



PASTORAL LETTER ON COVID-19, VACCINES AND IMMUNISATION

04th February 2021

International Day of Human Fraternity

Dear People of God,

For over a year now, together with all of you, we, your archbishops and bishops of Malaysia are not only aware but have also been affected by the outbreak of COVID-19 – none of us are spared. The outbreak which has rapidly spread around the world poses enormous health, economic, environmental and social challenges to the entire human population. We remember on this 1st International Day of Human Fraternity, those who have lost their lives, the thousands who are sick and the severe disruptions on day-to-day life.

Every one of us, individuals, families, parishes, dioceses, and countries have been required to make great sacrifices. As Church, we too have had to rethink and reorganise how to be Church in these unprecedented times. The virtue of solidarity in such a time has also required difficult and even unpopular decisions about matters at the very heart of our Catholic faith and way of life. Nevertheless, we must not stop but continue to find new and creative ways to bear witness to the love of God in such debilitating circumstances.

Despite the many challenges, we have and continue to witness the many heroic and selfless examples of men and women who truly exemplify human fraternity, goodness, and charity. We remember the medical and non-medical front-liners, law enforcement personnel, educators, parents, family members, caregivers, delivery persons, and many others who have stepped up to help one another in a collective way. These individuals have certainly put others before themselves in a heartfelt expression of human fraternity and solidarity, even when confronted with a threat to their own lives. In the words of Pope Francis, these are indeed “the saints next door”¹ (cf. *Gaudete et Exultate*, nn. 6-9, 9 April 2018) and we are grateful to God for having such generous selfless human individuals in our midst.

Part I – Catholic Social Teaching : Accountability, Accessibility and Unity

In recent months we have been following the news about the COVID-19 vaccines and the mixed reactions from peoples of all walks of life. Not only are there concerns from the scientific and medical fraternities but also from ethicists. We would like to encourage the faithful to be informed by reading the two recent documents issued from the Vatican:

¹ Pope Francis. *Gaudete et Exultate: Apostolic Exhortation on the Call to Holiness in Today's World (19 March 2018)*, nn. 6-9. http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20180319_gaudete-et-exultate.html

- (i) *Notes on the Morality of Using Some Anti-Covid-19 Vaccines* (Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, 17 December 2020);²
- (ii) *20 Points for a Universal and Fair Destination of Vaccines for a Fairer and Healthier World* (Vatican Covid-19 Commission and Pontifical Academy for Life, 29 December 2020).³

As our country receives and administers the COVID-19 vaccines, and roll out national programmes for vaccination, we recognise the difficult decisions governments and policy makers have to deal with. Reflecting on the Catholic Social Teaching, we call on those in authority to not only ensure that rigorous education and outreach campaigns to address vaccine hesitancy, but also an increased awareness in the following critical areas:

1. *Accurate Information*: The general population has a right to proper and accurate information – not only scientific facts but also the ethical facts so that persons of faith may have the clarity of mind to make informed decisions. Every person needs to educate his or her conscience on this matter in the light of one’s religious principles and teachings.
2. *Effectivity and Safety*: The urgency for the vaccine has accelerated the approvals from regulatory bodies for the use of these vaccines on humans. Regulatory bodies must ensure the safety of its people when choosing the right vaccines that minimises any future risks. Risks and uncertainties with regard to scientific data, distribution, availability, and delivery are unavoidable at this time. However, a standard should be set, and these should not be “loosely compromised” in view of the emergency.
3. *Accessibility*: The accessibility to the vaccine should not be only for the privileged. Even though vaccinations may begin with those who have greater needs, (e.g. front liners, elderly, sick, etc.), the government must ensure that everyone should have equitable access to the vaccine, especially the vulnerable and those in the margins of society who may not be able to afford the vaccines.
4. *Accountability and Transparency*: Given that the vaccine has become a grave necessity, great care should be taken to ensure that no individual or any organisation exploits the situation for any form of financial gain. “The sole purpose of commercial exploitation is not ethically acceptable in the field of medicine and healthcare... we ought to identify appropriate systems that favour transparency and cooperation, rather than antagonism and competition”⁴. The citizens have a right to information with regard to transparent procurement and equitable distribution. It is morally inadmissible to aggravate human suffering with any form of corruption.
5. *Common Good of All*: The pandemic has brought about not only a disruption but also hardships on the lives of many people. At a time like this, we need to be united for the common good of all. The pandemic cannot be used to politicise or divide Malaysians. We call on our leaders to put aside any differences in order to steer the country and help rebuild our lives and that of the nation. The lives of the *rakyat* must be at the forefront in overcoming this turbulent period.

²Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith. *Note on the Morality of Using Some Anti-Covid-19 Vaccines* (21 December 2020). https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20201221_nota-vaccini-anticovid_en.html.

³ Vatican Covid-19 Commission and Pontifical Academy for Life. *Press Release of the Vatican Covid-19 Commission and the Pontifical Academy for Life*. <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2020/12/29/201229d.html>.

⁴ Ibid. n. 8.

Part II – Catholic Moral Teaching : COVID-19 Vaccines

We are aware of the numerous uncertainties surrounding the COVID-19 vaccines that are being rolled out in different countries. Not only questions about the efficacy and the safety of the vaccines but also ethical questions that pertain to the Catholic faith. In this section we address some key questions that relate to the ethical issues concerning the vaccines in the light of Catholic moral teaching.

1. *Is the COVID-19 vaccine being derived from aborted fetuses?*

It had been reported that COVID-19 vaccines are unethical because they are being either created or researched using foetal cell lines. Foetal cell lines are biological products developed from the cells extracted from the foetus. They are not the same as cells or tissue taken directly from the foetus. Therefore, the original cells of the foetus no longer exist; the cell-lines consist of cells that were multiplied from those original cells. It has been noted that in order to determine the efficacy of some vaccines, it has been tested against foetal cell lines but they only function as a kind of 'biological soil' in which to develop a vaccine. However, in no way do these vaccines have any incipient or foetal tissue in the development stage.

2. *What does the Church say about using such cell lines for vaccine production?*

Some of the most commonly used foetal cell lines have been around for decades as the original abortions took place in the 60s or 70s. Based on the information made available, new cell-lines are not being ordered or developed for each new vaccine candidate or batch, but these are old cell-lines that are widely circulated in different labs around the world.

This does not mean that we should be indifferent or that we condone the original wrongdoing. The Church calls on scientists, researchers and decision makers to turn to ethically obtained cell-lines or other such products, even if they themselves are not closely connected to the abortion or to the harvesting of foetal tissue. They have a higher degree of responsibility in this context. Even though their connection to the original wrongdoing may somewhat be distant, as they are the ones actually using the cell-lines for all kinds of research (not just vaccines), they are a key part of the system that could perpetuate demand for such products. Thus, their cooperation with the consequences of the original wrongdoing is much closer.

The Church teaches that those in such positions have a duty to refuse the use of such material in their work and research, as a witness to the value of life. Their position is very different from end-users in the general population, who are only receiving the final vaccine in specific circumstances and are not in a position of responsibility to choose what biological material to use for research and production.

3. *What does the Church say about the moral permissibility of ordinary people (i.e., not scientists or decision makers) to use such vaccines that make use of foetal cell lines?*

For serious or grave reasons, one may be vaccinated even if the vaccine was derived from or tested on foetal cell lines. The question of whether we can use vaccines could be reframed in terms of a more general question: Can we benefit from past wrongdoing?

Based on the Catholic moral *principles of cooperation*, the Church teaches that for ordinary citizens, who have no direct say in how vaccines are produced, our connection with the past wrongdoing is so remotely distant. Therefore, it is morally acceptable to use a vaccine either developed or researched using foetal cell-lines when there is a grave reason, and no other alternatives are available. If there is an alternative vaccine, that is completely free from any morally compromised cell lines that is always preferred.

4. What about the use of the new COVID-19 vaccines?

As of now, a number of vaccines have been reported coming into our country. It is possible that some of these vaccines may not be completely free from any connection to morally compromised cell lines. Neither are we able to provide you a comprehensive update on their composition from independent sources. However, in view of the gravity of the current pandemic and the lack of alternative vaccines, the reasons to accept the COVID-19 vaccines are sufficiently serious to justify their use.⁵

In addition, receiving a COVID-19 vaccine could be understood as an 'act of charity and solidarity' toward the other members of our community - part of our moral responsibility for the common good. Both the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith⁶ and the Pontifical Academy for Life⁷ emphasise the positive moral obligation to do good.

It must therefore be considered that, in such a case, "all vaccinations recognized as clinically safe and effective can be used in good conscience with *the certain knowledge that the use of such vaccines does not constitute formal cooperation with the abortion from which the cells used in production of the vaccines derive*"⁸.

At the same time, we must be on guard that the use of these new COVID-19 vaccines does not de-sensitise us or weaken our determination to oppose the evil of abortion itself and the subsequent use of foetal cells in the field of research.

5. Do I have the right not to be vaccinated on the grounds of "conscience"?

Yes. However, the assumption here is that the conscience has been fully formed and informed. The moral principle with regard to vaccinations is that it "*depends not only on the duty to protect one's own health, but also on the duty to pursue the common good*"⁹. At the present time, given the severity and urgency of the situation and 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.

At a time like this, where there is fear, anxiety, and uncertainty, as Catholics, our faith urges us to strive towards promoting human, social and spiritual values for the common good of all. As we continue to read the "signs of the times", we need to discern wisely not just for the Church but in solidarity with others, for the whole human family.

⁵ The opinion expressed here is not related to the safety or efficacy of any vaccine in general or in any particular case.

⁶ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. *Instruction Dignitas Personae on Certain Bioethical Questions*, 35-36 (8 Sept 2008).

https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20081208_dignitas-personae_en.html.

⁷ Pontifical Academy for Life. "Moral Reflections on Vaccines Prepared from Cells Derived from Aborted Human Foetuses" (9 June 2005). *The Linacre Quarterly*, vol. 86, no. 2-3, May 2019, pp. 182- 87.

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6699053>. Pontifical Academy for Life *Note on Italian Vaccine Issue* (31 July 2017) <http://www.academyforlife.va/content/pav/en/the-academy/activity-academy/note-vaccini.html>.

⁸ Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith. *Note on the Morality of Using Some Anti-Covid-19 Vaccines (21 December 2020)*, n. 3.

⁹ Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith. *Note on the Morality of Using Some Anti-Covid-19 Vaccines (21 December 2020)*, n. 5.

Finally, we humbly acknowledge that “we are in the same boat, all of us fragile and disoriented”¹⁰ but not without hope. Let us turn our hearts to God, our common Father and the source of all goodness, to seek His blessings through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and St Joseph, our protector.

We continue to remember and pray particularly for all the front-liners and those affected by the pandemic, for one another, and for the world.

Together with my brother bishops, we impart our blessings upon all.

I remain, yours faithfully in Christ

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+ Most Rev Julian Leow Beng Kim D.D.
President, CBCM
Archbishop of Kuala Lumpur

+ Rt Rev Sebastian Francis
Bishop of Penang

+ Rt Rev Bernard Paul
Bishop of Malacca Johore

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+ Rt Rev Julius Gitom
Bishop of Sandakan

+ Most Rev Simon Poh
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+ Rt Rev Richard Ng
Bishop of Miri

+ Rt Rev Joseph Hii
Bishop of Sibul

¹⁰ Pope Francis, *Urbi et Orbi*, 27 March 2020.