

Alberta and NWT Bishops OK vaccination for COVID

When a vaccine is available to treat or prevent COVID-19, it is OK to take it.

That's the message from the bishops of Alberta and the Northwest Territories in a pastoral letter to the faithful as they navigate for Catholics a path through a moral dilemma presented by COVID-19 vaccine development.

While many of the possible vaccines are synthetic and have no relationship to abortion in their production, several contenders were developed using cell lines descended from cells originally derived from aborted fetuses or embryonic stem cells.

The bishops reiterate Church support and encouragement of scientific research into COVID-19, and have decided openly to address the question of possible moral complicity of Catholics in the previous act of abortion.

Even if a vaccine is sourced from cell lines distantly derived from aborted human fetuses, which is an evil act according to Catholic teaching, the bishops say taking that vaccine is morally permissible given the remoteness of the recipient from the original act of abortion, the scarcity of ethical alternatives, and the grave threat that COVID-19 poses to public health.

While physicians and families should seek out ethical vaccines, the bishops say that use of previous cell lines is so prevalent in research that there may not be an ethical alternative accessible during the current COVID-19 pandemic.



Dr. Moira McQueen

“Making use of abortion to create cell lines for research and development is an affront to human dignity and cannot be morally justified,” the bishops write. “Sadly, such cell lines are so widely used in the biopharmaceutical industry that a vaccine that has not been ethically compromised in its production and/or

testing by their use may very well not be available for employment against COVID-19.

“With respect to someone simply receiving the vaccine, the degree of connection with the original evil act is so remote that, when there also exists a proportionately grave reason for vaccination, such as the current, urgent need to halt the COVID-19 pandemic, then the Church assures us that it is morally permissible for Catholics to receive it for the good of personal and public health.”

“The official teaching is saying then, if ethical (synthetic) vaccines are truly not available, then take this vaccine,” said Dr. Moira McQueen, executive director of the Canadian Catholic Bioethics Institute, who was part of a group advising the bishops on the vaccine letter. “The level of moral cooperation by people in 2020 is what the Church would call ‘remote.’

“Here we are talking about a pandemic. The idea is because of two factors – lack of personal responsibility for an original action yet facing serious illness and needing to protect yourselves and your children – Church teaching says and I think it’s reasonable, that in these circumstances taking any vaccine is justified. They won’t say the action is right in the fullest sense, but they do say it’s justified. If an ethical vaccine comes along, you have to choose to use that one.”

The bishops’ letter is in keeping with statements from the Pontifical Academy for Life, which studies issues of biomedicine and law. The Academy has addressed this issue in statements in 2005 and 2017.

Currently, no COVID-19 vaccines are approved by Health Canada. Once approved, Alberta anticipates receiving enough doses of Pfizer and Moderna vaccines to initially immunize up to 435,000 Albertans who are most at-risk, between January and March 2021.

Alberta will roll out COVID-19 vaccines in three phases next year with the initial focus on the province’s most at-risk populations – residents and staff of long-term care homes and assisted-living facilities, on-reserve First Nations people, and other health workers.

Premier Jason Kenney said the federal government has assured Alberta that shipments will begin to arrive by Jan. 4 and continue to arrive in waves early next year. Alberta will not make vaccination mandatory, but Kenney said it’s recommended.

McQueen was part a group of Catholic medical, legal and theological experts who wrote to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau early in the pandemic, pressing for any vaccine to be ethically sourced.

Those two frontrunners, Moderna and Pfizer, are both Messenger RNA vaccines in which molecules are chemically synthesized. However, the Oxford and AstraZeneca vaccines are sourced from cell lines that were originally abortion-derived, according to the Lozier Institute, a pro-life institute based in the U.S., which studied a range of vaccines under development.



Dr. David Evans

Dr. David Evans, professor of medical microbiology at the University of Alberta, is quick to note that the vaccines are sourced differently and the bishops' letter shouldn't be used as justification to refuse to be immunized.

Evans, a member of the advisory group to the bishops, leads a team that has studied the coronavirus extensively both with a commercial company, and his lab has also received some funding from the Department of Defence to develop its own vaccine – although the local development will only come to light if the current frontrunners fail.

Still McQueen expects some Catholics and others to refuse a vaccine as a matter of conscience.

“It may *seem* acceptable to some people not to take the vaccine and say they will stay at home and never leave. But I don't see how people could reasonably take a stance like that and then go out into society, as they must at some point and perhaps they are carriers,” she said. “There's very much the reality of an individual conscience decision, which should always be respected. But that person always has to be thinking too about her or his responsibility *to everybody else.*”

Catholic teaching on the common good is also a factor in making a good conscience decision, McQueen said.

Evans noted that any government-approved vaccine will be safe and effective, however it's not yet known how long the immunity will last. Patients may have to be inoculated again with a 'booster' after weeks or months.