

Observer – Vaccines and COVID 19 (By Fr. Ken Wasilewski)

As concerns about the Coronavirus continue, and talk of an imminent vaccine becomes more prevalent, there are a few moral questions about the vaccine which have also arisen. These really come down to two basic areas: first, how a given vaccine is developed, and secondly, the morality of receiving that vaccine (or not receiving it). Generally speaking, the Church has long been a supporter of vaccine development and use. It's something She sees as connected to the Common Good. Vaccines are seen as an important tool in keeping people safe and healthy. Likewise, they help reduce personal and societal suffering caused by certain illnesses. Hence, they're something that can contribute positively to human welfare. However, if a given vaccine is developed using immoral means – such as using tissues from an aborted fetus – then this raises serious moral questions. Historically, this has happened sometimes. Understandably, some people have concerns about whether or not it's morally acceptable to receive such a vaccine. A document from the Pontifical Academy for Life in 2005 addressed these concerns directly, as have other notable theologians (like those at The National Catholic Bioethics Center). Given the forthcoming COVID 19 vaccines, it seems good to revisit the basic guidance the Church has previously offered and which remains especially relevant now. The Church is clear that utilizing fetal tissue from an induced abortion to develop vaccines (or for other uses) is immoral. Likewise, she is clear that Catholics should advocate for moral means in developing vaccines. But when it comes to whether or not a Catholic may, in good conscience, receive a vaccine that has a historical connection to an immoral development, the Church has said it is morally permissible, even if not ideal, to do so. How does She arrive at that conclusion? The answer has to do with the degree of connection (cooperation) the one receiving the vaccine has with the immoral actions involved. The answer is essentially none. The person receiving the vaccine (unless they were one of the developers) had no say, control or participation in those immoral actions that brought about the death of that child. Furthermore, the vaccines actually produced today are not utilizing tissues from abortion. The original actions may have been gravely immoral, but the subsequent actions which are today producing more of that vaccine are not in and of themselves wrong. Therefore, a vaccine received today – even if it was originally developed utilizing tissues from an abortion – has a historical, but not an actual connection to an abortion. Therefore, receiving such a vaccine is morally permissible. However, if there were alternative vaccines that didn't have even a historical connection to an abortion, those would be preferable.

This is good to keep in mind currently. While many of the companies working on a COVID vaccine haven't utilized tissue connected to an abortion, sadly, some have. They're wrong to do so. That being said, even if a COVID vaccine ended up having a historical connection to tissue from an abortion, a Catholic would still be morally permitted to receive it given the Church's previous guidance. A caveat to this would be that Catholics should continue advocating for vaccines developed in more morally acceptable ways. Not surprisingly, some people would still be uncomfortable with such a scenario and might wish to refuse such a vaccine. The Church would allow for such a refusal so long as there was a very serious reason for doing so. Refusing available vaccines – even if developed utilizing immoral means - can create other moral problems. Especially if that refusal could put other people at risk or hinder public health efforts. Doing so might involve working against the common good instead of contributing to it. Given

that possibility, the Church would still encourage vaccine use, even if the only ones available originally involved immoral development. This might be helpful to consider as COVID vaccines begin emerging.