COVID-19 VACCINES: MORAL EVALUATION - UPDATED

As of late August 2021, there is one COVID-19 vaccine with full U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approval from Pfizer, and two vaccines with emergency use authorization from Moderna, and Johnson & Johnson. Irrespective of approval status, the main ethical concern with any vaccine is that it is developed, tested, and produced in such a manner that is morally irreproachable. In this regard, a primary focus is the use of cell lines derived from elective abortions. Dignitas personae, specifically no. 34-35, is the most important and authoritative magisterial teaching on this topic.¹

Not all COVID-19 vaccines are morally equivalent. The Charlotte Lozier Institute continues to track COVID-19 vaccine development, allowing them to be divided into three groups based on their use of abortion-derived cells: (1) those that do not use abortion-derived cell lines whatsoever; (2) those that do not use abortion-derived cell lines in production, but use them in another point in the process; and (3) those that use abortion-derived cells in the production of the vaccine.² Those vaccines in group 1 are the best ethical choice, while those in group 2 are preferable to those in group 3. If no viable option exists from group 1, consideration must be given to using vaccines from groups 2 or 3. As a 2005 reflection from the Pontifical Academy for Life explained, according to the principle of cooperation, if no effective alternative exists, serious reasons may permit individuals to use vaccines which utilize abortion-derived cells to protect their own lives and those of others.³

The Johnson & Johnson vaccine was developed and is being produced using PER.C6 embryonic cells and falls into group 3. While not developed or produced using abortion-derived cell lines, the vaccines developed by Moderna and Pfizer have both used HEK293, a cell line from an abortion in 1973, for confirmatory testing and would fall into group 2. Without considering the safety, efficacy, and availability among options, using the logic of choosing the lesser evil, the vaccines developed in group 2 should be preferred to those in group 3. As such, for those with a choice, “Pfizer or Moderna’s vaccines should be chosen over Johnson & Johnson’s.”⁴ However, as the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith notes, “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.”⁵ Therefore, for those who are only able to receive the vaccine from Johnson & Johnson, although it is the most morally compromised, it can nevertheless be received in good conscience.

Until an equivalently safe, effective, and available alternative from group 1 exists, individuals, especially those whose health is at risk and those who are responsible for the health of others, may make use of the vaccines from Pfizer, Moderna, or Johnson & Johnson.
“under protest” without incurring moral guilt. Although the Pfizer vaccine now has full FDA approval, there are still grave moral concerns about the utilization of abortion-derived cell lines with the vaccines from Pfizer, Moderna, and Johnson & Johnson. That being said, under case-specific conditions, if there are no other alternatives available and the intent is to preserve life, there is, in principle, nothing morally prohibitive about using any of these vaccines.

Normally, in light of a proper Christian concern for personal health, the health of others who are vulnerable, public health, and the common good, there must be serious reasons for refusing immunization against dangerous contagious diseases. The fact that each currently available vaccine uses abortion-derived cell lines cannot be minimized, and, therefore, some people may be led to refuse vaccination in good conscience. As the Wisconsin Catholic Conference highlighted in a recent statement, “Nobody should violate the sanctity of conscience by forcing a person to do something contrary to his or her conscience. There are many health or ethical reasons why a person may refuse COVID-19 vaccination.” As the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has itself clarified, despite erroneous assertions to the contrary, as a medical intervention, vaccination is not morally obligatory and therefore must remain entirely voluntary. Every person must make a prudential judgment about whether COVID-19 vaccination is appropriate for his or her circumstances, weighing carefully the medical and moral facts, and the potential risks versus hoped for benefits. No matter one’s decision, every person must remain committed to taking the necessary precautions to lessen COVID-19 transmission.

---