



WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

January 13, 2021

STATEMENT OF THE CATHOLIC BISHOPS OF WISCONSIN ON THE MORALITY OF COVID-19 VACCINES

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

Over the past ten months, our lives have been impacted by COVID-19 and the subsequent disruption that it has caused in society. The tragedy of premature death and fear of infection has been experienced worldwide and its lasting effects are still unknown. Fortunately, the United States and other countries have undertaken a process to develop vaccines to combat the virus and these vaccines are now being made available throughout Wisconsin.

While access to effective vaccines is certainly welcome news and promises a great contribution to public health and safety, several moral considerations have arisen about their development.¹ Some vaccines have been either manufactured or tested with cell lines derived from the victims of abortion. Furthermore, the potential for mandatory reception of the vaccine poses questions regarding the right of conscience not to be vaccinated. Finally, advancing the common good requires reflection on how to effectively combat this disease, protect others and ourselves from the virus, and return to normalcy.

We do not address the medical efficacy of any particular vaccine. Individuals should discuss such concerns with qualified health professionals. However, we wish to respond to important moral questions surrounding vaccination and offer spiritual guidance to assist Wisconsin Catholics in forming their consciences and in following Jesus's command to love one another.

The Reception of a COVID-19 Vaccine

We are fortunate that vaccines have been developed which purportedly are over 90 percent effective in combating the virus. As of this writing, there are several different companies with vaccines in various stages of trial or approval. The challenge before us as Christians is that modern vaccines are sometimes manufactured or tested using cell lines from aborted children. This fact presents a significant moral dilemma, since a good end can never justify an evil means. Abortion is gravely wrong and every Christian must avoid participation in this evil.

The two earliest COVID-19 vaccines, manufactured by Pfizer and Moderna, fortunately do not use a cell line derived from an abortion in their manufacturing. During their testing, however, they did make use of abortion-derived cell lines. Potential vaccines from other companies make use of aborted cell lines both in testing and manufacturing, thus increasing the moral dilemma.

Catholic moral theology has always made a distinction between formal and material cooperation in an act which is morally compromised. Formal cooperation with a moral evil such as abortion is always sinful. An example of this kind of cooperation might be the doctor or nurse who directly assists with, and intends, the abortion itself. Material cooperation can be different in that it does not intend the evil act and is often more distant or remote from the act itself. For example, one might patronize a store to buy laundry detergent, knowing that the parent company of the store sometimes donates to an entity which in turn performs abortions. In this particular example, the cooperation with any potential evil is quite remote and not in itself sinful.

Taking all of this into account, the [United States Conference of Catholic Bishops \(USCCB\) has recently stated](#) that the use of current COVID-19 vaccines is morally permissible because of the remoteness of material cooperation.²

¹ The Charlotte Lozier Institute provides an assessment of vaccine candidates at <https://lozierinstitute.org/update-covid-19-vaccine-candidates-and-abortion-derived-cell-lines/>.

² Further COVID-19 vaccines resources are provided at <https://www.usccb.org/prolife/biomedical-research>.

This statement was further bolstered by the [Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith \(CDF\)](#) in Rome, which is the Holy Father's own doctrinal and moral office. Also, this same position was taken by the well-respected [National Catholic Bioethics Center \(NCBC\)](#). If a choice of vaccine is possible, the ones that are the least morally compromised should always be requested. However, when there is no choice, the Church teaches that it is morally permissible to receive the vaccine.

The Right to Act in Conscience

There will likely be those who, in conscience, do not wish to be vaccinated at this time. Reasons might include a concern about the safety of the vaccine, lasting moral concerns over the even remote cooperation in an abortion, or a general desire to exercise personal freedom in this matter. Such a choice must be treated with respect and those who do not wish to be vaccinated should not become the victims of discrimination. However, those who forgo vaccination should continue to do all in their power to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and ensure that their decision does not directly endanger the lives of others. It is important too that those who forgo vaccination do not judge others who have decided to receive the vaccine.

Promotion of the Common Good

In the end, it is our responsibility as Catholics to promote the common good in society, act in solidarity with our neighbor, and protect human life. How best to fulfill this duty requires reflection, prayer, and the formation of conscience informed by reason and natural law. Vaccination allows us to fulfill one of the greatest of God's commandments – to love our neighbor as ourselves. Those who are medically vulnerable and in need of vaccination should be afforded the means to access it.

Equally important is the need to strongly advocate for the development of vaccines that have no connection to abortion. Catholics should examine vaccines and know about the use of abortion-derived cell lines in their testing and manufacture, as well as more ethical options in development. We urge pharmaceutical companies and medical researchers to discontinue using abortion-derived cell lines and instead seek ethical alternatives.

Let us pray that God will lift this pestilence from us and that the lessons we have learned from these months of struggle will draw us ever closer to Him.

Sincerely Yours in Christ,

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