

Immunization Questions and Answers

2026-27 policy change for the Catholic Diocese of Wichita

1. Isn't it misleading to call this a religious exemption, since the Catholic faith doesn't actually teach opposition to vaccines?

The policy uses the state's label for the exemption category; we are not claiming that Catholic doctrine opposes vaccination.

In Kansas, "religious exemption" is state-law terminology, not a statement that the Catholic religion teaches vaccine refusal. The Church generally encourages vaccines for the common good, while also teaching that conscience must not be coerced. The exemption is granted as a prudential school policy operating within the state's categories, while we continue to teach clearly that Catholic moral teaching supports vaccination in general, even if some individuals—rightly or wrongly—judge they cannot comply in conscience.

Though the Church has no doctrine against vaccination, primacy of conscience is the teaching that would underpin the notion of a religious exemption within the Catholic Church. Inasmuch as legitimate conscientious concerns are raised by the cooperation with evil involved in some vaccines' development, the doctrine of primacy of conscience would support a religious exemption to such vaccines.

2. What changed? Why change the policy now?

The change is meant to address a real pastoral and practical situation - not to make a statement against vaccines. The diocese needed a policy that actually works in Kansas today: in concordance with nearby dioceses, consistent with public schools' policies, and mitigating disenfranchisement of Catholic families in the diocese.

3. Are we backtracking or admitting the old policy was wrong?

This is a prudential policy decision responding to new circumstances and recurring pastoral problems. The time is right, especially after what the COVID era did to trust, perceptions, and the conflict around vaccines. Neither the old policy, nor the new policy, is right or wrong. Both the old policy and the new policy have strengths and weaknesses, because both aim to balance the competing goods of public health and subsidiarity. The change is not from a wrong policy to a right policy, but the result of a re-evaluation of the competing goods, and an attempt to better balance them.

4. What is the Church's stance on vaccines in general?

The policy recognizes the importance of vaccines and continues to encourage them. The change is not anti-vaccine. It is a policy adjustment that also makes room for families who, for conscientious concerns, cannot comply.

5. Are we saying Catholics have a right to refuse vaccines?

The policy is not teaching that refusal is a Catholic ideal; it is acknowledging that conscience cannot be coerced. The Church may strongly recommend something, but conscience is not to be violated—even if a person is objectively mistaken. The point of the exemption is non-coercion, not endorsement.

6. Is this a “religious exemption” in the strict Catholic sense?

The primacy of conscience is a Catholic doctrinal principle line of reasoning. In Kansas, “religious exemption” is state terminology. Religious language can sound like “the faith teaches this,” when the reality is: the state uses that category and institutions must operate within it. The bottom line is this is a state-policy category being used for compliance purposes, not a dogmatic statement.

7. Why not invent our own Catholic conscience exemption category instead?

Kansas law gives specific categories, and schools have to operate within those structures. We can’t force the government to adopt our preferred theological terms; we’re working within two different structures (civil categories vs. theological precision).

8. Has the Wichita Diocese been out of step with other Dioceses in Kansas?

Yes. Wichita has been the only Catholic diocese in Kansas not aligned with the common exemption practice used elsewhere.

9. Isn’t it ironic that public schools allow exemptions more easily than Catholic schools?

Yes—this irony was explicitly noted as a major pastoral and principal concern. The policy change resolves that inconsistency and prevents Catholic schools from being more restrictive than the state in a way that becomes pastorally explosive. Before this change, a Catholic family could go to public school and receive a religious exemption with minimal friction, while Catholic schools had tighter constraints.

10. Didn’t the last change cause a lot of turmoil?

Yes, in the midst of COVID, many emotions existed in 2021. Now in 2026, this study, discernment, communication and rollout are being handled with prayer and intentionality.

11. How did we arrive at this new policy?

Through a diocesan task force with a deliberate cross-section of perspectives and backgrounds including physicians, clergy, parents, educators, and principals who met throughout the first semester of the 2025-26 school year. They reviewed how other dioceses handle it (including places like Oklahoma and Nebraska). The recommendation was presented to Bishop and the Presbyterial Council as a well-studied policy, not a rushed administrative move.

12. Doesn't this open a slippery slope to exemptions about other issues?

This policy is narrowly targeted to immunization requirements and school compliance, not a general opt-out mechanism for Catholic teaching or school expectations.

13. Are vaccines mandatory under Catholic moral teaching?

Vaccines are strongly encouraged but not by nature obligatory in the way that would justify violating conscience. The Church can urge vaccination for the common good, while also insisting that coercion of conscience is not the Catholic way.

Summary: The Church continues to encourage vaccination, but we also cannot violate conscience. The primacy of conscience is a Catholic doctrinal principle line of reasoning. In Kansas, schools operate within the state's exemption categories, and our diocese was the outlier. Over time, medical exemptions became harder to obtain, and families were getting stuck—some even leaving Catholic schools. A diverse task force studied this and recommended a policy that aligns with what other dioceses and schools do in Kansas, while still affirming the Church's teaching and the dignity of conscience.

All competing principles are important. It should always be emphasized that all three competing principles involved are important. The new policy does not aim to over-emphasize any one of them, but acknowledges the importance of all three, while recognizing that they do compete with one another to some degree

- 1) vaccinating for the common good
- 2) avoiding cooperation with evil in the case of vaccines derived from aborted fetal tissue
- 3) respecting parents' consciences in making medical and moral decisions for their children