



Theology Corner

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Theological Reflections by Paul Chutikorn - Director of Faith Formation

“Is it Morally Acceptable to Vaccinate Myself or My Children?”

In light of the recent document from the CDF (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith) on the COVID-19 vaccine¹, I wanted to provide some insight into some of the reasons a Catholic may be wary to immediately accept a vaccination, as well as the reasons why the Church has stated that the faithful are free to use certain vaccines that would otherwise be considered morally questionable.

At present, I am only considering the facts of problematic vaccines for a Catholic moral conscience. The primary purpose for which a Catholic might be wary of vaccines is due to the fact that there are some vaccines that were developed from cell lines derived from an induced abortion. The problem being that taking a vaccine which was produced in ways that involve aborted fetal cells can weigh on the conscience of the faithful inasmuch as it puts them in cooperation with an evil. This gets to the heart of the issue – in what way is a Catholic considered to be cooperating in evil by taking a vaccine that is derived from an abortion?

In the moral teachings of the Church, there are different levels of cooperation in an evil: formal, material, proximate, and remote. Formal cooperation has to do with whether someone *voluntarily* cooperates in the evil committed. This is never morally acceptable. In order for someone to be guilty of this type of cooperation, the person would have had to either willfully consent to the abortion itself or take the vaccine while also *approving* of aborted fetal cell use. The vast majority of Catholics would not fit in this category. Material cooperation has to do with the physical action of cooperating with an evil without intention or approval of the evil. Material cooperation can be further divided into proximate and remote cooperation. Proximate cooperation is when someone is directly involved in the morally evil action. In this context, this could be the person who either assisted in the abortion but does not approve of it, or someone who actually took the aborted fetal cells and began experimentation on it (these are also not morally acceptable). Remote cooperation in an evil is cooperating in such a way that

one is removed from the evil action altogether but gives occasion to the action. An example of this would be if someone was buying a product from a store that actively donates a portion of that money to an abortion clinic. You would be cooperating in the sense that you are giving this store money in exchange for their product which they will in turn donate to an evil cause, but you did not approve of this, nor did you directly donate to an abortion clinic (this is morally acceptable, but not desirable).

Getting a vaccination that is derived from aborted fetal cell tissue falls under remote material cooperation because you (presumably) do not approve of the use of aborted fetal cell tissue for experimentation, and you are also not directly involved in this action except in a remote (or distant) way by taking the vaccine. Since the recent document released by the CDF deals specifically with the COVID-19 vaccine, it explains that if there are no other ethical options from which to choose (i.e., a COVID vaccine created from cell lines used with informed consent from either the person themselves or a responsible parent and not from an abortion), then taking the vaccine is morally acceptable. The same goes for other current vaccines which are derived from aborted fetal cells (e.g. the MMR vaccine).

All this being said, as the Vatican document points out, this does not make taking a vaccine obligatory. These choices must be voluntary. There may be good enough reasons to take such vaccines “to protect one’s own health... or to pursue the common good.”² Or perhaps, for reasons of conscience, one has determined that there are *not* good enough reasons to justify a remote cooperation in an evil. This is a choice for the individual to make, by way of an informed decision taking into consideration any potential risks to the health of the most vulnerable.

For more background on this topic, you may also see the 2008 CDF document, *Dignitas Personae*, §§34-35.

¹ Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, “*Note on the morality of using some anti-Covid-19 vaccines.*”, (21 December 2020). https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20201221_nota-vaccini-anticovid_en.html

² Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, “*Note on the morality of using some anti-Covid-19 vaccines.*”, §5.