

Making Ethical Decisions about Vaccines **Statement of the Irish catholic Bishops Conference**

The Irish Catholic Bishops Conference welcomes the encouraging news that a number of vaccines for COVID-19 are at an advanced stage of preparation and are likely to be available for use in the near future. The Catholic Church recognises that safe and effective vaccination is an essential aspect of the prevention of disease. We are encouraging Catholics to support a programme of vaccination, not only for their own good, but for the protection of life and the health of those who are vulnerable and for the common good of humanity.

Questions have arisen that human foetal cell-lines, which have their origins in abortions carried out in the past, are used in the development and production of some of the vaccines for COVID-19.

If a more ethically acceptable alternative is not readily available to them, it is morally permissible for Catholics to accept a vaccine which involves the use of foetal cell-lines, especially if the potential risk to life or health is significant, as in the case of a pandemic.¹ Refusal to accept a vaccine could contribute to significant loss of life in the community and especially among those who are most vulnerable. This reality must inform any judgement of conscience.

We confirm the consistent teaching of the Church that abortion is always gravely immoral. The Church has always made a distinction, however, between formal (deliberate) involvement in an immoral act and material involvement, which may be incidental and remote. The decision of those who decide to accept vaccines which have had some link with foetal cell-lines in the past does not imply any consent on their part to abortion.

We note that many of the vaccines currently being developed do not depend for their design or production on foetal cell lines.² Catholics should continue to advocate for the availability of ethically-developed vaccines. In that way they bear witness that biomedical research should always be conducted in a manner which is consistent with respect for life and for human dignity.

Access to healthcare is a fundamental human right. The Church, while respecting intellectual property rights, believes that essential medicines, including vaccines, should be made available on the basis of need rather than on the basis of capacity to pay. This position is consistent with the TRIPS agreement of the WTO, which permits national governments to arrange for the manufacture of essential pharmaceuticals, for domestic use and for the use of poorer countries, even without the consent of patent owners.³

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¹ Cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. *Dignitas Personae*, Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana 2008, #34-35, and Pontifical Council for Pastoral Assistance to Healthcare Workers, *New Charter for Healthcare Workers*, Philadelphia: NCBC 2017, #69-70.

² Cf "An Ethics Assessment of COVID-19 Vaccine Programs" from <https://lozierinstitute.org/an-ethics-assessment-of-covid-19-vaccine-programs/> sourced on 19th Nov. 2020

³ World Trade Organisation. TRIPS Factsheet. https://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/trips_e/tripsfacsheet_e.htm Accessed on 3rd Sept 2020