

## TIPS FOR DISCUSSING THE COVID VACCINES WITH CHARITY

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I've been considering writing something about this for some time, but I've held off thus far, in part because I've been reluctant to add to the noise surrounding a topic that I'm sure many of us are sick of hearing about. That said, in my ministry I have encountered increasing anguish around this topic of late, with many families, workplaces, and even parishes experiencing significant tension.

In some Catholic circles—especially among younger Catholics who are serious about their faith—not being vaccinated for COVID is sometimes discussed as though it were an article of faith, such that a Catholic in good standing cannot be vaccinated under any circumstances without it being a serious sin. In other circles, the unvaccinated are viewed with considerable contempt, as though underlying selfishness could be their only motive.

Full disclosure: I am double-vaccinated. I was initially hesitant for moral reasons (due to the connection between the vaccines and cell-lines acquired from a decades-old aborted foetus), and I studied the Church's teaching on the matter. I continued to hold off for a while, but the deciding factor for me was the need to access hospitals, nursing homes, etc. in my ministry.

(A brief word about the Church's teaching on this question. Catholic teaching has long distinguished between direct and indirect cooperation with evil, the proximity or remoteness of such cooperation, as well as the question of whether cooperation will encourage further immoral activity. In cases where cooperation is indirect, remote, and no other options are available, it can be permissible to proceed if a greater good is involved. This teaching is not a modern innovation, but goes back at least to St Thomas Aquinas. The recent Vatican documents on problematic vaccines, whilst permitting their use, nonetheless beseech researchers to use less-problematic ways of developing vaccines. They affirm that the common good is a compelling motive during a pandemic, but also emphasise that no-one should be forced into using a vaccine against their will. They also acknowledge that possible health concerns of particular vaccines are outside the Church's competency.)

I shared the Vatican teaching on the vaccines in my parish and had some follow-up conversation with a few folks, but largely left it at that. I was aware that vaccination debates predated COVID, but I thought the anti-vax movement to be fairly small in size and I had little energy to enter that quagmire. I've thus been a little surprised at how the COVID vaccines have subsequently become an issue on which so many Catholics have drawn such a strong line in the sand. There are certainly some things that I would absolutely hold firm on in the face of harassment and even persecution, but suffice-to-say that, after studying the Church's teaching, I do not consider this to be such a clear-cut case of right and wrong.

That said, many dear friends whom I deeply respect are holding out on being vaccinated, and I have no intention to pile on or to dismiss their concerns as arbitrary. As noted above, I know many families who are divided on this issue, and I'm concerned that lasting scars may result. And so, in a spirit of good will and a desire to reduce tensions, let me humbly offer some tips on how Christians might strive to engage charitably with others on this difficult issue:

- Start with prayer.
- Strive to discern and do God's will in all things.
- Have the humility to acknowledge the difficulty in discerning God's will, and don't presume to know it with absolute certainty.
- Be consoled in knowing that the collective tension and drama of the present moment will pass, and strive not to burn bridges in the meantime.
- In all things, charity. Presume goodwill on the part of your interlocutor. Don't impugn motives.
- That said, some people (on all sides) seem to need a battle to fight to get out of bed in the morning. If your interlocutor seems intent on picking a fight, it may be best to wait for another opportunity (consider how often Christ was silent in the face of hostile opposition).
- Don't overstate your position, and strive to engage with the strongest version of your interlocutor's position.
- Distinguish between the various objections that are raised regarding the vaccines (e.g. moral concerns, health concerns, opposition to being forced), and discuss them separately, teasing out the primary obstacle if there is one.
- Don't conflate objections. One can acknowledge, for instance, that the approach of various governments has possibly been excessively harsh or otherwise poorly handled, whilst nonetheless deciding to be vaccinated for other reasons.
- Note that health concerns go both ways. Some are concerned that the vaccines carry unknown health risks, while others are concerned that not being vaccinated can place themselves and others at greater risk.
- Considerations of conscience also go both ways. For some, the connection with foetal cell lines or a desire to resist coercion weighs heavily on their conscience. For others, the prospect of people becoming sick or dying whilst under their care (which can include leaders of governments and other institutions), or the need to provide for one's family, also weighs heavily on their conscience. Respect your interlocutor's conscience, even if it has led them to a different conclusion from you. Note also the responsibility we all have to ensure that our conscience is well-formed.

***If vaccinated for COVID:***

- Acknowledge the courage it takes for the unvaccinated to take such a stand in the face of significant societal pressure, knowing the consequences to jobs, courses of study, relationships, to say nothing of the manifold inconveniences involved. Note also the significant peer pressure exerted within some groups not to be vaccinated, resulting in pressure from both sides.
- Be aware that our fallen human nature makes it difficult for any of us to step back from a strongly-held conviction, even if one's circumstances or understanding changes. The further one goes in taking a stand, the harder it is to subsequently change course.

- Tread carefully: if you push a loved one too hard to get vaccinated, they will likely feel resentment towards you afterwards. Plan to still be in relationship with this person five years from now, and act accordingly.

- Acknowledge that an underlying suspicion of the mainstream media on hot-button issues is not unmerited, given the assorted biases that manifest on a regular basis. And note that these biases need not be malicious: objectivity is hard, especially in our fractured culture, and much media leans towards opinion over objectivity as a result.

***If unvaccinated for COVID:***

- Maintain equal suspicion for alternative news and media, especially when it reports something that would affirm our preconceived ideas on a topic (the economic realities of clickbait news drive the vast majority of content, across the entire ideological spectrum).

- Recognise that it's been a long time since our society has had to wrestle with a major issue of individual rights vs the common good on this scale, and we're not used to it (we've not had large-scale agreement on suppressing individual rights in favour of the common good since perhaps World War II). This is not to imply that the unvaccinated are ignorant or uncaring about the common good, but simply to note that our culture is not very good at wrestling with such questions (on any issue).

- Acknowledge that here in Australia—and especially in W.A.—we've been spared the worst thus far, which can lead even well-meaning folks to subconsciously overlook the seriousness of the pandemic in much of the world.

***For everyone:***

- It's worth the effort. It's a cliché to note the echo-chambers of like-minded folks that we tend to surround ourselves with—especially online—but it's a cliché for a reason. Guarding against this tendency by being willing to engage charitably those with whom we might disagree is of immense spiritual and social value.

- No love is ever wasted, and God can use even our trials for good. Take this opportunity to grow in humility, trust of God, and love of neighbour.

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The Vatican documents alluded to above:

*Note on the morality of using some anti-Covid-19 vaccines* (21 December 2020), CDF

[https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20201221\\_nota-vaccini-anticovid\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20201221_nota-vaccini-anticovid_en.html)

*Instruction "Dignitas Personae" on Certain Bioethical Questions* (8 September 2008), CDF

[https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20081208\\_dignitas-personae\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20081208_dignitas-personae_en.html)

*Moral Reflections on Vaccines Prepared from Cells Derived from Aborted Human Foetuses* (9 June 2005), Pontifical Academy for Life

<https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?recnum=6539>