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A vile of the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine (CNS/Reuters/Lucy Nicholson)

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Last week, the Gospel reading for Tuesday of the second week of Lent began:

> Jesus spoke to the crowds and to his disciples, saying,
>
> "The scribes and the Pharisees
>
> have taken their seat on the chair of Moses.
>
> Therefore, do and observe all things whatsoever they tell you,
>
> but do not follow their example.
>
> For they preach but they do not practice.

> They tie up heavy burdens hard to carry
>
> and lay them on people's shoulders,
>
> but they will not lift a finger to move them.
>
> -Matthew 23:1-4

Apparently, some of our bishops lost their lectionary that day and did not get to read that Gospel or, if they read it, could not comprehend how it applied to themselves. Because that same day, Archbishop Joseph Naumann, chair of the Pro-Life Activities Committee at the U.S. bishops' conference, and Bishop Kevin Rhoades, chair of the Doctrine Committee, issued a joint statement stating, "Pfizer and Moderna's vaccines raised concerns because an abortion-derived cell line was used for testing them, but not in their production. The Johnson & Johnson vaccine, however, was developed, tested and is produced with abortion-derived cell lines raising additional moral concerns." After quoting the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's explicit judgment that it is "morally acceptable to receive Covid-19 vaccines that have used cell lines from aborted fetuses" they applied their moral analysis to a situation that does not exist and in a manner so skewed it is difficult to comprehend:

> However, if one can choose among equally safe and effective COVID-19 vaccines, the vaccine with the least connection to abortion-derived cell lines should be chosen. Therefore, if one has the ability to choose a vaccine, Pfizer or Moderna's vaccines should be chosen over Johnson & Johnson's.

Call me silly, but you would think the chair of a pro-life committee would be a little bit more fulsome about encouraging people to get vaccinated from a virus that has killed more than half a million of his fellow Americans and a like number of people in other countries. The best these two committee chairs could manage was to say that "given the world-wide suffering that this pandemic is causing, we affirm again that being vaccinated can be an act of charity that serves the common good." Can be?

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The bishops' conference statement followed statements from the New Orleans Archdiocese and a few other dioceses, including one from Bismarck, North Dakota, that said the Johnson & Johnson vaccine was "morally compromised" and that Catholics should not receive nor dispense it. The conference and these individual bishops were raising a scruple in people's minds where none existed. They were tying up a heavy burden and laying it on the people's shoulders. It was a moral version of the Benedict Option, and it was crazy.

Crazy, but not too difficult to understand. If you think abortion is really the only moral issue that matters in public life, you might not notice that a statement about taking a vaccine to help guard against a deadly pandemic is a little light on encouraging people to get vaccinated. If you turn to LifeSiteNews for some sense of what concerns the faithful, you would think this issue of the vaccines being morally compromised was a burning one. If you think abortion is the only important moral issue, you split hairs that need not be split and do not think twice about sowing confusion where it is helpful to eradicate confusion.

Bishop Rhoades followed up his joint statement with Naumann with a video in which he stated, "The Vatican has made it clear that all the COVID vaccines, recognized as clinically safe and effective, can be used in good conscience. There is no moral need to turn down a vaccine." That was all that had to be said. I wanted to shout "*Punto!*" or "Be done with it!"

You could not help thinking that the bishop's video looked like a hostage video: Rhoades was sitting in a dark room, appeared like he was under duress, and he was reading from a script. And I could not help but wonder why Archbishop Naumann has not made a similar video statement.

Over at EWTN, Raymond Arroyo gave one of his most despicable performances to date. He interviewed Fr. Tad Pacholczyk from the National Catholic Bioethics Center and they both seemed relatively uninterested in the principal moral question — what does the vaccine accomplish? — because they really just wanted to focus on the link to abortion.

No one is going to associate the phrase "intellectual gravitas" with Arroyo, but even I was surprised to hear him raise the issue of subsidiarity in questioning whether people should follow the moral guidance of the Vatican or that of his local bishop. Most galling of all was Arroyo's chiding of people who expressed happiness about

receiving the vaccine. He wants people to protest the fact that pharmaceutical companies are using these cell lines, but instead of that "all I see is people dancing and doing TikTok videos of themselves getting shot in the arm." There it is. He doesn't grasp why people who have lived in fear for a year are happy to get a vaccine? Having bemoaned public health measures that "limit personal freedom" all year, conservatives now bemoan the medicine that will remove the threat?

It is hard not to conclude there was some coordination to all this. A half dozen dioceses do not all come out with statements on the same topic on the same day without someone lighting a fire. I spend my days talking to Catholics in all walks of life, and no one I knew had raised any questions about the moral status of getting the vaccine. Who got this obscene and obnoxious ball rolling?

There is a clue in the joint statement from Naumann and Rhoades. They point to some resources, including a January statement from the Pro-Life Activities office. The first footnote in that latter statement cites Charlotte Lozier Institute. The news report on the New Orleans statement at the EWTN-owned Catholic News Agency also cited research by the Lozier Institute, which it calls a "pro-life" organization. In fact, it is the research arm of a Republican Party affiliate, the Susan B. Anthony List.

If you smell a rat, there is nothing wrong with your nose. Only in the world of politics, not the world of moral theology, does this whole business make sense. Only in the world of conservative, Republican Party politics is abortion the only important moral issue. The U.S. bishops' conference has become, like the Susan B. Anthony List, an arm of the GOP. And in sowing confusion about the morality of these vaccines, they will make it more likely more people will die. I am so glad our church and the GOP are pro-life, aren't you?