging Covid-19 has been, and still is – even, perhaps especially, the so-called 'mild' omicron variant. This is the moment that we have been preparing for, with all the requirements and restrictions we have been living with for the past two years.

The open letter observes:

the risks of COVID are very heavily skewed towards the elderly and the vulnerable, and that for the vast majority of people, Omicron is unlikely to be severe. This makes it much more reasonable to aim for focused protection of those who need it, and for vaccination to be a personal choice, taking into account an informed assessment of risks and benefits (pp 3-4).

Apparently, just at the time that Covid is spreading widely through our community, it is proposed that the general public abandon collective responsibility for the most vulnerable.

¹⁰ <https://thespinoff.co.nz/politics/20-02-2022/one-in-four-say-nz-covid-restrictions-too-harsh-one-in-four-say-too-weak-poll>

¹¹ http://www.beehive.govt.nz/sites/default/files/2022-03/Press%20Conference%2021%20February%202022_0.pdf, pp. 1-2.

The open letter speaks of ‘freedom’. We recall the words of Pope Benedict XVI: ‘individual rights, when detached from a framework of duties which grants them their full meaning, can run wild, leading to an escalation of demands which is effectively unlimited and indiscriminate. An overemphasis on rights leads to a disregard for duties’ (Caritas in Veritate, para 43).

We all have friends, workmates, relations, who have reason to be very worried about omicron, for their families and whānau if not for themselves. We know, too, that in whatever variant Covid disproportionately affects the poorer, the more marginalised, in our country. Our Catholic Social Teaching emphasises the virtue of solidarity, and it is in that light that we have accepted the need for restrictions over the last two years.

As we said at the beginning, we therefore support the position you took on mandates in your November 2021 statement. We believe that position is even more relevant now than it was four months ago. We support reviewing and removing mandates when they are no longer required, and we assume that such is the government’s intention. But the time for that is not now.

We close with some words from the late Sir James Hēnare, which others have quoted recently in the same context:

"Kua tawhiti kē tō haerenga mai kia kore e haere tonu. He nui rawa ō mahi kia kore e mahi tonu."—you have come too far not to go further; you have done too much not to do more.

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