

Whom will you serve? This is the question posed in today's first reading from the Book of Joshua. If you choose not to serve the Lord, then whom will it be? If we are not crystal clear both in mind and heart to whom we owe loyalty in service, we will most assuredly stumble and fall. Loyalty is virtuous whenever directed towards legitimate authority exercising good and principled leadership. Joshua was giving a pep talk because it was needed. The conversation continues after the end of today's selection.

Joshua answers back: "You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen to serve the LORD." They replied, "We are witnesses!" In other words, he was reminding them of the seriousness of their pledge. Words are cheap- follow through upon them. Whom will you serve? He follows up by exhorting them to "put away the foreign gods that are among you," inviting them to "turn your hearts to the Lord, the God of Israel." He instinctively knew of the dangers of false gods.

Words are cheap- actions matter. Increasingly, following the Lord means saying "No" to competing voices. It is particularly difficult when we do not know how to evaluate the many competing voices, even competing within the Church. I appreciate the level of frustration many feel about the pandemic and what is our duty as Catholics towards the vaccine. There are many mixed messages, not at all consistent with each other.

We priests study theology, not epidemiology. I am a firm believer in speaking what you know and knowing what you speak. By the same token, it is reasonable to be assisted in our teaching role by experts in various fields, especially in the case of medical ethics. We need their guidance and expertise, showing respect both for the common good and the inviolable nature of conscience. In December 2020, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) weighed in. The key points are these:

Practical reason makes evident that vaccination is not, as a rule, a moral obligation and that, therefore, it must be voluntary. In any case, from the ethical point of view, *the morality of vaccination depends not only on the duty to protect one's own health, but also on the duty to pursue the common good.* In the absence of other means to stop or even prevent the epidemic, the common good may recommend vaccination, especially to protect the weakest and most exposed. Those who, however, for reasons of conscience, refuse vaccines produced with cell lines from aborted fetuses, must do their utmost to avoid, by other prophylactic means and appropriate behavior, becoming vehicles for the transmission of the infectious agent.¹

There are reasons why some have decided against being vaccinated. Some people are faced with difficult decisions due to various institutions that have mandated them, whether in the workplace or in schools. These reasons may be of a medical nature or possibly on some religious grounds.

The latter is more difficult because the Church has been clear that “the reasons to accept the new COVID-19 vaccines from Pfizer and Moderna are sufficiently serious to justify their use, despite their remote connection to morally compromised cell lines.”² The Holy Father and many bishops note that, receiving the COVID-19 vaccine is rightly understood as an “act of charity” toward the other members of our community.

Nevertheless, some feel in conscience that they can't receive a vaccine, for any number of reasons. While not sharing that assessment, I certainly do uphold their right of conscience to make that decision. Immediately after testing positive for Covid-19 earlier this month, I isolated so as not to cause any possible harm to others. My case was extremely mild; I suspect being vaccinated lessened its severity. I tried to act in accordance with the

¹ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Note on the morality of using some anti-Covid-19 vaccines” (21 December 2020)

² Chairmen of the Committee on Doctrine and the Committee on Pro-Life Activities United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Moral Considerations Regarding the New COVID-19 Vaccines”

best guidance available. I am most grateful to my brother priests who stepped up to assist with the celebration of Mass and confessions as well as the prayers of the good people of this parish. It is very good to be back!

At the same time, it is increasingly clear to me that strongly held and widely divergent viewpoints on vaccines, masks and related topics have become a source of division, even within the Church. This is painful. And the guidance offered even by our church leaders has not always been consistent, adding to the level of people's frustration.

Whom will you serve? I am convinced that we can all agree on this—above all we should serve the Lord. We serve the Lord is by following his commands and statues and decrees. As faithful Catholics, we also believe that God's will is manifest through the consistent moral and doctrinal teaching of the Church, handed down through the centuries. In every age the Church must respond to new and complicated circumstances, taking the basic principles of morality and applying them concretely.

Our duty as individual Catholics is to be well-informed on Church teaching, even its complexity, seeking greater understanding through study where necessary and possible. That is no easy task, especially in complex questions of medical ethics.

We have been enriched by the Gospels these past weeks with their clear focus on the Eucharist, the sacrament of unity within the Church. May the power of the Eucharist guide us towards that unity for which we long. May its graces help us to respect one another even in our differences.

Together, as the people of God, may we humbly strive for the common good, making full use of our educated and informed consciences. Above all, may we be transformed into the likeness of Jesus Christ through our reception of the Holy Eucharist, the supreme gift of Jesus to heal and strengthen us in His service.