

VACCINATIONS (Follow-up)

In mid-January, both Pope Francis and Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI received their first doses of the Covid-19 vaccines. The Pope referred to the vaccination as “an ethical action, because you are gambling with your health, you are gambling with your life, but you are also gambling with the lives of others.”

"I believe that morally everyone must take the vaccine," Francis said in a Jan. 10 interview. "It is the moral choice because it is about your life but also the lives of others. ... I do not understand why some say that this could be a dangerous vaccine. If the doctors are presenting this to you as a thing that will go well and doesn't have any special dangers, why not take it?" he asked. "There is a suicidal denialism that I would not know how to explain but today people must take the vaccine," the pontiff concluded.

The pope's statements – while expressing his personal belief and not authoritative declarations – strengthened the Vatican's support of the ongoing vaccination effort beyond the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's recent statement: “*it is morally acceptable to receive Covid-19 vaccines that have used cell lines from aborted fetuses in their research and production process.*” The CDF did not say there was a moral obligation to take the vaccine, but only to consider how to fulfill one's duty to protect the common good when deciding whether or not to be vaccinated.

The Church's support for the Covid-19 vaccine does not ignore the fact that some vaccine manufacturers have used cell lines derived from aborted fetuses in either the production or testing of their products. (Both Pfizer and Moderna used them in testing, not production, of their Covid-19 vaccines.) These cell lines were developed decades ago, for reasons unrelated to vaccine production, and receiving the vaccine now does not constitute cooperating in the past abortion.

That these cell lines have been used beneficially does not excuse the moral evil of the abortion itself, and the Church does not “give a pass” to that action just because the cell lines so derived now contribute to a life-saving vaccine, any more than it would justify a homicide that resulted in an organ donation from the body of the deceased. Both the abortion and the homicide remain evil actions, condemned by the Church. But in neither case was the purpose of the evil action to obtain the benefits later derived. Just as the donated organ is not tainted by the homicide that made its donation possible, neither are the cell lines derived from an aborted fetus part of the evil that made them available. That something good comes from an evil action does not make that action morally good, nor does the fact of its evil origin make the resulting derivation morally bad.

We prefer that researchers use cell lines derived from non-abortion sources, such as adult stem cells or umbilical cords, and we can write to companies, urging them to take that approach. But we should not reject vaccines based on a misunderstanding of the Church's moral teachings.