

[News](#)

[Guest Voices](#)



Fresno Bishop Joseph Brennan singles out the Pfizer vaccine as relying on "stem-cell lines derived from, well, babies who've been aborted." (CNS Illustration/Reuters photo/Dado Ruvic)



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Let me start by affirming my love of babies — all babies, babies who are not my own, even babies of strangers. I love having babies and have done so four times. From intercourse to conception to pregnancy to birth, I am intimately acquainted with the miracle and the sanctity of life.

My body has been an instrument — and a battlefield — of God's creation of new life. I have loved and nursed and grown my babies into kind and productive adults of good conscience. My husband and I even spaced the births of our children according to the Billings ovulation method of natural family planning, which was a life-altering commitment to church teaching.

As you may imagine, I view the mechanics of abortion with the personal passion of a woman who has been well and truly awed by giving birth. My motherhood credentials are impeccable, so don't @ me.

All that said, I have to add that I am frustrated by the singular emphasis many church leaders have assigned to outlawing abortion. How has the richness of Catholic teaching on the innate dignity of life been laser-beam-narrowed to the prevention of the termination of pregnancy? How has the term "pro-life" come to mean nothing more than "pro-birth?" And how on Earth do representatives of the church always find ways to appear hypocritical and tone-deaf?

This last is in reaction to a [video statement](#) that Bishop Joseph Brennan of the Diocese of Fresno, California, posted on the [diocesan website](#) regarding the promise of a vaccine for COVID-19. Having lived in the Diocese of Fresno for over 30 years and having been in its past employ for eight, I should not be surprised by the tone of the video sermon. Brennan, after confessing that he gets his shots for the flu and pneumonia and shingles, presumably to prove he is no anti-vaxxer, states that the COVID-19 vaccine must prove to be "ethical and morally acceptable" before any sheep in his flock can get it. The problem: He singles out the Pfizer vaccine as relying on "stem-cell lines derived from, well, babies who've been aborted."

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Brennan further emphasizes that "if material has been used that is unacceptable on a moral level in any stage of the process of the development for a vaccine ... we

can't use it." Period. He'll hold out for a blameless vaccine, possibly from the John Paul II Medical Institute.

Oh, Lordy. For some Catholic leaders, everything comes down to abortion, even the ones that happened in the 1960s and provided stem cells that have been used in medical research ever since.

Where are the videos about the need to protest the ongoing vigorous schedule of federal executions? Where are the videos about the morally unacceptable situations of, say, homeless people living in our streets or brutally separated families wailing at our borders or people of color losing their lives because of their color or desperate women seeing no alternative to abortion? Where are the videos promoting living wages and safe workplaces, especially for the many farmworkers in the Diocese of Fresno?

The tunnel-vision focus on the single issue of protecting unborn life damages not only the church's credibility but also the church's work on behalf of the sanctity of all life. I know plenty of churchgoers who believe that the only ministry that matters anywhere is banning legal abortion. After that, everyone is apparently on their own. For these Catholics, the seamless garment of life is down to one short sleeve.

In the midst of a pandemic that is striking, impoverishing and killing so many thousands of people, I question how pro-life it is for Bishop Brennan to say, "I won't be able to take a vaccine, I just won't, brothers and sisters, and I encourage you not to ... ."

What are we doing? Who are we helping?

A church pursuing an agenda of precisely one issue is not fully about the work of the Gospel. Instead, such a church looks like a cult that recognizes only the dignity of the unborn, and the rest of y'all can go to hell.

I feel like I am not exaggerating.

By the grace of God, I am a mother. The lives of my precious children are the best way I will ever serve God. But, brothers and sisters, I am exhausted by clerical concentration on abortion at the expense of spreading God's message of love and life in the real world. Being anti-abortion is only the start of upholding the dignity of all life for all people. Shame on Bishop Brennan for using his power to sow seeds of

doubt about a vaccine that will save imperiled lives. Hope for survival is also pro-life.

[Valerie Schultz is a freelance writer and the author of *Overdue: A Dewey Decimal System of Grace*.]

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