



OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

DIOCESE OF WHEELING-CHARLESTON

1311 BYRON STREET
POST OFFICE BOX 230
WHEELING, WEST VIRGINIA 26003

December 21, 2020

Dear faithful of the Wheeling-Charleston Diocese,

We have reason to be grateful to God that some vaccines are now being made available to various segments of our American population and eventually to all who live here to inoculate them against the COVID-19 virus. I plan to get vaccinated when it's my turn and I strongly urge all Catholics and other residents of West Virginia to do the same when they have the opportunity.

We must remember that in protecting ourselves through an effective vaccine we are also protecting others. Getting vaccinated, then, is a way of promoting the common good and putting into practice the commandment: *Love your neighbor as yourself.*

Some questions have arisen about a connection between COVID-19 vaccines and abortion. Bishop Kevin Rhoades and Archbishop Joseph Naumann, who chair the US Catholic Bishops' Conference Committees on Doctrine and Pro-life Activities, respectively, issued a statement declaring that neither of the two vaccines now being made available, from Pfizer and Moderna, used cell lines from aborted fetuses in the design, development or production of their vaccines. Each, however used a cell line from an aborted fetus in confirmatory tests to determine the vaccine's effectiveness. There is a connection to abortion but it is remote. Citing Roman documents, the Bishops conclude that it is morally permissible to use either of these two vaccines, especially given the gravity of the threat that the COVID-19 virus poses to our people and the lack of other remedies. You can read the Bishops' full statement at <https://www.usccb.org/moral-considerations-covid-vaccines>.

To illustrate why we may in some circumstances benefit from a morally wrong action in which we did not directly participate and of which we do not approve, I offer a historical analogy. The Benedictine Sisters who taught me in high school lived in a convent that, in the early nineteenth century, was the home of a slave-owning family in Northeast Washington, DC. In the basement were chains and instruments used to punish slaves who worked on the family's farm. Were the Sisters giving approval to slavery or the mistreatment of slaves because they lived in that home? Hardly. They supported civil rights and taught and nurtured the descendants of former slaves in the high school. But the Sisters did benefit from living in a home built and occupied by former slave owners. There is a connection to slavery but a very remote one.

Jesus told a parable about wheat and weeds (*Matthew 13: 24-30*). The master's servants came to him to report that weeds were growing among the wheat. "An enemy has done this," said the master. Should they pull up the weeds? "No," said the master, "if you pull up the weeds you might uproot the wheat with them. Let them grow together until harvest." Then the weeds would be burnt and the wheat gathered into the barn.

There is wisdom in this parable. We should avoid participating in the evil acts of others but we cannot wall ourselves off from the rest of the world. We will inevitably come into contact with persons and situations that are tainted with evil. We should never give material aid to someone doing wrong but we will sometimes be presented with a *fait accompli*: the wrong has already been done and we cannot change it. But because our connection to the wrong-doing is not material (that is, it did not help cause the wrong) nor is it close to us in time, we can, if reluctantly, accept a benefit from it. Receiving a COVID-19 vaccine that was tested using a morally compromised cell line is in that category.

Because abortion is a gravely wrong act, we should always oppose it and never give the appearance that we approve of it. Ideally, we would avoid even a remote connection to evil. The aforementioned Bishops and heads of many other organizations wrote the Commissioner of the Food and Drug Administration last spring to urge that vaccines be developed and tested without even a remote connection to abortion. Why don't you add your voice to theirs? (Commissioner, FDA, 10903 New Hampshire Ave., Silver Spring, MD 20993; or call 888-463-6332.) Fortunately, cell lines that do not come from aborted fetuses are available for pharmaceutical companies to use. Some vaccines based on them are in development but are not yet ready for production or distribution. In the meantime, the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines are morally legitimate to use, given the remoteness of their connection to the aborted babies and the urgent need to protect ourselves and others from a deadly disease.

A third vaccine, being developed by AstraZeneca, has used a cell line from an aborted baby in its design, development and production phases, so it is more immediately tied to an abortion. If at all possible, that vaccine should be avoided. Yet, as the Bishops point out, it may not be possible for the individual to choose which vaccine he or she receives, while the danger to the person and to other people remains grave if vaccination is long delayed or refused. Because the researchers and producers of the AstraZeneca vaccine did not abort the unborn child, but used that child's cell line for their work, theirs is a more immediate connection to the evil of abortion but still not a material cooperation in it.

While we wait for our vaccinations, we should use the protective measures that can keep us from getting infected with the COVID-19 virus and from infecting others: washing our hands frequently, wearing face masks, not shaking hands, maintaining appropriate physical distancing and avoiding large crowds.

Let us continue to pray for the victims of this disease and their families, for our health care personnel and for others susceptible to the virus because of their type of work or their age or weak health. Pray, too, for an end to the pandemic and for a greater appreciation for the lives of all human beings, from the unborn to the elderly. God has given us life and breath. We ask Him to give us and all people good health, so we pray: Jesus, Divine Physician, have pity on your people!

*A blessed Christmas
and peaceful New Year to all!*

Sincerely in Christ,

+ Mark E. Brennan

+Mark E. Brennan
Bishop of Wheeling-Charleston