Vaccine morality explained

Since Covid-19 vaccines began to be discussed, Catholics have raised concerns about the moral and ethical aspects of taking them. While the Vatican and the USCCB have weighed in on the subject, a lot of Catholics still have questions.

In December 2020, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) independently issued statements on the morality of accepting COVID-19 vaccines that were developed or tested utilizing cell strains derived from the tissues of fetuses aborted decades ago.

In sum:
- Acceptance of the COVID-19 vaccines developed, researched, or tested utilizing fetal cell lines is morally permissible when no alternative COVID-19 vaccine is available or accessible.
- Acceptance of the COVID-19 vaccine involves very remote material cooperation in the twofold evil of the abortions of the fetuses from whom tissue was posthumously taken to derive cell strains for medical research.
- An action that involves remote cooperation in evil is permissible, or even encouraged, when there are grave moral reasons that are proportional to or outweigh moral badness of this cooperation.
- The proportional moral reasons for acceptance of the vaccine are the promotion of community health and prevention of serious risk of harm, which are grounded in the fundamental moral and social principle of the common good.
- It is permissible to refuse the COVID-19 vaccine, but those who refuse should perform additional actions that promote community health and prevention of serious harm.
- While accepting the vaccine is a morally responsible action, recipients nonetheless have an obligation to protest the use of fetal cell lines in vaccine development.

As Catholic bioethicist, Michael Deen, recently stated, "some of the confusion and resistance to the CDF and USCCB statements seem to stem from misunderstanding the nuanced and complicated moral traditions of the Church." The Pillar, a newer Catholic media project, recently released "The Ultimate Catholic Coronavirus Morality Explainer" as an attempt to answer many of the moral questions Catholic might have about receiving the COVID-19 vaccines.

The principle of the common good is the key to understanding the CDF and USCCB guidance on receiving COVID-19 vaccines that were developed utilizing fetal cell lines. The CDF explains that "From the ethical point of view, 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." The USCCB’s guidance adds: "In this way, being vaccinated safely against COVID-19 should be considered an act of love for our neighbor and part of our moral responsibility for the common good."

The Church teaches that the principle of the common good in a fundamental moral and social principle. Deen suggests that much of the confusion over the guidance he’s seen on Catholic social media and news sites is the failure to note this very foundation of the CDF’s and USCCB’s positions. While the COVID-19 vaccines no doubt can protect the health of recipients, the CDF and USCCB focus on how reception of the vaccine promotes the common good through protecting the health of the community and reducing risks of harm associated with contraction of COVID-19 for especially vulnerable persons.

Should a Catholic Accept Vaccination?

By Fr. Tom Knoblauch, Health Care Ethics Consultant, Diocese of St. Cloud

This is a prudential decision that each must make for oneself and at times for those who depend on one’s decision (for example, children or those lacking decisional capacity due to mental status or disability). Mandates from the government to vaccinate all are not recommended as there are reasonable exceptions, and a mandate tends to reduce rather than foster compliance.

This decision must be informed by facts about the vaccine’s origin, safety and efficacy: one’s own risk for infection and the consequences for self and others if infected; the severity of the illness and the public health crisis; the relative risks of side effects to the vaccine; availability; cost; and related factors.

While these are serious considerations, the refusal of vaccines may itself involve a degree of moral culpability, depending on the harms that are risked. Those who refuse a vaccine due to general concern about the relation of some vaccines to the use of aborted tissues have a stronger theoretical argument, but this must be fact-based in the context of the actual proposed vaccine. One must be cautious of adopting the same logic rightly criticized in the pro-choice position: that it is my body and my decision is a private one that is up to my own conscience. While Catholic teaching upholds values autonomy and self-determination, it also understands that autonomy is not an absolute right but conditioned by the common good.

In the current situation, with a pandemic approaching its one-year anniversary and the widespread social, economic, educational and relational harms we have seen, and a significant portion of the population still at risk, accepting a proven and safe vaccine is justified as a moral good, an act of solidarity and charity and arguably a work of mercy.

O n March 2, Bishop Kevin C. Rhoades of Fort Wayne-South Bend, chairman of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops’ (USCCB) Committee on Doctrine, and Archbishop Joseph F. Naumann of Kansas City in Kansas, chairman of the USCCB’s Committee on Pro-Life Activities, issued a statement on the Johnson & Johnson COVID-19 vaccine recently approved for use in the United States.

"The approval of Johnson & Johnson’s COVID-19 vaccine for use in the United States again raises questions about the moral permissibility of using vaccines developed, tested, and/or produced with the help of abortion-derived cell lines."

Pfizer and Moderna’s vaccines raised concerns because an abortion-derived cell line was used for testing them, but not in their production. "The Johnson & Johnson vaccine, however, was developed, tested and is produced with abortion-derived cell lines raising additional moral concerns. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has judged that ‘when ethically irreproachable Covid-19 vaccines are not available’ ... it is morally acceptable to receive Covid-19 vaccines that have used cell lines from aborted fetuses in their research and production process.” However, if one can choose among equally safe and effective COVID-19 vaccines, the vaccine with the least connection to abortion-derived cell lines should be chosen. Therefore, if one has the ability to choose a vaccine, Pfizer or Moderna’s vaccines should be chosen over Johnson & Johnson’s.

"While we should continue to insist that pharmaceutical companies stop using abortion-derived cell lines, given the world-wide suffering that this pandemic is causing, we are again that being vaccinated can be an act of charity that serves the common good.”