

CARE OR BUSINESS?

Hoping for a messianic vaccine is dangerous, immoral, and anti-scientific

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As the days go by, there has been news confirming various successes in the development of a medical treatment for defeating Covid-19. The results are ever more encouraging and comforting, but for reasons not yet understood, they are often being

met with skepticism and at times even suspicion and diffidence.

On the contrary, there seems to be an attitude of absolute fideism towards “the vaccine” – very few people have any doubts that it will arrive – sooner rather than later – and that it will solve every problem. Even high-profile Church leaders are praying that a vaccine will be created as soon as possible. We are not told the reasons for such faith, indeed even of the certainty that there will be a vaccine soon. It would seem to be the result of a certain relentless propaganda campaign that ever since the beginning of the pandemic has said that “the vaccine” will be the solution to the problem. And yet it would be completely legitimate to doubt this, because it is not always possible to create a vaccine for every single disease. For example, there is no vaccine for HIV; there is no vaccine for hepatitis C, which is one of the most dangerous infective diseases (while there is one for hepatitis A and B); and above all a vaccine has never been made for any type of coronavirus, a family of viruses that the medical community has known about for sixty years.

And what about SARS? We know that the present Covid-19 virus has a genetic structure very similar to that of the 2002 SARS coronavirus. How is it that it will now be possible to make a vaccine while for the last 18 years we have never succeeded in making one for the first SARS? To tell the truth, many attempts were made to produce an anti-SARS vaccine, with absolutely negative results. Four experimental vaccines were tested on animals, and they did lead to the production of antibodies against the virus, which is not surprising [as Professor Beelvite has explained for *The Daily Compass*](#). However, all of the vaccinated mice developed very serious side effects, more specifically a Th2 immunopathology with eosinophil infiltration, and as a result the researchers concluded that it was necessary to proceed with great caution in the application of SARS coronavirus vaccine for humans. In the end, nothing was done.

Thus the news that a vaccine is already ready and will be available within a few months, perhaps even before next winter in order to prevent the greatly feared “second wave,” should be met with great prudence and critical sense. It would be reasonable to greet the news of a vaccine with at least as much skepticism as was met by those who have proposed the therapeutic use of chloroquine, heparin, and plasma in treating Covid-19.

And yet the expectation of the vaccine has stirred up almost messianic expectation. For this reason, it would be prudent for leaders of the ecclesiastical hierarchy to abstain from sponsoring the vaccine, at least until we know what types of vaccination are being proposed. From this point of view, the American bishop Joseph

Strickland of Tyler, Texas, has made a very valuable statement. He has publicly declared his conscientious objection against any development of a vaccine for the coronavirus that uses tissues from aborted children. Bishop Strickland has distinguished himself during this epidemic by his interventions in the area of bioethics. In particular, he has spoken out strongly denouncing the practice of euthanasia against the elderly and disabled. At the end of March, he refused to sign a "Statement on Scarce Healthcare Resources" issued by the Bishops' Conference of Texas. "The elderly, the disabled, and the most vulnerable should always be protected and shown a love of preference," Strickland said, "because they are the poor in our midst, during this pandemic." The bishop of Tyler recalled that there are several principles of moral theology that should be applied. "For example, the family should always be consulted and considered in making vital moral decisions such as these."

Regarding the vaccine, Bishop Strickland has expressed his dismay at the fact that "also with Covid-19 we are discussing the use of tissue from aborted foetuses for medical research." In so doing, the Texas prelate has struck a painful nerve: for some time various pro-life organisations in the United States have denounced the fact that certain vaccines have been produced using cell lines obtained from aborted foetuses. These are very widespread vaccines like the quadrivalent vaccine for measles, mumps, and rubella, and the hepatitis A vaccine.

Cells from aborted foetuses are also being used for several of the potential Covid-19 vaccines that are presently being studied, cells that are not from miscarriages but from procured abortions. The Children of God for Life Association issued a press release which explained how "in the majority of seasonal influenza vaccines, the need to rapidly produce great quantities of the vaccine was a problem for many years, because the pharmaceutical agencies used chicken eggs to grow their viruses. It takes several months and millions of eggs to produce these vaccines, and so many agencies began looking for other cell lines in order to speed up production." Some of these cell lines are human cells taken from aborted foetuses.

The ethical problems raised by research, production, commercialisation and the use of vaccines are neither new nor few in number. In the case of Covid-19, such objections could easily be ignored in the name of "the emergency." The people could easily be led to accept the logic of "the end justifies the means." For the sake of saving many people from Covid-19, why shouldn't we accept the sacrifice of a few foetuses? And in reality this is the true and proper moral blackmail that courageous pastors like Bishop Strickland have denounced. A good end can never justify an evil means. In

addition, the use of these vaccines ends up actually creating an incentive for research based on this perverse “assembly line.” Embryos are produced and then killed in order to obtain material for the production of vaccines. The strong media pressure in favour of vaccines cannot become an alibi for superseding non-negotiable moral principles.

The enthusiasm of those who hope, dream, and await the Covid-19 vaccine

would thus be greatly cooled. Bishop Strickland has done well to raise the question of the moral licitness of these vaccines, but there is also a principle of prudence that is strictly scientific. One of the foundational principles of medicine, from its very inception, is *primum non nocere* – First, do no harm. If it will be possible to develop a vaccine, it must be done giving absolute guarantees that the vaccine itself will respect precise criteria ensuring the absence of any toxicity or harmfulness. The failure of the potential SARS vaccine to meet such criteria should lead us to great prudence. From this point of view, developing a vaccine responsibly takes five years, not five months. In the world of science, acting in haste is always absolutely the enemy of the good.

Here someone might object: “But for Covid-19 they are investing so many economic resources, above all thanks to “interested” benefactors like Bill Gates. And here truly we could respond: How come this never happened before, for other diseases? Every year millions of people die from malaria, yellow fever, tuberculosis, typhus, cholera, and still other diseases. How come the pharmaceutical industries, governments, and foundations have not committed themselves to curing all of these diseases with the same alacrity and the same wealth of resources?

A final objection can easily be imagined: well then if we must wait years for the development of a safe vaccine that is also created using ethical procedures, what is to be done in the meantime? The answer is already given in the numerous therapeutic treatments that are being found. Even without a vaccine, Covid-19 can be cured; it can become a disease that can be dealt with. And finally – and this is much more than a hypothesis – Covid-19 might disappear, if not forever then for a long time, such as happened with the H1N1 flu and SARS 1. And then we will no longer need the messianic vaccine.