



SOUTH DAKOTA CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

Statement of the Bishops of South Dakota Regarding COVID-19 Immunizations

December 30, 2020

Sixth Day in the Octave of Christmas

Introduction

Two weeks ago, South Dakota began receiving shipments of vaccines produced by Pfizer Inc. and ModernaTX, Inc. . These vaccines received Emergency Use Authorizations (EUA) through a Food and Drug Administration (FDA) crisis procedure that facilitates the availability and use of vaccines during public health emergencies. Additional vaccine shipments are expected on a weekly basis. While it is unclear when doses will be available in sufficient quantities to meet all demand, public officials have established a plan for orderly distribution. According to this plan, health care workers and long-term care facility workers and residents will be among the first given the opportunity to be vaccinated.

Moral Acceptability of COVID Vaccines

The question has arisen whether any COVID vaccines were developed with cell lines originating in the tissue of an aborted baby and, if so, whether a Catholic can accept such a vaccine in good conscience. We have been informed that the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines were not developed using cell lines that originated in the body of an aborted baby at any level of design, development, or production, though their efficacy may have been evaluated with a test with such a connection.¹ However, other vaccines in development have used abortion-derived cell lines in development, such as those made by AstraZeneca and Johnson & Johnson (Janssen).²

To consider the permissibility of using such vaccines, it may be helpful to give a brief overview of the moral principles the Church teaches us to use in evaluating the problem of *cooperation in evil*. In the language of moral theology, *formal cooperation* occurs when a person cooperates in an immoral act with another, and shares the other's immoral intention. *Formal cooperation* is always wrong. If a person cooperates in some way with another's immoral act but does not share the intention, it is described as *material cooperation*. Material cooperation, which can be wrong under some circumstances, can be further categorized as *immediate* (direct) or *mediate* (indirect) – depending upon whether one cooperates in the sinful act itself, or whether by doing some other thing to make the sinful act possible. Additionally, cooperation may be either *remote* or *proximate*, according to the “distance” (either temporally or materially) between the act of cooperation and the sinful act itself.³

The use of vaccines that depend on abortion-connect cell lines can be described in theological terms as “remote mediate material cooperation” with the evil of abortion. With the Pfizer and Moderna products,

¹ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, [“Vaccines for Covid-19” Memorandum](#), Nov. 20, 2020.

² Charlotte Lozier Institute, [“Analysis of Covid-19 Vaccine Candidates,”](#) last updated Dec. 14, 2020.

³ [“Moral Reflections on Vaccines Prepared from Cells Derived from Aborted Human Foetuses,” Pontifical Academy for Life \(2005\).](#)

the connection is even further removed to confirmatory testing, not the vaccine itself. As such, the Church recognizes that we may accept such vaccines IF no alternatives are available and if proportional reason exists, such as an uncontrolled pathogen that poses serious risk to many members of society. The moral justification for the use of such vaccines may indeed be viewed as an act of charity for the good of others, especially the vulnerable. Church teaching has also insisted that those involved in development of such vaccines have a higher degree of responsibility than those who have no voice in research and development decisions. And yet we must remember abortion is an unspeakable crime against the moral law. We must not be silent about this serious evil. It is therefore appropriate to make our respect for life and objection to such vaccines known, which might be done in a variety of ways (e.g., writing letters, in media, through associations, etc.). Nevertheless, to be clear, if the afore-stated conditions are met, Catholics may in sound conscience receive such a COVID-19 vaccine.

Moral Duty

The separate question has also been raised whether Catholics have a general moral duty to immunize against COVID-19. As the Vatican wrote recently, “practical reason makes evident that vaccination is not, as a rule, a moral obligation.”⁴ Vaccination is a decision that each person must make for oneself and for those under one’s care (for example, one’s children or an incapacitated adult). There are many potentially relevant facts about this decision. For example, information about vaccine origin, safety, and reliability; one’s own risk for infection and the potential consequences for one’s self and others if infected; the overall severity of the illness and the public health crisis in one’s location; the possibility and risk of adverse side effects of immunization; availability; cost; and related factors.

At the same time, although these are serious considerations, the refusal to immunize could itself involve a degree of moral irresponsibility, depending on the harms that are risked or disregarded. We must be cautious not to employ the same shallow logic that we rightly criticize in pro-abortion argumentation; namely, that it is “my body, my choice,” that my decision is a totally individual one made in isolation from the possible impact on others. While Catholic teaching upholds the values of autonomy and self-determination, it also understands that autonomy is not an absolute right but is conditioned by the common good.

In the present circumstances, as we near the one-year anniversary of COVID-19 in our country, and with the considerable social, economic, physical, emotional, and even spiritual harms we have seen endured across the human family, and recognizing that many persons remain vulnerable, accepting a safe and effective vaccine may be justified as a moral good, an act of solidarity and charity, and is arguably a work of mercy.

Even so, the vaccines are yet new and were created in a timeframe without precedent in modern medicine. To our knowledge, those vaccines currently authorized under an EAU have not yet been tested on or approved for children, and impact on fertility, pregnancy, and other long-term effects are unknown. For the overwhelming majority of people, COVID-19 has not proven lethal or even particularly dangerous, and pursuant to official vaccine distribution plans, the most vulnerable will be afforded the opportunity to immunize prior to the general public, which further mitigates the possible risk posed to those in high-risk categories. Moreover, it also seems that a sizable proportion of the population will voluntarily choose to vaccinate. Taken together with natural immunity from infection (should this general immunological principle hold), herd immunity appears likely to emerge. Therefore, there is no general duty on the part of all persons, irrespective of age, health, occupation, and other circumstances, to receive a COVID-19 vaccination. Vaccination for COVID-19 is not a universal moral obligation. Rather, it should be discerned in light of the considerations outlined above.

⁴ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, [Note on the morality of using some anti-Covid-19 vaccines](#), Dec. 21, 2020.

Summary

- Catholics may accept COVID-19 vaccines in good conscience, despite remote connection to abortion, IF no better alternatives exist and for proportionally serious reason.
- COVID-19 vaccination is not a moral obligation; rather, it calls for discernment of many factors.

The last year has been a time of great suffering for many, yet also cause for much gratitude: it has been an occasion for deeper conversion, to turn to God and say, “save us Lord!” (c.f. Ps. 106:47.) In this time as we prayerfully seek the common good, the Church reminds us that the highest common good is not of this world, but is eternal. The highest good is friendship with God, a joyful friendship that takes root and grows day by day when we open our hearts evermore to His saving love. In confidence that God hears our cries, we entrust our prayers to the intercession of the Blessed Mother.



The Most Reverend Donald E. DeGroot
Bishop of Sioux Falls



The Most Reverend Peter M. Muhich
Bishop of Rapid City