

VACCINATIONS

Last month, we cheered the arrival of vaccines to fight the Covid-19 pandemic. But some critics claimed that these vaccines had been produced using cells from aborted fetuses, raising the question of whether it would be morally permissible to use them.

Most people probably never even thought about the possibility that vaccine producers might have used cells from aborted fetuses, or that such use could raise a moral question about taking the resulting vaccine. In fact, this has been an issue that bioethicists have considered – and the Church has issued guidance on – for some time.

A little history – back in the 1960s, cells were taken from two aborted fetuses and companies developed cell lines from them which have continued to be used by researchers through the decades since. In a 1988 instruction, updated in 2008, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith noted that while there is a responsibility for medical researchers to remove themselves from the use of illicitly obtained biological material – such as that obtained from the deliberate destruction of a fetus – there are differing degrees of responsibility. Grave reasons may be morally proportionate to justify the use, for example, of a vaccine developed from such cells that's needed to protect a child's life.

More recently, the Pontifical Academy for Life noted in 2017 that contemporary vaccines do not require new abortions and that the cell lines derived from the two abortions in the 1960s are very distant from the original abortions and no longer imply the bond of moral cooperation that would result in their ethical condemnation. It also stated that the moral wrong pertains to the action of abortion, not to the material itself or the vaccines that may have used cell lines derived from such material. The contemporary production techniques of childhood vaccines led the Academy to conclude: “we believe that all clinically recommended vaccinations can be used with a clear conscience and that the use of such vaccines does not signify some sort of cooperation with voluntary abortion.”

Looking at the Covid vaccines, both Pfizer and Moderna have disclosed that they did not use cell lines from aborted fetuses in the development or production of their vaccines, but did use them in their testing stages on animals. The chairmen of the U. S. Bishops' Committees on Doctrine and on Pro-life Activities said that this connection is remote and does not prohibit Catholics from taking these vaccines. On Dec. 20, 2020, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued a Note stating: “*it is morally acceptable to receive Covid-19 vaccines that have used cell lines from aborted fetuses in their research and production process.*” The Note referred to the remoteness from the original abortions, the urgency of the pandemic, and the lack of alternative vaccines or choice of vaccine on the part of those being inoculated, as reasons for this conclusion.

This leaves one other moral question – is a person obligated to receive this vaccine? As a general rule, vaccination must be voluntary. But in making a decision, a person must consider “not only the duty to protect one’s own health, but also ... 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” (CDF’s Note of 12/20/2020). It adds that those who refuse vaccination “must do their utmost to avoid, by other prophylactic means and appropriate behavior, becoming vehicles for the transmission of the infectious agent. In particular, they must avoid any risk to the health of those who cannot be vaccinated for medical or other reasons, and who are the most vulnerable.”

So while each of us must decide what we will do, we do not make that decision in a vacuum. We have a moral obligation to protect not only our own health, but also that of others. If we choose not to receive a vaccine that offers that protection, we are under a moral obligation to take other measures, for the common good as well as for our own.