

THE NATIONAL CATHOLIC BIOETHICS CENTER

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January 28, 2011

The Most Reverend Thomas G. Wenski, D.D.
Archbishop of Miami
Florida Catholic Conference
201 West Park Avenue
Tallahassee, FL 32301-7715

Dear Archbishop Wenski:

We have received your letter requesting an opinion on diocesan vaccine policy. As a follow-up to that letter I had an extended telephone conversation with Dr. Michael McCarron, Executive Director of the Florida Catholic Conference.

With this letter I am enclosing a posting which The National Catholic Bioethics Center has on its website about the different types of exemptions from mandated immunizations for school admissions. In fact, Catholic schools or a Catholic diocese cannot grant an exemption from vaccination on *religious* grounds since the Catholic Church does not teach that the use of vaccinations produced in cell lines derived from tissue from an aborted fetus is intrinsically evil. It is to be very much regretted that we have to contend with this issue at all. However, the Pontifical Academy for Life (2005) and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in *Dignitas Personae* have both declared the use of these vaccines licit if no others are available. Parents would, therefore, have to obtain a conscience exemption rather than a religious one.

Personally, I encourage as liberal a policy as possible on the question of exemptions from the use of vaccines linked in any way to biological material that was obtained immorally. However, I often point out to parents that school superintendents and other officials must also act in accord with their consciences. If they rely on the judgment of local public health authorities that non-immunized children pose a threat in the schools to other children or to teachers and parents, then the school officials must follow their consciences and insist that the children be immunized. And parents would have to respect their consciences!

The Pontifical Academy for Life in its 2005 statement on the issue said the vaccines could be foregone unless it would constitute "considerable dangers" to health, citing particularly the dangers of contracting German measles. The statement even goes so far as to make the following argument in footnote 15: "This is particularly true in the case of vaccination against German measles, because of the danger of congenital rubella syndrome. This could occur, causing grave congenital malformations in the fetus, when a pregnant woman enters into contact, even if it is brief, with children who have not been immunized and are carriers of the virus. In this case, the parents who did not accept the vaccination of their own children become responsible for the malformations in question, and for the subsequent

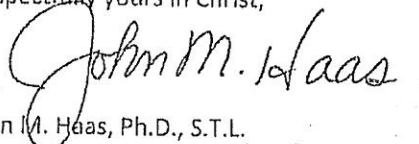
abortion of fetuses, when they have been discovered to be malformed." Any exemption policy for Catholic schools would have to take note of that caution.

My views would be the following:

- The ecclesiastical authorities could grant *conscience* exemptions to parents from immunizing their children with the problematic vaccines when they seek admission to Catholic schools. However, they could not grant *religious* exemptions, the Florida statute notwithstanding, because the Catholic Church does not teach that the use of these vaccines is immoral in and of itself. The Catholic Church believes in objective moral norms and has an agency to interpret and apply those norms, i.e., the magisterium. Appeal cannot be made by parents simply to their subjective "feelings" on the matter.
- The exemption should be granted as liberally as possible for the sake of the delicate consciences of pro-life, Catholic parents and also to allow them to make a witness for life.
- It should be made clear that an exemption from immunization with these vaccines is being made in order to allow the parents to make a pro-life witness not because the Catholic Church teaches that the use of these vaccines is immoral in and of itself. Some parents believe the use of these vaccines is immoral and then proceed to pass moral judgment on parents who have had their children immunized with them. This leads to phariseism and discord in the Catholic community.
- The consciences of school officials must also be honored even as we respect the consciences of parents. A policy should make it clear that if school officials, relying upon the scientific and professional judgment of public health officials, come to the conclusion that admitting children to schools would constitute a risk to other children or adults, then there should be compliance with the policies the school officials establish.

Enclosed with this letter is our position of "Vaccines and Exemptions Granted by Schools" as well as the FAQ sheet we developed on the question. Please do not hesitate have Dr. McCarron contact me if you have any other questions.

Respectfully yours in Christ,



John M. Haas, Ph.D., S.T.L.
President

Enclosures