

Ask Fr James

What is the Catholic Church's teaching on Organ Donation

Most people just do not have the natural inclination to give up their organs, even after death. This is mostly because of a widespread opinion that organ transplantation is not appropriate in religious terms. Also, very many Catholic Christians confuse the official Catholic teaching which opposes all methods of artificial reproductive technology (ART) with organ donation. They believe that the church forbids organ donation but in fact, the church supports organ donation and actually teaches that it is an expression of a genuine act of love. Pope John Paul II, addressing the 18th International Congress of the Transplantation Society on August 29, 2000, stated:

“The Catholic Church would promote the fact that there is a need for organ donors and that Christians should accept this as a “challenge to their generosity and fraternal love” so long as ethical principles are followed.”

Also, on November 7, 2008, Pope Benedict XVI addressing the participants of the international congress of the Pontifical Academy for Life (*Pontificia Academia pro Vita*), said; “Organ donation is a peculiar form of witness to charity.”

However, the church condemns any procedure which tends to commercialize human organs or to consider them as item for exchange or trade. This is considered morally unacceptable. The Catholic Church is against the practice of harvesting organs or organ transplants as a commercial activity. It has been the teaching of the church that, medical reasons and with consent of both parties, not other considerations - such as a person's age, religion, race, gender, or social standing, - should determine who is to receive transplanted organs.

Our Catholic Christian understanding is that life comes from God and that every one of us is created in the image of God (Imago Dei) and thus, life should not be an artifact or be treated as a commodity, because this is depersonalizing. The above quoted Vatican's statements shows that Catholic Church doctrine supports organ transplantation as morally acceptable if they are carried out with the consent of the donor and without excessive risks for the donor.

The North America Catholic Bishops, in 1995 released a revision of the Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services which was approved by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops and it says:

The transplantation of organs from living donors is morally permissible when such a donation will not sacrifice or seriously impair any essential bodily function and the anticipated benefit to the recipient is proportionate to the harm done to the donor. Furthermore, the freedom of the prospective donor must be respected, and economic advantages should not accrue to the donor (National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1995).