

‘Moral Responsibility’ in Question: Catholic Leaders Respond to Johnson & Johnson COVID Vaccine

Tension is rising in the Catholic community as leaders voice concerns over the newest COVID-19 vaccine from Johnson & Johnson with its alleged links to aborted fetal cells.

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops urges against receiving this specific vaccine and instead encourages everyone, if given the choice, to choose either the Moderna or Pfizer vaccine.

Shortly after the FDA issued an Emergency Use Authorization for the J&J vaccine, the USCCB released its statement:

The approval of Johnson & Johnson’s COVID-19 vaccine for use in the United States again raises questions about the moral permissibility of using vaccines developed, tested, and/or produced with the help of abortion-derived cell lines.

Pfizer and Moderna’s vaccines raised concerns because an abortion-derived cell line was used for testing them, but not in their production. The Johnson & Johnson vaccine, however, was developed, tested and is produced with abortion-derived cell lines raising additional moral concerns. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has judged that ‘when ethically irreproachable COVID-19 vaccines are not available ... it is morally acceptable to receive COVID-19 vaccines that have used cell lines from aborted fetuses in their research and production process.’ However, 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's vaccines should be chosen over Johnson & Johnson's.

The archdiocese of New Orleans echoed this sentiment, saying the Johnson & Johnson vaccine is "morally compromised" with its "extensive use of abortion-derived cell lines" but due to the "extremely remote" connection to the same cells, Moderna and Pfizer vaccines are preferred. Its statement also stressed the individual responsibility of those who choose whether or not to vaccinate to consult with their physician.

Michael Jackels, Dubuque, Iowa, archbishop, acknowledges that where choice is able to be made, the Moderna and Pfizer vaccines are preferable. However, if one is not given a choice, as many are not currently, "it is morally acceptable for them to use the Johnson and Johnson vaccine against the serious health risk of the coronavirus." He further elaborates, "they should gratefully receive whatever is available; the sooner, the better. The common good of protecting the public health against a contagious and potentially deadly virus takes precedence over any reservations Catholics might have about being treated with any of the available vaccines."

J&J assured the use of fetal cells in its vaccine are not the original tissue. "Several types of cell lines created decades ago using fetal tissue exist and are widely used in medical manufacturing but the cells in them today are clones of the early cells, not the original tissue," the statement read.

Ken Kniepmann, associate for health for the Florida Conference of Catholic Bishops, says this is only partially true.

"It's true. Their vaccine does not contain any fetal tissue. That's a true statement. It's just kind of incomplete," Kniepmann said. "They originally derived from fetal stem cells, and so it's not fetal tissue, (per se), so they're not injecting baby parts into us, but it would be inaccurate for

them to say that they did not use a cell line derived from an abortion.”

He summed up what many U.S. dioceses have said regarding the three available vaccines: “Ultimately, it’s left to the individual to prayerfully, to look at and discern, but the church is trying to provide some guidance and help folks in understanding the ethical issues that are involved and to say, ‘Listen if you have a choice, we’re always better to not cooperate with evil even if it’s this distant-past, remote evil, we’re always better to not cooperate with it.’”

Blase Cupich, a cardinal from Chicago, is in opposition to many of his colleagues’ views, and believes the “act of love” in vaccinating, regardless of method, is of more importance than the origins of the vaccination itself. He cites the moral responsibility to “look out for each other’s benefit.” {eoa}

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