



Round Table Final Document on the Ethical Aspects of Vaccination in the Light of Orthodox Teaching



*There was held on 20th May 2021 at the Sretensky Theological Academy **a round table on the ethical problems of vaccination in the light of Orthodox teaching**. At the conclusion of the event the participants issued a final document which stated the following:*

“The participants of the round table on the ethical problems of vaccination in the light of Orthodox teaching – the members of the Inter-conciliar Presence of the Russian Orthodox Church, specialists in the field of medicine and biology and representatives of Orthodox public opinion – discussed issues which arose, including among the faithful of the Russian Orthodox Church, concerning the vaccination against the COVID-19 infection.

Deserving of our gratitude and respect are the scientists and doctors who have exerted every effort to combat the effects and to avert the further spread of COVID-19 virus which has taken the lives of many people and caused significant disruption to peoples' lives. Today, as in the past, thanks to the achievements of medical science, including in the field of vaccine prophylactics, it has become possible to warn of and lower the spread of many diseases, to alleviate the suffering which they bring to people and to reduce the mortality rate to zero after the use of vaccines for these diseases.

The historical experience of the Russian Orthodox Church has given us examples of the active participation of clergy in extending the practice of vaccination as a medical procedure aimed at preserving the lives and health of people. In particular, the decree of the Holy Governing Synod of 1804 recommended that bishops and priests should explain to the people the benefits of vaccinations from smallpox. At the time, clergy had to study as part of their general education the basic means of applying vaccinations from this disease. The spread of vaccination programmes was supported, for example, by the ruling bishop of Moscow Innocent.[1]

It is erroneous to think that a firm refusal to take a vaccine as such can be justified by Orthodox teaching. The right to choose a vaccine or the right to refuse it is the individual decision of each person (with regards to a child, his or her parents or legal representatives) taken on the basis of personal beliefs, knowledge and experience of life, as well as by taking into account information from medical workers, the scientific community and vaccine manufacturers.

The Russian Orthodox Church has consistently adhered to the principles of the protection of defending the individual's right to choose to use or not to use new and rapidly developing technologies, including in the field of medicine. In particular, the Bases of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church emphasizes that "the doctor-patient relationships should be built on respect for the integrity, free choice and dignity of the personality. It is inadmissible to manipulate him even for the best purposes" (XI.3). In following the aforementioned principle and at the same time recognizing the importance of supporting initiatives for defeating the pandemic, including the widespread use of vaccines, the round table participants believe it vital to guarantee peoples' freedom to choose in relation to taking the vaccination against the COVID-19 infection and to exclude all forms of open or secret discrimination of people who refuse this vaccine for whatever reason. It should be noted that cases that have come to light of manipulating people forcibly into taking the vaccine and other actions aimed against the aforementioned freedom of choice evoke a negative reaction and merely serve to bolster rumours and anxiety among those who have taken measures to protect their health.

The concern of a part of society in relation to using a vaccine, including the vaccine for the COVID-19 infection, has been conditioned, among other reasons, by fears of post-vaccine complications and the routine approach to immune-prophylactics which does not taken into account the individual peculiarities of people. The round table participants, in noting that an evaluation of the effectiveness and degree of risk of side effects of medicines is not within the Church's competence and is not one of her tasks, nonetheless emphasize the importance of a broad expert and publica debate on the side effects, including delayed ones, as well as on the certification of these medicines. No less important is the complete and accessible imparting of information to people who have decided to take the vaccine and the degree of how necessary it is and its possible effects. There is also a need for a clear and public

resolution of the issue of adequate medical aid and social support for people in instances where serious and long-term post-vaccine complications arise.

At the same time, the round table participants regard as impermissible and sinful the spread of false evidence identifying the vaccine as “the seal of the antichrist” as well as conspiracy theories on the supposed use of vaccines as a secret means of introducing micro-chips into the human race.

The church community is alarmed at the fact that in the creation of certain vaccines, including vaccines against the COVID-19 infection, there have been used stem cells grown from embryonic human cells obtained as a result of abortions, even if they occurred a half century ago or more. As the Bases of the Social Concept notes, the Russian Orthodox Church believes to be wrong “the extraction and use of the tissues and organs of a human foetus aborted at an early stage of development as a means of curing various diseases and illnesses” (XII.7). It should be noted that according to information published by vaccine manufacturers the vaccines do not contain embryonic stem cells and that the aforementioned stem cells have been used for many years for the creation of vaccines. However, representatives of the scientific community (the participants of the round table) noted that in testing the stages of development of other vaccines and many other medicines there had been used similar embryonic human stem cells. The round table participants, in taking note of this situation, believe it necessary for pharmaceutical companies to explore the possibility of using technologies that would exclude the use of the aforementioned stem cells.

In taking into account all of the above, the round table participants believe that at the present time, in view of the absence of an accessible alternative and bearing in mind the threat to the health and lives of people that COVID-19 poses, the Orthodox Christian, in taking the vaccine against the disease, made or tested by using embryonic human stem cells, is not a participant in the sin of the abortion as a result of which this stem cell was made. If it is possible to choose between this type of vaccine and a vaccine developed without the use of embryonic human stem cells, the round table participants speak out in favour of the use of the latter type of vaccine as ethically more acceptable.

The round table participants call upon people to treat with respect those who consider it possible to take for themselves or for their children a vaccine prepared using embryonic human stem cells, as well as those who refuse to take it.

The round table participants believe it important to continue debate on the moral aspects of the broad application in medicine of cell cultures grown from embryonic human stem cells.

[1] See: I. P. Barsukov, St. Innocent, Metropolitan of Moscow and Kolomna: Writings, Letters and Contemporary Accounts (in Russian), Moscow, 1883, pp.82-83.

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