



## FORMING CONSCIENCES ON COVID VACCINES What Catholics Should Know

With the increasing availability of COVID-19 vaccines, and a plethora of information from varied sources, we have a particular responsibility as Catholics to seek the truth and form our consciences. While vaccines hold promising relief from the coronavirus pandemic, not all vaccines are created equal. There are serious medical-moral questions that must be considered in order to form one's conscience so as to make the best vaccination decisions possible amidst the competing voices surrounding us.

The following are some important points about Catholic moral teaching in light of coronavirus vaccines to assist in our prayerful decision-making.

### IF I DECIDE TO GET VACCINATED, DOES IT MATTER WHICH VACCINE I GET?

Not all COVID vaccines are morally equivalent. Some vaccines have a connection with fetal cells obtained from abortion. Currently, three vaccines have been approved for use in the United States. The Pfizer and Moderna vaccines do not use the aborted fetal cell line in the production of the vaccine.<sup>1</sup> The Janssen/Johnson & Johnson vaccine however, does use the aborted fetal cell line in the production of their vaccine. As additional vaccines come into the market, these too will have to be evaluated with the same moral criteria.

As the Bishops of the United States have reminded us, "If one can choose among equally safe and effective COVID-19 vaccines, the vaccine with the least connection to abortion-derived cell lines should be chosen. Therefore, if one has the ability to choose a vaccine, Pfizer or Moderna vaccines should be chosen over Johnson & Johnson's."<sup>2</sup>

### WHAT OTHER CONSIDERATIONS GO INTO CHOOSING A VACCINE?

Medical considerations include the efficacy of the vaccines<sup>3</sup>, and the state of one's health relative to the degree of risk of coronavirus infection. Certain questions remain open, such as the effects of the vaccine on pregnant women, unborn children, fertility, and other medical factors, and even whether particular vaccines might be more appropriate for particular populations. Many of these things will not be known without further medical research. Currently, all available vaccines have been approved for temporary emergency use and there is much that is not known about their long term effects.



Those who are younger and in good health, and statistically have a lower risk of becoming seriously ill, may reasonably decline, or choose to wait until more is known about the mechanism of the vaccine, or wait until better options are available in the future. Those in more vulnerable categories, such as age and comorbidities, will have to evaluate the various factors relative to their particular state of health.

Each person must make a careful determination about whether a COVID-19 vaccination is appropriate for his or her set of circumstances, weighing carefully the medical and moral facts, and the risks and benefits.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For details on the use of fetal cell lines, visit the Charlotte Lozier Institute at <https://lozierinstitute.org/what-you-need-to-know-about-the-covid-19-vaccine/>

<sup>2</sup> *Statement on the Use of the Johnson & Johnson Covid-19 Vaccine*, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, March 2, 2021

<sup>3</sup> Recent data shows that Moderna and Pfizer vaccines are about 94-95% effective. Johnson & Johnson vaccines are about 72% effective. The duration of immunity continues to be tracked.

<sup>4</sup> Fr. Tad Pacholczyk, *Should We Take Whatever Vaccine is Offered?*, Making Sense of Bioethics, March 9, 2021

## **CAN I CHOOSE WHICH VACCINE TO GET?**

Because of the limitations of vaccine availability, currently each provider distributes only the brand of vaccine they have been able to obtain at any given time.

## **WILL I BE INFORMED ABOUT WHICH VACCINE WILL BE AVAILABLE?**

Yes, most providers will tell you which vaccine will be administered before you arrive for the scheduled appointment. If it is not on the registration page, it may be included in a confirmation email or text message. While vaccination providers may not have all vaccine options available simultaneously, it would be wise, if possible, to ask for either the Pfizer or Moderna vaccines, when making a vaccination appointment.

## **CAN I REFUSE TO GET A PARTICULAR VACCINE?**

Yes. You can always refuse to take a particular vaccine, and if you do so, be sure to let your provider know why. It is always important to weigh your decision with an informed Catholic conscience relative to your own medical circumstances. Deciding about vaccines is a complex choice which must be discerned carefully in light of each individual's health situation.

## **HOW CAN WE ENCOURAGE HEALTHCARE PROVIDERS AND PHARMACEUTICAL COMPANIES TO RESPECT CATHOLIC MORAL TEACHING?**

Most healthcare providers do not even realize that the Johnson & Johnson vaccine is produced using aborted fetal cell lines. Patients should, therefore, thoughtfully and respectfully voice their concerns to their healthcare providers and to pharmaceutical companies. If more people speak up it will help to encourage the production and use of ethical alternatives.<sup>5</sup>

Contact information of vaccine manufacturers and sample letters advocating for the ethical production of vaccines are available at: [www.usccb.org/resources/letters-pharmaceutical-companies](http://www.usccb.org/resources/letters-pharmaceutical-companies).

## **CAN VACCINES BE MANDATED?**

The Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith recently noted, "Practical reason makes evident that vaccination is not, as a rule, a moral obligation and that, therefore, it must be voluntary."<sup>6</sup> Each individual has the right to accept or decline a vaccine.<sup>7</sup>



## **WHERE CAN I GET MORE INFORMATION?**

More detailed information from reliable sources, including the Holy See, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, and The National Catholic Bioethics Center can be found on our vaccine resource page at [www.worcesterdiocese.org/vaccines](http://www.worcesterdiocese.org/vaccines).

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<sup>5</sup> The U.S. Bishops wrote to the Commissioner of the FDA in April 2020 in the early days of the pandemic asking the FDA to help ensure "that Americans will have access to vaccines that are free from any connection to abortion" and pointed out that there is no need to use morally compromised cell lines to produce a COVID-19 vaccine, or any vaccine. Other cell lines or processes that do not involve cells from abortions are available and are regularly being used to produce other vaccines. (USCCB, *Moral Considerations Regarding the New COVID-19 Vaccines*, December 2020)

<sup>6</sup> *Note on the Morality of Using Some Anti-Covid-19 Vaccines*, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, December 2020

<sup>7</sup> *Vaccines and Conscience Protection* – Joint Statement of the Catholic Medical Association, American College of Pediatricians, Christian Medical and Dental Association, and National Association of Catholic Nurses <https://www.cathmed.org/vaccines-and-conscience-protection/>