

Benedict XVI on Organ Donation

"A Unique Testimony of Charity"

VATICAN CITY, NOV. 7, 2008 Here is the address Benedict XVI gave upon receiving in audience participants in the international congress "A Gift for Life. Considerations on Organ Donation."

Venerated brothers in the episcopate,
Bothers and sisters:

Organ donation is a unique testimony of charity. In a time such as ours, frequently marked by various forms of egotism, it is more and more urgent to understand how it is necessary to enter into the logic of gratitude to correctly understand life. There exists, in fact, a responsibility of love and charity that commits oneself to make one's own life a gift for others, if one truly seeks one's own fulfillment. As Lord Jesus taught us, only by given one's life, can you save it (cf. Luke 9:24).

Greetings to all those present, in particular to Senator Maurizio Sacconi, Italy's labor minister; and I thank Archbishop Rino Fisichella, president of the Academy for Life, for the words he addressed to me, illustrating the deep significance of this encounter and presenting the synthesis of the work of the congress.

Together with him, I also thank the president of the International Federation of Catholic Medical Associations, and the director of the Italian National Transplant Center, underlining with appreciation the value of the collaboration of these organizations in the area of organ transplants, which has been debated in your days of work and study.

The history of medicine shows evidence of the great advances that have been made in giving more dignity each day to people who suffer. Tissue and organ transplants represent a great conquest of medical science, and are certainly signs of hope for those suffering serious, and often grave, illnesses.

If we turn our gaze to the entire world, it is easy to confirm the numerous and complex cases in which, thanks to the technique of organ transplantation, many people have overcome extremely grave illnesses, and in them the joy of life has been restored. This would never have happened if the commitment of the doctors and the competence of the researchers had not been able to count upon the generosity and altruism of those who have donated organs.

Unfortunately, the problem of the lack of available vital organs is not a theoretical one, but a considerably practical one; one can see this in the long waiting list of those whose only hope for survival is linked to the small number of non-useful donations.

It is useful, above all in this context, to reflect on this advancement of science so that the multiplication of transplant petitions don't change around the ethical principles upon which it rests. As I said in my first encyclical, the body can never be considered as a mere object (cf. "Deus Caritas Est," No. 5); to do otherwise would impose on it the logic of the market. The body of each person, together with the spirit that is given to each one individually, constitutes an inseparable unity upon which is impressed the image of God himself. To prescind from this dimension brings to mind points of view that are incapable of understanding the totality of the mystery present in each person. It is necessary, then, that priority must be given to respect for the dignity of the human person and the protection of individual identity.

Regarding the technique of organ transplants, this means that one can only donate if this act doesn't put on e's own health and identity in serious danger, and if it is done for a valid moral and proportionate reason. Any reasons for the buying and selling of organs, or the adoption of utilitarian and discriminatory criteria, would clash in such a way with the meaning of gift

that they would be invalidated, qualifying them as illicit moral acts. Abuses in transplants and organ trafficking, which frequently affect innocent persons, such as children, must find the scientific and medical community united in a joint refusal. They should be decidedly condemned as abominable.

The same ethical principle must be reiterated in the case of the creation and destruction of human embryos destined for therapeutic objectives. The very idea of considering the embryo as "therapeutic material" contradicts the cultural, civil and ethical foundations on which the dignity of the person rests.

With frequency, organ transplantation takes place as a completely gratuitous gesture on the part of the family member who has been certifiably pronounced dead. In these cases, informed consent is a precondition of freedom so that the transplant can be characterized as being a gift and not interpreted as a coercive or abusive act. In any case, it is useful to remember that the various vital organs can only be extracted "ex cadavere" [from a dead body], which possesses its own dignity and should be respected. Over recent years science has made further progress in ascertaining the death of a patient. It is good, then, that the achieved results receive the consensus of the entire scientific community in favor of looking for solutions that give everyone certainty. In an environment such as this, the minimum suspicion of arbitrariness is not allowed, and where total certainty has not been reached, the principle of caution should prevail.

For this it is useful to increment interdisciplinary research and study in such a way that the public is presented with the most transparent truth on the anthropologic, social, ethical and legal implications of a transplant. In these cases respect for the life of the donor should be assumed as the primary criterion, in such a way so that the extraction of the organs only take place after having ascertained the patient's true death (cf. Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, No. 476).

The act of love, which is expressed with the gift of one's own vital organs, is a genuine testament of charity that knows how to look beyond death so that life always wins. The recipient should be aware of the value of this gesture that one receives, of a gift that goes beyond the therapeutic benefit. What they receive is a testament of love, and it should give rise to a response equally generous, and in this way grows the culture of gift and gratitude.

The path that must be followed, until science discovers new and more advanced possible therapies, needs to be that of the formation and diffusion of a culture characterized by solidarity and that opens itself to others without excluding anyone. Organ transplants that are in line with ethic of giving require the commitment of all sides to invest every possible effort in formation and information, so as to increasingly awaken consciences to a problem that directly affects the lives of so many.

It would be necessary, then, to overcome prejudices and misunderstanding, dispel suspicions and fears and substitute them with certainties and guarantees, so as to create in all people an awareness, ever more widespread, of the great gift of life.

Wishing that each one of you continues your own commitment with due competence and professionalism, I invoke the help of God over the working sessions of the congress and impart to all of you, from the heart, my blessing.