

Vatican cardinal urges priority vaccinations for priests

The prefect of the Congregation for the Clergy says priests should have easier access to the anti-Covid vaccination because of their essential contact with so many people.



Cardinal Beniamino Stella, head of the Congregation for the Clergy, has called on civil authorities to give greater priority to vaccinating Catholic priests against COVID-19. "A priest who is faithful to his vocation and mission, and therefore dedicates himself to exercising his ministry in parishes, prisons and hospitals, could be considered part of an 'at-risk category' that performs a 'socially useful' service," he told the Italian Catholic news and information agency, SIR.

The 79-year-old cardinal, who was papal nuncio in Colombia in September 2013 when Pope Francis appointed him to his current post, defended his call that priests be given easier access to the vaccine. He made his comments as authorities in Italy announced plans to prioritize the vaccination of professional soccer players who will be competing this coming June and July in the UEFA European Football Championship (Euro 2021).

Cardinal Stella insisted that he is not asking for a free pass from civil authorities, but just more careful consideration."

The Church has paid a high price because of the pandemic

"It appeared he was speaking specifically about the situation in Italy, but in order to defend his request he recounted a conversation he had a few months ago with the archbishop of a major city in Latin America. The cardinal said the archbishop told him that "at the beginning of the pandemic he had to remove hospital chaplains, since most of them were elderly priests and more susceptible to infection". He said the archbishop replaced them with younger priests who volunteered to serve in hospitals, receiving permission from the civil authorities and appropriate protections to do so safely.

To emphasize the importance of vaccination for priests who are in contact with many people, including the most vulnerable, Cardinal Stella pointed out that, "like other parts of society," "the Church has also paid a high price because of the pandemic and its consequences".

269 Italian priests have died from COVID-19 in the last year

The Church has not been and is not exempt from the effects of this tragedy, mainly due to the death of many of its ministers who were affected by the virus while selflessly working so that the People of God feel the closeness of their pastors," he said.

According to the latest report, 269 priests died of COVID-19 in the last year in Italy. In paying tribute to those priests "who truly gave their lives", the prefect of the Congregation for the Clergy also praised the dedication of the many lay people who have continued to reach out to others."

Through the many faces that come to mind, I think I can say that the Church, as a people of God as a whole, had the courage not to let itself be crushed by the virus," the cardinal said. He told SIR that the Church needs to reflect on its experience these past many months of dealing with the pandemic and draw lessons for the future. Stella said the "ecclesial and pastoral organization" could no longer remain as it was before." Pastoral practices that have been sustained only out of habit and that can no longer nourish the faith of the People of God will probably fall," he predicted. The cardinal, who turns 80 in August and is expected to retire in the coming months, said the Church is in great need of missionary creativity that is far from "abstract theological-pastoral rantings".

Arnaud Bevilacqua - La Croix International