News



A Catholic pastor receives the first of the two Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccinations at a hospital in Chicago, Dec. 23, 2020. In a growing consensus, religious leaders at the forefront of the anti-abortion movement in the United States are telling their followers that the leading vaccines available to combat COVID-19 are acceptable to take, given their remote and indirect connection to lines of cells derived from aborted fetuses. (AP/Charles Rex Arbogast)

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Editor's note: *Catholic News Service reported March 4 that Bishop Kevin Rhoades said that use of the Johnson & Johnson COVID-19 vaccine "can be used in good moral conscience." Rhoades said this in a video posted March 4 on YouTube.*

Leaders at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops are discouraging Catholics from using the new Johnson & Johnson COVID-19 vaccine if given a choice, citing the use of cells with a distant link to abortion in the development of the vaccine.

The announcement, which followed a similar proclamation from the Archdiocese of New Orleans last week, argued that, while USCCB leaders have already condoned the use of COVID-19 vaccines created by Moderna and Pfizer-BioNTech because an "abortion-derived cell line was used for testing them, but not in their production," the Johnson & Johnson vaccine is different.

"The Johnson & Johnson vaccine … was developed, tested and is produced with abortion-derived cell lines raising additional moral concerns," the announcement said.

The statement cited a recent Vatican document that declared it "morally acceptable to receive COVID-19 vaccines that have used cell lines from aborted fetuses." However, the USCCB urged Catholics to choose a vaccine other than the Johnson & Johnson vaccine — which was approved for use in the United States over the weekend — if presented with the option.

“If one has the ability to choose a vaccine, Pfizer or Moderna’s vaccines should be chosen over Johnson & Johnson’s,” the statement read.

The bishops’ statement was written by Bishop Kevin C. Rhoades of Fort Wayne-South Bend, chairman of the USCCB’s Committee on Doctrine, and Archbishop Joseph F. Naumann of Kansas City in Kansas, chairman of the USCCB’s Committee on Pro-Life Activities.

The New Orleans statement described the Johnson & Johnson vaccine as “morally compromised” and, like the USCCB, asked Catholics to avoid it if possible.

The controversy centers around the use of cells commonly used in medical research that reportedly can trace their origins to aborted fetuses in the 1970s and 1980s. The cell lines — known as HEK293 and PER.C6 — have been used by Moderna, Pfizer-BioNTech and Johnson & Johnson to various degrees, but scholars and ethicists have noted that the cells in those and similar cell lines are clones and are not the original fetal tissue.

One Catholic cleric, Bishop Joseph Strickland of the Diocese of Tyler, has argued Catholics should also avoid the Moderna and Pfizer-BioNTech vaccines because of their involvement with the cell lines.

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Asked about the USCCB guidance, a spokesperson for Johnson & Johnson issued the following statement:

"There is no fetal tissue in our Janssen COVID-19 vaccine. Our COVID-19 vaccine is an inactivated/non-infective adenovirus vector (similar to a cold virus), which codes for the coronavirus ‘spike’ (S) protein. We are able to manufacture hundreds of millions of doses using our engineered cell-line system that enables the rapid production of new viral vaccines to combat many of the most dangerous infectious diseases.”

The statements could impact ongoing vaccine rollout efforts across the country. Myriad Catholic institutions, ranging from hospitals to individual churches, are already involved with vaccine distribution, and it is unclear how they will react to the new USCCB statement.

Should organizations alter their practices in response to the recommendations, the rollout may differ depending on the diocese: On Monday, the Archdiocese of New Orleans told RNS it is “asking all Catholic entities to distribute vaccines according to the ethical guidelines we have released.”

The Catholic Health Association, which represents some 600 hospitals and 1,600 long-term care and other health facilities, released a statement on Feb 25 declaring that the group's "ethicists, in collaboration with other Catholic bioethicists, find it is morally acceptable to receive Covid-19 vaccines developed by Johnson & Johnson."

Asked if the USCCB's statement changes their conclusion or whether they will decline to distribute the Johnson & Johnson vaccine if given the option, a CHA spokesperson responded: "the simple answer is 'no' to both questions."The spokesperson added: "Our priority is to ensure all have access to a vaccine."

USCCB officials were among several faith leaders who raised concerns about the Johnson & Johnson vaccine in a letter to the commissioner of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration in April 2020, saying it was being produced using "ethically problematic cell lines.”

The Vatican document cited by the USCCB was released in December and concluded it was “morally acceptable” for Catholics to receive vaccines that used the controversial cell lines for research. The document did not cite any vaccines by name, although Vatican officials have offered the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine to all of the Vatican's citizens. Pope Francis, for his part, was reportedly vaccinated in January.

The Johnson & Johnson vaccine is heralded for its practical advantages over Moderna and Pfizer-BioNTech’s vaccines. Unlike its competitors, which require two doses, Johnson & Johnson’s vaccine only requires one. It can also be stored in a refrigerator, making it easier to distribute.

This story has been updated to include comment from the Catholic Health Association.

Read this next: Bishop Rhoades: Latest COVID-19 vaccine can be used in good conscience

A version of this story appeared in the **March 19-April 1, 2021** print issue under the headline: US bishops disagree about Johnson & Johnson vaccine.