

The Catholic Responsibility for COVID-19 Vaccination

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As the vaccines created to inoculate the public from COVID-19 begin to be distributed, some questions have been raised as to whether or not one should receive the vaccine and if it is morally acceptable to do so. In two recent statements, one from the **U.S. Bishops' Committees for Doctrine and Pro-Life Activities** and the other from the **Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith**, we are reminded that the use of COVID-19 vaccines is a



necessary means of ending this pandemic and its threat to the lives and well-being of countless persons, communities, and faithful across the globe. Catholics are called to promote the common good and to have a special regard for the young, the elderly, the infirmed, and the impoverished, who are disproportionately affected by the ubiquity of this disease. In sum, to quote the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "the common good may recommend vaccination, especially to protect the weakest and most exposed."

In addition, the statements share the following points regarding the reception of vaccines to combat COVID-19 in light of the disturbing information that some of the testing processes used for the vaccines did utilize cells derived from morally problematic sources, i.e., embryonic stem cells from aborted fetuses; they are:

There is false information, widely promoted on the internet and in social media, claiming that Pfizer and Moderna vaccines are manufactured from illicit embryonic or fetal material. This is untrue; such cell lines were not, in fact, used in developing these vaccines. It is true that some of the testing processes used for these vaccines did utilize cells derived from morally problematic sources. This level of complicity—that is, the connection to a moral evil—is remote or low, meaning that it is possible for a Catholic to accept these vaccines in good conscience.

Further, both the document from the Vatican and the memo from the U.S. Bishops note that it is even acceptable to use a vaccine that comes from morally problematic sources, provided that there are no reasonable alternatives. As the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith affirms, "The moral duty to avoid such passive material cooperation (with problematic cell lines) is not obligatory if there is a grave danger, such as the otherwise uncontrollable spread of a serious pathological agent—in this case, the pandemic spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus that causes COVID-19."

The memo from the U.S. Bishops explains that, following the Pontifical Academy for Life, vaccinations—even ones derived in some way from illicit material—are considered a "proportional" medical treatment because they stop the spread of a pathological agent that endangers "public health" and they protect "innocent" populations, including children.

Since the availability of COVID-19 vaccines is likely to be highly limited in terms of number and manufacturer, Catholic faithful will not have a high level of choice in the vaccines they receive. Moreover, the Church has for many years accepted the moral permissibility of receiving many vaccines that are connected to morally problematic processes—for Hepatitis A, Measles, Mumps, and Rubella, etc.—because of the lack of alternatives and for the sake of the common good. Importantly, this does not justify abortion, but articulates how we may, in good conscience informed by the Church’s guidance, receive the vaccines available.

The Church calls Catholics (1) to make their frustration known about the medical marketplace’s connection to illicit cell lines but, nevertheless, (2) to know that the reception of these vaccines is morally permissible because of (a) the gravity of life-threatening and widespread disease and (b) the proportionately important role that herd immunity plays in combating such disease, especially in a state of global pandemic.

If you have any further questions about the Catholic Franciscan responsibility for the COVID-19 vaccination, please reach out to us.



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