



“COVID Vaccines: A Pastoral Guide”

Introduction

Over the last several months, the federal government has partnered with a number of researchers and pharmaceutical companies to develop a vaccine to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. This work has led to the possibility of more than one vaccine being available for patients as early as the first quarter of 2021. Widespread distribution of a successful vaccine would be critical in permitting a “return to normalcy” in American life, allowing the various health restrictions imposed by state and local regulators to be lifted or eased. This is critical to allowing churches, schools, and businesses to fully re-open, lost jobs to be restored, and for a broader economic and social recovery.

For the last several decades, some pharmaceutical companies and researchers who develop vaccines have involved themselves in grave ethical issues by using cells in the testing and development of vaccines that were derived through one or more individual acts of procured abortion. The morality of using vaccines that are unethically “sourced” in this fashion is something the Catholic Church has grappled with in its ethical teaching.

In this letter, written with assistance from Right to Life of Central California, we intend to clarify and refine the position of the Catholic Church and the Roman Catholic Diocese of Fresno on the use of some of the COVID-19 vaccines that are likely to come to market in the next several months. Coordinating with the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and the California Catholic Conference, we will be developing our position and giving further guidance to Catholics in the months ahead.

Normative Moral Principles

The Church’s Competence and Duty to Teach on Bioethical Questions

The Catholic Church teaches authoritatively on questions of faith and morals. As the First Vatican Council solemnly defined, the Pope, and the bishops when speaking in union with the Pope in the setting of an Ecumenical Council, receive the protection of infallibility as they transmit the deposit of the faith they received from Christ and the Apostles in divine

revelation.¹ As successors of the Apostles, local bishops exercise the Church's Magisterial authority when, in union with the teachings of Popes and Councils, they instruct their local Churches on questions of faith and morals.² While not infallible, a bishop's instruction to his faithful has significant moral authority and weight, and a strong assurance of truth insofar as it adheres to the broader Magisterium.³

The ethical questions surrounding the use of vaccines chiefly stem from considerations of the natural law. "Natural law" refers to the ethical principles that arise from our nature as human beings. In observing humanity, one can see that man is ordered to certain ends, or goods, from which one derives certain ethical conclusions.⁴ The natural law tradition of ethical philosophy stretches back to Greek and Roman philosophers such as Aristotle and Cicero, and has been embraced and refined in the teaching of the Catholic Church, particularly in the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas.⁵ In the Letter to the Romans, St. Paul eloquently speaks to this law that even the Gentiles know, because it is written in the human heart.⁶ The Church affirms that the moral norms of the natural law "can be infallibly taught by the Magisterium."⁷

The ethical constraints of the natural law are essential for ensuring that medicine and medical research is oriented towards its proper ends of advancing science, respecting the interests of patients, and respecting the interests of the community.⁸ As Pope Francis has stated, "Research, whether in academia or industry, requires unwavering attention to moral issues if it is to be an instrument which safeguards human life and the dignity of the person."⁹ To these ends, the Church and its bishops have clear authority to speak on bioethical questions.

The Problem of Vaccines Using Cells Derived from Aborted Children

In the development of vaccines, pharmaceutical companies and researchers often utilize cell lines that are derived from a child who was killed through abortion. Fr. Nicanor Austriaco, OP, a

¹ First Vatican Council, *The First Dogmatic Constitution on the Church of Christ*, chaps. 3 and 4.

² Second Vatican Council, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium)*, no. 25.

³ Ibid.

⁴ See Charles Rice, *50 Questions on the Natural Law: What It Is and Why We Need It* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999), 30-33.

⁵ See *ibid.* at 33-40.

⁶ "As for the Gentiles, though they have no law to guide them, there are times when they carry out the precepts of the law unbidden, finding in their own natures a rule to guide them, in default of any other rule; and this shews that the obligations of the law are written in their hearts; their conscience utters its own testimony, and when they dispute with one another they find themselves condemning this, approving that" (Rom. 2:14-15).

⁷ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian* (1990). See also Pius XII, Allocution *Magnificate Dominum* (1954); and Second Vatican Council, *Dignitatis Humanae*, no. 14; *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §§ 2032-2040.

⁸ See Pius XII, *Address to the First International Congress on the Histopathology of the Nervous System* (1952), at 5, 18.

⁹ CNA/EWTN News, "Pope: Ethical Medical Research Requires Morality, 'Safeguards Human Life,'" *National Catholic Register*, April 29, 2016, <https://www.ncregister.com/news/pope-ethical-medical-research-requires-morality-safeguards-human-life>.

Dominican priest with doctorates in biology and theology who teaches at Providence College in Rhode Island, aptly describes the situation:

Growing human cells in a laboratory environment is not easy, and the earliest attempts to do so in the middle of the previous century often ended in failure. To make their task easier, cell biologists sought to obtain the freshest and youngest human cells they could find, which in many cases were cells obtained from human fetal remains. Three of the most successful human cell lines developed then—WI-38, MRC5, and HEK293—are human fetal cell lines. WI-38 cells were derived from cells obtained from a 12-week old fetal lung taken from an aborted fetus in the early 1960s; MRC5 cells were derived from cells taken from the 14-week old fetal lung of an aborted fetus in 1966; and HEK293 cells were isolated from cells taken from a fetal kidney of unknown gestational age in 1973.¹⁰

The Church has reiterated, since the first century, “the moral evil of every procured abortion.”¹¹ This absolute negative prohibition of the natural law extends even to the human embryo, which must be respected, protected, and never made subject to “exploitation as disposable biological material.”¹² The abortion of human beings to create these cell lines for research was a serious moral evil.¹³

Obligation to Seek Ethical Alternatives

Before considering whether it is permissible for Catholics to utilize such vaccines as prescribing doctors and patients, Catholics should look at the Church’s ethical exhortations to decrease the scientific community’s reliance upon these vaccines. “[O]n a cultural level, the use of such vaccines contributes in the creation of a generalized social consensus to the operation of the pharmaceutical industries which produce them in an immoral way.”¹⁴

The Church states that doctors and families have a duty to use vaccines that do not utilize objectionable materials, if such alternatives exist.¹⁵ The Church also urges us to put “pressure on the political authorities and health systems so that other vaccines without moral problems become available.”¹⁶ The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has done precisely this through its ongoing grassroots lobbying campaign to the Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services over the past several months, urging the federal government only to fund ethically sourced COVID-19 vaccine research campaigns.¹⁷

Cooperation With Evil

¹⁰ Rev. Nicanor Austriaco, “Moral Guidance on Using COVID-19 Vaccines Developed with Human Fetal Cell Lines,” *Public Discourse*, May 26, 2020 [<https://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2020/05/63752/>].

¹¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* § 2271.

¹² *Ibid.* at §§ 2274-75.

¹³ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dignitas Personae* (2008), no. 34.

¹⁴ The Pontifical Academy for Life, *Moral Reflections on Vaccines Prepared from Cells Derived from Aborted Human Foetuses* (2005).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ “Demand a COVID-19 Vaccine Free from Abortion,” United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, <https://www.voterve.net/mobile/USCCB/Campaigns/73486/Respond> (accessed November 24, 2020).

While acknowledging the moral evil of the abortions that created unethical cell lines, the question nonetheless is asked: may Catholics, while maintaining moral clarity against all acts of abortion, utilize vaccines from cell lines derived from an aborted child, when no alternatives exist?

The Church does not give an absolute prohibition on using vaccines that are unethically sourced, in all circumstances. Abortion in itself is prohibited in all cases as a direct taking of innocent human life. The use of a vaccine that is in some way connected to an act of abortion (in some cases, a single abortion from 40 years ago) is not identical to the sin of abortion, but is a form of cooperation in evil that may or may not be ethically permissible.¹⁸

We must distinguish between “formal” and “material” cooperation in evil. Formal cooperation in evil occurs when someone wills the evil action of the principal agent, like a doctor recommending an abortion.¹⁹ Material cooperation in evil simply involves giving some sort of support or aid to evil activity, regardless of whether one directly wills the evil end.²⁰

Material cooperation can be either morally permissible or impermissible, depending on whether the cooperation is proximate or remote.²¹ Remote material cooperation is permissible if there is a proportionate reason for it.²²

As stated above, the Church places an obligation upon Catholic doctors and patients to advocate for ethical vaccine options. If no such ethically-sourced options are available for a given illness, is the use of a vaccine developed with unethically-sourced materials a morally acceptable form of remote material cooperation in evil? The Church writes the following:

Of course, within this general picture there exist *differing degrees of responsibility*. Grave reasons may be morally proportionate to justify the use of such “biological material”. Thus, for example, danger to the health of children could permit parents to use a vaccine which was developed using cell lines of illicit origin, while keeping in mind that everyone has the duty to make known their disagreement and to ask that their healthcare system make other types of vaccines available. Moreover, in organizations where cell lines of illicit origin are being utilized, the responsibility of those who make the decision to use them is not the same as that of those who have no voice in such a decision.²³

¹⁸ One misconception from concerned persons is that the use of such vaccines is intrinsically and always immoral—this is not the case. Some persons, rightly outraged about the original act of abortion, characterize vaccines made from these materials as being almost the moral equivalent of cannibalism, a gross violation of natural law that can never be morally justified. This is an incorrect way of looking at the problem. The Church’s concern has always focused on the origins of biological material for these vaccines, not the use of cells derived originally from human tissue or cells *per se*.

¹⁹ “Cooperation with Moral Evil,” February 2013, National Catholic Bioethics Center, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5e3ada1a6a2e8d6a131d1dcd/t/5ed65fe1acf7c915f772f786/1591107554407/NCBCsummFAQ_2013_Cooperation.pdf.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ *Dignitas Personae*, no. 35.

The Church further states the following:

As regards the diseases against which there are no alternative vaccines which are available and ethically acceptable, it is right to abstain from using these vaccines if it can be done without causing children, and indirectly the population as a whole, to undergo significant risks to their health. However, if the latter are exposed to considerable dangers to their health, vaccines with moral problems pertaining to them may also be used on a temporary basis. The moral reason is that the duty to avoid *passive material cooperation* is not obligatory if there is grave inconvenience. Moreover, we find, in such a case, a *proportional reason*, in order to accept the use of these vaccines in the presence of the danger of favouring the spread of the pathological agent, due to the lack of vaccination of children.²⁴

Thus, the Church does not prohibit Catholics of good will, with moral clarity opposing abortion, from using unethically sourced vaccines for proportional moral reasons when no alternatives exist. The moral responsibility for creating and utilizing such vaccines lies more heavily upon the companies and researchers who develop them, than upon the Catholic doctors, patients, and parents who are simply attempting to protect their patients, themselves, their children, or their communities from terrible diseases.²⁵

General Concerns: Consent, Safety, and Efficacy

These special moral concerns are not the only reasons for end-users of a vaccine to pause. The government has never approved a coronavirus vaccine before, and the various vaccines are being developed in an extremely short amount of time.²⁶ The public deserves answers to legitimate questions to ask about these vaccines' reliability, safety, and method of approval prior to hitting the market, as this is critical both for patient safety and informed consent.²⁷ Vaccines should also be distributed equitably, without undue discrimination on the basis of race, age, sex, religion, or other criteria unrelated to public health.²⁸

²⁴ Pontifical Academy for Life, *Moral Reflections on Vaccines Prepared from Cells Derived from Aborted Human Foetuses*. See also "Conscience Exemption for Vaccines based on Fetal Tissue from Abortions," April 2015, USCCB Secretariat of Pro-Life Activities, <https://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/how-we-teach/catholic-education/upload/Vaccines-Conscience-Exemption-updated-April-2015.pdf>.

²⁵ Pontifical Academy for Life, *Moral Reflections on Vaccines Prepared from Cells Derived from Aborted Human Foetuses*. The document specifically states that "the lawfulness of the use of these vaccines should not be misinterpreted as a declaration of the lawfulness of their production, marketing and use, but is to be understood as being a passive material cooperation and, in its mildest and remotest sense, also active, morally justified as an *extrema ratio* due to the necessity to provide for the good of one's children and of the people who come in contact with the children (pregnant women)[.]"

²⁶ Dr. Michael Parker, MD and Dr. Joseph Meaney, PhD, Letter on behalf of the National Catholic Bioethics Center and Catholic Medical Association to the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Department of Health and Human Services, September 18, 2020, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5e3ada1a6a2e8d6a131d1dcd/t/5f8717abe01bd6753e90a6f8/1602688939809/CDC+Public+Comment+COVID+Vaccine+2020.pdf>, 3.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 4.

Survey of Developing COVID-19 Vaccines and Ethical Conclusions

Potentially Available Vaccines: Pfizer, Moderna, and AstraZeneca

As of this writing, three companies, Moderna, Pfizer, and AstraZeneca, are among the closest to being able to bring vaccines with reportedly high effectiveness rates to market in the next several months.²⁹ Various pro-life and Catholic thinktanks, most notably the Charlotte Lozier Institute and the National Catholic Bioethics Center, have provided careful analysis and scrutiny of the process by which COVID vaccines have been funded and developed.

The news regarding these three vaccines is mixed. It is encouraging to read assessments from various Catholic and pro-life groups that the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines are *largely without ethical problems*, as they do not utilize unethically sourced material in their development and composition. Because of the lack of unacceptable material, the Charlotte Lozier Institute views both the Moderna and Pfizer projects as “Ethically Uncontroversial” in their assessment of COVID-19 vaccines.³⁰ While these vaccines may have had some involvement with unethically sourced cells in the testing phase, this is a further step removed from the moral evil of abortion than a vaccine that uses such cells in its actual development.³¹ On November 22, the Pontifical Academy for Life stated from its official Twitter account that it found “nothing morally prohibitive” with the Pfizer or Moderna vaccines.³²

The AstraZeneca vaccine was developed using HEK293 cells, one of the major cell lines that may have originated from an aborted fetus. Given the ready presence of better alternatives, this is not a morally acceptable alternative for Catholics.³³

Overall, the news of two fetal-tissue-free vaccines is encouraging, though it is still troubling to hear of the use of illicit material in their testing. We should not be complacent and view this as “okay” simply because the use of illicit material is relatively minimal. While individual Catholic doctors and patients may discern that they have proportional reasons to use these vaccines, we should nonetheless make it clear to our legislators, regulators, and healthcare systems that Catholics resist any use of fetal tissue from aborted children in vaccines and healthcare treatments.

Conclusion

It is morally permissible for Catholic doctors, patients, and parents to prescribe or utilize the vaccines developed by Pfizer and Moderna, as a form of acceptable, remote material cooperation with evil, if this is chosen for serious and proportionate reasons of public health and

²⁹ Carolyn Y. Johnson and Aaron Steckelberg, “What you need to know about the AstraZeneca, Moderna, and Pfizer vaccines,” *The Washington Post*, November 23, 2020.

³⁰ James L. Sherley M.D., Ph.D., and David A. Prentice, Ph.D., “An Ethics Assessment of Covid-19 Vaccine Programs,” *On Point*, Iss. 46 (May 2020): 3-4.

³¹ EWTN, “Pfizer Coronavirus Vaccine: Does it Use Fetal Cell Lines?” YouTube Video, 3:01, Nov 13, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eEx1SSV5IW8&t=16s>.

³² Pontifical Academy Life, Twitter Post, November 22, 2020, 12:31 a.m. <https://twitter.com/PontAcadLife/status/1330428758747213832>.

³³ David Prentice, Ph.D., “Update: COVID-19 Vaccine Candidates and Abortion-Derived Cell Lines,” November 11, 2020, Charlotte Lozier Institute, <https://lozierinstitute.org/update-covid-19-vaccine-candidates-and-abortion-derived-cell-lines/>.

viral prevention with sufficient ethical discernment. Catholics should opt not to utilize the AstraZeneca vaccine due to its heightened use of morally questionable material, and the existence of better alternatives.

Brothers and sisters, these are difficult times and heavy issues. The vaccines themselves, if taken at all, cannot be taken lightly, happily or with a lack of serious consideration for the ethical concerns. In all of this we place our lives in the hands of our Lord who loves us beyond measure.

We commend ourselves and those we love to His mercy.

Bishop Joseph Brennan, D.D., Diocese of Fresno
with Right to Life of Central California

Summary of Points

- The Catholic Church, through her bishops, has the right and duty to instruct the faithful on questions of the natural law that touch upon medicine and bioethics. This extends to the ethical question of whether or not Catholics may utilize vaccines developed with cell lines derived from individual acts of abortion.
- Some vaccines and other treatments are developed from cell lines that originated with aborted fetuses. Catholics have an obligation as citizens, patients, and doctors to urge their healthcare systems and governments to provide and support ethical vaccine alternatives that are not made with materials derived from the moral evil of abortion.
- Nevertheless, for serious and proportional reasons, Catholic doctors, patients, and parents may utilize such unethically sourced vaccines if no other alternatives exist, while maintaining consistent moral clarity in opposition to all acts of procured abortion.
- The Pfizer and Moderna vaccines only utilized illicit materials in the testing phase, not in their development or composition. Without better alternatives, their use is morally permissible for Catholics.
- Catholics should not utilize the AstraZeneca vaccine due to its development from the HEK293 line, and the presence of less morally problematic options from Pfizer and Moderna.
- The Roman Catholic Diocese of Fresno will provide the lay faithful with more updates and resources on COVID vaccines, as well as vaccines to treat other illnesses, in order to provide ongoing ethical guidance.