

The faithful may, without qualms of conscience, receive the available COVID-19 vaccines to protect their own health and the health of others. They may also, in conscience, decide to decline the use of such vaccines or to wait for others that have no ethical taint. –Bishop John Folda

COVID-19 and the use of vaccines

Since last spring, the COVID-19 pandemic has gripped the world, and it continues to impact our nation, our families, and our Church in a profound way. But now, after months of intense work and speculation, several potential vaccines have emerged that give hope for substantial protection from the virus, and more are in development. In fact, at the time of this writing, one of these vaccines has been approved for use in the United States, and approval of another seems imminent. But questions have now arisen about the ethical side of these vaccines and whether we as Catholics should take the vaccines that are now being distributed. Recent reports have revealed that some of the vaccines, like many others already in common use, have certain problems from an ethical point of view, specifically their connection to the use of cell lines derived from past abortions.

Many decades ago, researchers developed cell lines from the tissue of aborted infants, and these cell lines have become widely used in many types of medical research, including the development of vaccines. The Church teaches that it was morally wrong for researchers and pharmaceutical companies to create abortion-derived cell lines. However, because any connection to the past original act of abortion is extremely remote, people may for serious reasons use vaccines produced with such cell lines. Based on authoritative guidance from the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and the Pontifical Academy for Life, it is clear that preserving one's health and that of others outweighs the very remote association with past abortions, which were neither desired nor intended by those now using the vaccines.

It is also important to note that the COVID-19 vaccines do not use embryonic stem cells, nor do they use cells from actual abortive fetal tissue. Some of the manufacturers use the cell lines for actual production of a vaccine, while others only use the cells for testing. And still others do not use the questionable cell lines at all.

While it can be morally acceptable for persons to receive vaccines that involve ethically problematic sources, the Church tells us that it is also necessary for recipients to register their protest and to advocate for the availability of vaccines that have no links to unethical practices. Vaccine recipients can express this directly to their health care providers, and some pharmaceutical companies have already responded by changing their development protocols. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has also strongly advocated to the federal government for ethically produced vaccines that have no connection to immoral practices like abortion.

A few voices have claimed that Catholics should not and cannot receive any vaccines that have any connection with abortion-derived cell lines. However, this objection does not reflect Catholic teaching. The faithful may, without qualms of conscience, receive the available COVID-19 vaccines to protect their own health and the health of others. They may also, in conscience, decide to decline the use of such vaccines or to wait for others that have no ethical taint. Unfortunately, no such vaccine is nearing availability, and future vaccines may have more ethical problems than those becoming available now. As such, the urgency of the current situation allows for the use of vaccines that are less than perfect in an ethical sense.

Some have wondered if there can be a mandate that requires the use of vaccines. There will always be certain individuals who should not receive vaccines for medical reasons determined in consultation with a physician. The principle of autonomy may lead others to consider the use of vaccines in general to be unacceptable. Certain religious denominations, like the Christian Science Church, teach against the use of any vaccines at all. But there is no Catholic teaching that the reception of vaccines, including those that rely on fetal cell lines from abortions that happened long ago, is sinful.

The social teaching of the Church requires that all of us work together for the common good, and so it would seem reasonable in the current circumstances to support the vaccination efforts now

underway. The COVID-19 virus has proven to be very dangerous, especially to vulnerable segments of our population. The current pandemic has caused much harm and sorrow across the globe, and by now many of us know someone who lost their life to COVID-19 or was profoundly impacted by its effects. It would therefore seem advisable, not only for ourselves but for those we love and for the sake of the common good, to consider receiving the vaccination that will be available in the near future.

Vaccines have long been used to protect public health and to ward off the effects of various diseases that once devastated the population: smallpox, polio, mumps, measles, rubella, and whooping cough. Getting an annual flu shot has become a normal practice for many of us. The COVID-19 vaccines are still very new, and some of their effects remain unknown. Every medical procedure carries certain risks, and vaccines are no exception. So an individual must weigh the benefits and the burdens of receiving the vaccine, and there is no absolute duty on the part of all persons to be vaccinated.

But there are also risks to declining this or any other vaccine for a dangerous disease, and those risks affect not only ourselves but also those around us, especially those who are most vulnerable. So whether or not to be vaccinated is a personal and prudential decision, but not necessarily a private one. While Catholic teaching upholds the values of autonomy and self-determination, we also understand that autonomy is not an absolute right (as pro-abortion advocates believe). Our self-determination is always conditioned by the common good, the needs of our brothers and sisters. With the pandemic still causing great harm in many parts of the world, including our own state, and with a large portion of the population still at risk, accepting a safe and effective vaccine can be justified as a moral good, an act of solidarity with our brothers and sisters, and even an act of charity and mercy.