

The Catholic position on vaccination

This paper will aim to provide clarity and assurances to Catholics about Church teaching and moral issues regarding vaccination. It will demonstrate the Church's support for vaccination to protect the most vulnerable of our society, especially those affected by immunodeficiency, pregnant women and their unborn children. Finally, it will address concerns regarding the development of future vaccines, including those regarding the Church's teaching on vaccination raised by Catholics during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Safety and solidarity with the most vulnerable

The Catholic Church strongly supports vaccination and regards Catholics as having a prima facie duty to be vaccinated, not only for the sake of their own health but also out of solidarity with others, especially the most vulnerable. We believe that there is a moral obligation to guarantee the vaccination coverage necessary for the safety of others. This is especially important for the discovery of a vaccine against COVID-19.

Avoidance of vaccination carries with it dangerous and potentially grave consequences for the most vulnerable in society, and we recognise the anxiety which this is causing to those most at risk.

Concerns have been raised by some about potential side effects of vaccination. We echo the words of the Pontifical Academy for Life published in a 2017 document, published in collaboration with the "Ufficio per la Pastorale della Salute" of Italian Bishops' Conference and the "Association of Italian Catholic Doctors", which commented:

*'From the clinical point of view, it should also be reiterated that treatment with vaccines, despite the very rare side effects (the events that occur most commonly are mild and due to an immune response to the vaccine itself), is safe and effective. No correlation exists between the administration of the vaccine and the onset of Autism.'*¹

Moral obligations and objections

The Church is opposed to the production of vaccines using tissue derived from aborted fetuses, and we acknowledge the distress many Catholics experience when faced with a choice of not vaccinating their child or seeming to be complicit in abortion.

Nevertheless, the Church teaches that the paramount importance of the health of a child and other vulnerable persons could permit parents to use a vaccine which was in the past developed using these diploid cell lines.

In 2005 the Pontifical Academy for Life published a document titled, 'Moral reflections on vaccines prepared from cells derived from aborted human fetuses.' The document details

¹ 'Note on Italian vaccine issue' (2017), Pontifical Academy for Life, <http://www.academyforlife.va/content/pav/en/the-academy/activity-academy/note-vaccini.html> (accessed 26.11.19)

the moral objections towards vaccines which have been prepared from cells derived from aborted human fetuses.

We support the Pontifical Academy for Life's belief 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.'*²

If a pregnant woman, for example a teacher in a school, comes into contact with unvaccinated children, unfair and complex moral decisions may be imposed upon her, including whether it would be safe for her to work during her pregnancy. Exposure to unvaccinated children could incur serious consequences, the gravest of which include a threat to the lives of the mother and her unborn child.

The Pontifical Academy for Life also clearly states the moral obligations which we have as a society to vaccinate in order to protect the health of the most vulnerable. It distinguishes between the work to prevent the unethical production of vaccines and the harms arising from non-vaccination:

*'There remains a moral duty to continue to fight and to employ every lawful means in order to make life difficult for the pharmaceutical industries which act unscrupulously and unethically. However, the burden of this important battle cannot and must not fall on innocent children and on the health situation of the population - especially with regard to pregnant women.'*³

The Church distinguishes between the present unethical sourcing of vaccines and the use of historical cell-lines which were derived from aborted fetuses in the 1970s.

Human society has often benefitted from the wrongs done in the past for which we must repent. We live with the benefits of very questionable medical experimentation. For example, Edward Jenner, who invented vaccination, conducted research by injecting an 8 year old boy with cowpox followed by smallpox. While today such experimentation would be unethical by any standards, we wouldn't deny life-saving vaccination because of its dubious historic provenance.

Covid-19

The Catholic Church prays for and encourages all those who are seeking to find a vaccine against this destructive virus. We hope that ethical sourcing of such a vaccine is possible.

The development of future vaccines

On 7 June 2019 Bishop John Sherrington wrote to the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Public Health and Primary Care urging the Government to promote the future production of vaccines using material from non-human cells or ethically sourced human cells.

² 'Note on Italian vaccine issue' (2017), Pontifical Academy for Life

³ 'Moral reflections on vaccines prepared from cells derived from aborted human fetuses' (2005), Pontifical Academy for Life, <https://www.ncbcenter.org/files/1714/3101/2478/vaticanresponse.pdf> (accessed 15.1.20)

The Department of Health and Social Care gave Bishop John Sherrington the following assurances:

'As I am sure you will agree, the safety and efficacy of vaccines is extremely important. In cases where it can be proven that they are equally effective and as safe as the original vaccine, manufacturers have introduced alternatives to the human diploid cells. However, this has not been the case for rubella, rabies or hepatitis A vaccines.

*'Please be assured that new human foetal tissue will not be used to make these vaccines. Moreover, the Department is not aware of any new vaccines being produced using human diploid cells.'*⁴

Conclusion

We hope that this document has been helpful in providing clarity and assurances about the moral issues regarding vaccination and we encourage Catholics to commit to protecting the most vulnerable in our society, one method of which is effective vaccination.

Bishop Paul Mason (Lead Bishop for Healthcare)

Bishop John Sherrington (Lead Bishop for Life Issues)

⁴ Letter from Nung Yang (Ministerial Correspondence and Public Enquiries, Department of Health and Social Care) to Bishop John Sherrington, (3 July 2019)