

“Prudence Will Watch Over You”

Practical, Biblical, and Theological Reflections
on COVID-19 Vaccination

A Compilation of Articles

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Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The following series of articles is one that I put together at the request of our bishop, from January to March of 2021. Their origin came from the intersection of two trends. First, the publication of very good—but very technical!—moral teaching on vaccination by magisterial authorities in the U.S. and Rome. They covered the subject well, but not in a way that was especially accessible. At the same time, misunderstandings of the Church’s teaching on vaccination have been spreading. These articles were intended to address the second problem by putting the Magisterium’s documents into easier language.

With the recent spread of the Delta variant in our region, the issue of vaccination has become more pressing than ever. As a result, I’ve decided to compile the newspaper articles into this collection as a reference for Catholics who are looking to better understand the Church’s stance. Reading through it, I hope you have the same experience I did when writing it: amazement at the beauty of the Church’s teaching. This doctrine is a true fountain of wisdom, capable of bringing together ancient philosophy and cutting-edge science, through the mystery of God revealed in Christ.

I should also explain the pastoral motive which made this project such a passion for me. Over the past few years, I have been very concerned by the dilution of Catholic identity—our sense of who we are and what makes us unique, as a people called by God into communion with the successors of the apostles, under the leadership of Peter. Here in Alabama, that identity faces unique challenges. By clarifying the Church’s stance on vaccines, I also hope to help strengthen our identity as Catholics.

In a culture shaped by Protestant fundamentalism, there is a tendency to absorb the language and belief of our separated brethren. This is usually fine, since the Church looks to find the good in everything, but sometimes it creates confusion. In particular, there is a tendency in many Protestant groups to see faith and reason in opposition: “if you just have enough faith, God will protect you from COVID without a vaccine.” This kind of thinking is directly opposed to the Church’s belief and tradition. God has entrusted us with minds capable of understanding His creation, and He expects us to use those minds to help our neighbors in charity. Medical science is one way to put the good minds the Lord gave us *together* with prayer and faith.

Thank you for reading with an open mind and heart. I look forward to seeing you all out there on the road of discipleship, as together we build up the Kingdom.

Christ’s peace,

Fr. Brad Jantz, S.T.D., M.S.

Part 1: Introduction and Discernment

Although we're riding the roller coaster of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have good reason to hope. We mourn with the many who have lost much, but we can also give thanks to God, who has shown his faithfulness. In particular, we are blessed that medical researchers have so quickly produced a tool which can turn the tide: vaccinations to help us protect ourselves and each other. Since these vaccines are of paramount importance for our society and the Church's witness to human dignity, Bishop Raica has requested me to put together a series of articles exploring the moral and theological dimensions of the COVID vaccines. The goal is to make sure that the Catholics of the Diocese of Birmingham are well informed about the issues at stake.

As a student of Sacred Scripture, I think the Book of Proverbs provides us with a good starting point for this discussion. The authors and compilers of the poems and sayings of Proverbs were very interested in finding God in the decisions of their ordinary lives. In fact, they saw the search for wisdom and guidance as a place to encounter God and learn his will. As Proverbs 2:11 says, "prudence will watch over you, and understanding will guard you." Prudence and understanding are God-given gifts within the human spirit, and he rejoices when we use them for His glory. My prayer is that our shared search for wisdom and prudence in this matter will be an occasion for all of us to come closer to the Lord and give witness to his truth.

The gift of prudence is important for reflecting on the moral dimension of these vaccines for two major reasons. First, the availability of vaccinations is a great gift for the common good of our society and indeed the entire world. COVID-19 has affected all of us profoundly, and it has caused tremendous physical, spiritual, and economic suffering, which the vaccines will help to address. This is why Pope Francis, Pope-Emeritus Benedict, and many other leaders of the Church, including our own Bishop Raica, have received it: as a witness to the positive value and importance of getting vaccinated as a personal contribution to the good of protecting our neighbors.

Second, prudent reflection is needed because the process of research and development behind some of the vaccines presents a few ethical questions. As you may have heard, some medical research over the last decades has made use of stem cells derived from aborted fetuses obtained in the 1960s. While the Church objects to this practice, the position of the Vatican and the National Catholic Bioethics Center (NCBC) is that when there is no alternative to a vaccine using these cell lines, getting vaccinated with them is morally permissible, since the connection with abortion is extremely remote—receiving vaccines like these does not contribute to abortion. Since most of the candidate and approved vaccines make at least some use of these stem cell lines, this is a good moment for Catholics to inform ourselves on this issue. We will dedicate one entire article to reflecting on it in light of the Church's moral teaching.

Our shared journey of prudent discernment will unfold in an article series which will cover:

- The bioethics of the current and upcoming vaccines
- How vaccines are related to the common good
- A Biblical reflection on public health and disease

This discernment will apply the magisterial guidance received from the Vatican and the Pontifical Academy for Life, Pope Francis' recent encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, and the helpful documents from the NCBC. The goal is to take these high-level documents and use them to help us make practical decisions here in Alabama.

Since I know many people are looking for practical guidance right now, I will go ahead and summarize the conclusion of the overall article series: the Vatican and the NCBC have indicated that the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines—the ones currently approved in the United States—are morally satisfactory from the Church's standpoint, since they have not used cells derived from aborted fetal tissue for production or development. Both companies unfortunately used such stem cells in some late-stage confirmatory tests, but these vaccines are not intrinsically tied to abortion. When you have access to them, you can receive them in good conscience! In fact, receiving them is a very positive and important way for Catholics to witness to God's and our love for every human being.

Since this is a rapidly-developing topic, we will be working to provide information that is as up to date as possible, including further articles in the future if the need arises. I would also like to invite all of those who may have questions about this matter to send them in. I will work to address the major issues connected with these vaccines in this article series, but truth is often uncovered in conversation and dialogue. If you have any questions that you feel are not being well addressed by this article series, please feel free to get in touch. Who knows, your question might lead to another article to help everyone be more knowledgeable!

Part 2: Principles of Catholic Bioethics

In this section, we will address the major bioethical question about receiving the COVID vaccines by applying the wisdom of Scripture and Tradition. Since vaccines have only been invented in the last couple centuries, the morality of vaccination is not something directly mentioned in Scripture, which means we will turn to magisterial teaching and the Church's tradition for assistance. Fortunately, the Church has been reflecting on vaccinations in general over the last few decades. In this article, I am drawing upon guidance from the Vatican, the Pontifical Academy for Life, and the National Catholic Bioethics Center in the United States.

To begin, we should clear the air about some misinformation. The approved vaccines have been through rigorous, public, scientific investigations, designed to verify their safety and effectiveness as best as humanly possible. They do not “change your DNA” in some nefarious way, and they are not a sinister conspiracy or the mark of the Beast. Rumors like these are expressions of the fear we have all been feeling over the last year—but as Catholics, we are a people of hope, not fear, so let's put the fear aside and assess the moral issues using our God-given reason.

There is, however, one important issue related to the science of these vaccines. Specifically, many of them have used fetus-derived stem cells in research and production. These stem cell lines are derived from a child aborted in the 1960s, so our Christian respect for human life and dignity invites us to moral reflection. As always, our goal is to follow Jesus' teaching of imitating God's holiness: “Be perfect, as your Heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48).

Cooperation with Evil?

The main bioethical issue with the vaccines is best addressed through the thought of a famous Doctor of the Church from the 1700s: St Alphonsus Liguori. He wrote about situations where a morally good or neutral action has some relationship with evil, which he calls “cooperation.” For example, there is nothing wrong with driving a car, but if someone drives the bank robber away from the scene of their crime, they are cooperating with robbery. However, the moral responsibility of the driver depends on their circumstances and intentions. If they knowingly chose to aid the robber, they would be an accomplice to a violation of the 7th Commandment (“You shall not steal”, Deuteronomy 5:19). A driver-accomplice “formally cooperates” with the robber by choosing to share the robber's goal of stealing money. Formal cooperation with evil—directly helping someone do wrong—is never justifiable.

On the other hand, we can imagine more complicated versions of this situation. Say that after robbing the bank, the robber jumps into someone's car, waves a gun around, and demands that the car's owner drive him away. In this case, the driver “materially cooperates” with the robber by driving the car, but they are obviously not an accomplice! They do not share the thief's criminal intent, and the crime would have still happened even if the driver had not coincidentally parked in front of the bank. This is “remote material cooperation:” the driver did nothing inherently sinful, they did not freely cooperate with the wrong, and the evil would have happened regardless. It is

not a sin when someone, through no fault of their own, has no feasible choice other than remote material cooperation with evil.

A classic case of this is the situation of taxpayers. As good citizens, we are required (legally and morally) to contribute to having an orderly society, which requires paying for a justice system, the protection of human rights, national defense, and so on. We cooperate in this effort by paying taxes to support our government. Yet we know from experience that sometimes governments do bad things: applying laws unfairly, or using their powers unjustly. In other words, every taxpayer “cooperates” with evil to some degree—but because the cooperation is so incredibly remote, and because an orderly society is so important, paying taxes is morally justified and required. Jesus himself paid taxes to the unjust Roman government and taught his followers to do the same (Mark 12:17). Tax season involves only “remote material cooperation” with evil, and a greater good outweighs the incidental cooperation.

Remote Material Cooperation

With that in mind, let’s think about these vaccines. First, the COVID vaccines do not involve formal cooperation with evil—receiving them is not morally equal to abortion. Their purpose is to promote individual and public health, which is a good thing. Second, receiving vaccination does not involve close material cooperation with evil: the stem cells in question were derived decades ago, and taking these vaccines does not encourage future abortions. This is why the Pontifical Academy for Life and the National Catholic Bioethics Center have classified the vaccinations as only “remote material cooperation” with abortion.

Just to be clear, when we say that receiving certain vaccines is “remote material cooperation” with evil, we are not saying that we are only encouraging abortion a little bit. It means that the connection is so distant that it does not reflect on the individual receiving a vaccination. In the absence of other vaccination options, personal health and public safety far outweigh the minimal connection with disrespect for human life. Morally speaking, getting vaccinated against COVID is like being a taxpayer, who responsibly contributes to society despite objecting to some of the things their government does.

Moral Tiers of Vaccines

All that said, some of the vaccines are morally preferable to others. Ideally, we would have access to vaccines that make no use of fetus-derived stem cells at any point in their development or production. Morally, these would be “Tier 1,” without any degree of connection with abortion. Unfortunately, no such vaccine is currently available.

At the moral “Tier 2,” there are vaccines that do not use fetus-derived stem cells in development or production, but have used these cell lines in late-stage confirmation tests. This category includes both of the currently-approved vaccines (from Pfizer and Moderna). There is no intrinsic link to

abortion in the manufacture of these vaccines. All else being equal, we would prefer a Tier 1 vaccine, but in the meanwhile, we can certainly receive these vaccines in good conscience.

Some of the vaccines that may soon become available fall into “Tier 3:” they have used ethically problematic stem cell lines as part of their development and production processes. The best-known Tier 3 vaccines are those from AstraZeneca-Oxford and Johnson & Johnson (currently unapproved in the United States). While the Church objects to the way they are manufactured, the Vatican and National Catholic Bioethics Center have stated that we can still receive them in good conscience if we do so “under protest,” just as a taxpayer contributes to the common good but speaks out against unjust laws.

For these lower ethical tier vaccines, receiving them “under protest” does not mean we should make life more difficult for our hard-working and stressed-out health care workers. Instead, as individuals, we should “vote with our feet” by seeking out the morally preferable vaccines first, but it is OK to get the Tier 3 vaccines if they are the only ones offered to us. As a Catholic community, we can encourage pharmaceutical companies to move away from the practice of using fetal-derived stem cells in their research and production.

To help everyone keep these complicated issues straight, we have provided a chart of the approved and upcoming vaccines, rated by ethical tier. We will continue to run this with each part of this series for your reference, as well as update it as vaccine deployment and research continues.

Thank you for your attention to this important issue. The theology is complex, but by reflecting on it, I believe we will be better witnesses to Jesus’ teachings on the dignity of human life. Next week, we will continue our discernment of the moral issues surrounding vaccines by reflecting on their relationship to the common good. Let wisdom and prudence continue to watch over us (Proverbs 2:11), and may God bless our state, our country, and our world!

	Company Name	Fetal-Derived Stem Cell Lines Used as Part of:			Ethical Tier*
		Development	Production	Testing	
Currently Approved	Moderna	No	No	Yes	2
	Pfizer-BioNTech	No	No	Yes	2
	Johnson & Johnson	Yes	Yes	Yes	3
Not Yet Approved	AstraZeneca-Oxford	Yes	Yes	Yes	3
	Novavax	No	No	Yes	2

*Tier 1 is preferable to Tier 2, which is preferable to Tier 3.

Part 3: Vaccines and the Common Good

There is another important moral dimension of the vaccines that we should reflect on: their relationship to the common good, and what that means for us here in Alabama. The Catechism of the Catholic Church (par. 1906) quotes St John XXIII to define the common good: the “social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily”. The idea speaks to the importance of every member of society working together to promote the good of all.

What is the Common Good?

Perhaps you recall memorizing the Preamble to the US Constitution in school? It gives a handy summary of the idea of the common good:

“We the People of the United States, in order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, ensure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity ...”

As a nation, we have committed to a Union of mutual cooperation in our common good, which includes respecting human rights (justice); maintaining a peaceful and stable social order (common defense and domestic tranquility); allowing everyone to participate equally in society (liberty); promoting universal access to the essential elements of a full life, such as food, clothing, housing, and work (the general welfare); and being confident that our commitment to freedom will lead to a prosperous and enduring society (blessings).

The Constitution may have been written mostly by the Protestant founders, but this Preamble is very Catholic! The Church teaches that each of us shares responsibility for the common good of our nation and the whole world. Last week, we mentioned the requirement for Christians to pay taxes, but taxes are certainly not our only responsibility. We are called to contribute to the world around us through humanitarian efforts, advocacy for the poor and marginalized, charitable works and giving, and passionate involvement in community, state, national, and international institutions. In other words, we should be zealous for the common good.

Vaccination and the Common Good

In his parables, Jesus often used health as an example of how righteous individuals contribute generously to the common good. The Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) paints a picture of a man who cares for an injured and dying person he encounters on the roadside. Despite differences of ethnicity and religion, their shared humanity moves the Samaritan to become a neighbor to the injured Jew, binding up his wounds, putting him on his own donkey, and bearing the financial burden for his healing. This act of mercy is a beautiful image of the meaning of shared responsibility for the common good of health.

The lessons for us now are clear. We are our brothers' and sisters' keepers, and they in turn take care of us. There are so many inspiring stories of how people have come together over the last year: dropping off food for immune-compromised neighbors, creatively finding safe ways to socialize, and being disciplined in their response to the recommendations of public health authorities.

To take one example, the masks are driving us all a bit crazy, and we all look forward to seeing each others' faces again, but for now, wearing masks in public helps protect the well-being of our vulnerable neighbors. We Catholics should strive to be Good Samaritans through our public health practices, out of love for the vulnerable and as a witness to those whose hearts have grown cold.

With this in mind, it is clear that getting vaccinated is a positive contribution to the common good, reducing and eventually ending the pandemic. Just think of how much good has come because you do not have to worry about smallpox, polio, or the measles—through those vaccines, we have all benefitted tremendously from others' responsibility. Similarly, the COVID vaccines protect everyone around us. This is especially important because not everyone can be vaccinated: no vaccines have been approved for children yet, and some adults suffer from medical conditions that make vaccination medically inadvisable for them. Love for vulnerable neighbors should be foremost in our minds, as we contemplate getting vaccinated.

Practical Contributions to the Common Good

Beyond getting vaccinated ourselves, the current moment presents us with other ways to contribute to the common good. As Pope Francis has made clear, the world's goal in the vaccine effort should be universal access: "for these lights to illuminate and bring hope to all, they need to be available to all" (*Urbi et Orbi*, Christmas 2020). All of us have a part to play in this task.

First, we should be generous and proactive in helping others get vaccinated. For those with family members or neighbors who lack transportation, this is a good opportunity to reach out—like the Good Samaritan, let's place those in need on our own donkeys, if that's what it takes! Similarly, technologically-savvy individuals can help the technologically-challenged navigate the reservation systems for hospitals and pharmacies. If someone you know is eligible for a vaccine but is having trouble with the sign-up website, giving them a helping hand will be a great kindness.

Pope Francis has suggested another way to contribute to the common good in his recent encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti* ("Brothers and Sisters, All"). In this letter, he describes how certain voices in our world benefit from spreading despair and suspicion to the detriment of society (*FT*, 15). A key tool in this assault on the common good has been social media, where people often talk past each other instead of genuinely opening their hearts (*FT*, 199).

The common good of our society and world requires us to be voices of encouragement and positivity, especially on social media. The words we say and write have an impact on others, and the importance of vaccination for the common good means that we must be conscientious about our words. Above all, we should strive to be examples of truth and charity in conversation. This means taking care to avoid unintentionally passing along inaccurate health information—please

be sure to rely on verified information from legitimate public health authorities rather than internet “experts” or political commentators. We also need to work as hard as we can to avoid disparaging or demeaning others, regardless of how their beliefs differ from ours.

Finally, as Catholics, we need to speak up for all members of our community and our world. COVID has affected every member of the human family, and our hope is that the suffering it has caused will be relieved for all. Members of under-served ethnic and economic communities and nations possess the same human dignity and are part of our common good—when our neighbors suffer, we suffer. The recent emergence of new variants of the virus highlights the depth of our inter-dependence. The pandemic will not be over until it is over for everyone, and so we must ensure that the most marginalized have access to vaccination, through personal generosity and public advocacy.

Part 4: Disease and Health in the Old Testament

At this point, we will begin a reflection on the Bible's perspective on disease and public health. This is not just an ornament on our previous discussion but something integral to it. Sacred Scripture has a way of firing the imagination and inspiring us to action in ways that reflections in philosophical language have trouble doing: "The Lord's testimony gives wisdom to the simple" (Psalm 19:7). Our imaginative participation in the poetry and stories of the Bible, in union with the Church's teaching and tradition, leads us to a true encounter with Christ and produces much fruit in our lives. This week, we begin with a reflection on disease and health in the Old Testament, to be followed by the Good News of the New Testament next week.

In the Beginning ...

In the opening chapters of Genesis, we find that disease was not part of God's plan for the world. As we read through the majestic sweep of Genesis 1, we see an orderly and thoughtful arrangement of all its parts: sun and stars, earth and sea, plants and animals, and humankind, all in perfect harmony. The Lord called his creation "very good," because his craftsmanship was perfect, with everything arranged in tranquility.

But somewhere along the way, something went wrong: sin and evil entered the world, disrupting creation's harmony. The good and fruitful earth started to produce thorns (Genesis 3:18), and pain was transformed from simple information into true suffering (Genesis 3:16). Sin led not just to the disruption of individual happiness, but to the disruption of society, as brother turned against brother (Genesis 4:1-16), and ultimately even the earth was contaminated by sin (Genesis 4:10).

The Law of Moses brought disease into further focus. In the Book of Leviticus, the laws of Israel focused on three major issues: justice within society; public health (through dietary and quarantine laws); and right worship. Interestingly, the Law treats the problems of sin and infectious disease very similarly. Both lepers and sinners were excluded from the community (as in Leviticus 13 and 18:24-30), and the restoration of a sinner or a disease victim required similar sacrifices (in Leviticus 14 and 16). In other words, both contagious diseases and sin "go airborne," infecting others and endangering communities.

This gives us a key lesson about public health from the Old Testament: as members of a community, we all share responsibility for each others' moral and physical well-being, and the bodily or spiritual illness of one hurts us all. In the present moment, we need to be very aware of how our individual choices about health practices and moral responsibility affect those around us.

Prophetic Promises

Despite the wisdom of the Law of Moses, the spread of disease remained mysterious in ancient times. The prophets often interpreted plagues as a sign of God's punishment of sin. When King

David's pride grew too great, the prophet Nathan warned of a coming disease outbreak (2 Samuel 24:10-17). Similarly, Jeremiah declared that Jerusalem's failure to establish justice for poor laborers would result in the city dying by war, famine, and plague (Jeremiah 34:8-17).

In stories like these, we should keep in mind that God never personally causes evil. His work of creating and sustaining everything is always "very good," even if sometimes he permits the evil that comes from our bad choices. In spite of Israel's mistakes, God continued to hold out the promise of a path to spiritual and physical health. The repentant King Hezekiah's illness (Isaiah 38) was healed by a fig-based remedy from the prophet Isaiah—but his recovery is attributed to the Lord. The restoration of health comes through collaboration between human skill and divine goodness. God allows us to participate in his work of restoring creation to the way he intended it to be. The wonder of modern medicine, which has produced vaccines against COVID-19 in record time, is a good example of this collaboration.

On a positive note, the prophets speak of health as a result of God doing surgery on the world: "'I will heal your wounds,' says the Lord" (Jeremiah 30:17). Isaiah promises that all nations will be healed by the Lord, which will take place through humankind joining together in the right worship of God (Isaiah 56:1-8) and through the establishment of justice for all members of the Lord's community (Isaiah 58:6-12). The result of this will be such health that "he who lives to be only 100 years old is thought to have died young" (Isaiah 65:20).

The prophets teach us that moments of disease can be occasions for repentance. As we encounter our human insufficiency, we learn to place our trust in God. They also help us learn what it means to wait in hope: the Lord is planning to do something about the combined problem of sin and disease.

Wisdom and the Mystery of Disease

The Wisdom literature of the Old Testament reflects deeply on the remaining traces of the order that God established in the beginning, hidden but truly present, despite sin and evil. This order shows up especially in human decision making. For example, Sirach starts from the Law of Moses to find the beauty of creation, which leads him to describe remedies for disease, discoverable by human wisdom, as a sign of God's goodness (Sirach 38:2-7). Those who heal others give honor to God, and a good physician is an image of virtue: wise in knowing how to give God's healing to others, and just in giving that healing generously. Medicine is one way in which prudence watches over the righteous (Proverbs 2:11).

Even with this positive perspective on creation, people who suffer from illness still confront a real difficulty. The Book of Job describes it most clearly, in pages of anguished poetry. While disease and sin are interrelated, their connection presents a riddle: if someone hasn't committed grave sin, how is it fair for God to allow others' sin to harm them? In modern terms, when the physical, economic, and social effects of pandemics fall disproportionately on weak and innocent members of a community, where is justice?

Job himself never quite arrives at a full answer to this mystery, but he has an encounter with God (Job 38–41) and is satisfied that the question has an answer. There has to be more to creation, more to humankind, than just sin and disease, but we can't quite arrive at that goodness by our own efforts. Somehow God himself will have to break the boundaries of evil and death, if health and justice are to be truly restored to creation and human society.

And by raising this challenge, the Old Testament has asked its deepest question: how can God possibly make things right? The answer, of course, is found in the New Testament!

Part 5: Health and Healing in the New Testament

In the Old Testament, we heard how the sacred authors perceived a deep connection between sin and disease: both represent the wound upon creation that God had promised to heal. We also explored how God's Law saw disease and evil as public problems, which affect everyone and require the contribution of the whole community to overcome. And we also encountered one of the great questions of the Hebrew prophets and sages: when the physical, economic, and social effects of disease and sin fall disproportionately on the weakest and most vulnerable, what will God do to establish justice?

Jesus, the Great Physician

This difficult question receives a dramatic answer in the New Testament. In the Gospels, Jesus Christ first becomes famous (Mark 1:27-28) as a healer of diseases of both body and soul, as he cures the sick and drives out evil spirits. In the healing stories of Jesus' early ministry, Scripture once again explores the connection between sin and disease, but this time with an emphasis on God's power to overcome both of these forces. The Lord has both the power and the desire to help those who suffer (Mark 1:40-45), including us in our present moment.

The Gospels make it clear that Jesus' healing miracles show us that he came to undo *all* of the consequences of the Fall: to restore health to those who suffer, to forgive the sins of the whole world, and to return the isolated and quarantined ("lepers") to the fullness of their communities. His desire and purpose is for us to "have life, and have it more abundantly" (John 10:10).

On one occasion, Jesus directly addressed the issue of why God permits sin and disease to affect the innocent (John 9:1-41). While they were travelling, the disciples saw a blind man and asked the Lord, "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" In other words, they were echoing the Old Testament understanding that sin and disease are related in some mysterious way. Jesus' answer gives a profound insight into God's purposes for creation: "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be made manifest in him." God only allows evil in the world because he is planning to bring a greater good out of the midst of that evil.

The Redemptive Suffering of Christ's Body

The idea that Jesus came to restore all things brings us to the greatest healing God has brought about: the Resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Death is the apparent triumph of disease and sin—but when Jesus rose from the grave, he made it clear that the truly "contagious" thing is now the power of life (I Cor 15:20-28). For anyone who, like Job, was wondering why an all-powerful and loving God would allow death and disease, we now know: it was so that Christ himself could die, and in dying, destroy sin and death forever (Hebrews 2:14-15). Jesus's Resurrection is the answer to Job's riddle of what God can do to establish justice and health in a fallen creation.

Since we ourselves are part of Christ's body, we share with him in his redemptive suffering and rising. As St Paul says, "If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together" (I Cor 12:26). Joined to the suffering of Christ, we have the privilege of sharing in all things and working for the good of all (II Cor 1:1-7). Through Christ, the solidarity of the human family in sin has been transformed into solidarity in righteousness and health.

St Paul also writes frequently about healing as a gift of the Holy Spirit (I Cor 12:27-28). The way the Lord works through some people to bring about healing is a sign of Jesus' on-going presence in power among us, as the lives and intercession of the saints show us so clearly. At the same time, we should be clear that God himself considers the ability to work miracles of healing to be one of his less important gifts (I Cor 12:31). An immature faith requires signs, but mature faith means acting in love, even when we do not understand everything. In other words, if the present pandemic does not cause us Catholics to grow in charity, in joyful self-sacrifice for the sake of others, and in willing responsibility for others' needs, we will have failed to receive the Lord's greatest gift (I Cor 13:1-13).

The Church, the Field Hospital

With all that in mind, what does the gift of love look like? We can begin by noticing that Jesus did not just perform healings himself, but he also gave his disciples authority to participate in his work of healing (Mark 6:7-13). Their mission continues today: as Jesus' disciples, we have the same task of relieving human suffering. This takes the form of both prayer for and help to the afflicted, which includes both sacramental anointing (James 5:13-16) and all works of mercy.

We should also keep our eyes focused on our ultimate destination: eternity with God. The portions of the New Testament which speak about the end of all things remind us of two truths that are very relevant right now. First, we are called to be people of hope. Disease is one of the effects of sin that will be destroyed in the end, along with every source of sadness and pain (Revelation 21:4). In St Paul's inspiring words, "the sufferings of the present time are not worthy of comparison with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (Romans 8:18).

Second, Scripture is very clear that we are accountable for our actions and choices, even when times are difficult. We sometimes get hyper-focused on the grand visions of the Book of Revelation, but when Jesus describes the end of times, he lays out a judgment based on very simple criteria: "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you welcomed me, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me" (Matthew 25:35-36). Here at the beginning of Lent, this can be an examination of conscience for us: our Lord is immune compromised—are we wearing masks? Our Lord is poor and lacks insurance and internet access—are we helping him get a vaccine? Our Lord is unborn—do we speak in favor of medical research that better respects his life? Our Lord lives in a third world country—are we advocates for his health, too?

Part 6: Conclusions

By way of conclusion, we will now bring together our discussion of Scripture and the Magisterium's teaching. Throughout this series, several ideas have come up from different angles: God cares about human well-being and lets us join Him in caring for each other; public health and society's moral order are interrelated; and we all have a part to play in protecting each other.

The Way of Understanding

As we know from the Gospels, Jesus came among us as a healer of body and soul. God cares deeply for the well-being of each of His children, and he has allowed human beings to play a part in restoring the health He intends for His creation. The skill of our scientists and medical professionals in quickly developing vaccines to protect us against the current pandemic is something that we rightly celebrate.

Unfortunately, despite the reasons for cautious optimism right now, many people are still feeling the burden of these hard times. After a year of disappointments, we are almost afraid to let ourselves feel hope. That fear seems to be the source of much of the suspicion some people have toward the vaccines. In response, we need to work hard to let hope and reason speak rather than fear and anxiety—in reality, the vaccines have been through very rigorous tests to ensure their safety and effectiveness.

With that in mind, we Catholics have a duty of charity to be voices of positivity in the present moment. As a people saved in hope (Romans 8:24), we need to help our despairing friends and neighbors feel the strength of hope: God is allowing human skill and understanding to help our nation and our world in this moment! Let's be intentional about amplifying hope rather than suspicion. As Pope Francis teaches, this means we need to be especially careful about the information we share with others on social media.

To get specific, we have a responsibility to make sure that the information we share about medical matters comes from (or at least reflects) reliable sources of medical information, such as the Center for Disease Control (CDC) and other public health authorities, rather than from partisan or unverified sources. It also means we must take care to always speak in charity and love to our virtual neighbors, regardless of how their beliefs differ from ours.

The Way of Wisdom

Next, the current effort of restoring physical health to the human family provides us with a moment to reflect on and improve society's spiritual health. For the current vaccine effort, the connection between the realms of health and morality mean that we must be advocates for the marginalized. In the present moment, "marginalized" includes two important groups of people.

First, we must work to protect the economically and socially marginalized. This will occur through personal and public efforts to make sure everyone has access to vaccination, both in the United States and around the world. Practically speaking, if you know someone eligible for vaccination but who lacks internet access, insurance, or transportation, it will be an act of charity to help them get this protection, following the example of the Good Samaritan. Similarly, as a Catholic community, we must raise our voices in support of those within our country and around the world who have been or continue to be excluded from vaccine access, for any reason. People of all races, legal statuses, and nationalities are loved by God and are part of our common good.

Second, we have an opportunity in this moment to improve our society's respect for the unborn. The current COVID vaccines (from Pfizer and Moderna) have made some use of fetal-derived stem cell lines in their confirmatory testing, a practice to which the Church objects. This does not present a moral barrier to getting vaccinated, and the currently approved COVID vaccines (from Pfizer and Moderna) are an improvement compared to common vaccines against other diseases, but there is still room to do better. Concretely, we should preferentially seek out the higher tier vaccines if and when lower tier options become available. As a community, we should be intentional about expressing our moral beliefs to pharmaceutical companies and public authorities, in the form of (polite and charitable!) letters and advocacy, both acknowledging the moral progress they have made and challenging them to eliminate all use of this ethically problematic technology.

The Way of Prudence

Finally, we have seen throughout Scripture and the Church's teaching that the health of both body and soul is a community effort. All members of society have a responsibility to cooperate in support of the public good. As Catholics, we are called to be leaders in this effort, beginning in our prayers for the world around us and continuing through our individual decisions of receiving vaccination responsibly and helping others do the same. It also includes our public witness as a Church: our on-going commitment to being agents of hope, justice, and reconciliation in our world.

Just to make sure the Church's guidance is clear: both the Vatican and the US bishops have stated clearly that we can receive the currently available vaccines in good conscience, a position which reflects decades of magisterial teaching and precedent. The connection between the vaccines and abortion is extremely remote, and getting vaccinated does not promote abortion. Receiving vaccination and helping others do so are important contributions to the common good. At this writing, all approved vaccines in the USA are in Tier 2, which are preferable to the (unapproved) Tier 3 ones.

Additionally, while the COVID vaccines have been our main focus, the Vatican has also indicated that following the preventive guidelines recommended by public health authorities (wearing masks, social distancing, etc.) is another dimension of the Church's witness right now. We're all looking forward to the happy day when those measures will be relaxed, but in the meanwhile, let's stay committed to protecting our neighbors through these acts of prudence and charity. May God bless all of us in the troubled times, and may His wisdom and prudence watch over us, now and always!