

# Organ donation

7 November 2008

**Address to Participants at an International Congress organized by the Pontifical Academy for Life**

Pope Benedict XVI

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Dear Brothers in the Episcopate, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

Organ donation is a peculiar form of witness to charity. In a period like ours, often marked by various forms of selfishness, it is ever more urgent to understand how the logic of free giving is vital to a correct conception of life. Indeed, a responsibility of love and charity exist that commits one to make of their own life a gift to others, if one truly wishes to fulfil oneself. As the Lord Jesus has taught us, only whoever gives his own life can save it (cf. Lk 9: 24). In greeting all those present, with a particular thought for Senator Maurizio Sacconi, Minister of Labour, Health and Social Policies, I thank Archbishop Rino Fisichella, President of the Pontifical Academy for Life, for the words he has addressed to me illustrating the profound meaning of this meeting and presenting the synthesis of the Congress' works. Together with him I also thank the President of the International Federation of Catholic Medical Associations and the Director of the Centro Nazionale Trapianti, underlining my appreciation of the value of the collaboration of these Organizations in an area like that of organ transplants which, distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, has been the object of your days of study and debate.

Medical history clearly shows the great progress that it has been possible to accomplish to ensure to each person who suffers an ever more worthy life. Tissue and organ transplants represent a great victory for medical science and are certainly a sign of hope for many patients who are experiencing grave and sometimes extreme clinical situations. If we broaden our gaze to the entire world it is easy to identify the many and complex cases in which, thanks to the technique of the transplantation of organs, many people have survived very critical phases and have been restored to the joy of life. This could never have happened if the committed doctors and qualified researchers had not been able to count on the generosity and altruism of those who have donated their organs. The problem of the availability of vital organs to transplant, unfortunately, is not theoretic, but dramatically practical; it is shown by the long waiting lists of many sick people whose sole possibility for survival is linked to the meagre offers that do not correspond to the objective need.

It is helpful, above all in today's context, to return to reflect on this scientific breakthrough, to prevent the multiple requests for transplants from subverting the ethical principles that are at its base. As I said in my first Encyclical, the body can never be considered a mere object (cf. *Deus Caritas Est*, n. 5); otherwise the logic of the market would gain the upper hand. The body of each person, together with the spirit that has been given to each one singly constitutes an inseparable unity in which the image of God himself is imprinted. Prescinding from this dimension leads to a perspective incapable of grasping the totality of the mystery present in each one. Therefore, it is necessary to put respect for the dignity of the person and the protection of his/her personal identity in the first place. As regards the practice of organ transplants, it means that someone can give only if he/she is not placing his/her own health and identity in serious danger, and only for a morally valid and proportional reason. The possibility of organ sales, as well as the adoption of discriminatory and utilitarian criteria, would greatly clash with the underlying meaning of the gift that would place it out of consideration, qualifying it as a morally illicit act. Transplant abuses and their trafficking, which often involve innocent people like babies, must find the scientific and medical community ready to unite in rejecting such unacceptable practices. Therefore they are to be decisively condemned as abominable. The same ethical principle is to be repeated when one wishes to touch upon creation and destroy the human embryo destined for a therapeutic purpose. The simple idea of considering the embryo as "therapeutic material" contradicts the cultural, civil and ethical foundations upon which the dignity of the person rests.

It often happens that organ transplantation techniques take place with a totally free act on the part of the parents of patients in which death has been certified. In these cases, informed consent is the condition subject to freedom, for the transplant to have the characteristic of a gift and is not to be interpreted as an act of coercion or exploitation. It is helpful to remember, however, that the individual vital organs cannot be extracted except *ex cadavere*, which, moreover, possesses its own dignity that must be respected. In these years science has accomplished further progress in certifying the death of the patient. It is good, therefore, that the results attained receive the consent of the entire scientific community in order to further research for solutions that give certainty to all. In an area such as this, in fact, there cannot be the slightest suspicion of arbitration and where certainty has not been attained the principle of precaution must prevail. This is why it is useful to

promote research and interdisciplinary reflection to place public opinion before the most transparent truth on the anthropological, social, ethical and juridical implications of the practice of transplantation.

However, in these cases the principal criteria of respect for the life of the donor must always prevail so that the extraction of organs be performed only in the case of his/her true death (cf. Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 476). The act of love which is expressed with the gift of one's vital organs remains a genuine testimony of charity that is able to look beyond death so that life always wins. The recipient of this gesture must be well aware of its value. He is the receiver of a gift that goes far beyond the therapeutic benefit. In fact, what he/she receives, before being an organ, is a witness of love that must raise an equally generous response, so as to increase the culture of gift and free giving.

The right road to follow, until science is able to discover other new forms and more advanced therapies, must be the formation and the spreading of a culture of solidarity that is open to all and does not exclude anyone. A medical transplantation corresponds to an ethic of donation that demands on the part of all the commitment to invest every possible effort in formation and information, to make the conscience ever more sensitive to an issue that directly touches the life of many people. Therefore it will be necessary to reject prejudices and misunderstandings, widespread indifference and fear to substitute them with certainty and guarantees in order to permit an ever more heightened and diffuse awareness of the great gift of life in everyone. With these sentiments, while I wish each one to continue in his/her own commitment with the due competence and professionalism, I invoke the help of God on the Congress' works and I impart to all my warm Blessing.