

Appendix D

Catholic Diocese of Lincoln



Integrating One's Catholic Faith and Sincerely Held Religious Beliefs into Medical Decision-making

Introduction

This resource is intended to help Catholics to make sound ethical decisions about accepting vaccines and immunization, in general and as this may relate to attendance at diocesan Catholic schools, which follow laws on immunization of the State of Nebraska.

The resource outlines the teachings of the Catholic Church regarding vaccines as well as other important considerations on ethical decision-making from the Catholic moral tradition. By respecting the teachings of the Church and integrating key considerations with integrity, Catholics and all people of good will can better form their conscience and act upon their sincerely held religious beliefs.

For a variety of reasons, controversies related to vaccines and immunization arise from time to time. For example, the fact that some vaccines are dependent upon cell lines derived from elective abortions has raised questions for decades. More recently, there have been concerns related to Covid-19 vaccines and boosters, as well as to increases in the childhood vaccine schedule over the last few decades..

People ask questions such as, “Is it ethical to use vaccines dependent upon abortion-derived cell lines (ADCL)?”; “As a Catholic, am I required to receive the recently developed Covid-19 vaccines or boosters?”; and, “How should the commandment to love my neighbor as myself, the duty to promote the common good, and the need to obey just laws, factor into my decision about whether to accept a particular vaccine?” Since scores if not hundreds of vaccines currently are in development, other questions may arise in the future

Answering such complex questions requires careful consideration of many objective factors, including clinical issues and the doctrinal teachings of the Church. Ethical decision-making is often a complex endeavor, as there can be many complex considerations and perspectives. Catholics should carefully reflect on the formal teachings that the Church has issued and draw upon the rich resources in the Catholic moral tradition, several of which are outlined below.

Magisterial Teachings

The magisterium of the Church, as defined by the Instruction *Donum Veritatis* (1990), has issued some specific moral guidance related to vaccines and immunization. This guidance has focused mainly on whether vaccine products dependent upon abortion-derived cell lines (ADCL) may be used.

A. Instructions of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF)

1. Instruction *Dignitas Personae* (2008).

After condemning the derivation of “biological material of illicit origin” (cells/tissues obtained after abortions) and proscribing cooperation in the use of such materials, the CDF stated in no. 36:

“Of course, within this general picture there exist differing degrees of responsibility. Grave reasons may be morally proportionate to justify the use of such “biological material”. Thus, for example, danger to the health of children could permit parents to use a vaccine which was developed using cell lines of illicit origin, while keeping in mind that everyone has the duty to make known their disagreement and to ask that their healthcare system make other types of vaccines available.”

Comment: The statement about using such vaccines is permissive in nature; that is, vaccines dependent on “biological material of illicit origin” *may* be used. *Dignitas Personae* does not teach there is a general obligation to use vaccines or to use vaccines dependent upon “biological material of illicit origin.”

2. Note on the Morality of Using Some Anti-Covid-19 Vaccines (2020).

This Note of the CDF, issued in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, makes three important points:

- a. No. 2. “[W]hen 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.*” (Emphasis in original.)
- b. No. 5. “[P]ractical reason makes evident that vaccination is not, as a rule, a moral obligation and that, therefore, it must be voluntary.”
- c. No. 5. “In any case, from the ethical point of view, *the morality of vaccination depends not only on the duty to protect one's own health, but also on the duty to pursue the common good.* In the absence of other means to stop or even prevent the epidemic, the common good may recommend vaccination, especially to protect the weakest and most exposed. 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. . . .

Comment: Statement a) draws upon and applies the teaching of *Dignitas Personae*. Statement b) recognizes that acceptance of vaccines should be voluntary (as vaccines constitute a medical intervention; see below page __, Informed Consent). Statement c) notes that immunization can be related to the ethical obligations toward oneself and to promote the common good. The CDF recognized that there can be options in promoting the common good.

B. Papal Statements

In the course of the 20th-21st centuries, only Pope Francis made statements related to the morality of accepting vaccines, all related to Covid-19 vaccine products.

- January 10, 2021. In an interview with a television channel (Canale 5/TG24), Pope Francis stated, “I believe that morally everyone must take the vaccine.”
- August 17, 2021. In a public service video (Ad Council, Unity Across the Americas campaign), Pope Francis called getting vaccinated "an act of love."
- January 10, 2022. In an address to diplomats. Pope Francis described health care, including vaccination, as a moral obligation to protect the common good.

Comment: Lumen Gentium no. 25 teaches that “religious submission of mind and will must be shown in a special way to the authentic magisterium of the Roman Pontiff, even when he is not speaking ex cathedra . . . according to his manifest mind and will . . . [which] may be known either from the character of the documents, from his frequent repetition of the same doctrine, or from his manner of speaking.”

Pope Francis’ brief, at times informal statements expressed concerns. Despite some repetition, it is not clear from the character of the documents (for example, a “public service” video) or his manner of speaking that Pope Francis intended to issue binding moral doctrine (compare, for example, John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae* no. 62 (1993); Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae* no. 11, 14, and 15 (1968)).

Practices, Statements, and Resources

Some Church practices, statements, and resources related immunization can be of interest, even if none constitute binding moral doctrine.

A. Practices

The Church has never condemned the theory or practice of immunization; indeed, leaders of the Church have promoted both for over 200 years.

In the 19th century, some popes enacted legislation to encourage vaccination for smallpox. Some popes have publicly announced that they received vaccines (Pope Francis and Pope Emeritus Benedict did so for the Covid-19 vaccine). During the Covid-19 pandemic, the Vatican required employees and visitors to accept Covid-19 vaccines as a condition of employment and entry.

B. Statements and Resources

Several advisory or administrative bodies have issued statements on immunization. While not authoritative moral teaching, they may contain helpful information.

1. Pontifical Academy for Life

- a. “Moral Reflections on Vaccines Prepared from Cells Derived from Aborted Human Fetuses,” 2005

Comment: This statement contains the most extensive reflection by an ecclesial advisory body on the ethical implications of ADCL-dependent vaccines. Its conclusions informed the teachings of the Instruction *Dignitas Personae* (2008).

2. Other Advisory and Administrative Organizations of Interest

- a. Pontifical Academy for Life, Italian Bishops Conference’s National Office for Health Pastoral Care, Association of Italian Catholic Doctors, “Clarifications on the medical and scientific nature of vaccination: Note on Italian vaccine issue,” July 31, 2017.

Comment: This joint statement addressed questions of vaccine ethics based on issues in Italy. It is a local resource, not one for the universal Church.

- b. Vatican COVID-19 Commission, Pontifical Academy for Life, “Vaccines for All: 20 Points for a Fairer and Healthier World,” 2020.

Other Considerations for Ethical Decision-Making from the Catholic Moral Tradition

Beyond formal teachings and statements, there are important resources in the Catholic moral tradition that can be helpful, such as teachings on important ethical principles and elements in the process of ethical decision-making.

A. Three Ethical Principles Regarding Medical Decision-making, Including Vaccines

1. Stewardship of Health and Ordinary/Extraordinary Means

The Church teaches in the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) that “Life and physical health are precious gifts entrusted to us by God. We must take reasonable care of them, taking into account the needs of others and the common good (CCC no. 2288). For almost 500 years, theologians have guided people in fulfilling this duty for their own lives and those of their dependents through the principles of “ordinary and extraordinary” means or treatments. We have an obligation to accept treatments that are “ordinary.” Treatments that are “extraordinary” are considered “optional.” *Ethical and Religious Directives* no. 56 outlines what these principles mean, including their objective content and a scope of discretion in applying them based on individual circumstances.

Comment. Catholics should take reasonable steps to protect themselves and their dependents from the threat of contagious diseases. Catholics should discern with care and sincerity whether a given vaccine constitutes an ordinary means for them or not. While the Church has issued formal teaching identifying one form of ordinary means—providing nutrition and hydration (with or without clinical assistance) to the sick and injured, the Church has not taught that vaccines in general or a specific vaccine constitute ordinary means.

2. Informed Consent/Person and Patient Agency

Individuals have a moral duty and right to accept or refuse clinical treatments. These precede the legal doctrine of informed consent but are consistent with it. Pope Pius XII addressed this issue in 1952:

“12. In the first place it must be assumed that, as a private person, the doctor can take no measure or try no course of action without the consent of the patient. The doctor has no other rights or power over the patient than those which the latter gives him, explicitly or implicitly and tacitly. . . .”

Facilitating informed consent—by disclosing all relevant information, ensuring that patients understand it, and respecting patients’ decisions—are ethical duties for health care professionals. For brief ethical guidance on informed consent and respecting decisions of patients, see the *Ethical and Religious Directives*, no. 26. Also, see the Virtue of Prudence, page 7, below.

3. The Common Good

The Catechism of the Catholic Church contains important teachings on the common good in paragraphs 1905-1912. This rich teaching outlines how individuals find fulfillment essentially in belonging and contributing to communities. The Vatican Council II document, *Gaudium et spes* no. 26, defined the common good as the "the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily." In the Catholic moral tradition, common good was understood as the "good common to societies that share a way of life and goal(s) in common," for example, in the "societies" of the family, a community or state, and in the Church (CCC no. 1910). The common good is a complex principle that addresses a wide range of social issues, including public health.

Comment. While emphasizing the communal nature of human fulfillment and our duties to the common good, the Church teaches that "the common good presupposes respect for the person as such. In the name of the common good, public authorities are bound to respect the fundamental and inalienable rights of the human person . . . such as "the right to act according to a sound norm of conscience and to safeguard . . . privacy, and rightful freedom also in matters of religion" (CCC no. 1907).

In light of Church teachings on the common good, Catholics should not approach decisions about vaccines solely in terms of self-interest or with an exaggerated individualism. Catholics should respect and promote the common good of communities to which they belong. At the same time, respect for persons requires respect for rights of conscience and for the decisions persons make, with informed consent, about medical treatments. Also, as the CDF's Note on the Morality of Using Some Anti-Covid-19 Vaccines (above pages 2-3,) recognized, there can be different ways of promoting the common good.

Three Key Elements in the Process of Ethical Decision-Making

In ethical decision-making, persons go through an internal process of deliberation, discernment, and choosing. While there are many resources in the Catholic moral tradition, this resource will focus on three that are significant for decision-making about immunization and particular vaccines.

1. The Virtue of Prudence

The Catechism of the Catholic Church summarizes the importance of virtues in the moral life, above all the cardinal and theological virtues (CCC no. 1803-1845). The virtues perfect distinctively human powers of the intellect, will, and the emotions, helping each to function optimally and all to work together. The virtue of prudence (CCC no. 1806), the most important of the cardinal virtues, enhances our ability to think through complex issues well. Exercising the virtue of prudence can help people to avoid making decisions based on ignorance, fear, or superficial reasoning, to seek counsel, and to identify optimal ethical responses to complex challenges.

Comment. The virtue of prudence is essential for making sound decisions about immunization or specific vaccines as there are many clinical and social issues to assess. Clinical issues include the nature and dangers of the pathogens against vaccines are available, the nature of and the benefits and risks of receiving single or multi-pathogen vaccine shots, both in the short-term and long-term; and the health status of the person for whom immunization is being considered. It is necessary to assess claims made about the safety and efficacy of vaccines and prudence can be helpful here. For example, initial claims that mRNA Covid-19 vaccines could prevent transmission of the Sars-Cov-2 virus later were found to be unsupported.

With regard to social issues, vaccines are unique medical interventions that can protect not only the individual, but also others from transmission of contagious pathogens and society, which can benefit if the burden of severe illnesses is mitigated. Both the clinical details and the ethical implications of these social benefits should be carefully considered. Making good decisions about these complex sets of issues requires more than simple calculation or gut instincts. Prudence and other virtues are essential.

2. The Formation and Exercise of Conscience

The Church teaches that conscience plays an indispensable role in human action (CCC no. 1776-1794). Conscience is a judgment of reason whereby the human person recognizes the moral quality of a concrete act . . . (CCC no. 1778). Conscience includes the perception of the principles of morality (synderesis); their application in the given circumstances by practical discernment of reasons and goods; and finally judgment about concrete acts yet to be performed or already performed. (CCC no. 1780)

Comment. Catholics are called to form their conscience and to make sincere and truthful conscientious judgments in accord with the teachings of the Church. For example, some people may wish to avoid any involvement with ADCL-dependent vaccines and view pressure to become entangled with ADCL-dependent vaccines as a moral harm, while many others might accept some or all vaccines without moral qualms. When, after careful consideration, people come to a conscientious judgment to reject a particular vaccine, they are obliged to obey their conscience. There still

may be important clinical and ethical considerations to address after a decision to reject immunization relating to the duty to protect one's own health and to promote the common good as the CDF's *Note on the Morality of Using Some Anti-Covid-19 Vaccines* noted (see above pages 2-3).

3. Charity and the Virtue of Religion

The ultimate acts to which we are called as human beings, in particular when making decisions that impact our own lives and health and those of others, are acts of charity and of the virtue of religion. Charity (see CCC no. 1822-1829; 2093-2094), the greatest of the theological virtues, enables us to love God above all things and our neighbors as ourselves. The virtue of religion (CCC no. 2095), which is a human virtue, enables us to render to God all that we owe him as creatures.

Comment. These virtues address our ultimate goal, goods, and duties. They are introduced here for further reflection. A complete explanation is not possible. Whether we are making medical decisions that seem merely practical or are charged with uncertainty and moral import, we should strive to relate our decisions to these ultimate goods and duties.

Conclusion

The theory and practice of immunization, as ordered to individual health and the common good, long have been supported by the Church. While the Church has encouraged immunization and issued doctrinal clarifications that even vaccines dependent on abortion-derived cell lines may be used when there is a sufficiently serious reason, the Church does not teach that every person must accept a given vaccine product or all vaccines. Immunization always involves unique human persons, unique circumstances regarding particular pathogens, unique vaccine products, and free human actions.

Everyone reading this resource should strive to make sound decisions about immunization that promote both individual health and the common good. In discerning and making sound choices, people should draw upon the teachings and moral tradition of the Church, exercise the virtues, and follow the judgment of their well-formed conscience. Such efforts will enable them to act on their religious beliefs in a manner that is consistent with the teachings of the Catholic Church.