



COVID-19 Vaccines – an FAQ on Catholic Bioethics

Version 2

March 9, 2021

New Changes, at a Glance

Since the beginning of the pandemic in March of last year, Health Canada has approved four vaccines with which to combat the spread of COVID-19.

As more and more Manitobans have the possibility of being vaccinated against COVID-19, Catholics may be asking themselves questions regarding the ethics and social justice issues surrounding vaccination, beyond the medical question of the effectiveness of the vaccines on offer. For instance, were the vaccines now available developed and made in a manner that is consistent with Catholic moral teaching? In other words, are they morally irreproachable? In literature and the news, you may see the term “morally irreproachable”, which means ethically acceptable.

Of the four vaccines being distributed in Canada, two (Pfizer-bioNTech and Moderna) were created in an ethically acceptable manner, since they were not created using fetal cell lines. Two vaccines however (AstraZeneca and Johnson & Johnson), are problematic from a Catholic ethical standpoint, as the source of the original cell lines from which the vaccines were created and developed are fetal cell lines.

However, Catholics are not necessarily prohibited from taking these vaccines. Questions of conscience, of our intent in getting vaccinated and the moral proximity or distance

from ethically questionable acts that contributed to the creation and development of some vaccines must be taken into consideration.

Therefore the questions of conscience of ethical decision making are the following:

1. Source, production and testing of vaccines where cell material of aborted fetuses or embryos is used.
2. The common good, i.e. protecting all people in the world, especially the vulnerable, from disease and death.
3. The safe, rapid and affordable provision of vaccines to the developing world and other populations at risk.

We ought, therefore, in considering the moral aspects of vaccines, reflect on how to oppose the evil of abortion and promote respect for all life, and on how to best make sure all of us are as healthy as possible, both for ourselves and our families, but also for other people. As Catholics, we should strive towards the common good, within our archdiocese, province and in Canada, as well other less developed countries that may have little or no access to the benefits of vaccination.

To help you in your reflection along these lines, we invite you, therefore, to read the full document ***COVID-19 Vaccines – an FAQ on Catholic Bioethics*** below for further details.

Thank you,

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Why should I consider being vaccinated against COVID-19?

Vaccinations save lives. And in as much as they contribute to the common good with varying levels of effectiveness, the Catholic Church supports and often promotes their use.

The Church also supports and encourages ethical scientific research into the development of vaccines that will mitigate or even end the harm caused by COVID-19, which has been linked with the death to date of more than one million people, and has caused great harm to millions more.

Getting vaccinated comes down to a question of the common good. As the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has stated, “from the ethical point of view, the morality of vaccination depends not only on the duty to protect one's own health, but also on the duty to pursue the common good. In the absence of other means to stop or even prevent the epidemic, the common good may recommend vaccination, especially to protect the weakest and most exposed” ([click here](#) for full document ***On the Morality of using some Anti-COVID-19 Vaccines***, published December 21st, 2020).

Am I obligated to get vaccinated?

No. No one ought to be forced to take a vaccine.

Catholics are free to decide, according to their discernment. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith reminds us that “practical reason makes evident that vaccination is not, as a rule, a moral obligation and that, therefore, it must be voluntary”.

That said, we all need to reflect on the degree of our moral responsibility for the purpose of the common good in deciding to be vaccinated or not since receiving a vaccine saves lives.

Dr. Moira McQueen, the executive director of the Canadian Catholic Bioethics Institute, points out ([click here](#)) that our decisions should be illuminated by Catholic bioethics and social principles, which are based on Christ’s example and teachings, as well as reason and scientific principles.

Are all vaccines equal, according to Catholic ethical teaching?

No.

As the Catholic Bishops of Alberta and the Northwest Territories put it in a [December 2, 2020 letter to the Faithful](#), “the moral issue arises from the fact that vaccine development and testing often make use of cell lines derived from either the tissue of aborted fetuses or destroyed human embryos”.

Pope Francis, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith ([click here](#)), the Pontifical Academy for Life in July 2017([click here](#)), as well as our Canadian bishops on May 21st, 2020 ([click here](#)), have all stressed the importance of vaccines that are **ethically acceptable**, meaning those that have not used cell

lines derived from aborted fetuses or destroyed human embryos, either in their development or testing.

However, as well, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued an “Instruction” back in 2008, entitled ***Dignitas Personae*** (The Dignity of the Person). It point out clearly the moral challenge of vaccines that might use fetal tissue and human embryos in their development or production. The document, citing Saint John Paul II’s encyclical ***Evangelium Vitae*** (The Gospel of Life), states that “the use of human embryos or fetuses as an object of experimentation constitutes a *crime* against their dignity as human beings who have a right to the same respect owed to a child once born, just as to every person”.

Are the Pfizer-bioNTech and Moderna vaccines currently being distributed in Canada morally acceptable?

Yes. As more and more Manitobans get vaccinated, Catholics of our diocese can find comfort knowing that from an ethical standpoint, these vaccines were created in a manner compatible with Catholic moral teaching.

In fact, North Dakota Health has noted ([click here](#)):

*The Pfizer and Moderna vaccines were found to be ethically uncontroversial by the pro-life policy organization the Charlotte Lozier Institute. Further, Brian Kane, senior director of ethics for the Catholic Health Association of the United States, in an interview for **America: The Jesuit Review of Faith and Culture** stated: “In terms of the moral principles of being concerned about the use of any pharmaceuticals that*

were developed from aborted fetuses, that is certainly an issue that we all want to be cognizant of and try to avoid their use. With that in mind, the Pfizer and Moderna COVID vaccines that are coming out are not even tainted with that moral problem.”

The Charlotte Lozier Institute has prepared a document, which it constantly updates, that compares the various new vaccines, pointing out which ones are based on abortion-derived cell lines. To view the latest document, updated on January 4, 2021, [click here](#). For further reading from the Charlotte Lozier Institute on these vaccines and the methods used to produce them, [click here](#).

* The Charlotte Lozier Institute, based in Arlington, Virginia, USA, is a pro-life organization whose goal is to promote deeper public understanding of the value of human life, motherhood, and fatherhood, and to identify policies and practices that will protect life and serve both women’s health and family well-being.

What about the AstraZeneca vaccine that was accepted for use in Canada on February 26? Is it morally acceptable?

Given that the AstraZeneca vaccine was developed using lines of cells derived from aborted fetuses, it is **not** “morally irreproachable”.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops declared in December that the AstraZeneca vaccine is "more morally compromised," and should be avoided if there are alternatives available."

The reason being that AstraZeneca used a cell line known as HEK293 to develop its vaccine. According to the Oxford University team that developed it, the original HEK293 cells were taken from the kidney of an aborted fetus in 1973, but the cells used now are clones of the original cells and are not the original fetal tissue.

And what about the Johnson & Johnson vaccine, accepted for use in Canada on March 5? Is that one morally acceptable?

According to Canada's *Catholic Register*, ([click here](#) for full article):

“Cell lines used in the Johnson & Johnson vaccine are drawn from tissue obtained from two abortions that occurred in the last few decades. Cells of this kind are easily and frequently reproduced in labs and therefore to some are considered far removed from the original source.”

However, once again we can say that the Johnson & Johnson vaccine is **not** morally irreproachable.

What is a Catholic to do, then, if there are no irreproachable vaccines available?

In any decision we make that has moral implications, there are different issues and different degrees of responsibility that must be discerned together as a whole.

The teaching of the Church recognizes that a Catholic, weighing the benefits of the vaccine against the effects of not being inoculated, could receive the vaccine for the common good. ***Even if the situation is morally far from ideal.***

The use of fetuses and embryos in the development of vaccines is abhorrent and morally wrong. However, in times of great need, perhaps such as the present pandemic, if an ethically irreproachable vaccine is not available, then a vaccine derived from either the tissue of aborted fetuses or destroyed human embryos could be taken, under certain circumstances, ***even as the person receiving makes a request for a more ethical vaccine.***

The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's ***Dignitas Personae*** (The Dignity of the Person) makes a distinction between *direct* and *remote* cooperation with regard to the evil of abortion at the root of the development of vaccines ([click here](#) for full document):

*“danger to the health of children [or other vulnerable persons] could permit parents to use a vaccine which was developed using cell lines of illicit origin, while keeping in mind **that everyone has the duty to make known their disagreement and to ask that their healthcare system make other types of vaccines available** (emphasis added). Moreover, in organizations where cell lines of illicit origin are being utilized, the responsibility of those who make the decision to use them is not the same as that of those who have no voice in such a decision.”*

As the Pontifical Academy for Life notes ([click here](#) for full document):

“As for the question of the vaccines that used or may have used cells coming from voluntarily aborted fetuses in their preparation, it must be specified that the ‘wrong’ in the moral sense lies in the actions, not in the vaccines or the material itself.

*The technical characteristics of the production of the vaccines most commonly used ... lead us to exclude that there is a morally relevant cooperation between those who use these vaccines today and the practice of voluntary abortion. Hence, we believe that all clinically recommended vaccinations can be used with a clear conscience and that the use of such vaccines **does not signify some sort of cooperation with voluntary abortion**” on our part (emphasis added).*

In its March 9 **Note on Ethical Concerns Related to Currently Approved COVID-19 Vaccines** ([click here](#) for full document), the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops reiterates the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith’s statement that “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.*” ([Click here](#) for the CDF’s **Note on the morality of using some anti-COVID-19 Vaccines**).

The Canadian bishops further advise:

“If/when presented with the choice, one should choose to receive either the Moderna or Pfizer vaccine over the AstraZeneca or Johnson &

Johnson vaccine. When no choice of vaccine is available, the AstraZeneca or Johnson & Johnson vaccine (or any other COVID-19 vaccine that may be approved) can be used in good conscience with the certain knowledge that the use of such vaccines does not constitute formal cooperation with abortion.

Consequently, if it is possible in a given area or local region to choose a vaccine, Pfizer and Moderna would be recommended at this stage. However, when a choice is not provided or it is quite difficult to have recourse to these said vaccines, given the health urgency at hand and other considerations, nothing morally prevents anyone from receiving in good conscience the AstraZeneca or Johnson & Johnson vaccines or others that may eventually be approved which will have been developed, tested and produced in a similar fashion.”

Dr. Moira McQueen, the executive director of the Canadian Catholic Bioethics Institute, shares this viewpoint:

“People should be aiming to get the vaccines that don’t have aborted fetus components. But if they were not available then the Church is still saying, use them because you’re facing a lethal illness or death. You’re remote from the original source. So remote that you’re not co-operating in evil.”

The **Catholic Register** also notes:

“Health professionals and many in the Catholic faith community encourage people to get the first vaccine available to them since the moral responsibility of helping to achieve herd immunity from this deadly disease as soon as possible outweighs any ethical concerns.”

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops also recommends that Catholics openly state their ethical concerns about morally compromised vaccines. In a March 2nd statement about the Johnson & Johnson, it argues that though taking these vaccines may be acceptable, Catholics should continue in efforts to push pharmaceutical companies to look more ethically at the matter:

“While we should continue to insist that pharmaceutical companies stop using abortion-derived cell lines, given the world-wide suffering that this pandemic is causing, we affirm again that being vaccinated can be an act of charity that serves the common good.”

Other material for further reflection

For further reflection on how, in other manners, to protect the health of all, and other ways in which we can promote respect for life:

The Catholic Health Alliance of Canada has produced a document which can assist Catholics in their reflections, ***Ethical Issues Concerning Vaccines Derived from the Tissues of Aborted Fetuses***. To read it, [click here](#).

USCCB published this article on the Johnson & Johnson vaccine: ***U.S. Bishop Chairmen for Doctrine and for Pro-Life Address the Use of the Johnson & Johnson Covid-19 Vaccine*** To read it, [click here](#).

Katarina Lee, ethicist at St. Boniface Hospital, led an online presentation on vaccines on November 5, 2020 for Life’s Vision Manitoba. [Click here to access the video of this conference](#).