

Pastor's Notes: The choice to take the COVID vaccine

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On July 21, the National Catholic Bioethics Center issued a statement on the many proposals springing up around mandatory vaccines for defense against COVID-19. As a pastor of souls, I find this to be good and reasonable guidance from an authoritative Catholic source. This is a very controversial topic that spills over into morality, civil politics, and even Church politics. There are many competing goods and some evils that must be addressed and acknowledged. The choice for taking the vaccine or not is not as simple as many would make it or want it to be. We must be very careful thinking about this in simple black-and-white terms. Just like everything, there are many nuances, exceptions, and variations that have to be taken into account before we render judgment on the issue. If we have learned anything throughout the societal turmoil of the past couple of centuries, it is that we get into trouble when we absolutize things that have more subjectivity to them than we would like. There are absolute truths that bind our consciences, but taking a particular medical treatment such as this vaccine is not one of them, even if it is a good and recommended choice for most.

For my part, I chose to get the vaccine as soon as I was eligible back in the spring, because I come into contact with many people every day, especially those who are in a vulnerable state. I chose to get the Pfizer vaccine, as the Holy See and the U. S. Bishops have declared, this is one of two vaccines not derived from aborted fetuses, and it is morally acceptable, even if it may have been tested with morally objectionable materials. *"There are currently two vaccines (Pfizer and Moderna) being distributed for use in the United States.... Neither [of which] used an abortion-derived cell line in the development or production of the vaccine. However, such a cell line was used to test the efficacy of both vaccines. Thus, while neither vaccine is completely free from any use of abortion-derived cell lines, in these two cases the use is very remote from the initial evil of the abortion."* - from "Answers to Key Ethical Questions about COVID-19 Vaccines," USCCB (Jan. 2021)

Besides the issue of aborted fetuses, there are also concerns that this is a relatively new type of vaccine, and a concern that it is still experimental, as it was so rapidly developed, bypassing the many rigorous trials normally associated with treatments such as this. Furthermore, there have been reports of serious complications and side effects associated with this vaccine that give many legitimate pause in taking it. These objections and hesitations should not be so readily dismissed as some would do and, again, speak against mandating its reception. These, among many other personal reasons, can motivate a person to legitimately object to taking this experimental and potentially dangerous vaccine.

I will always defend the right of conscientious objection, and I respect those who choose not to get it for serious reasons – yes, even moral reasons. The Church takes very seriously the protection of one's conscience, especially when it is informed. No one should ever be coerced against one's conscience, as it is a grave violation of the natural right of human freedom. The statement from the National Catholic Bioethics Center affirms that *"Practical reason makes evident that vaccination is not, as a rule, a moral obligation and that, therefore, it must be voluntary."* Furthermore, it states, *"Mandates, by their very nature, exert pressure that can be severe if employment or the ability to further one's education are threatened."* - from "Vaccine Exemption Resource for Individuals," NCBC (7/21/21) Therefore, the Church should always resist efforts that would impinge upon the freedom of conscience in matters such as this, even if she might promote the common good by voluntary adherence to the guidance of civil authority.

However, a balance must be struck, and we can't have it both ways. Either we get the vaccine or we take responsible measures for our health and the health of others by distancing and, yes, even at times, wearing facemasks. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith said as much in statement in December 2020: *"Those who, however, for reasons of conscience, refuse vaccines produced with cell lines from aborted fetuses, must do their utmost to avoid, by other prophylactic means and appropriate behavior, becoming vehicles for the transmission of the infectious agent. In particular, they must avoid any risk to the health of those who cannot be vaccinated for medical or other reasons, and who are the most vulnerable."* - from "Note on the morality of using some anti-Covid-19 vaccines," Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (Dec. 2020) One major way we do that is by being aware of our own health status. If you feel symptoms consistent with COVID, stay home and get tested. We must be responsible for the common good.

We should be careful about judging others and their motives. Those who push for mandatory vaccines seem to judge and damn those who have very legitimate and good moral and medical reasons to choose not to vaccinate with this vaccine. I know of someone who was told by a doctor that this vaccine would actually be perilous to his health, owing to other conditions he has. Likewise, those who have chosen not to get the vaccine should not judge those who do choose to take the vaccine. Their consciences have led them to take the vaccine for good reason, and we cannot claim conscientious objection if we do not respect the conscientious choice of others. Someone's choice to get the vaccine should not be held against them, or be made fun of, as if they had done wrong.

The vaccine is not the panacea many make it out to be. But it is also not the goblin others make it out to be. This past year and a half since the pandemic has struck has surely stretched us and challenged us in so many ways. We have had to apply all of the principles of Catholic social teaching and moral theology to issues that came suddenly upon us. What we do in the moment of crisis is usually the best we can do with the information at hand. We must judge choices with that in mind, even if, after hindsight, things may be seen more clearly. I pray that we trust that the Holy Spirit is at work in those who have been given leadership in the Church. When we do disagree with them, which is our right and sometimes obligation, in conscience, we should do so respectfully and with the decorum befitting Christian people, after having first submitted ourselves to the judgment of the Church.



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