

“WHY DISTINCTIONS MATTER”: VACCINES AND PRO-LIFE

It wasn't the biology classes that did me in; rather, chemistry and physics forced me to reconsider my pre-Med plans. That combined with a gnawing sense of vocation led me to switch to a philosophy major midway through my sophomore year. My “pre-Med” chapter ended for good—“all in” for the seminary! So, to write about **vaccines** today is a bit of a stretch. On such **thorny issues** my “go to” source on such matters has long been the **National Catholic Bioethics Center**, located in Philadelphia. Founded in 1972, its mission is “to promote and safeguard the dignity of the human person in medicine and the life sciences, thereby sharing in the ministry of Jesus Christ and his Church.” They are a reliable guide through a maze of complex issues. Bottom line—some COVID vaccines **never** made use of cell lines that originated in fetal tissue at any level of design, development or production. Others did. **Distinctions matter.**

The USCCB Committees on Pro-life Activities and Doctrine issued a joint statement on Dec. 14: “In view of the gravity of the current pandemic and the lack of availability of alternative vaccines, the reasons to accept the new COVID-19 vaccines from **Pfizer** and **Moderna** are sufficiently serious to justify their use, despite their remote connection to morally compromised cell lines.” Read it [here](#). With respect to these two vaccines, **zero material** derived from any cell line from an abortion is present in these vaccines. But the story does not end there. The “remote connection” refers principally to **limited use in lab testing** of the vaccine from those unethical cell lines developed decades ago. What does that mean? It means they reached back to already existing tainted cell lines for testing, though not in the production of the new vaccine. Still, some will object. Yet, such cooperation is **so remote** as to remove moral culpability upon those **receiving the vaccination**, which should be considered an act of love for our neighbor in service of the common good.

Take the case of **German measles**, one of the most dangerous infections for a pregnant woman to contract. Congenital rubella can cause serious abnormalities in the fetus, even resulting in spontaneous abortion (miscarriage), induced abortion, or neonatal death. No vaccine exists for this that did not involve aborted fetal cell lines. The Catholic position has been to **strongly advocate** to develop **other cell lines**, so that scientists initiate **no new cell lines** with remote **fetal** origins. A fetal cell line is taken from an aborted baby, multiplied into many cells of the same kind. They may be grown indefinitely, used to grow viruses and then create inactive viruses for vaccines. But vaccines can be **developed ethically** using cells from animals, insects, chicken eggs, yeast or even no cells. A vaccine works when a lipid particle containing genetic instructions (mRNA) merges with a person's cells, “telling it” how to make a viral protein. Recognizing this as foreign, our immune cells create antibodies. These stockpiled antibodies then go into overdrive should an actual virus invade us.

Cell lines maintained from aborted fetuses, even many decades ago, continue to be used in various ways in the laborious process of vaccine development. In June 2005, the **Pontifical Academy for Life** issued a [document](#) *Moral Reflections on Vaccines Produced from Cells Derived from Aborted Human Fetuses*. It distinguished between formal and material cooperation. “*Formal cooperation* is carried out when the moral agent cooperates with the immoral action of another person, sharing in the latter's evil intention.” Conversely, if one cooperates with the immoral action of another person, **without sharing** his/her evil **intention**, it is a case of *material cooperation*. If available, a grave responsibility remains to use alternative vaccines and to make a conscientious objection with regard to those of dubious origins.

Let's say I head to a local grocery store to satisfy my craving for a snack of dried apricots. Upon arrival, I see several signs posted in the store window, one of which reads: “I Stand with Planned Parenthood.” Is my patronage of that store and purchase of the apricots rendered an immoral act because my money is supporting an owner whose views are against defined Catholic moral teaching? The answer would be a clear “No,” and yet, **personally** I would **absolutely choose** to shop elsewhere. I've done precisely that in fact on numerous occasions. I went to purchase groceries, not receive an unsolicited lecture about the owner's political views. The **mere act of purchasing** a product of someone whose views are antithetical to mine is **not sufficient** to render the purchase itself immoral. Applied to the issue at hand, we must recognize the multivalent layers of responsibility involved in the production of a vaccine. Ought Catholics be concerned about some of the COVID-19 vaccines being produced? Absolutely!

In an imperfect world, good and evil are too often intertwined. The examples are too numerous to list, the grocery store example being but one. Unlike **Moderna and Pfizer** processes cited above, the **AstraZenca** vaccine used the HEK293 **abortion-derived cell line** for its **production**. Thus, this vaccine should be avoided, if alternatives are available without a lengthy delay. We must **remain vigilant**, so that nothing desensitizes us to the evil of abortion or the use of fetal cells in research. The 2008 “Instruction on Certain Bioethical Questions” (paragraphs [34-35](#)) by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith is most helpful.

- “Been a long time—great to see you, neighbor!” On the evening of Monday, December 21, **Jupiter and Saturn** will be closer together than they have been for 400 years. This “great conjunction” is not new, of course, but has been dubbed “the Christmas star.” On Monday after sunset, look for Jupiter (the “bright planet”) low and to the west; **very near** you will see a fainter Saturn.
- The **Twins** are relocating their AAA minor league franchise from Rochester, NY to St. Paul! The St. Paul Saints will no longer play in an independent league. Independent ball is filled with gimmicks; I’d call it “anti-establishment” in some ways. Yes, some fans love the zany Saints, but others prefer to be entertained by the game— not by a **pig** outfitted in a **wig**! Sorry to be the skunk at the garden party, but I’m **very skeptical**! I’m already a coffee snob— I guess now I’m a baseball snob too.
- Your **cooperation is critical** as we prepare for Christmas Masses. If you made an online reservation or phoned the office (for those without the internet) you must **present the printed e-mail receipt**. Without such a system, it would be quite **chaotic** with people being turned away at the door. Please have your information handy. All members of a household should enter the Church together.
- All Cathedral households were sent an end of the year mailing that includes our **Christmas schedule** and other information. You may drop your envelope with names for the Communal Mass intentions or Flowers immediately in the four drop boxes or mail it. Your support is deeply appreciated.
- As this bulletin went to press (early deadline), via Operation Warp Speed, the first doses of a COVID-19 vaccine were being delivered to health care workers, on the front line since last spring. Deo gratias!

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,
Rector