

Organ donation: expression of universal fraternity

26 March 2026

Address to participants in the meeting organized by the National Transplant Centre

Pope Leo XIV

26 March 2026

In the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Peace be with you!

Your Excellency, Dear Minister, Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome, and thank you for your patience!

I am pleased to receive you on the occasion of the General Assembly of the National Transplant Network, and I thank the Pontifical Academy for Life for its work in this important field. Your presence here bears witness to the commitment of so many healthcare workers, professionals and volunteers who, with skill and dedication, serve human life in its moments of greatest fragility.

You are commemorating an important anniversary: indeed, seventy years ago the first Italian donation took place, when Blessed Don Carlo Gnocchi asked for his corneas to be removed after his death and transplanted into two very young patients cared for by his charity, enabling them to see again. That gesture, made in a context still lacking comprehensive legislation, sparked widespread reflection within Italian society and helped to set in motion a process of legislative clarification.

Just a few weeks after Don Gnocchi's gesture, Pope Pius XII offered some initial moral guidance on these issues, recognizing the legitimacy of removal for therapeutic purposes, respecting the dignity of the human body and the rights of the people involved. [1: Pius XII, Address to the Association of Cornea Donors and the Italian Union of the Blind (14 May 1956).] From the very beginning, then, the Church's reflection has accompanied the development of transplantation medicine, recognizing its value and at the same time setting out the necessary ethical criteria.

Since then, a prolific development of scientific research and human dedication has led the Italian Transplant Network to achieve results of great significance, recognized at international level. Behind these results lies a wealth of expertise and also a culture of responsibility and trust that needs to be safeguarded and upheld.

Saint John Paul II, in the Encyclical *Evangelium vitae*, recalled that among the acts that foster the culture of life, "a particularly praiseworthy example ... is the donation of organs, performed in an ethically acceptable manner" (no. 86). Indeed, it is an act that combines the generosity of giving with the moral responsibility that accompanies it. The Catechism of the Catholic Church states, in turn, that "organ donation after death is a noble and meritorious act and is to be encouraged as an expression of generous solidarity" (no. 2296), at the same time recalling the need for consent and respect for the dignity of the person. Vigilance is always necessary to avoid any form of commodification of the human body and ensure that transplants are governed by fair and transparent criteria. [2: Cf. St. John Paul II, Address to the 18th International Congress of the Transplantation Society (29 August 2000).]

Transplantation medicine reminds us that the relationship of care, trust and mutual responsibility constitutes an essential condition for a transplant to take place. The very possibility of saving lives through transplants depends, in fact, on the generosity of donors. [3: Benedict XVI, Address to participants in the International Congress on the theme "A gift for life. Considerations on organ donation", promoted by the Pontifical Academy for Life (7 November 2008).]

Pope Francis has emphasized that donation is not limited to its social utility, however important that may be, but is an expression of universal fraternity. He also reiterated that it must remain a gratuitous act, capable of bearing witness to a culture of help, giving, hope and life. [4: Cf. Francis, Address to the Italian Association for the Donation of Organs, Tissues and Cells (AIDO) (13 April 2019).] This is a reminder that is more valuable than ever at a time when there is a risk of assessing everything according to the logic of price, efficiency or self-interest.

I, too, take this opportunity to encourage scientific research, which continues to open up important prospects for transplant medicine. It is called upon to develop ever more effective solutions to meet the need for organs and the needs of patients, in a context where demand still far exceeds supply. It is essential that this commitment always goes hand in hand with responsible reflection, so that scientific progress remains oriented towards the integral good of the person and respect for their dignity.

I wish to express my gratitude to all of you. Your work is demanding and often unseen, requiring skill and rigour and, at the same time, conscientiousness, balance and a keen sense of humanity. It involves clinical responsibilities, delicate decisions and relationships that touch people's lives at their most difficult moments. Continue to carry it out with faithfulness and dedication, always keeping the well-being of the patient as your guiding principle.

Finally, I encourage institutions and the voluntary sector to continue their work of providing information and raising awareness, so that a culture of donation may grow that is ever more informed, free and shared, capable of recognizing in this gesture a sign of solidarity, fraternity and hope.

I wish you every success in your efforts as an association, and I invoke the Lord's blessing upon you and your loved ones.

Thank you once again, and all the best in your work!