

Shannon's Law

Over the years I have been asked many times during interviews exactly how our contact with the Vatican began regarding the use of aborted fetal cell lines in vaccines and medical products. I share with you the following true story proving once again, that it does not take super-heroes to move mountains – but rather, courage, determination and most importantly, an unshakable Catholic faith and love of God.

Shannon. Law was not opposed to vaccines in general. In fact her children were current on all their required immunizations. But after reading an article in American Life League's *Celebrate Life* in early 2003 about several vaccines that were cultivated on cell lines taken from the lung tissue of aborted babies, her heart sank. Her children had already received at least one of the vaccines mentioned – the MMR and as she would reiterate later, "It mad me sick inside to think that my own precious babies were benefiting from the murder of their own tiny brothers and sisters in Christ!"

So when the chickenpox vaccine, which is cultivated on aborted fetal cell lines became mandatory in the State of Arkansas to all school children, Shannon adamantly refused to allow her two boys Rob, a first grader and Joey, a kindergartner to be immunized. And when the school notified that her that her children would be expelled if they were not vaccinated, she immediately summoned her priest for assistance in filing a religious exemption. Upon hearing her predicament, the pastor was at a loss as to what could be done and he recommended that Shannon contact the Little Rock Diocese, which she immediately did. After being bounced around among several diocesan officials, she was finally told, "someone will get back to you". No one ever did.

With time running out, Shannon decided to call American Life League for help. But while she paced the room nervously awaiting a return call from their office, panic began to set in. Shannon had already been warned that the Arkansas Law was formidable, if not impossible to overcome. Their religious exemption regulation was so stringent that in effect, it could only be used by those denominations that refused to accept vaccinations of any kind. And even if she could somehow overcome the State objections, her Church was remaining silent and she needed their backing. In desperation, Shannon picked up the phone and with trembling hands, dialed the number for the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith at the Vatican.

Much to her surprise her call was immediately answered by a kindly, English-speaking priest, Monsignor Charles Brown, who listened with great sympathy to her plight. And while he too admitted he was not aware of this problem he suggested she first make contact with the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, while he did some further checking. Meanwhile the hotline was ringing between American Life League and Children of God for Life asking us to help Shannon.

When I contacted Shannon later that day she was distressed that no one, not even her pastor seemed to share her pro-life position. And she could not believe the State could get away with forcing her to act against her Catholic faith. She said she felt like she "had stepped back in time to a Nazi regime in a foreign country." Two promises were made to Shannon that day: one, to

contact the Vatican directly and second to get her some legal help. She was deeply grateful for even the slightest ray of hope.

Help on the Way

To ensure I would reach Rome in the proper timeframe, I arose at 3:00AM EST the very next morning and called the Vatican. In what I can only describe as Divine intervention, Msgr. Brown himself answered the phone. He listened patiently as I explained who Children of God for Life was and that while we were already working with the USCCB, the problem was not confined to only Mrs. Law.

State officials were unfairly targeting Catholics nationwide due to an article in which at least one Catholic ethicist had stated it was morally okay to use the vaccines. In the eyes of the State, it did not matter that these were opinions by lay persons and not formal Church doctrine. They had found a basis to deny Catholics in particular their civil right to a religious exemption. Methodists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Judaism, Hinduism – any religion except Catholicism was allowed to exempt. Without question, clear-cut guidelines from the Church was badly needed.

Recognizing the seriousness of the situation, Msgr. Brown agreed that the Vatican needed to intervene and he asked me to send him written documentation so that action could be taken. “I will need two sets of information,” he noted. “One is for me and the other, for the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith – that is, Cardinal Josef Ratzinger.”

“Also”, he added. “While the Magisterium has never ruled one way or another on this issue, there is already sufficient teaching for Catholics. Thus, while we take this under review, please advise those who have problems to follow the Church teaching on Moral Conscience which is clearly defined in the Catechism of the Catholic Church and in several Vatican encyclicals.”

“And you must tell Mrs. Law”, he cautioned. “If she turns away from her conscience on this matter, it would be considered a grave error!”

Within 24 hours the Church teachings were assembled, loaded on Children of God for Life’s website and sent in overnight mail to Shannon Law. Likewise a detailed package of information was sent to the Vatican for consideration. When I broke the news to Shannon she was elated and with renewed spirit, proudly exclaimed, “I have God and the Vatican on my side – what else do I need?”

There was, as it turned out, only one more thing that Shannon would need: an attorney who was not afraid to stand up to the State of Arkansas. Within the week, Erik Stanley, P.A. from Liberty Counsel, a Christian law firm based in Orlando, Florida that defends religious rights nationwide agreed to take her case. It was not going to be easy, since by this time the State Health Department had formally rejected Shannon’s request for a religious exemption, stating, “Your letter exempting from vaccines is not documented explicitly by Catholic teaching. The State of Arkansas does not grant religious exemptions based on personal statements.” Her sons were expelled. The battle lines were drawn.

Let the battle begin

As Liberty Counsel filed its motion against the State, another Catholic parent, Susan Brock would become a second party in the lawsuit, giving the entire matter full media coverage. Those were dark days for Shannon as her once friendly pastor ostracized her for putting him in the public spotlight. And as Shannon began to feel the pain of the countless saints who have suffered for their faith, during the many conversations that would follow she simply asked for prayers that she would have the courage to endure what was to come.

When *Shannon Law vs. the State of Arkansas* was finally brought to court the prosecuting attorney began his case by boldly displaying what he deemed to be appropriate Catholic teaching to the judge. “I have an article here with comments from Catholic ethicists who say that using vaccines from aborted fetal tissue is morally acceptable,” he stated rather smugly.

Not to be intimidated, defense Counsel Erik Stanley addressed the judge. “Your honor, I too am holding a document in my hands taken from the Catechism of the Catholic Church that is attested to be a valid teaching of my defendants’ faith.” He then added, “You will note, your honor, mine is signed by Pope John Paul II.”

With the clear evidence of what the Catholic Church teaches behind them, Judge Susan Webber-Wright moved on to the wording of the law itself, which Mr. Stanley pointed out was clearly in violation of the Fourteenth Amendment, giving equal protection to all religious faiths. The judge agreed. “At first glance,” she stated. “This law appears to be unconstitutional as written. However, I cannot change the law in this hearing. What I can and will do is grant the right for the children of these parents to attend school while the matter is addressed by the State.”

It would take a year and a half before the State would finally concede defeat. During the April 2003 regular session, the Arkansas law was amended to provide both religious rights and personal philosophical exemptions to all who oppose the vaccines. It was especially good news for Shannon who was preparing to relocate within the state and feared she would have to go through the entire ordeal again with another school.

And it was a great triumph for all residents of the State of Arkansas who were finally freed from an oppressive and clearly unconstitutional mandate. Even more far reaching was the first established guideline given directly by the Vatican that could not be denied for any Catholic, in any civil proceeding in the United States. The right to follow one’s moral conscience is sacred to Catholic Church teaching: undeniable, irrefutable and unchangeable.

During one of the many counseling sessions I had with Shannon that year, I had told her that if somehow her litigation was able to get the law changed, people would always remember it by her own last name. Rightfully I have dubbed it, Shannon’s “Law”. Because sometimes it does not take an army but only one person willing to put on the armor of Christ to defeat the enemy.