Covid-19: US Catholics split after bishops’ conference recommends against Johnson and Johnson vaccine

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US Catholics looking for church guidance on vaccination were left with several competing viewpoints this week, as several bishops moved to distance themselves from a statement by the US Conference of Catholic Bishops urging followers to shun the Johnson and Johnson covid-19 vaccine if alternatives were available.

While no covid-19 vaccine contains human tissue of any kind, the Johnson and Johnson vaccine’s manufacturing process used cell lines derived from elective abortions performed decades ago. Other vaccines being used in the US, such as those from Pfizer and Moderna, used these cell lines in testing their vaccines but not in production.

This distinction led the archdiocese of New Orleans to call the Johnson and Johnson vaccine “morally compromised.” The vaccine “should not be accepted by Catholics if other choices are available,” agreed Pennsylvania bishop Alfred Schlert.

“There is no justification for any Catholic” to use the vaccine when “two morally acceptable vaccines are available and may be used,” wrote the diocese of Bismarck, North Dakota, in a statement, calling the vaccine “unacceptable for any Catholic physician or healthcare worker to dispense and for any Catholic to receive because of its direct connection to the intrinsically evil act of abortion.”

That position appeared to receive national backing when the US Conference of Catholic Bishops stated that “if one has the ability to choose a vaccine, Pfizer or Moderna’s vaccines should be chosen over Johnson and Johnson’s.”

But amid concerns about the health consequences for congregations, which include many parishioners from high risk demographics, such as Latinos and the elderly, other spokesmen for Catholicism have since pushed back.

San Diego bishop Robert McElroy wrote that “in the current pandemic moment, with limited vaccine options available to achieve healing for our nation and our world, it is entirely morally legitimate to receive any of these four vaccines, and to recognise, as Pope Francis has noted, that in receiving them we are truly showing love for our neighbour and our God.”

The archdiocese of Boston wrote, “There is an urgent race against time, in the growing presence of these variants, to get as many people vaccinated as possible.” The previous use of aborted tissue was “significantly distant and remote from where we find ourselves today, in the battle to save the lives of billions of people around the globe,” it added.

Pope Francis has urged Catholics to get vaccinated, and vaccination will be mandatory for Vatican employees, but a December statement from the Vatican’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith appeared to support the moral ranking of vaccines, telling Catholics that “when ethically irreproachable covid-19 vaccines are unavailable it is morally acceptable to receive covid-19 vaccines that have used cell lines from aborted fetuses in their research and production process.”

Tanzania’s Christian leadership ends covid-19 denial

Around the world, religious leaders have often railed against social distancing measures imposed on religious services, but most have been careful to avoid taking anti-vaccine positions. By far the most serious cases of religious obstruction of healthcare have occurred in the Great Lakes region of East Africa, where the devout political leaders of Tanzania and Burundi have repeatedly claimed that their peoples are too Christian to be infected by coronavirus.

Burundi’s president Pierre Nkurunziza became the first head of state to die of covid-19 last June, shortly after claiming that “God has cleared the virus from Burundi’s skies.”

Tanzania’s president John Magufuli disparaged vaccines and urged citizens to pack churches, arguing that “corona is satanic and cannot survive in the body of Christ.” The country has refused to join the Covax vaccine scheme and has not updated its case numbers in 11 months, claiming that prayer had eliminated the disease.

But a recent outbreak among the political class appears to have shifted attitudes, as Tanzania acknowledged new cases and urged citizens to take basic health precautions. US ambassador Donald Wright, himself a doctor, welcomed the change of heart, urging Tanzania to “convene its health experts and review the evidence on vaccines.”

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