

Religion vs science

After days of halting statements about vaccine morality, multiple Catholic leaders call the shots urgent, important

After days of halting, nuanced statements by U.S. Catholic bishops about the morality of taking the coronavirus vaccines, some Catholic leaders began pushing back late this week, saying the shots are moral and needed urgently to save lives.

5 The barrage of differing, sometimes lengthy philosophical opinions on the three Food and Drug Administration-approved vaccines were based on how central the use of fetal cell lines were in their production. The lines are essentially reproductions of fetal cells from abortions done in the 1970s and 1980s and the shots themselves don't actually contain fetal cells.

10 The controversy began Feb. 26, when the Archdiocese of New Orleans, singled out the Johnson & Johnson vaccine, saying it is "morally compromised as it uses the abortion-derived cell line in development and production of the vaccine as well as the testing."

15 That sentiment was echoed by the Bismarck, N.D., diocese, which wrote Tuesday of Johnson & Johnson, "there is no justification for any Catholic" to use the vaccine when "two morally acceptable vaccines are available and may be used." Allentown, Pa., Bishop Alfred Schlert wrote in a Wednesday newsletter that Johnson & Johnson's vaccine "should not be accepted by Catholics if other choices are available."

20 Some Catholic leaders and medical professionals worried that the stream of criticism over the Johnson & Johnson shot and tepid wording about the vaccines in general could discourage devout Catholics at a time when, for many, procuring any coronavirus vaccine is elusive. And some felt the need to say explicitly that getting a vaccine is not at all problematic morally and there is an ethical imperative to do so.

"It is clear that there is an urgent race against time, in the growing presence of these variants, to get as many people vaccinated as possible and to do that as soon as possible," the Boston archdiocese wrote Thursday. [...]

25 None of the vaccines contain fetal tissue. The Moderna and Pfizer vaccines used the cell lines in testing. The vaccines developed by Johnson & Johnson and AstraZeneca used them in manufacturing as well. A U.S. regulatory decision on AstraZeneca is expected in April.

30 Some observers felt the statements, from bishops across the country, as well as from their industry group, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, were actually more alike than different. They all emphasized the abortion that facilitated the production of vaccines is evil, and to try to be as morally "distant" from it as possible, but that getting vaccinated has moral benefits as well. The statements all included some kind of permission to use vaccines and mostly said a shot is optional. [...]

But after much Catholic debate and discussion about what exactly was being said, Rhoades on Thursday released a new, more explicit statement.

35 "There's no moral need to turn down a vaccine, including the Johnson & Johnson vaccine, which is morally acceptable to use," Rhoades, of Fort Wayne-South Bend, Ind., said in YouTube video. "All the COVID vaccines recognized as clinically safe and effective can be used in good conscience."