

CATHOLIC DIOCESE OF SPOKANE

Office of the Bishop

January 29, 2021

Dear Catholic Faithful of the Diocese of Spokane,

The distribution of vaccines designed to combat COVID-19 has been an occasion of hope for many people. At the same time, a cell line derived from a past abortion was involved in the overall process that created the two vaccines currently available in the United States. This fact has raised a significant moral question for Catholics and other pro-life individuals: *Can we morally take such a vaccine?* I have heard the worry, confusion, and fear borne by people as they have grappled with this question and other matters associated with the vaccine. This distress is likely further heightened in this month of January as we have marked the 48th anniversary of the fateful *Roe v. Wade* decision and anticipate policy and legislative moves on the stateⁱ and federal levels that may further endanger the dignity of the human person.

In my shepherding and teaching roles as the Bishop of Spokane, I wish to address this moral issue raised by the current COVID-19 vaccines and provide some practical guidance in accordance with the moral principles and teaching of the Catholic Church. I offer three points:

One. We may morally receive the currently available vaccines. Prior to COVID-19, the Church had outlined principles regarding the morality of taking vaccines associated with past abortions.ⁱⁱ In brief, the accepting of such a vaccine is connected to the past abortion through what is called “remote material cooperation.” This kind of cooperation *does not provide something essential to the evil action* committed by another and is *multiple causal steps removed* from the evil. The Catholic moral tradition has long held that such cooperation can be justified by a morally proportionate reason.ⁱⁱⁱ The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) affirmed what many moral theologians and bishops had already recognized – that such morally proportionate reasons are present during this time of pandemic.^{iv} We may accept these vaccines for the morally proportionate reasons in this circumstance, such as the preservation of health, lives, and livelihoods. If we do, we should opt, if possible, for the vaccine with the *most remote connection* to abortion and *voice our moral objection* to the use of abortion-derived cell lines as outlined in point three below. The currently available vaccines by Moderna and by Pfizer/BioNTech are both ethically equivalent in their degree of remoteness to abortion.

Two. We are not morally obligated to take a vaccine. The CDF, in the same document that affirms the moral permissibility of taking COVID-19 vaccines, states that vaccination “must be voluntary.”^v Individuals are morally free to decline the vaccine. Nevertheless, people should remain attentive and responsive to ways that they can contribute to the common good in this time of pandemic.

Three. We should take this opportunity to advocate for more ethical research and pharmaceutical development. It is incumbent upon us as pro-life individuals to advocate for higher ethical standards in biomedical research. I recommend two forms of advocacy. First,

we ought to voice our moral protest to pharmaceutical companies that use of abortion-derived cell lines. Second, we should consider financially supporting research institutions that are actively working to eliminate our reliance on these ethically problematic materials.^{vi} The Diocese of Spokane has provided additional information on how to advocate for ethical research at www.dioceseofspokane.org/advocate-for-ethical-research.

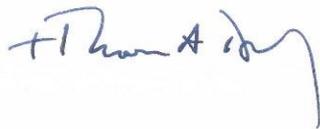
While many people may be satisfied by my brief teaching in this letter, there are likely others who would like to know more. At my direction, the Diocese of Spokane has posted further materials at www.dioceseofspokane.org/guidance-on-covid-19-vaccines.

I must emphasize that the Church's clear teaching on the moral permissibility of accepting COVID-19 vaccines can in no way be seen as a validation of abortion or of the use of biological materials derived from them. As Archbishop Naumann of Kansas City and Bishop Rhoades of Fort Wayne-South Bend have stated, "we should be on guard so that the new COVID-19 vaccines do not desensitize us or weaken our determination to oppose the evil of abortion itself and the subsequent use of fetal cells in research."^{vii}

It has been over a year since a Catholic hospital in Washington State treated the first confirmed COVID-19 case in the United States.^{viii} Since then, Catholics, from the bedside to the church pew, have confronted the challenges of this time with admirable generosity, ingenuity, and – above all – confidence in God. Yet we have also experienced how this pandemic has engendered resentment and division in our society and even within the Body of Christ. Sadly, we have seen differences in prudential decisions overshadow the unity rooted in charity and the sacraments. If we look at the present question of whether to accept a COVID-19 vaccine, we know that people will come to differing conclusions as they weigh both moral and prudential matters. For instance, a man may choose to accept vaccination to protect his health and livelihood, and his neighbor may discern that she should reject vaccination as part of a principled stand against violations of human dignity. They are morally free to make such choices. We ought not allow our differing responses to the demands of these times be occasions for division. Instead, I exhort us to be united in our common pursuit of virtue, respect for our neighbor, and humble reliance on God's grace. It is my prayer that as we continue to navigate this time of disease and distress, we, as God's people, *may shine forth as a prophetic sign of unity and concord* in a world in need of healing.

Our Lady of Lourdes, pray for us! St. John Gabriel Perboyre, pray for us!

In Christ,



Most Reverend Thomas A. Daly
Bishop of Spokane

-
- ⁱ The Washington State Catholic Conference lobbies for legislation and public policy on the state level that advance Catholic values in areas involving respect for life, justice, religious freedom, and education. The WSCC also works to oppose legislation that challenge our values. To learn more and get involved, go to <https://www.wacatholics.org/>.
- ⁱⁱ The National Catholic Bioethics Center, a reputable and seasoned champion for Catholic teaching in the realm of bioethics provides a useful summary of relevant Church teaching and applies it to the current question regarding COVID-19 vaccines. [[Link](#)]
- ⁱⁱⁱ Incidentally, the category of remote material cooperation with evil can also be applied to many instances of economic exchange in our inter-connected world due to the evil actions committed by various businesses, such as utilizing unjust labor practices to manufacture a consumer product and supporting abortion by directing some profits to pro-abortion organizations. While the evil actions of certain companies may induce us to avoid their products and services and conscientiously choose alternatives, the Church has not bound us to fastidiously avoid all possible remote material cooperation.
- ^{iv} Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Note on the Morality of Using Some Anti-COVID-19 Vaccines,” n. 3. [[Link](#)]
- ^v Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Note on the Morality of Using Some Anti-COVID-19 Vaccines,” n. 5. [[Link](#)]
- ^{vi} I especially encourage the faithful to financially support the John Paul II Medical Research Institute, which has been dedicated to conducting biotechnological research in accord with Catholic moral teachings. [[Link](#)]
- ^{vii} United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Moral Considerations Regarding the New COVID-19 Vaccines." [[Link](#)]
- ^{viii} Providence Medical Center in Everett, WA admitted the first patient with confirmed COVID-19 on January 20, 2020. [[Link](#)]

