To whom it may concern:

I sincerely thank you for this opportunity to express my position regarding my request for a religious exemption as it relates to mandatory COVID-19 vaccination. This response is the fruit of intensive introspection and prayer. What is included below is genuine, honest, and representative of my sincerely held personal religious beliefs, which are in accordance with the ancient teachings of the Orthodox Christian Church that has witnessed the Gospel to the world for the last two millennia.

In Orthodox Christianity, theology permeates every aspect of life. It informs and conditions our moral code, conduct, choices, behaviors, and ethical foundation as relational beings. The Orthodox Church considers Herself to be “the One, Holy, Catholic (i.e. ‘universal’), and Apostolic Church”[[1]](#footnote-1) which was established by Christ Himself. It is the Faith that was disseminated by the Apostles to the ends of the earth, and the Faith which has been preserved by the Saints throughout the ages. Sources of irrevocable authority in the Orthodox Church exist in both Holy Scripture and Holy Tradition. Holy Tradition includes the writings and teachings of the Saints, her liturgical practices, the oral teachings of the early Church, and the decisions of the Ecumenical Councils. In her teachings and practice, the Orthodox Church safeguards a robust theology of the person, which includes sophisticated theology regarding the divine gift of free will, the sanctity of life, the preeminence of the conscience, and the holiness of the body.

Personhood is an important principle in Orthodox theology with the foundational belief that every human person is created in the image and likeness of God. In the first pages of the Bible, we clearly read: “Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness’.”[[2]](#footnote-2) In Orthodox Christianity, every human person is an icon and epiphany of God. It follows, therefore, that God calls all human persons, in one’s own unique way, to become, by His grace, power, will, energies and love, everything that He is by nature. We are called to share in the very qualities of God.[[3]](#footnote-3) Indeed, human nature consists of both soul and body, but it is also infused with life by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. The acquisition of grace through the Holy Spirit, which is each Orthodox Christian’s earthly quest, promotes sanctification of the entire person, which is valued even more than temporary, bodily health.

Importantly, being created in the image of God is directly reflected in our possession of free will. God is free, so human beings, made in His image are free to choose. Personal autonomy is a divine attribute which God has bestowed upon humankind by grace. “Heaven, sun, moon and earth have no free will,” state the *Macarian Homilies* of the fourth century[[4]](#footnote-4), “but you are in the image and likeness of God; and this means that, just as God is His own master and can do what He wishes… so, in like manner, you also are your own master.” Therefore, our vocation, as beings made in God’s image is not to become copies of one another, but through our freedom, to become authentically our own image. Furthermore, Saint Maximos the Confessor (c. 580-662) writes: “If man is the image of the divine nature and if the divine nature is free, so is the image.”[[5]](#footnote-5) In Orthodox theology, the exercise of free will is not a human right bestowed upon an individual by earthly powers: it is a heavenly, divine attribute that is to be applied to facilitate communion with the Holy Trinity. Repression of one’s expression of free will in any degree is a form of bondage and devalues the human person, since we are ultimately called to “stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

In Saint Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, which was probably written from Ephesus around 55 AD, he exclaims: “All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful; all things are lawful for me, but not all things edify.”[[7]](#footnote-7) In this passage, highlighting the preeminence of free will, the faithful are exhorted by Paul to obey Christ’s law. Christ Himself highlights the importance of freedom in His commandments when he states: “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Christ’s law allows for no element of coercion in human interaction, but to act “not by compulsion but willingly.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

Elsewhere, Paul writes: “Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own?”[[10]](#footnote-10) “Temple” here refers to the individual Christian as a dwelling place of the Spirit.[[11]](#footnote-11) For Orthodox Christians who partake in the communion of the Body and Blood of the Lord, their bodies become physical temples of the living God. In a similar note, Saint Paul highlights the importance of preserving one’s physical health, saying: “For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it.”[[12]](#footnote-12) From the above, one can glean that free will and the sanctity of the body are aligned. Consequently, one ought to exercise caution in the practice of free will, so as not to cause any degree of harm to the body volitionally, while simultaneously upholding the sanctity of human life. On the same note, spiritual harm rooted in sin, likewise directly impacts one’s salvation, and is not of lesser importance when compared to the maintenance of one’s physical health.

Faith likewise informs one’s decisions in exercising free will and autonomy. A modern Orthodox Saint, Elder Porphyrios (+1991), who himself ministered in a downtown Athens hospital for three decades, states: “When faith is real, whether you take medicine or not, the grace of God will act. And God acts through doctors and medicines[[13]](#footnote-13). The Wisdom of Sirach says: ‘Honor the physician with the honors due to him, according to your need of him, for the Lord created him.”[[14]](#footnote-14) Here, we can appreciate that the Church truly values modern medicine as a gift from God. Since God is the true healer of our souls and bodies, it is He Who gives the physician healing skills.[[15]](#footnote-15) Finally, the same passage from Sirach concludes: “My son, do not be negligent when you are sick, but pray to the Lord and He will heal you.”[[16]](#footnote-16) This passage highlights the direct link between prayer, repentance, and worship as they relate to the mystery of healing. Faith in God’s healing grace holds preeminence over the fear of mortality. An excessive reliance and trust in modern scientific advancements over divine providence can potentiate spiritual harm to one’s soul through its impact on faith. This has been negatively impacting my faith on a personal level.

Now, how do the above theological principles relate to our novel COVID-19 vaccines? As Orthodox Christians, to emphasize the healing power of God does not mean that human efforts at healing are downgraded. On the contrary, medical treatment is also seen as human cooperation with God's healing purposes and goals.[[17]](#footnote-17) However, given only the span of some months for authorized emergency use in the general population, there is simply an inherent paucity of longitudinal data relating to the long-term safety and side effect profiles of our current Covid-19 vaccines. Rev. Dr. Stanley Harakas, an esteemed Orthodox Christian bioethicist writes about free will and the exercise of autonomy with reference to one’s health. In his work, *For the Health of Body and Soul,* he states: “Human self-determination requires that the patient decide. Such a decision must be based on adequate information regarding the procedures, ends to be achieved, and risks involved. The patient does not have the right to inflict harm upon himself unnecessarily… The hope of benefiting mankind in general does not outweigh the moral obligation of the protection of the individual life.”[[18]](#footnote-18)

As stated above, Orthodox Christians maintain a strict religious belief in the sanctity of life and the human body which is expressed in an unwavering reverence for human life in all forms, from conception and pre-birth periods to death and the afterlife. For instance, the Orthodox calendar of feast days maintains holy days where we commemorate the conception of significant figures in salvation history, from the Mother of God on December 9th and John the Baptist on September 23rd. Even in death, a person’s body is revered as an icon of Christ, and in anticipation of the Resurrection, cremation for example, is not an accepted practice in the Orthodox Church. Furthermore, the veneration of the body at the end of the funeral service with the “last kiss” denotes the body’s sacredness. By extension, any process that devalues the sanctity of life such as the practices of abortion, euthanasia, human experimentation, and anything that might benefit from or stem from such practices is rejected.

A modern Orthodox Christian consensus statement affirms: “The Church believes it to be definitely inadmissible to use the methods of so-called fetal therapy, in which the human fetus on various stages of its development is aborted and used in attempts to treat various diseases and to ‘rejuvenate’ an organism. Denouncing abortion as a cardinal sin, the Church cannot find any justification for it either, even if someone may possibly benefit from the destruction of a conceived human life… this practice, even if its hypothetical effectiveness could be proved scientifically, presents an example of glaring immorality and is criminal.”[[19]](#footnote-19) In a 2000 press release, a local Orthodox Church declared that: “Our Church expresses its categorical opposition to conducting experiments on human embryonic cells… the effort to improve life cannot pass through the destruction of human beings of embryonic age.”[[20]](#footnote-20)

As such, any vaccines or therapeutics that have been designed or developed using research in any way incorporating the use of stem cell lines from aborted fetuses or that directly use harvested fetal tissue, in general, are not permitted for strictly observant Orthodox Christians. Such actions amount to spiritual participation in the guilt of such a sin indirectly. As it is widely known, the Janssen (Johnson & Johnson) COVID-19 vaccine has incorporated the use of PER.C6 retinal cell lines in its development, confirmation, and production protocols[[21]](#footnote-21). While both the Pfizer and Moderna lipid nanoparticle mRNA vaccines were not produced using stem cell lines from aborted fetuses, they were subjected to known confirmation and proof-of-concept testing processes which implemented the use of similar fetal cell lines[[22]](#footnote-22). Both companies used the fetal cell line HEK (human embryonic kidney) 293 in the confirmation phase. All HEK 293 cells are descended from renal tissue taken from a 1970s elective abortion that took place in the Netherlands. The manufacture and testing of such vaccines using such ethically tainted human cell lines demonstrates profound disrespect for the dignity of the human person. No person should be forced to choose between being vaccinated against this potentially deadly virus and violating his or her conscience. “This being so, I myself always strive to have a conscience without offense toward God and men.”[[23]](#footnote-23) To my knowledge, there is no Covid vaccine available in the USA at this time that does not experiment upon or commodify human cells.

In addition to very clear religious and moral objections to the testing and development protocols of these vaccines, the CDC’s voluntary Vaccine Adverse Event Reporting System (VAERS) records at least 6,789 US deaths linked to the Covid-19 vaccines reported as of August 16th, 2021[[24]](#footnote-24). To compare, as of September 1, 2020, per the federal Vaccine Injury Compensation Program (VICP), 188 deaths have been claimed following influenza vaccination.[[25]](#footnote-25) It has been documented that fewer than 1% of all vaccine-related adverse events get reported to the voluntary VAERS database: "Adverse events from drugs and vaccines are common… and low reporting rates preclude or slow the identification of ‘problem’ drugs and vaccines that endanger public health."[[26]](#footnote-26) It is possible that the number of deaths related to the Covid-19 vaccines may very well be significantly higher than that which is reported in VAERS. Thus, receiving one of the novel Covid-19 vaccines at this time, may pose a high complication or even death risk to me, which contravenes God’s commandments to honor the temple of the Holy Spirit which is my body and to protect my health through the exercise of my free will. Before it was time to ascend upon the Cross, Christ Himself avoided the potential of self-harm: “Then they took up stones to throw at Him; but Jesus hid Himself and went out of the temple, going through the midst of them, and so passed by.”[[27]](#footnote-27)

Harm to my body can therefore potentiate harm to my soul, thus, disturbing and negatively impacting my relationship with Christ and ultimately, my eternal salvation. This is particularly significant for me personally as an Orthodox Christian, as I am called to uphold the highest of moral standards. Canon 14 of Timothy says that: “Whoever kills himself out of faintheartedness or some other suffered injury, and is of sound mind, is not to be commemorated, being a murder of himself.”[[28]](#footnote-28)

As such, I humbly ask for our institution’s full support in honoring the diversity of my strongly held religious beliefs and convictions, and to allow for the necessary accommodations per a religious exemption from mandatory coronavirus vaccination. I ask that you permit me to continue to execute my duties and responsibilities unhindered, as well as to pursue my future career goals with our respected and esteemed organization. I wholeheartedly promise to continue to comply with our organization’s guidance on PPE use and testing requirements as instructed.

Please allow me to end my attestation with a quote by Saint John Chrysostom (c.347-407 AD), one of the preeminent biblical exegetes and authorities of the Church: “Beloved, God being loving towards man and beneficent, does and contrives all things in order that we may shine in virtue and to this end, He draws no one by force or compulsion… For He will have no unwilling, no forced domestic, but all of their own will and choice, and grateful to Him for their service. God, being without wants, and not standing in need of anything of ours, but doing all only for our salvation, makes us absolute in this matter, and therefore lays neither force nor compulsion on any of those who are unwilling. For He looks only to our advantage: and to be drawn unwilling to a service like this is the same as not serving at all.”[[29]](#footnote-29) In the spirit of the teachings of the Orthodox Church and my own sincerely held religious convictions, I again ask that you honor this humble request for religious exemption from obligatory coronavirus vaccination.

May God bless and protect you all and your loved ones always. I thank you for your time and attention to this very important matter.

**PRAYER OF PROTECTION FROM THE CORONAVIRUS**

*By His Grace Bishop Alexis (Trader) of Bethesda*

O God Almighty, Lord of heaven and earth, and of all creation visible and invisible, in Your ineffable goodness, look down upon Your people gathered in Your name. Be our helper and defender in this day of affliction. You know our weakness. You hear our cry in repentance and contrition of heart. O Lord who loves mankind deliver us from the impending threat of the coronavirus. Send Your Angel to watch over us and protect us. Grant health and recovery to those suffering from this virus. Guide the hands of physicians, and preserve those who are healthy that we may continue to serve You in peace and glorify Your most honorable and majestic Name, of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, now and forever and to the ages of ages. Amen.

1. Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, 381 AD. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Genesis 1:26. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <http://www.greekorthodox.org.au>. The above is excerpted from Dr. Philip Kariatlis’ work, academic director and senior lecturer of theology at the Saint Andrew’s Greek Orthodox Theological College in Sydney, Australia. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. A collection of spiritual texts that contain exhortations and responses to questions about prayer and progress in the spiritual life, emphasizing conflict between sin and grace within the inner person. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Orthochristian.com. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Galatians 5:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. 1 Corinthians 10:23. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Matthew 16:24. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. 1 Peter 5:2-11 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. 1 Corinthians 6:19. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *The Orthodox Study Bible.* St. Athanasius Academy. Thomas Nelson, Inc. 2008. p.1558. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ephesians 5:19. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *Wounded By Love: The Life and Wisdom of Elder Porphyrios*. Denise Harvey Publishers. 2005. pp. 224-231. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Wisdom of Sirach, 38:1-4 (LXX). This is a book of the Old Testament included in the canon, dating to c.180 BC. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Orthodox Study Bible, p.961. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Sirach, 38:9. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. https://www.goarch.org/-/for-the-health-of-body-and-soul-an-eastern-orthodox-introduction-to-bioethics. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. https://www.goarch.org/-/for-the-health-of-body-and-soul-an-eastern-orthodox-introduction-to-bioethics. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church (http://orthodoxkansas.org/Bases\_of\_Social\_Concept.html). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Greek Orthodox Press Release on “The Cloning of Embryonic Cells” - https://www.bioethics.org.gr/03\_c.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. https://www.janssen.com/emea/emea/janssen-vaccine-technologies. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. https://lozierinstitute.org/update-covid-19-vaccine-candidates-and-abortion-derived-cell-lines/ [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Acts 24:16. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/safety/adverse-events.html [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. https://www.nvic.org/vaccines-and-diseases/influenza/vaccine-injury.aspx. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. U.S. Government report found at https://digital.ahrq.gov/sites/default/files/docs/publication/r18hs017045-lazarus-final-report-2011.pdf. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. John 8:59. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Saint Nikodemos the Hagiorite. *The Exomologetarion.* Uncut Mountain Press, 2006. p.244. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Homily 10. https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf114.iv.xii.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)