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COVID-19 VACCINES: MORAL EVALUATION

Although there are many factors to consider, the main concern of the Church with any vaccine is that it is developed, tested, and produced in such a manner that is morally licit. In evaluating the morality of a vaccine, the primary concern 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.ⁱ

The Charlotte Lozier Institute has tracked COVID-19 vaccine candidates, 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.ⁱⁱ 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.ⁱⁱⁱ

As of December 2020, there are three promising vaccines that have been developed by Moderna, Pfizer, and AstraZeneca respectively to combat COVID-19. AstraZeneca's vaccine was developed and is being produced using abortion-derived cell lines and falls into group 3. While not developed or produced using abortion-derived cell lines, the vaccines developed by Moderna and Pfizer have used HEK293, a cell line from an abortion in 1972, 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 AstraZeneca's.

Regarding the vaccines from Moderna and Pfizer, a November 20th, 2020 memo from the USCCB states that "it is morally permissible to accept vaccination when there are no alternatives and there is a serious risk to health."^{iv} This same memo clarifies that, although Moderna and Pfizer make use of a "tainted" cell lines, their connection with abortion-derived cell lines is relatively remote. Evaluating the current situation, a recent document from USCCB concludes that: "In view of the gravity of the current pandemic and the lack of availability of alternative vaccines, the reasons to accept the new COVID-19 vaccines from Pfizer and Moderna are sufficiently serious to justify their use, despite their remote connection to morally compromised cell lines."^v Therefore, despite grave concern about the use of abortion-derived cell

lines, there is, in principle, nothing morally prohibitive about using these two vaccines. Until an equivalently safe and effective 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 Moderna or Pfizer “under protest” without incurring moral guilt.

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. At present, particularly because these vaccines are so new, because so much is unknown about their consequences, and because they all use abortion-derived cell lines, some people may still be led to refuse vaccination in good faith. As the National Catholic Bioethics Center points out in their assessment, besides the moral evaluation of the vaccine itself, there are many other significant factors that must be considered in deciding whether to use a vaccine.^{vi}

ⁱ [Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dignitas personae*, September 8, 2008.](#)

ⁱⁱ [Charlotte Lozier Institute, “Update: COVID-19 Vaccine Candidates and Abortion-Derived Cell Lines,” December 14, 2020. PDF file.](#)

ⁱⁱⁱ [Pontifical Academy for Life, “Moral Reflections on Vaccines Prepared from Cells Derived from Aborted Human Foetuses,” June 9, 2005.](#)

^{iv} [United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Memorandum: Vaccines for COVID-19,” November 20, 2020. PDF file.](#)

^v [United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Moral Considerations Regarding the New COVID-19 Vaccines,” December 11, 2020. PDF file.](#)

^{vi} [National Catholic Bioethics Center, “Points to Consider on the Use of COVID-19 Vaccines,” December 8, 2020. PDF file.](#)