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LETTER of BISHOP CARY

On COVID-19 VACCINES

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In our COVID-battered world the arrival of vaccinations has raised hopes of longed-for relief. But the highly complex circumstances that produced the vaccines in record time, not least their links to abortion research, have caused many to question whether we can take them in good conscience.

It falls to the pope and the bishops to provide authoritative guidance so faithful Catholics can make conscience-forming distinctions in a time of confusion and find peace of soul in the midst of turmoil.

COVID-19 is not the first pandemic the Catholic Church has had to confront in her history, so she does not engage it with a mind like an empty slate. In the last two decades the Church has given repeated scrutiny to the use of cell lines from aborted fetuses in vaccine research and development, to discern different degrees of cooperation with evil acts of others on the part both of those who produce vaccines and of those who receive them.

Toward that end, it must be noted that none of the three vaccines currently (or soon to be) available resulted from *new* abortions. Rather, researchers make use of materials from the bodies of fetuses aborted previously, such as one in Holland in 1973 from which a fetal cell line was derived. The moral status

of the vaccines, therefore, turns on the relationship each of them has to that 1973 fetal cell line or others like it.

What matters morally is whether the drug company used the abortion-derived cell line (1) in *all* phases of development (design, manufacture, and testing); (2) in *some* phases, for example, confirmatory testing and manufacturing; or (3) only to confirm the vaccine's efficacy *after* it had been produced, but in no other phase of development.

Pfizer and Moderna took the latter route (#3). Syringes that inject these vaccines do not introduce into the body of the recipient any material obtained from an abortion. In the case of these two vaccines the connection with the original evil of abortion decades ago is very remote. That abortion did not affect the shaping or the making of the end-product vaccines; it only played a (dispensable) part in confirming their reliability.

In contrast, the AstraZeneca vaccine was extracted from a cell culture that included abortion-derived cell lines (option #1), thereby involving a presumably deliberate willingness on the part of the company to capitalize on the unjust taking of an innocent human life.

All that being said, it is realistic to assume that most people will not be given a choice between the Pfizer/Moderna and AstraZeneca vaccines; they will simply have to take what is offered them. "In view of the gravity of the current pandemic and the lack of availability of alternative vaccines," Archbishop Joseph Naumann and Bishop Kevin Rhoades conclude in their December statement for the American bishops, "inoculation with the new COVID-19 vaccines in these circumstances can be morally justified." Why? Because "the reasons to accept the . . . Pfizer and Moderna [vaccines] are sufficiently serious to justify their use," especially in view of "their [very] remote connection to morally compromised cell lines."

The "sufficiently serious" reasons include the preservation of health and the saving of life. Who would have such reasons? According to Father Tad Pacholczyk of the National Catholic Bioethics Center, the elderly and those with co-morbidities like diabetes, obesity, or respiratory disease "are among the highest risk groups for adverse outcomes from [COVID-19] infection" and "would clearly have a serious reason" to be vaccinated.

Father Pacholczyk reaches the same conclusion as the American bishops: "While it is a personal decision of conscience as to whether or not to accept a vaccine, it is important to be clear that the Church . . . does not require us to decline it on such grounds in the face of serious reasons."

Out of concern for the profound threat to public and personal health that COVID-19 poses, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in its authoritative letter of 21 December 2020 allows for inoculation even with the morally compromised AstraZeneca vaccine (as do the two American bishops).

When health authorities do not permit citizens to choose their vaccine or when "ethically irreproachable COVID-19 vaccines are not available," the Congregation says, "*it is morally acceptable to receive COVID-19 vaccines that have used cell lines from aborted fetuses in their research and production process.*" In the face of "the otherwise uncontrollable spread of a serious pathological agent [like the Coronavirus], . . . all vaccinations recognized as clinically safe and effective can be used in good conscience with *the certain knowledge that the use of such vaccines does not constitute formal cooperation with the abortion from which the cells used in production of the vaccines derive.*" In other words, the decision to accept the AstraZeneca vaccine in our current circumstances does not involve the commission of sin.

The Congregation hastens to point out that the use of AstraZeneca and like vaccines in the COVID conditions that make it licit "does not in itself constitute a legitimation, even indirect, of the practice of abortion, and necessarily assumes the opposition to this practice "on the part of those so vaccinated. Context-specific approval of the use of AstraZeneca "does not and should not in any way imply . . . a moral endorsement of the use of cell lines proceeding from aborted fetuses."

For those who wish to think through these issues in more detail, I refer you to the following sources, which I found very helpful:

"Answers to Key Ethical Questions About COVID-19 Vaccines" from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops <https://www.usccb.org/resources/Answers%20to%20Key%20Ethical%20Questions%20About%20COVID-19%20Vaccines.pdf>

Pints with Aquinas podcast with Jimmy Akin, "The Vatican on the Morality of COVID Vaccines." <https://pintswith-aquinas.com/the-vatican-on-morality-of-covid-vaccines-w-jimmy-akin/>