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COVID-19 VACCINES: MORAL EVALUATION - UPDATED

As of early March 2021, there are three COVID-19 vaccines with emergency use authorization from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) from Moderna, Pfizer, and Johnson & Johnson respectively. 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.ⁱ

The Charlotte Lozier Institute continues to track 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

The newly authorized 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.”^{iv} 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.”^v 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 Moderna, Pfizer, or Johnson & Johnson

“under protest” without incurring moral guilt. Despite ongoing grave concerns about the use of abortion-derived cell lines, given the current circumstances, there is, in principle, nothing morally prohibitive about using 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. At present, particularly because these vaccines have only received emergency use authorization, 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 pointed 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,” March 3, 2021. 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, “COVID-19 Vaccines: Moral & Ethical Concerns,” March 4, 2021, YouTube video.](#)

^v [Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Note on the morality of using some anti-Covid-19 vaccines,” December 17, 2020.](#)

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